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Christopher Myers
Congress and Arts Backers Form Battle Lines Over Support for Arts and Humanities

By CHRISTOPHER MYERS
WASHINGTON

The Bush Administration, members of Congress, and arts advocates last week outlined terms of disagreement in the continuing conflict over federal support of the arts and humanities.

The Administration told Congress it would not seek permanent restrictions on the kinds of work that can be supported with federal money. But several lawmakers said such restrictions—designed to prevent government support for works that some people might find offensive or obscene—would almost certainly be added to new legislation governing the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Several conservative Republicans, led by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher of California, have pledged to seek the complete elimination of the arts endowment, or, failing that, severe restrictions on what it could support.

Rep. E. Thomas Coleman, the ranking Republican on the House subcommittee that oversees the endowments, told arts advocates they should suggest limitations they can live with. "I would be fairly good money that there's going to be some restrictive language," he said, "so if you want to be a player, you've got to offer some language."

Authorization Expires This Year

His comments came during a reauthorization hearing on the arts endowment. Every five years, Congress reviews the two endowments and decides whether to extend their legislative mandate. The current authorization for the two agencies expires in September.

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arts and humanities began early last year when several members of Congress—led by Sen. Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina—objected to the use of arts-endowment money for two projects they felt were obscene or offensive.

Eventually Congress approved a one-year ban on federal support of work that is obscene and that lacks significant literary or artistic merit. Although the controversy has centered on the arts endowment, both endowments are governed by the same legislation, so any restriction placed on one would be likely to apply to the other.

The reauthorization hearing last week came the day after a rally by artists, writers, and other arts advocates who met here to lobby against restrictions on the arts endowment.

The novelist Larry McMurtry, who spoke at both the rally and the hearing, told the Congressional panel that the endowment's current grant-making process, which is based on reviews by panels of experts, operates well and should not be tampered with. "Art is best entrusted to those who create it and who study it," he said, adding that attempts to control what kind of art receives federal support reflect "an old, tenacious, profoundly anti-intellectual fear of art itself.

Kathryn Martin, dean of the college of fine arts at Wayne State University, said she was strongly opposed to restrictions on the arts endowment.

Ms. Martin, who also is chairman of the National Coalition for Education in the Arts, said she did not think the current restriction had affected art schools. Ms. Martin added, however, that "as universities, we must stand totally opposed to any kind of censorship, and we must stand totally in support of freedom of expression."

She said that much of the current controversy was the result of "visual illiteracy," adding that the endowment must work to improve arts education throughout the country, so that more people can recognize and appreciate good art.

"Art Is Trying New Things"

John E. Prohmayer, the chairman of the arts endowment, conceded that a few of the agency's past grants might have been offensive to some people, but he said it would be impossible—and undesirable—to avoid all controversy.

He said: "Art is like research—it is trying new things, taking risks, pushing boundaries. Not all research succeeds, but the process of doing that research is valuable, and the product when it succeeds is glorious."

Rep. Pat Williams, a Montana Democrat who is chairman of the panel, said he would like to pass reauthorization legislation without any restrictions, but that he would accept some restrictions if they were necessary to insure the survival of the endowments.

Mr. Williams and other members of the subcommittee said they had been receiving many letters from their constituents urging that more controls be placed on the endowments.

Mr. Coleman said: "We need to seek a middle ground that will bring in the mainstream in the House and in the American public. I am looking for language that will guarantee artistic expression and public accountability."

Another Hearing in April

The subcommittee will hold another hearing in early April to give other members of Congress a chance to express their views about the reauthorizing legislation. Mr. Williams said he hoped the legislation would be before the full House by June.

The Senate panel with jurisdiction over the endowments is scheduled to begin its hearings on reauthorization this week.

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