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Arts: Policy and Talking Points (1994): Article 01

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BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ECONOMY?

Those who are hoping that the 104th Congress will kill the National Endowment for the Arts (and other federal programs that support the country's culture) on moral or philosophical grounds—and believe they won a mandate in November to do the deed—are quite silent on the economic consequences of their aims.

A look at the numbers, taken at face value without regard to morals or philosophy, suggests that not only would a few agencies be erased, but also that a substantial and growing cultural economy would sustain a slam dunk of a punch -- with the overall negative impact unevenly spread among the states.

Just to eliminate federal funding for arts activity, for example, would be akin to an economic earthquake, blasting a \$40 billion industry employing 1.3 million people and supporting another 900,000 jobs, and bringing enjoyment and pleasure, along with a few questions, to millions of American citizens each year.

The reason lies with the strategic placement of federal dollars, within each state. Their elimination would cause severe dislocations; and in some states, the impact would be the equivalent to closing down an entire industry, or closing military bases in Georgia.

National Endowment for the Arts' money goes to each state in two clumps. One is to the state arts agency which adds it to whatever the legislature appropriates, and the other clump goes mainly to cultural agencies and institutions tying local institutions to national artistic goals and objectives. (The grants awarded in this clump are even more competitive than the block grants to each of the 50 state arts agencies.) A few dollars each year are invested in artists fellowships.

When one considers that every NEA dollar attracts \$11 in other money, the negative impact on the nation's cultural economy is further highlighted if indeed the stimulative effect of federal funds is removed.

In a surprising number of states, according to a 1992 report sent to Congress by George Bush's NEA, the federal money is greater than what the state legislature appropriates. And it is surprising where some of those states are.

CALIFORNIA: From 1987 to 1991, the NEA sent \$81.4 million to the state's arts agency and other institutions while California legislators were appropriating less, \$75.7 million. The arts are the backbone of a major sector of California's economy.

COLORADO: In the same five year period, the NEA awarded \$8 million grants to the state and local arts organizations. The Colorado legislature appropriated \$6.6 million.

CONNECTICUT: It was \$17.7 million from NEA; \$10 million from the state.

IDAHO: From 1987 to 1991, it was \$2.7 million from the NEA; \$1.7 million from the state.

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KANSAS: \$4.6 million from NEA; \$4.5 million from the state capitol.

MARYLAND: \$48 million from NEA, \$26.6 million from Annapolis;

MINNESOTA: \$31 million, NEA; \$17 million, the state;

NEBRASKA: \$5 million from NEA; \$4 million from the state capitol;

NEW HAMPSHIRE: \$3.8 million from the feds; \$2.2 million from the state coffers;

NEW MEXICO: \$14.9 million from the NEA; \$4.1 million from Santa Fe;

NORTH DAKOTA: \$2.6 million from Washington; \$1.2 million from Bismarck;

TEXANS also left most of the funding for their cultural resources to Washington during the 1987-1991 time period: \$22.7 million from Washington and \$15.8 million from Austin.

In **WASHINGTON**, the NEA distributed \$14.6 million during the period while state lawmakers appropriated \$10 million to the Washington State Arts Commission. And in **WYOMING**, it was \$2.9 million from the NEA versus \$1.2 million from Cheyenne.

In **GEORGIA** and surrounding states, the picture was only marginally better...or worse, depending on your point of view.

From 1987 to 1991, Washington sent a total of \$13.5 million to the Georgia Arts Council and local arts institutions; while Georgia legislators were appropriating \$15.7 million.

ALABAMA: It was \$5 million from Washington and \$7 million from Montgomery;

LOUISIANA: \$5.8 million from DC; \$4.7 million from Baton Rouge; **MISSISSIPPI:** \$3.3 million from the NEA; \$2.3 from Jackson; In **SOUTH CAROLINA**, it was \$9.8 million from the NEA to the South Carolina Arts Commission and other groups such as the Spoleto Festival; and legislators added another \$15.9 million from state tax coffers; **TENNESSEE**, \$5.9 million from the NEA compared to \$14.5 million from Nashville.

Only in **FLORIDA**, among Georgia's neighbors, did state funds during the 1987-1991 time period far outstrip federal resources. It was \$10 million from the NEA during those years matched by \$101 million from Tallahassee for the state's cultural institutions.

The little understood facet of Washington's funding strategy to connect local institutions to national cultural aspirations--similar to Interstate highways to connect one coast with another--promoting state and local economies along the way--would also be subtracted if the NEA's budget is knocked off.

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For example, not many people know it, but NEA's money to symphonies requires them to encourage, nurture, and commission American composers and to play American music—not Bach, Mozart or even a state's music—but American music.

A North Carolina legislature is not going to ask the North Carolina Symphony to nurture and play music which comes from Georgia, or Virginia or New York composers. Nosireebob! It'll be Tar Heel music. If you get my drift.

It was not the South Carolina legislature in the early 1970's which asked the South Carolina Arts Commission to recognize, nurture and fund the arts which flow from Black Americans. No, it was the NEA. Same is true with the folk arts. The strategic emphasis came from Washington, not from state arts agencies and not from state legislatures.

The strategic placement and strategic emphasis from the NEA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Institute of Museum Services have enriched the entire nation, not just a few wealthy states.

Federal funds for art and culture are like the Interstate highway system. Those broad swaths of Interstate concrete traversing the country through the states connect with other US highways, and a spiderlike array of interlocking state, county and municipal roads. With great ease, a US traveler, all in one day's driving, can move back and forth from big six-lane Interstate to small country lane... both built by tax payers.

When you consider the whole, the US Government has sponsored, and spent billions on, a national roads system for which Interstate highways are now the backbone.

Similarly, NEA's funds to each state's major cultural institutions (directly or through its block grants which go to the states' arts agencies) have contributed substantially to the development of an interlocking array of smaller cultural institutions.

Often, the NEA-supported institutions serve as mentors, role models, a source of talent, expertise and audiences for newer, smaller arts organizations....sort of like the states' primary and secondary roads and city streets.

And their "drivers"—audiences, artists, contributors—drive back and forth. One night, it's the NEA-backed show. Another afternoon, it's a visual arts exhibition supported by the county. On Saturday, it's the city-backed festival in the park.

Like Interstates which connect to state and local roads, NEA-supported institutions are inextricably linked to state and locally-supported arts activities. Sometimes they share the same space. Generally, they serve the same art forms, the same artists, the same audiences. A positive environment and healthy economy is needed by all.

But potholes in one road affect the flow of traffic on all roads.

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In regards to the Interstates, billions have been spent to build them, and no one, no one, has ever suggested that because drug dealers, or murders, or thieves, or perpetrators of other immoral acts use interstate roads that the whole system should be closed down, or that hunks of it be torn up, or that bridges be taken out for spite.

And yet, using some peoples' attitude about a handful of NEA grants (out of 100,000 since 1965), federal dollars subsidize "blasphemous" behavior.

And transportation policy makers, furthermore, don't suggest that standards for Interstate highway construction be left to "the individual states."

Nearly everybody believes that state's economies, states' communities, and states' citizens benefit enormously from federal funds for highways.

The evidence is also clear that states' economies, states' communities and states' citizens benefit enormously from federal funds for culture.

Those who argue that the budgets for the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, Institute of Museum Services, the Smithsonian, Corporation for Public Broadcasting should be eliminated ought to be asked what they propose be done about the cultural economic crisis which would surely follow..especially in the west and midwest and in most Southern states.

To say that the Country can't afford the NEA, NEH and other federal cultural budgets is absurd. It's preaching economic parsimony, offering up the picture of a society strolling along Fifth Avenue but with the cuff of our pants over the ankle.

No, the NEA shouldn't support sin. But neither should the Interstates!

By Adrian King
January 8, 1995

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