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Federal Advisory Council to the Arts, United States Arts Foundation: Hearings (August 1962): Speech 03

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STATEMENT OF HON. FRANK THOMPSON, JR.
A MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
FROM THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY
BEFORE THE SPECIAL SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE ARTS
OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND PUBLIC WELFARE
AUGUST 29, 1962

Mr. Chairman, it is a great pleasure for me to be here today. As you know, I have the honor to be the House sponsor of bills identical to S.741, the Federal Advisory Council on the Arts, and S.785, the National Cultural Development Act. My interest in these bills, particularly the Advisory Council proposal, dates back a number of years, and I am sincerely happy to know that so many of my colleagues in this Body share that interest.

Let me bring you up to date on what has happened on our side of the Capitol. House versions of all three of the bills being considered here today were referred to the Select Subcommittee on Education, which I chair. The only one of the three that we attempted to bring to the House Floor for a vote -- and I shall say more about that later -- was the Advisory Council bill. It was brought up last year under suspension of the rules, a procedure that requires a two-thirds vote for passage, and it failed even to get a majority. The vote was 166 to 173. During the present Session we have attempted to get clearance from the Rules Committee to bring the bill up under normal procedures, but the Committee has not yet seen fit to give it a hearing, and the prospects for the future look dim.

The problems of the arts in the United States are complex and in discussing them one is always faced with the danger of oversimplification. But there are certain basic conclusions we can draw, and from these conclusions our course of action should be clear. Last winter my Subcommittee held hearings in New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., on economic conditions in the performing arts. Testimony presented at these hearings clearly showed that the problems of the arts do not result from a lack of interest on the part of the public. Public interest has never been higher. The underlying problems are

two: first, production costs have far outpaced reasonably available revenues. Take the Metropolitan Opera, for example. The Met is sold out for every performance, and its ticket prices -- if you are lucky enough to be able to get tickets at all -- are the highest in the country. Yet the Met's annual deficit is about \$1 million. Attracting more people or raising ticket prices will not help. The first is physically impossible and the second would be self-defeating. There is a great danger in pricing opera out of the reach of the average citizen. The second factor is that the great patrons of the arts who once gave of their personal fortunes to support cultural activities are disappearing. The ninety percent tax bracket donor could afford to be lavish in his deductible gifts to artistic institutions, because the government, in effect, picked up ninety percent of the cost of his gift, but there are far fewer of these benefactors than there were 25 years ago. The president of the San Francisco Opera Association testified that when one of his 90 percent bracket patrons died ten more donors might be needed to take his place, because their tax brackets are lower and they cannot afford to bear such costs.

As I said, this is a simplified analysis, and if you are interested in more detail I will be glad to furnish copies of our hearings.

My conclusion from this study is that unless government takes a more active role in encouraging and supporting the arts, the United States will be faced with a very serious problem in the next decade or two, namely, the wasting away and eventual disappearance of some of our greatest cultural resources. For this reason I have fully endorsed the "six point program" set forth by Secretary Goldberg in his award in the Metropolitan Opera Arbitration last year, and for this reason I have strongly advocated some form of subsidy to the arts.

My recommendations for legislative action, however, would not, at this time, include subsidy, despite the fact that I believe it necessary and have sponsored legislation that would authorize grants to the States and despite the fact that I know that the States would put this money to good use. My own State of New Jersey, for example, will be

building a cultural center in Trenton and it would be of immense help to the State to be able to participate in a federal matching program. Government participation in this area must proceed slowly and with careful planning. Proper safeguards must be devised to insure that the Government's role is only that of catalyst and that well-intentioned programs do not result in stultification of creative activity. We must formulate National policy in this area and work toward a clear definition of the federal role and responsibility. Should the federal government, for instance, limit its role to stimulating local or regional activity? Or should it attempt to preserve the great, established cultural institutions? Should we have a National Theatre or Opera or Ballet, analagous to those in so many European countries? Or should we attempt to ease the plight of the individual artist by such means as training scholarships?

These are hard questions, and they are questions that should be studied by experts in this area. That is why I feel the creation of a Federal Advisory Council on the Arts is an essential first step, and that is why our efforts in the House were concentrated on this bill. If an Advisory Council were established it could help to formulate a national policy with regard to the arts. It could determine to what extent subsidy actually will be needed, and, if it is needed, what form it should take. As I pointed out before, the government is already giving the arts a tremendous subsidy through the income tax laws, and it may be that our course for the future should continue to follow this indirect route.

One of the most important functions an Advisory Council could perform would be to work with and stimulate State, regional, and local arts councils. There is a tremendous move on in the United States toward the creation of such organizations. New Jersey, for example, under the vigorous leadership of Governor Richard J. Hughes, has created a council, and New York's arts council has been actively and successfully operating for two years. In my view it is inevitable that any federal assistance in the arts would be channeled through such agencies.

My final argument for the Advisory Council is that it is within our grasp. The concept is not a radical departure and it has received

widespread endorsement. In my Subcommittee's files alone are more than two hundred letters from university and college presidents and professors wholeheartedly supporting the idea, and support ranges far wider than this. Furthermore, the Council is not an expensive proposition; it could return untold value to the country for an annual expenditure of about \$100,000. The Senate has already passed this bill once, and while the House has dragged its feet, I firmly believe a majority of its members now favor this bill.

In making this plea for the Advisory Council bill I by no means intend any unfavorable reflection on the other legislation before you. It is of great value to have as many ideas as possible put to the test of debate and public scrutiny, and it is of supreme importance to the cause of the arts to stimulate public interest in and awareness of the problems at which these bills aim. All I suggest is that as a matter of priorities the Advisory Council must, in my opinion, come first.

I would like to commend the Committee once more for undertaking this study, and express my appreciation for the invitation to testify today and my willingness to be of any assistance I can in the future.