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NEA's Pornography Ruckus

9/12/85

Three Lawmakers Attack Selection of Poems for Funding

By Mary Battiata

Washington Post Staff Writer

An energetic troika of Texas congressmen has transformed the traditionally somnolent funding hearings for the National Endowment for the Arts into a series of heated debates on the definition of pornography, on censorship and on the role of the government in both.

In recent weeks Republican Reps. Dick Armey and Tom DeLay from Houston, and Steve Bartlett

from Dallas, have charged that the endowment has been mismanaged and that the nation's taxpayers are unwittingly subsidizing the creation of pornographic and politically unacceptable poetry.

To prove their point, the three have circulated the texts of sexually explicit poems and poems extolling Marxism that they say were written by artists who have received NEA grants. The NEA says the poems were written prior to the award of endowment money. Nonetheless,

the congressmen are using the poems to bolster their argument that the endowment is elitist and must be made more accountable to the "average Americans" who foot the bill. The National Endowment for the Arts is a federal agency that last year awarded \$147 million in grants to artists and cultural institutions.

Yesterday Bartlett proposed an amendment to this year's endowment funding bill that would have

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NEA Grants Criticized

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prohibited the award of money to any artist whose work was deemed "patently offensive to the average person."

Just who the average person is, and how to establish what he or she would find patently offensive, was the subject of heated discussion in the House Committee on Education and Labor.

"I know it when I see it," Arney said when asked by his colleagues to come up with a definition for pornography. That definition has eluded the U.S. Supreme Court, which has left the matter up to local communities.

The Bartlett amendment—or the pornography amendment, as it has come to be called—was opposed

and ultimately defeated by congressional critics who said that it amounted to government censorship and raised the specter of blacklists and Big Brother.

Arney said if Bartlett does not resuscitate the amendment when the funding bill goes to the full House for consideration, he will introduce it himself.

"I know that I am an average American and I was patently offended when I saw these poems," Arney said. "What we want to do is tell the endowment that someone is watching, that the Congress has the authority to call you to accountability, to see that tax dollars are spent in a manner commensurate with the taste of the American taxpayer at large, not a clubby group that thinks it knows better."

"He said he wanted to know someone is watching, and that someone is Big Brother," shot back Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.), chairman of the subcommittee that is in charge of drafting the bill that will authorize the endowment's existence for the next four years.

"What you are saying is that if you find Marxism offensive, we would say to the writer who perhaps does not, 'You will be denied public funds because of your political beliefs.' This is not just a simple amendment that tries to keep pornography out of the schools," Williams warned. "It is much more insidious than that."

Williams and others who voted against the Bartlett amendment said there is no debate over the offensiveness of the poems in question. NEA officials have said repeatedly that the poems were not produced with NEA funds, and that the panel of experts that awards the

grants has a consistent record of funding only projects of genuine artistic merit.

After the hearing, Rep. Arney said that his criticism of endowment practices began when a constituent and Texas poet complained that his own grant applications had been rejected. "This was a frustrated applicant who felt that his work was very good and some of the others, who were getting money, was trash.

"This is not a matter of censorship, it is a matter of judgment, of values . . . In a way I'm asking the NEA to live by the same standards that I set for my daughter: He who pays the bill, sets the standards. My daughter wanted to go to college, I told her you'll go to a school I approve of and major in an area I approve of. I didn't want her to major in art or history or literature or anything else that would leave her unemployed."