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House Panel Blocks Move to Censor Arts Funding

By IRVIN MOLOTSKY

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14.— An attempt by three members of the House of Representatives from Texas to cut off Federal funds to poets they accused of having written pornographic poetry has failed in Congress and has led to a suggestion by the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts that the Government does not make a very good censor.

One of the Texans had sought to require that Federal panels deny grants to artists for works that are "patently offensive to the average person and lack serious literary or artistic merit."

In testimony before a Congressional committee, the endowment chairman, Frank Hodsoll, said, "Our legislative history is clear that the endowment would not have been established if there were any suggestion that we would in any way influence the content of the art we support."

Mr. Hodsoll asserted that "some excellent art will be offensive to some or even a substantial group," but he added, "Our legal system places these matters primarily at the community level."

Mr. Hodsoll appeared before the Education and Labor Subcommittee on Select Education and Post-Secondary Education this week after the three Representatives from Texas mounted an effort to reduce funds to the endowment because money had

gone to some poets whose work they found offensive. Much of the poetry in question, however, had been written earlier, and not during the period subsidized by the grants.

Grants Are Minor Part

The arts endowment chairman said that, in any event, those grants represented a minuscule portion of the agency's activity, and he asserted that "any remedy designed to reach the occasional case would likely cause much worse problems than those it is attempting to solve."

Mr. Hodsoll concluded, "In a fiercely independent democracy such as ours, established by individuals who themselves were fleeing from persecution by those who did not share their particular point of view or spiritual predilection, we must ask ourselves which danger is greater: running the risk of someone speaking 'offensively,' to some, or running the risk of censorship of freedom of expression, and tyranny which would logically ensue from such a course."

An Amendment Proposed

Another witness, Cleanth Brooks, emeritus professor of rhetoric at Yale University, who testified on behalf of the Association of American Publishers, had the view that censorship is "a clumsy way of dealing with an important problem."

On the other side were Representatives Richard Arney, Thomas DeLay and Steve Bartlett, all Texas Republicans.

NY Times 9/16/85
Mr. Bartlett introduced an amendment to the endowment's authorizing legislation, which is up for renewal this year, that would have added this requirement:

"Panels of experts appointed to review or make recommendations with respect to the approval of applications or projects for funding shall, when reviewing such applications and projects, not recommend for funding those which, in the context with which they are presented, in the experts' view, would be patently offensive to the average person and lack serious literary or artistic merit."

Mr. Hodsoll said that this could not be done by a Federal panel. Besides, he added, "The arts include the ugly as well as the beautiful, just as life does."

The Texans used the question about obscenity in poems, which has been raised in the past, to challenge the need and appropriateness of the federally supported arts program.

"Even if they cleaned up their act, I still wouldn't want them to exist," Representative Arney said of the arts endowment.

Arts for 'Elitist Minority'

Mr. Arney said the endowment had no business subsidizing "obscene and pornographic poetry" at a time when Congress was looking for ways to reduce Government spending. He charged that the arts were enjoyed by an elitist minority of Americans and that Federal grants to the theater,

dance, opera and other art forms represented transferring tax money "from the less fortunate to the more fortunate."

He was supported by Representative DeLay, who said, "The taxpayers would be absolutely outraged if they could see what is being funded."

Mr. Arney and Mr. DeLay circulated excerpts from seven poems that had been written by people who had received Federal arts grants in the past. The excerpts contained four-letter words and graphic descriptions of sexual acts.

The full Education and Labor Committee wrote an end to this chapter of the dispute by defeating Mr. Bartlett's amendment in a 19-to-8 vote.