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Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 09

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Senate Cuts Endowments' '81 Funds

By Ruth Dean

Washington Star Staff Writer

A shock was in store yesterday for officials of both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. They learned that a Senate authorization subcommittee on Thursday had unexpectedly voted 6-to-10 percent spending level cutbacks in current appropriated funds for both agencies.

Still reeling from adjusting their 1982 budget requests to conform with the 50 percent slash asked by the Reagan administration, the endowments assumed current funds were the last of their worries. Referring to the unanimous subcommittee action, one observer even wondered if "it was legal," since it has been supposed that '81 funds appropriated in the lame duck Congress last December were immune to cutbacks.

Lights are likely to be burning late in the offices of both endowments this weekend as they assess their current financial posture against obligations already made. There are only four months left in the current fiscal year.

Joseph Duffey, NEH chairman, called for "a temporary (spending) freeze" to last until "perhaps Wednesday," he said, so bookkeepers can have more stable ground on which to work in assessing where they are and where they're going. The humanities endowment has already obligated 70 percent of its program funds. "We're still negotiating the conditions of program grants that were obligated by the previous two (humanities) council meetings," he explained. "These programs have been advertised and people prepared applications for the last 18 months."

Stopping just short of a moratorium, NEA chairman Livingston L. Biddle, Jr. said he and his staff were also spending the weekend figuring

out how the NEA will spread the 6 percent cutback proposed by the Senate subcommittee over the remaining 65 percent of its unspent current funds. "It's really quite complicated," he sighed.

Even their House counterparts thought the Senate subcommittee had acted precipitously. "They didn't even wait for the (Senate-House budget) conference report; it's crazy," said one staffer. "Now they'll have to go back and do it all over again, because they used only the Senate figure."

The Senate panel acted on a mandate from the Senate Budget Committee to cut back \$1.8 billion in the programs under its jurisdiction. The subcommittee, which authorizes spending levels for the endowments, voted Thursday to cut the arts endowment back from \$159.1 million to \$150 million; and the humanities endowment back from \$151 to \$140 million. They also lowered spending levels for 1982 and 1983.

Asked if it planned a similar action, a spokesman for the House postsecondary education subcommittee said it was awaiting the report of the Senate-House budget conference which has the final compromise figures, and as yet unscheduled action on them by its parent committee, the House Education and Labor Committee.

Given the usual labyrinthian route that legislation takes the endowments are expected to be in what Duffey called "a kind of limbo" until perhaps mid-July.

A Senate subcommittee spokesman conceded it had acted perhaps with dispatch, but hardly without preparation. "We've been working on this for six weeks," he explained.

Yes, he said, the subcommittee will probably have to meet again "to make further cuts - maybe \$100-to-\$200 million more than we have already made," to conform with the conference figures.

Lyman Calls Funding Cuts 'Punitive'

A leading educator and foundation executive told a House appropriations subcommittee yesterday that the 50 percent cut in humanities funding for 1982 proposed by the Reagan administration is "punitive" and "will do lasting harm" to the nation's cultural effort.

Dr. Richard Lyman, vice chairman of the National Council on the Humanities, and president of the Rockefeller Foundation, told Rep. Sidney Yates that "speaking as a private citizen . . . the 50 percent cut is too severe, and considerably deeper than most agencies have been asked to undertake."

Not only would it blunt scholarship efforts, the former Stanford University president said, but in some instances would cause some efforts "simply not (to) survive."

Lyman's warning was borne out in the testimony of endowment program chairmen whom Yates - as he did with the arts endowment last week - called upon to describe how deep cuts would affect their areas.

Not only would independent scholarship suffer, Yates was told, but so would public programs - like the popular "Odyssey" series on public television - and foreign exhibitions such as the Chinese Bronzes which toured the United States last year.

Stephen Rabin, chairman of public programs, said his area had been cut 60 percent in the endowment's revision of its 1982 budget request because other areas couldn't be cut.

Translated to everyday terms, Rabin said this would mean "no production support for major tele-

vision series and very few single programs." Pressed for further details by Yates, he said it would mean that were applications made in 1982 for programs such as "Odyssey," or "Hard Choices," a bio-medical series, or "American Short Story," funding probably would not be available.

Other program directors also reeled off examples of the degree of damage that would result from a 50 percent cutback, listing a sharp reduction in permanent museum exhibits, disappearance of independent scholarship, curtailment of Chinese and Islamic studies (which both Duffey and Lyman said are crucial to U.S. foreign policy insights), elimination of summer humanities study institutes for teachers, and restriction of archeology grants to ongoing projects.

Duffey said it would also mean postponement of such major scholarship projects as the collected papers of Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, Samuel Gompers, "and even some of our founding fathers."

Yates asked the NEH chairman what he thought of the prospect of the endowments being put under a public corporation - a suggestion attributed to but not confirmed by administration sources. Duffey called the idea "dangerous" because it allegedly would be premised on the idea of donations from private givers which would then be distributed by the corporation board.

Such a plan, he said, would have no built-in "safety checks on arbitrary decisions" such as the present peer review panels and requirement for matching funds.

- Ruth Dean