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Conservative arts patrons gear up to defend the N.E.A.

private money to the arts and that the poorest audiences and smallest cultural organizations, not the wealthy, will suffer if the N.E.A.
dies. "Elite is a very flexible word," said Mr. Heston, dismissing talk of "elite" N.E.A. "It primarily means someone you disapprove of."

Even David Christopher, a board member of the Pittsburgh Symphony as conservative he was one of 10 delegates to vote for Mr. Reagan over Gerald Ford at the '76 conven-
tion, says flaity that the Federal Government must encourage the arts as part of "the quality of life."

Peggy Collins, a KING Broadcasting heir whose contributions to the Seattle Opera more than triple those of the Federal Government, shrugs off past N.E.A. controversies; while she found Robert Mapplethorpe's photos "disturbing," she loved the gay epic "Angels in America." Another Repulicran stalwart, Thomas Barrow, a Texas oil man who is president of the Houston Grand Opera board, says, "There are N.E.A. grants I don't like, but I don't like where every military base in the U.S. is located, either."

Mr. Barrow will make his case strenuously to his longtime ac-
quaintance Tom DeLay, the power-
ful new House G.O.P. whip and
N.E.A. opponent. Lyn Grinstein of East Worth, who is on the executive committee of the Van Cliburn Con-
testion, intends to do the same with
Mr. Armey, whom she knows and regards as "very smart" and "open-
minded" but in need of more infor-
mation about the endowment.

And what about the new Speaker?
John Wieland, the biggest home builder in Atlanta and the board chairman of that city's High Mu-
seum, plans to tell him in person why
the destruction of the N.E.A. would be "a great tragedy for the coun-
try." Mr. Wieland, who has been a Gingrich supporter and contributor for a dozen years, says that the
Speaker is "one of the best thinkers of our time" and is "willing to say I made a mistake."

While no one expects any agency to emerge uncut in the new Con-
gress, some conservative Repub-
licans I talked to feel that the endow-
ment should take a modest hit at most. Many find the whole contro-
versy a counterproductive distraction from the real Federal downsiz-
ing promised by the "Contract With America," and wonder why time is being wasted arguing about the N.E.A.'s tiny $167 million when there's $16 billion in farm programs on the table.

The answer, of course, is politics:
The N.E.A., as caricatured by its
opponents, is red meat for the reli-
gious right. But as the arts' powerful Republican friends loudly join the other bipartisan forces mobilizing to save the N.E.A., they may yet force the new House leadership to choose between getting down to business or getting mired in a symbolic culture war that no one can win.