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Endowment for Arts deserved House slap

The U.S. House of Representatives sent an important message to the National Endowment for the Arts last week and, in the process, avoided action that could have damaged the relationship between the government and artists.

What should have become a serious case of government censorship did not become one.

The issue involved the annual appropriation to the National Endowment, an organization that provides funding for arts projects throughout the nation. The total appropriation is about \$171 million — peanuts in the overall scope of national spending. Indeed, the United States spends a smaller percentage of its money on the arts than many smaller nations.

Still, in times of budget problems, the arts seem a convenient place to cut, and the budget for the National Endowment is never secure.

It was less so this year than in some past times because of two outrageous art projects that the endowment funded: an exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe and a separate photographic project by Andres Serrano. Both have been criticized as inappropriate for public funding. The Serrano photo showed a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. The Mapplethorpe show was criticized by many for its sexual content.

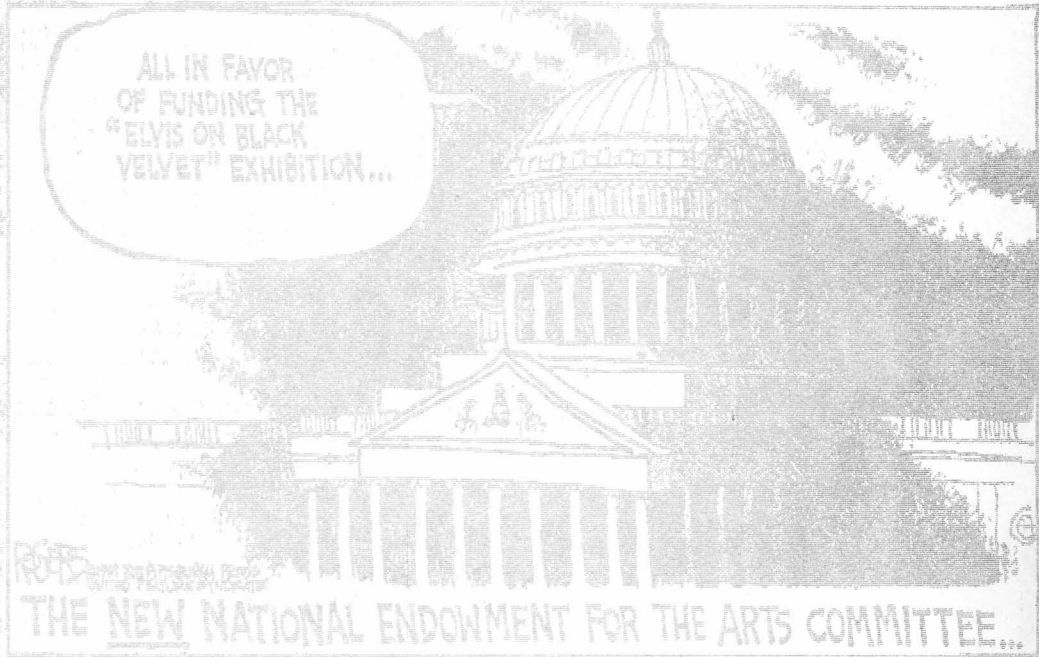
The two were the topic of argument when the House considered the funding for the National Endowment, which was included in the \$11 billion appropriation for the Department of the Interior.

Angry members of Congress first considered eliminating the entire budget for the endowment. That was quickly cast aside without a vote. Next was a vote to cut funding 10 percent. It failed. A vote to cut funding 5 percent was next. It failed, too. Finally, the House voted 361 to 63 to cut the appropriation by \$45,000 — that amount that was spent to support the two controversial exhibits.

Rep. Ron Machtley of Portsmouth opposed the large cuts and supported the \$45,000 measure.

We applaud all of these votes. The issue before the House was far more important than the work by the two artists, which is clearly distasteful. More significant, however, was the question of what role Congress should have in evaluating art. The danger, of course, is moving beyond the legitimate role of assuring wise spending of government funds to the arena of censorship.

In the House debate, many who defended the endowment denounced the two exhibits: "Is a picture of Jesus hanging from a cross submerged in a jar of urine worthy of public fund-



ing" asked Rep. Dana Rohrabacher of California.

Of course not.

But Rohrabacher's proposal to do away with all funding for the endowment was a ridiculous response.

Buying \$700 toilet seats is not worthy of public support, either, but nobody suggests doing away with all funding for the Defense Department.

The proposals to cut the endowment 10 percent or 5 percent were also stronger medicine than was required. Either would cripple an already underfunded program.

The \$45,000 cut represents the amount paid for the two outrageous exhibits. It makes the point that little care was used in supporting these two exhibits without damaging the good work done by the Endowment. It is a meaningful slap on the wrist.

In explaining his opposition to the more drastic proposals and his support for the \$45,000 cut, Machtley showed that he understands the problem of government censorship of the arts.

"I believe in the arts. I'm a painter," Machtley said. "We didn't need a chain saw to re-

spond to an administrative mistake."

Machtley said the officials who granted funds for the two exhibits did not exercise enough care in making their decisions and should be made aware of that fact. The decisions on what art to support and what not to support should be made by the Endowment, not the Congress, he said, but the Congress has a right and an obligation to assure that the process of making those decisions is reasonable.

"We ought to question where taxpayer money is spent" without becoming art censors, Machtley said.

We agree with this view and with the rational members of Congress, like Machtley, who sent a message without crippling the National Endowment for the Arts.

We are concerned that the endowment not be pressured into sponsoring only non-controversial art, but we do not think public funds need be used to support showing a crucifix suspended in human waste.

The \$45,000 slap on the wrist should not be intolerable pressure but it should alert those who run the endowment to the need for thought in spending tax dollars.