

1994

## Appropriations (1994-1995): Editorial 01

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## EDITORIALS

# ARTS FUNDING

## National Endowment plays an important role

It has become a ritual on Capitol Hill. Every year, it seems, the National Endowment for the Arts is forced to fend off attempts to slash its budget or abolish the agency outright. This year is no different. Last week, in a contentious debate, the House considered proposals to cut the endowment's appropriation in half or eliminate it entirely. The fact that the lawmakers ultimately trimmed the budget by only 2 percent was considered a victory of sorts for the besieged agency.

It would be one thing if the budget debate were driven by fiscal concerns. But nothing so responsible was behind the plans to kill or cripple the National Endowment for the Arts. Instead, the whole work of the agency was being judged on the basis of a single grant it had made. Clearly, a number of congressmen were out to punish the entire endowment because of one controversial — some would say, misunderstood — performance it had helped to underwrite this year.

Hinging a \$171 million budget on a \$150 grant is not only unfair; it is terribly shortsighted. Anyone who takes the time to consider the full sweep of the agency's work realizes that the National Endowment for the Arts makes an important contribution to the richness that is American life. One of this year's 4,500 grant recipients, for example, is the Dallas Symphony's Young Strings program, which is introducing the beauty of classical music to inner-city youngsters.

Obviously, since the agency draws its support from the public, it needs to be mindful of general standards of decency in awarding its grants. Still, art is inherently controversial. What some people regard as valid artistic expression other people will find objectionable. The challenge facing the endowment is to make sure that as many viewpoints as possible are represented among the 1,000 citizen panelists who review and judge the 18,000 grant applications received every year.

Congress should not lose sight of the larger issue at stake here. The arts are an essential element in our way of life — perhaps now more than ever. Educators have discovered that students are more engaged in all subjects when they learn about the arts. And, lately, the arts even have been used as a way to give juveniles a positive alternative to crime. That kind of bold work should be encouraged by Congress, not discouraged. When the funding comes before the full Senate, the lawmakers should resist efforts to make punitive cuts.