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Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 16

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The Arts Under Reagan's Ax

It was a happy moment for budget director David Stockman when he turned from the complicated issues of foreign aid and farm-price supports to the question of Federal aid to the arts and humanities—the National Endowment for the Frills, as hardheaded Republicans seem to regard it. It was not considered part of the “safety net” of social-welfare programs, but more a kind of trampoline for the elite. If synthetic-fuels and child-nutrition programs were on the block, after all, who would go to bat for a grant for “Heresies,” a feminist art quarterly, or the first book-length edition of Hegel’s letters in English?

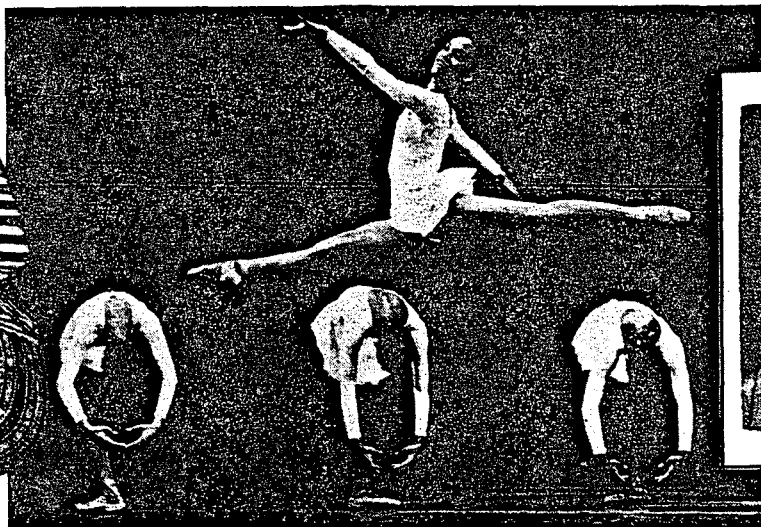
Stockman’s first impulse was reportedly

“Wasteland” to a House subcommittee hearing last week, warning of “voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” if the rain of Federal dollars should ever stop falling.

And culture has friends on Capitol Hill, although it has to make them the hard way—by conviction, rather than campaign contributions. Its lobby, the American Arts Alliance, is a four-person effort on a limited budget; but senators of both parties banded together last month as “Concerned Senators for the Arts,” while 134 members of the House belong to an arts caucus headed by New York Democrat Frederick Richmond, himself a wealthy

grams and large institutions—the museums, symphonies and opera companies—may have more success in fending off cuts than the small, community-based programs that have far fewer alternate sources of funding. “It’s not the people who pay top ticket prices who would be hit; it’s the people who can’t afford them,” says Martin Segal, who was named chairman of New York’s Lincoln Center last week and promptly announced a campaign to fight the cuts. “We fund a lot in the rural areas and the cuts will really hurt there,” says Frank Ratka, head of the Georgia Council for the Arts and Humanities. “For the most part they are new, emerging groups with no experience in fund raising.”

Debate: Can private sources make up the difference as Reagan suggests? Some leading lights in the arts say they must. “It is time to look to the private patrons of the arts, just as Michelangelo did,” says



Martha Swope



King Tut mask, Harlem dancers, MacNeil-Lehrer: ‘Voices singing out of empty cisterns’ if the rain of Federal dollars stops.

to cut cultural funds to zero, at a savings next year of something over \$300 million, though when the cuts were announced Feb. 18 he had restored half the money. Even so, the Muses—personified by Democratic Congressman Sidney Yates of Illinois, chairman of the Arts and Humanities Appropriations subcommittee—whispered a warning of a fight in the offing: possibly the loudest fight per dollar the Administration may face in getting its budget cuts through Congress. At stake is perhaps \$200 million in spending reductions in three agencies—the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities—an almost invisible .03 per cent of total Federal spending.

The Wasteland: The \$46 million the Administration proposed cutting from the arts endowment is in fact less than the Defense Department will spend this year on military bands. But not all the tubas in Fort Bragg could drown out the eloquent outrage of Broadway producer Alexander Cohen, who quoted T. S. Eliot’s “The

arts patron. Their legislative strategy is to present the arts as an economic boon as well as a spiritual one—an industry employing over a million people, generating \$5 in local tax revenues for every dollar of government support. “An unemployed artist,” observes lobbyist Anne Murphy, “is just as unemployed as an unemployed steelworker.” Yates, whose subcommittee will have to pass on the endowments’ budgets, thinks the 50 per cent cutback is “too drastic”; nevertheless, one member of the House leadership said he expects Congress ultimately to go along with Reagan’s proposed reductions.

It is too early to tell just where the cuts will fall; the grant system is intentionally designed to put layers of bureaucracy between politicians and artists. This is especially true in public broadcasting, which is funded two years in advance, although star public-television journalists Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer are already considering where they might take their award-winning news show if funding dries up after 1982. One fear is that mass-audience pro-

actor Charlton Heston, chairman of the federally funded American Film Institute, who played the great artist in “The Agony and the Ecstasy.” “I’ve had a lot of success with several major corporations.” But spokesmen for AT&T, IBM, Exxon and other corporations were doubtful whether they would be able to step up their arts funding very much. “We’re also going to be hit by the health, welfare and school people,” says Robert Thill of AT&T in New York. “There just isn’t enough to take care of everybody.” And in hard-pressed communities like Muskegon, Mich., which has the second-highest unemployment rate in the nation, the public may not be able to fill the gap. “Psychologically it would be wrong to go back to the people,” says Wilson Cronenwett of the city’s 41-year-old West Shore Symphony. “They’re being as supportive as they can.”

Artists say they are prepared to do their share in revitalizing America; what concerns them more than the exact level of cuts is the suggestion that the Reagan Administration may want to reopen the whole

debate over whether government should subsidize the arts at all—a debate they thought was won fifteen years ago when the two endowments were created by Congress. It is a debate that is largely settled among civilized nations, most of which spend far more in support of the arts than the United States. Britain—whose Prime Minister had so recently embraced her brother-in-austerity President Reagan—last week hiked subsidies for the Royal Opera House by 15 per cent, to nearly \$20 million. By contrast, Washington's arts endowment in 1979 made less than \$5 million in grants to all the opera companies in the United States.

'Blues in the Schools:' Support for the arts has somehow managed to be regarded as both suspiciously elitist and dangerously democratic. On the one hand, there is the neo-philistine argument, as raised by Boston lawyer and novelist George V. Higgins, who gripes, "I don't like the idea of a steam-fitter [paying taxes to] subsidize a book of poetry. Tickets for the [New England Football] Patriots are \$20. Should they be subsidized?" Taking the contrary view, an influential Heritage Foundation report to Reagan charged that the arts and humanities endowments "have compromised their high purpose by funding programs that dilute intellectual and artistic quality in order to expand their popular appeal." Conservatives question whether the endowments' Olympian ideals are advanced by funding an artist-in-residence in the Oklahoma prison system, or by paying blues guitarist Fenton Robinson to play "Stormy Monday" in the classrooms of Springfield, Ill., for a "Blues in the Schools" project. "We started this program mainly to reach black chil-

dren and tell them about some important part of their cultural heritage," admits Mike Townsend, a Springfield teacher. A worthy purpose, surely, but more a social goal than an artistic one.

In recommending the budget cuts, Stockman warned that artists and cultural institutions were beginning to look to the Federal government as "the financial patron of first resort"—supplanting individual and corporate donors. "This is simply not true," retorts Democratic Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, who wrote the original law creating the endowments. While Federal support for the arts endowment has gone from an initial \$2.5 million to about \$159 million, private contributions have swollen from \$226 million to \$2.7 billion. It is the rare theater or symphony that gets more than a small fraction of its budget from Federal grants; the average of 30 major nonprofit theaters was 4.6 per cent last year. But the government's influence is far greater than its modest dollar contribution because it serves as an official imprimatur of worthy endeavors. As the number of regional theaters, dance groups, symphonies, light operas, video collectives, mime troupes and jazz workshops has exploded, befuddled corporate benefactors increasingly turn to the arts endowment to sort out the competing claims.

The situation is different, and possibly more desperate, in the humanities, whose projects are without the obvious appeal of, say, a free symphony in the park or the NEA-assisted traveling exhibit of King Tut's treasures. There are scholarly projects such as a translation of the Popol Vuh, sacred book of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala, which received a \$28,000

grant in 1979, and bits of local boosterism like a historic coloring book of Wyandotte County, Kans. These are "not the sort of things you'd expect a corporation to fund," admits Joseph Duffy, head of the humanities endowment. But even Duffy agrees that "both endowments have grown too quickly. . . . Areas nobody questions are riding high."

The New Look: The two endowments are still controlled by Carter appointees—Duffy at humanities, Livingston Biddle at the arts endowment—but their terms expire in the fall, and Reagan is considered certain to replace them. A hint of what the Administration may look for in new chairmen comes from the transition teams. Washington publicist Robert Carter, who headed the arts transition team, criticized grants that make a "social statement," especially the "expansion arts" program, which makes awards for projects in prisons, neighborhoods and minority communities. Richard Bishirjian, a political-science professor at the College of New Rochelle in New York who headed the humanities team, found that the endowment was "inundated with junk"—a charge he backed up by singling out a \$753,000 grant to make a film about textile workers in North Carolina. Bishirjian approved, however, of a smaller grant for a film about Carl Sandburg. "The life of Carl Sandburg touches millions," he explained. "I'm not interested in the lives of workers." That, at least, is an unmistakable statement of purpose and a direct challenge to the spirit that has guided the endowments—which is that everyone ought to be interested in everything.

JERRY ADLER with MARY HAGER in Washington, STEVEN SHABAD in New York and bureau reports