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Arts Groups Gird to Take On the New Congress

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A 900 number has been set up for fund-raising to get the message out.

America; it's the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," said Ardis Krainik, general director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, which is getting some $500,000 from the Government this year toward its $30 million operating budget. She recalled that a large cut in arts funds was also sought when President Reagan took office, but that Republican allies on the boards of arts groups proved persuasive in rolling back the effort.

Martin E. Segal, chairman of the New York International Festival of the Arts and former chairman of Lincoln Center, said arts groups were best advised to make their case for Federal funds through influential members of their boards rather than by scattershot lobbying of Congress, and he indicated that such efforts were already under way.

The president of Lincoln Center, Nathan Leventhal, said that although the Federal contribution made up a bare 1 percent of the performing arts complex's $340 million budget (which is roughly double the arts endowment's entire budget), it helped. Besides, he said, the endowment's contribution amounts to 66 cents a year for every American. "We spend more on military bands than on the arts in this country."

Like a number of others, Mr. Leventhal attributed the anti-financing backlash to recent controversial artworks that offended religious and conservative sensibilities. Beverly Sills, the chairwoman of Lincoln Center, said: "I can't believe that out of thousands and thousands of grants they would latch on to two or three they found objectionable, whoever 'they' are."

"What happened after the $750 toilet seats?" she said in reference to military overcharges. "Did we attempt to shut down the Pentagon?"

To one major recipient of Federal arts and humanities grants, WNET/Channel 13 in New York, one of the nation's largest public broadcasting stations, the threatened cutback or cutoff was particularly ominous.

Although the station gets about a fourth of its $100 million budget directly or indirectly from Washington, by its nature it cannot fight for funds, said its president, William Baker.

"Our strength is our weakness," he said. "We're very apolitical. We're not left or right and we feel uncomfortable at lobbying for anything, including ourselves."

The station could not be self-sustaining, Mr. Baker said, because its programs were "not economically viable." Fully half the schedule consists of children's programming, he said, and 9,000 schools a day used WNET programs in their curriculum. Public broadcasting has been threatened before, he said, but never so directly.

For all the concern among arts groups about Republican leaders in Washington, there was praise for Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who has maintained city arts financing even in the face of severe budget problems. Ellen V. Futter, director of the Museum of Natural History, said that Republicans in New York City had been "extremely sensitive and highly sympathetic to the arts."

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