National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): News Article 07

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Reagan Aides Discuss U.S. Role in Helping Arts and Humanities

An important debate on the future course of Government policy on the arts is in progress in the inner councils of President-elect Ronald Reagan's advisers on cultural affairs. The debate is concentrated on the programs and policies of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its outcome is likely to determine how the two Federal agencies will allocate funds and establish priorities for years to come.

At the crux of this debate is a firmly held belief, reportedly to be virtually unanimous among otherwise divided Reagan advisers, that the activities of both endowments have been profoundly compromised by politicization and an accompanying lowering of standards under the Carter Administration.

Divergent Conclusions

Yet from this belief two widely divergent conclusions are being drawn. One calls for the adoption of narrower programs designed to meet stricter standards of professional accomplishment. This, in effect, would mean a significant withdrawal from programs of popularization and mass appeal, and a renewed emphasis on programs encouraging high art and professional scholarship.

The other conclusion is more extreme.

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Reagan Advisers Debate Financing of Arts

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It takes the view that the endowments have strayed hopelessly off their intended course and that the social and political causes unsanctioned by the legislation that brought them into being. As a result, there is no alternative but to abolish them altogether. It would, of course, appear to be an act of Congress to abolish the agencies.

Two committees have been authorized by the President's transition team to look into the activities of the endowments and make recommendations for policy. The committees assigned to evaluate the arts endowment is headed by Robert S. Carter, a Washington publicity agent who organized the Republican National Convention this year and is a former trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. The committee for humanities endowment is headed by Richard J. Bishirjian, a conservative writer and editor who is chairman of the department of political science at the College of New Rochelle in Westchester County.

Both committees have been meeting this week with officials of the endowments in Washington to submit interim reports, Dec. 22, and final recommendations Dec. 27.

Conservative 'Blueprint'

Until the recommendations are submitted, the struggle associated with the committees or the transition team is speaking out on public television and in the press record.

The substance of the debate now formulated into two conservative units - the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank based in Washington, as part of its so-called "blueprint" for a conservative American Government. The chairman of the team that wrote the harshly critical report on the endowments - Michael Joyce, executive director of the John M. Olin Foundation, which prepared the report for the Heritage Foundation - and several of his colleagues are now members of Dr. Bishirjian's committee on the humanities endowment.

The report states at the outset that recent activities of the endowments have a tendency to emphasize politically inspired social policies at the expense of the independence of the arts. It also suggests a "redirection of the efforts toward the highest purposes for which they were intended." Noting that the endowments were "created with the idea that the arts merit public support because of their social function," the report charges that they have strayed from that purpose.

"Sweeping Criticism

The section on arts endowment - written by Samuel Liptman, a concert pianist and former music critic for The New York Times, and 25th edition, was supported by Ted Weisgall, a composer and professor of music at Queens College, exits, especially sweeping in its criticism: "Because the current direction of the N.E.A. is in the hands of those with very few aesthetic commitments and less discernment, art is increasingly seen as mere entertainment, a diversion whose only purpose is - and the amount of money it received - is measured by the number of people who can be tuned to make up its audience."

Deploiting what it calls a "flawed conception of art" and the "validity of support advocated for individual composers, writers, and visual artists, the report goes on to say that the N.E.A. N.E.A. spends millions of dollars yearly to fund programs and policies which are not only unfounded in any way, but also are an enduring artistic accomplishments; and that in the process the endowment might jealous of the popular culture of the past, and the worst are little more than well-meaning and employment schemes. It calls for a categorical disallowance of the endowments of the "N.E.A. and removes the "arts" from the "art" when it is characterized as "art for the sake of social service."

"Principle of Scholarly Excellence"

The section on the report concludes that "the major problem" now facing the arts endowment is "not financial or philosophical" - "which need to redefine its mission as support of art and artists, nothing less, and nothing more."

Under the Carter administration, the National Endowment for the Arts has prided itself on extending its services to more groups and larger areas of the country. It has also reached by Federal programs in the arts in the past. Its governing philosophy has been to make the constituency for the arts while at the same time attempting to recruit the traditional values of the arts. As an example of the endowment's recent move to lavish money on expanding the mass audience for art at the expense of standards, critics cite the endowment's Expansion Arts Program. This was described in the endowment's 1979 annual report as "a point of entry for developing groups that are established in and reflect the culture of the arts, of America's pluralism, blue-collar, urban, and vysc culture communities." The report goes on to say that the Expansion Arts Program "is, in many respects, a mini-endowment" within the National Endowment for the Arts. The section of the Heritage Foundation report on the humanities agency was also highly critical. It was prepared, by, among others, Mr. Joyce and Philip Marcus, a former member of the endowment's staff. Dr. William J. Bennett, director of the National Humanities Center in Triangle Park, N.C., was consultant. Acknowledging that the agency "engages in many worthwhile tasks," the report urges that the endowment now "restrict itself in funding the humanities to projects and programs which truly are in the realm of humanities."

"A major issue in redirecting and reorganizing the agency will be to establish the principle of scholarly excellence as the criterion for budgeting and program definition."

$200,000 Office-Worker Study

In keeping with its support of what the report calls "the criterion of excellence," it urges that recently established "guidelines for racial or ethnic groups be applied to the arts endowment's norms and evaluation processes" be immediately revised. This section of the report also deplores "some present programs" that are said to serve political purposes.

A 1965 humanities grant of $199,853 to a group called Working Women: National Association of Office Workers, for holding classes, film forums and so forth, for office workers for improved conditions has been cited by critics of the endowment as an example of the kind of "political project," that, in their view, does not properly belong "in the realm of humanities."

It has been the policy of the National Endowment for the Humanities under the present Administration to take a view of the humanities that embraces popular culture and social-action programs as well as projects of a scholarly nature. It is keeping with its so-called "popularist" attitude toward the humanities.

Although the Heritage Foundation's report on the two endowments urges reform in the name of "serious art" and "scholarly excellence," there are other voices in the Reagan camp calling for the complete dismantling of Federal programs in art and culture. Speaking this week at the New College of Arts and M University, for example, Milton Friedman - the Nobel laureate in economics whose PBS series, "Free to Choose," did much to popularize his conservative economic theories said, "There is no justification that I can see for the National Endowment for the Humanities."

He added that "there is no justification that I can see for the $100 million a year that is being given to public broadcasting." He acknowledged that he was "a beneficiary, in part," but also said, "Fair is fair." Recent articles by Kingsley Amis and Ernest van den Heever in Policy Review, the journal of the Heritage Foundation, have likewise urged abolition of Federal programs in the arts.

How much of this debate on the future of the endowments will form the basis of their future policies is not something that anyone participating in the discussion is willing to predict, but the desire for change is felt to be very strong among those in a position to advise the new Administration.

Complicating the prospect of any quick categorical reversal of policy is the fact that the chairman of the endowments are not expected to leave their posts until next fall. The appointment of Livingston L. Biddle Jr., chairman of the arts endowment, will expire Nov. 4 and that of Joseph D. Duffey, chairman of the humanities agency, Sept. 4.

There are apparently a dozen senior staff positions at both endowments, however, that are regarded as political appointments, and these, of course, could change hands as President-elect Reagan takes over early in January.

Exactly where President-elect Reagan stands on the endowments remains a little vague. In his campaign, he spoke of the possibility of annual increases in funds for the arts, and generally showed himself to be favorably disposed to Government support for them. During his often-repeated talk of cuts in Federal programs, he made a point of stressing that his cuts were for cutting back on Government money for the arts. But he has also urged a greater degree of private and corporate support in this area.

Robert S. Carter

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 1980

Arts Lost Congress Friends

By MARJORIE HUNTER

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 25 - The defeat of three dedicated Congressional advocates for the arts is certain to affect the extent of future Federal involvement in the cultural life of the arts.

Swept from office in the presidential tide on Nov. 4 was Representative John Brademas, Democrat of Indiana, who acquired the title of "Mr. Arts" in the 10 years he guided such legislation through the House. Also defeated was Representative Frank Thompson, Democrat of Jersey, a key sponsor of legislation that created the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities in the 1960's, and Senator Jacob J. Nutts, Republican of New York, an influential voice in arts legislation.

Relegated to Minority Role

The elections also relegated another influential friend of the arts, Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, to the ranks of the minority when Republicans take control of the Senate. These losses and shift of power, when combined with President-elect Reagan's plan to trim Federal spending, are troubling the arts community.

Both Mr. Brademas and Mr. Thompson are members of a House Education Subcommittee with Jurisdiction over arts legislation.

The present chairman of the subcommittee, Representative William D. Ford, Democrat of Michigan, has relied on both Mr. Brademas and Mr. Thompson in shaping arts bills. And even Mr. Ford may not be able to avoid the new emphasis on the House, for he is under heavy pressure to cut Federal outlays in order to become chairman of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service.

In the Senate, Mr. Pell has been the leading champion of the arts. In his position as chairman of a subcommittee on education, arts and the humanities, Mr. Pell has been influential in the Senate, Mr. Pell will become ranking minority member of the panel, a post far less influential than the one he has held.

His Best Effective Voice

Though some of the most effective arts spokesmen will not be back next year, there will still be some influential voices.

In recent years, for example, Representative Slattery by the Yates, Democrat of Illinois, has become an effective voice in Federal spending on the arts, as chairman of a House appropriations subcommittee with Jurisdiction over that area.

Among other supporters of the arts who will remain in Congress are Senators Charles H. Percy, Republican of Illinois; Harrison A. Williams Jr., Democrat of New Jersey; Mark O. Hatfield, Republican of Oregon; Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, and William S. Cohen, Republican of Maine.