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OVER THE COFFEE



Donald
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Playing games with the NEA

Once a year Congress, like the villain in a silent film melodrama, ties the National Endowment for the Arts to the rails and threatens to leave it there until the train comes. And every year, just as the choo-choo arrives, it cuts it loose so that it can torment the poor thing another day.

It happened again just last week.

The solons (that's classical Greek for "chowderheads") always have an excuse for their inexcusable behavior. If it's not an NEA-sponsored exhibition of homoerotic photographs, it's an exhibit featuring a "sculpture" of Christ immersed in urine that gets the good ol' boys going.

Such controversies bring the virtuous in Congress to their feet quicker than "The Star-Spangled Banner." They angrily seize the microphones to announce their outrage at the immorality *du jour* and thunder at the degenerates who would inflict such decadence on the public at government expense. It's not the immorality that gets them so much, it's the wasting of the taxpayers' precious dollars. They threaten to cut off funding for the NEA. Then they get voted down. That's the drill.

This year the spark was provided by a performance artist in Minneapolis. Ron Athey, who is HIV-positive, punctured a pattern on the back of a fellow, HIV-negative, artist then blotted the blood with a towel and sailed the result on a wire above the heads of the audience. The event was sponsored by

the Walker Art Center, a recipient of NEA funds. It seems a little weird to me too, but the bottom line is that Athey's share of the NEA loot figured out to be about 150 bucks.

That was enough for the fellows in Congress, however.

"How can you rationalize throwing this money away?" asked Rep. Philip Crane of Indiana, who promptly introduced an amendment to abolish the NEA.

Another representative suggested the \$171 million NEA budget be diverted to children's program. Senators Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., issued dark threats and warnings. Draconian cuts were insinuated.

It went back and forth like that for a couple of days. The House finally approved a 2 percent cut in the NEA budget, while the relevant Senate committee opted for a 5 percent slice. The republic is saved.

But don't kid yourself for even one minute that any of those clowns were concerned about wasting taxpayers' money. If you're looking to save taxpayers' money, you don't turn to the NEA; \$170 million is a lot if you win it in the lottery, but in terms of the federal budget it's not even petty cash.

You want waste? You want big bucks? Look at the Pentagon. That budget is \$260 billion and the waste is astronomical — literally — and often deliberate.

Take the MILSTAR program, for example, a system of satellites meant to secure military communications while we fought a nuclear war for as long as six months. It took 13 years and \$8 billion to get the first satellite into the air earlier this year and already it is pooping out and running on a back-up power system. Also, there is no longer anyone to fight a six-month nuclear war with, if there ever was.

But does that mean our parsimonious Congress — Messrs Helms, Byrd, Crane and the rest — has asharuned it? No. It means it authorized spending another \$918 million for it this year.

As a matter of fact, according to a new report, between 1990 and 1993, Congress appropriated \$28.7 billion for defense programs that the Pentagon never asked for, didn't need and didn't want.

In another report, the Pentagon's own inspector general pointed to \$1.4 billion in questionable spending on building projects and said: "Every military construction project in the Department of Defense is suspect."

And still Congress votes for them, because there's a project in there someplace that benefits virtually each member's district.

For example, last year Senators Hollings of South Carolina, Johnston of Louisiana and Sasser of Tennessee gave an extra \$10 million to the Defense Department for the maintenance and operation of C-130 military transport planes, but insisted that the money be used only for planes in South Carolina, Louisiana and Tennessee. Great conservatives all.

So don't tell me they're trying to save money with the NEA. Most senators and representatives should recuse themselves voting on the NEA's budget, anyway, on the basis of conflict of interest. It's an educational institution and they have a vested interest in keeping the public dumb.