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Let's not scrap subsidies for arts, humanities

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A battle over subsidizing of the arts and humanities is being refought in the ranks of Reagan advisers. It poses a threat to the companion endowments that have been financed by Congress for the past 15 years. The most intensive criticism is being leveled at them for having been politicized and watered down in quality during the past few years. But that should not be seized by the new administration as an excuse to abandon a program that has done much to enrich the cultural life of the country.

The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have grown in a decade and a half to a point where they spend millions each year to sponsor artists, composers, writers and groups that either perform artistic works or stimulate appreciation of both art and scholarship. Recent changes in policy have been directed to tailoring activities to reach larger audiences — a popularization that has aroused intense controversy.

Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island has been at the center of the controversy, since, in his position as a subcommittee chairman on the programs, he has favored the new direction. The critics contend that this "populist" trend has worked to either politicize programs or to reduce standards of excellence.

While there was a certain logic in Senator Pell's insistence on the "populist" trend, it has always been questionable, because of the danger that, rather than

spread appreciation among the masses, the programs would result in compromising the excellence that both advocates and critics desired. Many of the Reagan advisers feel so much damage has been done

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that the programs should be abandoned completely. Budget cuts can be expected in any general paring of federal costs; but that is different from budget — and program — elimination.

Those who viewed government subsidy

of art and scholarship with mistrust originally but have since accepted the benefits should now speak out to prevent the entire undertaking from being scrapped. There is no excuse for throwing out the good along with the questionable. A change of administration should be able to put the programs back on their original path. If that lays the endowments open to new charges of "elitism," so be it.

In an age when more of the people will have leisure time, these programs can have a real impact in promoting good taste and appreciation of art, literature and other cultural activities. The aim always has been to prevent the United States from becoming a wealthy nation of illiterates. It is still a worthwhile aim.

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