Senate Speeches on the Arts and Humanities (1994-1996): Speech 16

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Mr. President, I rise in strong support of this amendment. I believe that the cuts in the budget to the National Endowment for the Arts reductions to the National Endowment for the Arts would be a major blow to mainstream arts organizations all around the nation. In addition, targeting these cuts to the theater and performing-presenting programs would place the existence of many smaller organizations which serve rural and inner city communities in grave jeopardy.

The theater, visual arts and performing-presenting programs have already suffered reductions of between one and two million dollars in recent years. Under this bill, these programs would each lose over 40% of their federal funding around the country. For the Trinity Repertory Theater in my own state of Rhode Island, one of the most innovative and important theaters in the nation, and one which has received significant funding from the Endowment’s theater program, this cut would be very severe. A reduction in funding will require the theater to eliminate those programs which do not provide an immediate financial return. In the case of the Trinity Rep, this will mean elimination of the extraordinary "Project Discovery Program" which brings 18,000 Rhode Island high school students each year to see a theatrical production. Hence, the money cut from the NEA budget would result in a dramatic reduction in the theatrical programs available to lower income citizens that can presently be offered at a reduced price because of federal aid.

These targeted budget reductions would also end the efforts of the Endowment’s Presenting and Commissioning Program to extend grants to rural and underserved areas, would virtually eliminate all theater educational programming and theater-for-youth programs and would eliminate funding for the development of new plays.

Mr. President, the National Endowment has given over 100,000 grants throughout its existence, approximately 4,000 a year. Two or three of those a year have become controversial, including the grant to Walker Institute of Art under the previous Chairperson of the Endowment. While I do not agree with the controversial program that was, in turn, sponsored by the Walker Institute with the federal funds it received, I am firmly of the mind that cutting nearly half of federal funding for all our theaters and visual arts around the country is not the best solution and is not in our nation’s best interest.

I hope that my colleagues will take these concerns into account, along with Ms. Alexander’s efforts to make the Endowment more accessible to applicants from communities around our nation and will support this amendment.