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Federal arts, humanities aid deserves budget scrutiny, too

ONE GREAT VIRTUE of occasional belt-tightening, as virtually all federal agencies except the Defense Department are now being reminded, is that it forces the spenders to rethink and defend their priorities. Like the proverbial 2-by-4 wielded to get the mule's attention, talk of a budget cut is a surefire galvanizer.

That doubtless is the primary goal of federal budget director David Stockman in urging President Reagan to seek sharp cuts in spending for two companion, 16-year-old programs, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Short of abolishing them, which Mr. Stockman does not propose, there's not much money to be saved in agencies whose budgets total only \$307 million in 1980-81. And it's extremely doubtful that Congress would trim these popular programs by anything like the amounts — nearly 40 percent — that he suggests over the next four years. But some pruning might be achieved, in the spirit of the times. And, more importantly, budget-cutting pressure could force timely rethinking of basic purposes.

Mr. Stockman recognizes the problem: His report notes the strong national constituencies for both the arts and humanities. But he also maintains that these agencies surely deserve a lower priority than the many human-needs programs that will have to be cut back if the federal budget is to be balanced.

That's hard to dispute: Man does not live by bread alone, to be sure. But if it comes down to bread vs. a challenge grant to the Kalamazoo Symphony or a year of overseas study for a professor of archaeology, then federal spending on the arts and humanities should have to take its share of trimming, too.

This doesn't mean that the two endowments should (or would) be gutted, as some Republican economizers propose. Even the right-wing Heritage Foundation, whose mountains of studies seem to have done much to help shape the Reagan program, does not propose major retrenchments. But the foundation does sensibly argue that it's time for a tough look at the goals of the endowments.

On the humanities, the argument mostly is on behalf of a return to quality: to a stress on research and scholarship rather than programs with political "sex appeal," such as promotion of humanities studies in the nation's schools, that should be shifted elsewhere if they're to continue. On the arts, it's the same, but more so. The Heritage Foundation is not alone in observing that much of the fast growth in the budget for the Endowment for the Arts has stemmed from a "pork barrel" instinct: something for everybody, and the more crowd-pleasing, the better.

This philosophy has been enormously popular on Capitol Hill, as it has been in the 50 states and thousands of communi-

ties that have benefited from grants to encourage the arts. But anything spread that widely has to be at least somewhat suspect, because quantity tends to become more important than quality. And a good argument can be made for greater efforts at the state and local level — as has happened in Kentucky with the Governor's matching grants and in Louisville with big gains in corporate giving.

To be sure, if money were no object it would be splendid to have Uncle Sam helping every needy scholar and every fledgling arts organization, particularly if there were adequate safeguards against federal controls or even censorship. And even with money in short supply, a good case can be made for some continuing federal encouragement of individual or group talent — especially in a start-up capacity — and perhaps of such an imperiled national treasure as the Metropolitan Opera.

But much of America's strength has been its inclination to let local communities decide their own priorities: are they interested in spending more of their own money to get better schools? An orchestra? A downtown parking garage? Daily garbage collection? A sports arena?

And when people at that level of government wince and say, "Well, obviously, we can't afford everything," they're playing right into the hands of people like David Stockman. He may be young and brash, but he's certainly right to remind us that the U.S. Treasury also is not a bottomless pit full of cash ready to be doled out for every worthy project. Nothing has happened to change the old axiom: There still ain't no free lunch.