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## Reauthorization: Hearings and Reports (1990): Speech 05

Vartan Gregorian

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TESTIMONY OF VARTAN GREGORIAN  
PRESIDENT, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

on

The National Endowment for the Humanities

Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies

The Honorable Sidney Yates, Chairman

17 March 1988

Chairman Yates, Members of the committee, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak today about the National Endowment for the Humanities. Although I am currently president of The New York Public Library, my point of view on the NEH is shaped by my also having been, over many years, a professor of history at universities in Texas and California, Dean of Arts and Sciences and Provost at the University of Pennsylvania, and a member of two different state humanities councils. Through this variety of experience I have become aware of the many different ways in which support from the NEH enriches our national life. I have come to believe that the teaching, research and public programs that NEH makes

possible are central to shaping the quality of our national discourse, as well as preserving our national heritage.

This is a particularly satisfying year in which to testify about the NEH budget, since this is the first year since 1981 that a reduction in funding has not been proposed for the agency. Throughout those seven years, which coincide with my tenure at The New York Public Library, this subcommittee's leadership has been the critical factor in preventing substantial reductions in the agency's funding. Without you, Chairman Yates, I would be testifying today about a very different agency. In addition, the NEH has had many fine Chairmen, who have all maintained commitments to scholarship, education, outreach, and the central institutions that support these activities. I am pleased that the current chairman continues this fine tradition. As a result of Chairman Lynne Cheney's leadership no cuts have been proposed for the NEH next year, and we can talk today about funding issues and priorities, and about achieving excellence, rather than about survival.

The real and potential contributions of the disciplines of the humanities to our national life are increasingly recognized in the press, in government, and among the American public. The need to improve the teaching of literature, history and language to our young people has been

highlighted in numerous widely publicized reports. Books about the humanities, or based on research in the humanities, are not only on best seller lists but are informing national debate: witness The Closing of the American Mind by Allan Bloom, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers by Paul Kennedy, and Bearing the Cross by David Garrow. The problem of books, periodicals, pamphlets and photographs crumbling in our libraries is becoming a matter of increasingly broad national concern.

The realization is growing that needs in the humanities are not just the needs of universities, but the needs of all Americans. In spite of this realization, Federal support for the humanities lags far behind Federal support for the arts. It was not always so. In the early years the respective appropriations for NEH and NEA were quite close. After 1977 they began to diverge, to the point where now \$27,000,000 more is spent on the arts than on the humanities.

I see no evidence that needs in the humanities are less pressing than needs in the arts, or that the contributions of the humanities to our society are any less impressive than those of the arts. To give just one example of need, at The Research Libraries of The New York Public Library, we this year are spending 300% more on the purchase of books and periodicals than we were in 1980, even though our collections

policies are unchanged. And as an example of contribution, what could be more significant to the nation's cultural and educational life than saving our past from irreversible physical loss?

Certainly responsible members of Congress have no interest in parity for the sake of parity, or in adding more money so that less worthy projects can be funded. You want to know specifically where additional funds are needed, and want to be assured that funds will be well spent. I have a few suggestions. While I understand that this is a year in which funding increases will be few, this subcommittee has always evinced strong interest in learning about the issues, regardless of dollars, in ends, not just means.

One area in which I know I speak to the converted is preservation. The actions of this committee and the NEH have exemplified what can be accomplished with Federal leadership and a modest initial investment of funding, which has grown over the years. I believe the critical question that faces us now is what the federal role in preserving our deteriorating heritage should be. NEH, appropriately, began with conferences, training, and model projects with broad impact. A number of large scale projects with national implications have also been funded. I believe the future federal role lies in supporting those national projects that

will save information and make it broadly accessible through microfilming. Progress is being made; the NEH and the community of national research libraries with the capacity to conduct microfilming should work in partnership to save the record of the humanities. The National Commission on Preservation and Access, from which you will hear later in this hearing, has been and will continue to be instrumental in this partnership, and The New York Public Library is pleased to cooperate in its effort. Substantial federal commitment in this area would be an incentive for the expansion of preservation capacity. It will also result in greatly expanded national access to our intellectual resources, since filmed volumes can be shared more easily than the originals.

The libraries that have active preservation programs are often quite different from the libraries that conduct public humanities projects. The New York Public Library is one of the few where these two NEH programs come together. In fact, our preservation program often treats fragile materials so that they can then be exhibited to the public in a project supported by the Humanities Projects in Libraries and Archives Program. This fine program is often a vehicle for making the fruits of recent research in the humanities available to a broad public. For example, at The New York Public Library, our programs on the bicentennial of the U.S.

I am pleased that our sister institutions have always supported the unique nature of NEH funding to NYPL.

For the past three years the NYPL has received this special NEH support through the Challenge Grants program. The existence of this program is a result of Congressional recognition that the humanities would be well served not just by support for projects, but by strengthening the financial underpinnings of the institutions where the humanities thrive. The Challenge Grants program has been enormously successful, and remains in great demand. The annual success rate of applicants is only 20%, and even successful applicants do not always receive the full amount requested. I firmly believe that the kind of basic, substantial support that Challenge Grants provide does as much to contribute to the health of the humanities in this country as do some specialized projects. I recommend expansion of Challenge Grants funding so that the opportunities for other institutions to receive these grants will be more numerous and more substantial.

These three areas are ones with which I am familiar, where I know the need is great. There are surely others. My colleagues who teach will surely be able to recommend ways in which NEH resources can help strengthen education. The fine work of the state humanities councils could have even greater

impact if additional funds were available. The NEH has enormous opportunities to strengthen our intellectual resources, improve the quality of the education of our young people, preserve our nation's rich history, and exemplify democratic principals of free public access to important ideas and traditions. The agency is doing a magnificent job. With your help, they can do even more.