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Congress a poor art critic

Members of the U.S. Senate have been handed budget knives and asked to make like art critics. On the chopping block is funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, and guiding the hand of Congress is the misguided notion that the public wants politicians setting a national standard for artistic taste.

The House has already agreed to cut 2 percent of the NEA budget, though hardline Republicans wanted to chop deeper. Bristling conservatives, unhappy that government money might be spent in support of art they find distasteful, have aimed their anger at NEA funding.

In debates last month, Rep. Robert Dornan, R-Calif., referred to one NEA-sponsored artist as a "porno freak" as he whipped up Republican support for a failed attempt at a bigger cut. Said Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., leader of the House art critics: "Art should provide us with a whiff of greatness, provide optimism. It should cultivate good taste and elevate the human spirit. It should not turn to pessimism and negation and be sponsored by the federal government."

A Senate committee has recommended a 5 percent cut totaling $8.5 million that includes $1.5 million less for matching grants and challenge grants.

The cuts are unmistakably part of a punitive drive, and as such should be turned back. This kneejerk legislation was motivated, in part at least, by widespread coverage of Minneapolis performance artist Ron Athey's act last spring in which the HIV-infected man cut himself, then dangled a bloody towel over the heads of the audience.

Mr. Athey received a small grant from the NEA. Many may disagree with what he called art, but government should not be in the habit of censoring art through budgeting. The NEA, besides, supports much more than that.

Testifying before the House appropriations subcommittee in May, New Orleans restaurateur Leah Chase, who spoke as a trustee of the New Orleans Museum of Art, talked about another side to government funding of the arts.

"Today more than ever before, our country needs the arts to nourish the minds of our children to the creative wonderment of life and to soften the hearts of all people who call the United States their home," Mrs. Chase said.

"For me, support of the arts is an investment in the artistic excellence of my people, an investment in the education of the neighborhood kids, who like me a time ago, needed to see something beautiful and breathtaking in order to aspire to higher things and to value living more."

That is the unending potential of the arts. Members of Congress should not trample on all that potential just to get at the few who offend them.