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As early as Tuesday the United States Senate may vote to maim American cultural institutions from the Old Globe Theater in San Diego to the Art Institute of Chicago to Kennedy Center in Washington. And it has all happened because of a firestorm accidentally ignited by two middle-aged friends — Dennis Yelkin, a hair stylist, and Jim Berenson, a flight attendant — who went to a performance in a tiny cabaret theater in Minneapolis four months ago.

How did a visit to a show by two arts-loving suburbanites evolve into a crisis imperiling the National Endowment for the Arts? The story would be a farce if the stakes weren’t so high — and if the threat to the N.E.A. were not another example of how the religious right poisons the civic atmosphere.

The performance Mr. Yelkin and Mr. Berenson saw, an adults-only fringe event sponsored by the Walker Art Center, was given by the now notorious Ron Athey, who uses ritual tattooing as part of his autobiographical art. But at the time Mr. Athey’s show was not notorious; it only became so after surfacing in The Minneapolis Star Tribune three weeks later.

In that front-page article, Mr. Yelkin and Mr. Berenson are the only two audience members quoted by name. Their description of the Athey event suggested that a panicked crowd fled from overhead towels allegedly soaked with a performer’s H.I.V.-positive blood. The story also reported that $150 in N.E.A. funds had been spent on the show.

Soon the Christian Action Network was recycling the account in a “Declaration of War” asking its faithful for money to prevent the N.E.A. chairwoman, Jane Alexander, from seeking a $50 billion budget for “dripping blood on the audience.” (The N.E.A.’s actual budget is a mere $49.83 billion short of that figure.) Before long The Washington Times imported this hysteria to the capital, running a dozen pieces, among them a crude satirical fantasy of Ms. Alexander’s being kidnapped by North Korea’s Kim Jong Il.

The noise reached the prim Senator Robert Byrd, all-powerful Democrat who is chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and he has now responded by supporting unprecedented cuts of 40 percent to specific N.E.A. programs. A typical example: Theater grants would be reduced from $5.3 million to $2.2 million — thereby making the entire Federal largesse to American drama, much of it spent on programs for children, less than half the budget of a single Broadway musical like “Beauty and the Beast.”

How did things reach this pass? By one long trail of lies. Last week both Mr. Yelkin and Mr. Berenson, furious at their exploitation by N.E.A. opponents, told me that their words were taken out of context in the original Star Tribune article; both called the Athey performance “valid,” if shocking, art. Other witnesses have said that there was no panic, no dripping blood and no health hazard that night in Minneapolis. For that matter, the $104,500 Walker Art Center grant from which came the infamous $150 was not even approved by Ms. Alexander but by her conservative predecessor, Anne-Imelda Radice, who had been installed by George Bush to placate the religious right.

Now dozens of cultural institutions — including the Wheeling Symphony in Senator Byrd’s own West Virginia — stand to be penalized because of a cunning fear campaign designed to make voting against the N.E.A. synonymous with voting against AIDS-infected blood. Whatever happens in Congress, the hysteria will enrich the Christian Action Network, its political patrons and their fight against abortion rights, homosexuals and the separation of church and state.

Senators who threaten to vote against the N.E.A. say they are safeguarding either the public health or the taxpayers’ dollars. Don’t believe them. There was no health threat, and why would the same politicians who slept through the grand larceny of the S.& L. scandal be so concerned about $150 — or the rest of a tiny N.E.A. budget that is less than the Government spends each year on military bands? And if protecting public morality is the issue, why not cut the defense budget for the outrages of Tailhook?

The N.E.A., about to be punished for a crime it didn’t commit, is simply an easy, politically cost-free whipping boy for the far right as it seeks to raise money and support for its larger agenda. Since the N.E.A.’s most powerful Washington allies are at this moment so busy with their own larger agenda, especially health care, the arts need all the friends they can get — and now.