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7-13-1989

## Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 19

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July 13, 1989

POST

# House Trims NEA Budget as Reprimand

## Drastic Cuts Rejected In Arts Funding Bill

By Elizabeth Kastor  
Washington Post Staff Writer

In a move one congressman called a "slap on the wrist," the House voted yesterday to cut the proposed \$171 million budget for the National Endowment for the Arts by \$45,000—the exact amount the agency gave for two controversial photography exhibits.

Three more drastic proposals—to eliminate the NEA budget, to cut it 10 percent and to cut it 5 percent—were defeated.

The \$45,000 solution—approved 361 to 65—was the idea of longtime arts advocate Rep. Sidney Yates (D-Ill.) and was seen as a compromise that allowed members of Congress to satisfy NEA critics without slashing the budget.

"I don't favor cutting the arts," Yates said. "But if there was to be some form of amendment to signal to the endowment how the House felt about it, then it ought not to be punitive on anybody or any organization, and it should be limited to the amount of money involved." He called the vote "a victory for the arts" in view of the campaign led by Rep. Dick Armey (R-Tex.), who had proposed the 10 percent cut.

"Really, it's a shot across the bow," Rep. Charles Stenholm (D-Tex.) said of the \$45,000 cut, which he introduced. "It's sending the appropriate message without shooting everything in sight."

The NEA budget must still be considered by the Senate, so yesterday's actions are not final. The vote came after three months of intense debate on the Hill over the NEA's funding of art that some find offensive.

The controversy began over an Andres Serrano photograph of a Christ figure submerged in a container of the artist's urine. Serrano was supported by a \$15,000 NEA grant to a North Carolina arts group. NEA critics were further outraged by a \$30,000 grant that funded a

See NEA, C15, Col. 4

# House's Slap At NEA

NEA, From C1

traveling show of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe. The Mapplethorpe show, which includes a series of homoerotic and sadomasochistic pictures, was scheduled this summer at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, but the museum—in a much-criticized move—canceled it to avoid becoming embroiled in the political battle.

Oregon lawyer John Frohnmayer, whom President George Bush has selected to be the next NEA chairman, said from Portland, "I was relieved that the punitive cuts did not go through, but I recognize that the \$45,000 cut is a very clear signal from the House of Representatives and one that the NEA and myself personally would be ill-advised to ignore."

NEA acting chairman Hugh Southern called the vote a "vindication. It seemed like democracy was working its difficult way out. The opposition only offered two grants for criticism, which seemed in the end not to amount to very much. We will go on working with members of Congress to resolve their concerns. I really think that on the whole this is a remarkable example of the system working . . . to really lay out the issues as it should be done and to encourage the debate about the role of federal funding for the arts."

Yates, the chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the NEA, suggested the \$45,000 cut to House Whip William H. Gray III (D-Pa.), who then asked Stenholm to offer it for a vote.

On the House floor, Stenholm praised the NEA for having only \$45,000 worth of problems in the four years since the agency last came up for

its periodic reauthorization, a process scheduled again for next year. "If only the rest of government would . . . listen as well to Congress as the NEA has done since 1985," he said.

"You have to look at it as a victory," said Anne Murphy, executive director of the American Arts Alliance. "There were efforts to cut by 100 percent, 10 percent and 5 percent. In accepting an amendment for \$45,000, I think Congress felt it wanted to send a signal to the endowment that they would be constantly aware of their responsibility for dispensing public money. I have to say, I think the endowment is aware."

Yates already had attempted to quell the criticism by inserting language in the appropriations report that would make the NEA more accountable for money that had been regranted, as was the case with the money given Serrano by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Yesterday's debate, which took several hours in the middle of congressional consideration of the House Appropriations interior subcommittee's \$11 billion budget, was often fiery.

"This is an extreme amendment," Yates said in response to the 100 percent cut proposed by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.). "This is justice as it is accorded in Iran. This is the justice of Ayatollah Khomeini to the proclaimed blasphemy in Salman Rushdie's book—'Off with his head!'"

In June, Arney wrote a letter critical of the agency that was signed by more than 100 members of Congress. Yesterday he waved the catalogue from the Mapplethorpe show—which has been circulating on the Hill for weeks—saying, "I won't show you the prints within this book."

His proposed 10 percent reduction, he said, would show the NEA that "if you do not want to be sensitive, responsible, respectful and tolerant of the taste of the vast majority of American people, if you insist instead on being clearly, blatantly . . . obnoxious in violation of the tastes of a clear and vast majority of the American people, you will have your funding reduced."

Calling the proposed \$45,000 cut "a puny little effort," Rep. Robert Walker (R-Pa.) said of the Serrano photograph:

"If somebody wants to wallow in their own excrement, that's fine, but it should not be at public expense."

"Once again, we have politicians rushing in to define what is academic work, what is scientific endeavor, what is a work of artistic value—where none of us are qualified to do that," said Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) during the debate over the proposed 10 percent cut. "Somehow, you're going to put in your newsletter that you took a courageous and bold action against the National Endowment for the Arts—a distinguished agency! It's a disgrace to this body that we're considering this amendment."

Yates said that having Stenholm introduce the winning amendment was a wise political move. "Mr. Stenholm is one of the leaders of the Southern group of congressman, and he's very highly respected not only by his Southern colleagues, but also by all the Democrats. When he's willing to take a position as he did, it makes an impression. I think it was very helpful to the position we took."

Some arts supporters worried yesterday that the House action, although not as harsh as it might have been, set a disturbing precedent for congressional interference in NEA granting procedures. But there was also agreement that, given the political climate, the cut inflicted "as little harm as possible," as Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.), chairman of the subcommittee that will hold NEA reauthorizing hearings, put it.

Asked if he was worried that the House has set a precedent, Frohnmayer said, "I think we have to keep in mind that Congress really does control the purse strings and what they have done here is to pass an appropriations bill. I am not of the view that Congress just has to appropriate the money and can't say anything about how it's used, so it's not my view that Congress was out of line."

Sens. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), Alfonse D'Amato (D-N.Y.) and others, including some Democrats, have criticized the NEA, and a fight in the Senate is also possible. A Helms staffer said yesterday that Helms is "considering" his plans.