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Before the Senate passed a bill the other day providing for creation of a National Arts Foundation, some strange arguments were made for it—strange, even allowing for the customary flights of Senatorial oratory.

The measure authorizes Federal grants to states and nonprofit professional groups of up to \$5 million in the present fiscal year and \$10 million annually thereafter. It was called "urgently needed" by Sen. Claiborne Pell.

How come urgently? Well, "one of the great advantages over the Communists enjoyed by the West," he said, "is in the area of the creative arts, but . . . in the United States we are rapidly losing our relative advantage."

That is likely to be news to a lot of people. The Soviets do pay a lot of attention to the arts, but most observers are unimpressed by the general run of the art which the Soviet system of circumscribed freedom allows. In any case, it is not clear why the U.S. should be called upon to emulate Soviet subsidies.

Nonetheless, so intensive is the Soviet sponsorship of artistic endeavor, said Sen. Jacob Javits, that the U.S. should give official recognition to the arts. "The grandeur and dignity of our nation are at stake," he said. Just exactly as though spending Federal money is a sure way to produce instant culture.

And Sen. Kenneth Keating, in support of the bill, cited the "financial crisis" faced today by the arts—even though they're flourishing on the greatest scale ever. In the past, he said, the arts "have had their greatest support from private sources" which now are dried up "in part by reason of our tax programs." But why have those tax programs grown so burdensome? In part, by reason of measures like this which bring the Government needlessly and expensively into areas where it has no business intruding.

Thus was passed a bill which, if it ever becomes law, would paint the first faint strokes on a huge canvas of Federal activity.