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2-20-1981

Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 51

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Recommended Citation

Schonberg, Harold C., "Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 51" (1981). *Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982)*. Paper 48.
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Proposal to Cut Back Budgets of Cultural Agencies Called Unfair

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

President Reagan's proposed 50 percent cut in the appropriations from the Carter budgets for the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities has created consternation and some resentment among New York cultural leaders.

Many consider the cut unfair. All are agreed that arts agencies, like all Government agencies, have to tighten their belts. But they point out that the endowments for the arts and the humanities are the only two Government agencies for which so extreme a cut has been recommended.

Most heads of the large cultural organizations say they could live with a 15 or even 25 percent cut in Federal money. The sums involved, they say, are not a matter of life or death to such groups as the Lincoln Center organizations or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, smaller groups could be hard hit. Many small groups rely extensively on Federal money, and those are the less-glamorous organizations working in communities.

Effect on Research Projects

Many scholarly research projects in New York's colleges and universities would also be curtailed if the 50 percent cut in the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities went through.

Cultural leaders say that Washington seems to have no idea of the economic importance of the arts around the country and in New York in particular. The benefits from the arts to New York are estimated at between \$3 billion to \$5 billion

annually — from cultural events and such spinoffs as tourism, real-estate values and taxes, and benefits to business.

The endowments were created in 1966; the original budget for both totaled \$2.5 million. It has risen steadily ever since. For fiscal 1982, in the budget submitted by the outgoing Carter Administration, they would have been \$175 million for the arts endowment and \$169 million for the humanities. The cuts would bring those sums down, respectively, to \$88 million and \$85 million. Their 1981 budgets are \$152 million and \$155 million.

In addition, a 25 percent cut is being recommended in the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's \$172 million budget. Its budget for this fiscal year is \$162 million.

Contributions Could Diminish

It is not only the loss of the money that disturbs cultural leaders, who say each dollar in Federal money is the equivalent of five additional dollars raised in matching funds from corporate, philanthropic and private groups. A possible drying-up of contributions worries cultural leaders.

"Any cutback for the arts is a tragedy," Beverly Sills, general manager of the New York City Opera, said yesterday. "The Federal funds generate a lot of extra money. The Government's attitude can be catching in terms of foundation and private giving. It could be contagious, and is dangerous."

Many figures in the arts yesterday echoed Miss Sills's remarks. Richard Dougherty, vice president for public affairs of the Metropolitan Museum, was

especially concerned about the challenge grants of the humanities endowment:

"It's murky and unclear, and we all will have to learn more about the intent of the cuts. But it seems to me that challenge grants are directly in line with what President Reagan is asking for. He wants the arts to rely on private sources. Challenge grants do exactly that."

5% of Annual Budgets

Most major New York cultural institutions in recent years have received challenge grants from the national endowments in excess of \$1 million, for which they have to raise an additional \$3 million from nongovernmental sources. John W. Mazzola, president of Lincoln Center, and Richard W. Couper, president of the New York Public Library, both said yesterday that Federal money was essential in bringing out private support.

For most major cultural organizations in New York, Federal money amounts to about 5 percent of their annual budgets. But the research divisions of the library receive about 25 percent of their budgets from the Federal Government.

A. B. Spellman, head of the Expansion Arts Program of the arts endowment, said yesterday that service-oriented programs of minority groups would be hurt. He said that because grants were so small to begin with, whole programs rather than grants would have to be cut. Such groups as the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Harlem School of the Arts and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater could be affected.

Livingston L. Biddle Jr., chairman of the arts endowment, said yesterday that the state had received more than \$31 million, or 18 percent, of the entire arts allotment. Of that, \$25 million goes to New York City. Joseph Duffey, chairman of the humanities endowment, said that the city disbursement was even larger — about one-third of his agency's budget, or \$40 million.

Sums range from several million dollars to the Metropolitan Museum to \$3,000 for certain scholarly projects. For eight years in a row, the humanities endowment has given the library a challenge grant of \$1.6 million, and the library has raised triple that sum each time.

Dance companies were also worried about the effects of the requested cuts. Joyce Moffatt, general manager of the American Ballet Theater, pointed out that the company, the New York City Ballet and the Joffrey Ballet, among others, would be hurt if funds from the arts endowment's Large Touring Program were curtailed.

The program gives sponsors of performances by these companies around the country 30 percent of the fee. Without that guarantee, sponsors might not be willing to take the risk of presenting the companies on tour.

Mr. Biddle, in a statement released yesterday, said that he was aware of expressions of concern by many members of the arts community. He promised the endowment would continue to function as "positively and constructively as possible for the abiding value of the arts."

For WNET-TV, the proposed cuts could mean less financing for such nationally broadcast programs as "The McNeill-Lehrer Report" or the "Great Performances" series. Lawrence Grossman, president of the Public Broadcasting Service, said yesterday that "at a time when public-television's audience is growing dramatically, we see grave risks that the demand for good programs will not be able to be filled."

The most dramatic victim may be National Public Radio, which receives nearly all of its financing from the Government — \$14.1 million for fiscal 1981.

It has recently been argued that administrative costs in public broadcasting were excessive, with large office staffs and elaborate furnishings costing too much in relation to spending for programming.

Lines Drawn for Battle

The reaction of small-theater groups was expressed by Nancy Heller, executive director of the Off Off Broadway Alliance. She called the President's proposal "disastrous, undermining a pattern of pluralistic support for the arts." "The smaller and poorer you are," she said, "the quicker you are to feel the crunch."

On Capitol Hill, lines were being drawn up for a battle over the cuts. Some legislators say the cuts are too deep.

"The arts shouldn't be cut to the magnitude of 50 percent, but they shouldn't be exempt from belt-tightening altogether," Senator Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, said.

NY Times Feb 20, 1981