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While You’re Up, Get Me a Grant

Raccoon hunting; hand fishing; the harp tradition of Uganda. There’s a grant to study nearly anything at the National Endowment for the Humanities.


You should be. Your taxes are paying for these—and hundreds of other dubious projects funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

When President Reagan recently proposed a 50-percent cut in the NEH budget—saving taxpayers $85 million this year alone—reaction was swift: “Shortsighted and Philistine,” fumed the American Arts Alliance, a Washington-based lobby; “A serious blow that could set back 15 years of work,” lamented NEH Chairman Joseph Duffey.

But the NEH has no one to blame but itself. It has dispensed nearly $1 billion in federal funds—too often on grants that range from the trendy to the trivial. Says Sidney Hook, a

By Joseph A. Harris
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senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution and a member of the NEH's National Council from 1973 to 1979: "I have seen the NEH transformed into a political tool that today amounts to wholesale subsidization of mediocrity."

Consider these examples:
- $2500 to the University of Iowa "to help youth understand how the sky has influenced the humanities disciplines."
- Up to $22,000 to the University of Illinois "to study the impact of Cicero's jokes on Renaissance France and Italy."
- $145,940 to the Municipal Art Society of New York "to produce an exhibition on the humanistic aspects of New York's Grand Central Terminal."

Asserting that "world leadership rests in part on the nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit," Congress set up the NEH in 1965. Since then, its budget has leaped from $2.5 million to $151 million. Some of that money has been well spent. A $260,736 NEH grant enabled artifacts from the tomb of King Tut to tour the country to the delight of millions of museum-goers. Awards to scholars have produced such solid work as a thesaurus of classical Greek and atlases of early American history. The NEH funded the 13-part, public-television series, "The Adams Chronicles," which was seen by four million viewers a week, and a popular series on the American short story, with works by Hawthorne, James, Faulkner, Hemingway and others.

But as the NEH's budget rose, so did its vulnerability to political pressures. By 1976 it was spending $85 million a year, and some key members of Congress felt that not enough of the money was reaching their constituents. That year, Sen. Claiborne Pell (D., R.I.), chairman of the Education, Arts and Humanities Subcommittee, blocked the reappointment of the NEH Chairman Ronald S. Berman, a respected Shakespeare scholar, on the ground of elitism.

Joseph Duffey, former Democrat candidate for the Senate and a top policy adviser to Jimmy Carter's campaign, was named to head the agency in 1977, and he undertook to raise its profile. Accordingly, the NEH hosted more than 40 social events in his first nine months at the agency. Duffey also made liberal use of Chairman's Grants, which do not require prior review by grants officials. Originally intended for emergency situations when there was not money, the grants were often awarded to please politically important factions such as ethnic groups and labor unions.

Even when not political, grants approached the ultimate in futility. Witness $2445 to a man for "raccoon hunting and hand fishing: a study of two vanishing skills," and $2500 to a researcher to study "the significance as cultural artifacts of neon-tube advertising in Texas."

Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman has a theory to
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explain such politicization and de­
basement of culture. "If you put a
pot of gold at the NEH," he says,
people are going to try to get it."
Friedman thinks President Reagan
has not gone far enough: "The only
solution is to abolish the agency."

Investigators from the House Ap­
propriations Committee criticized
the NEH for conflicts of interest
among persons assessing applica­
tions and staff pressure on the sup­
posedly independent review panel.
The Rockefeller Foundation's Com­
mision on the Humanities put its
finger on an administrative failure:
grant evaluation procedures had not
been clearly defined. In fact, grant
results are reviewed by the same
people who award the funds in the
first place and who have a vested
interest in making their projects look
good.

Meanwhile, formerly vigorous
areas of our cultural life are increas­
ingly hooked on federal funds. Au­
thors, who used to rely solely on
their talents to write salable books,
now ask for—and receive—NEH fel­
lowships and grants. An author who
has already received an advance
from his publisher will approach the
NEH for further financial aid. When
the book comes out, the writer
gets royalties, the publisher gets
profits—and the public gets to pay
twice for the book: once with tax
money and again at the bookstore.

Some in Washington feel that,
despite its excesses, the NEH budget
is peanuts. Voicing skepticism that
Congress would support a cut in the
Endowment's fund, Sen. Howard
Metzenbaum (D., Ohio) commented,
"We're really talking about a
very modest amount of money."

Others disagree. After three years
on the NEH Council, Prof. Jacob
Neusner of Brown University has
concluded that the main problem
with the agency is simply that it has
too much money. "It ought to keep
the really good programs and cut out
the rest," he holds. "Then we
wouldn't look so foolish with such
silly grants."

Recently, the NEH has dished out
funds to finance such projects as
"Prizefighting in Boston's Irish
Community," "The Americaniza­
tion Process of Syrian-Americans,"
"The Life and Times of Rosie the
Riveter," "Mothering in Three
Generations of Orthodox Jewish
Women," "The Harp Tradition of
Uganda," and "Medieval Doctri­
nal Attitudes Toward Male Sexual
Aberration."

"These six studies cost taxpayers
nearly $220,000," says Sen. William
Proxmire (D., Wis.). "That's every
tiny penny paid in federal taxes by 120
typical Wisconsin families. It's their
money we must protect."

Those proud of keeping an orderly desk never know the thrill of finding
something they thought they had irrevocably lost.

-Sydney J. Harris, Field Newspaper Syndicate