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IT'S YOUR MONEY

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

By JOSEPH A. HARRISS

INTERESTED IN "The Romantic Poetry of the Young Karl Marx"? Or "The Folk Rituals of Birth, Marriage and Death Among Urban Polish-Americans"? Or "The Contribution of the Gay Experience to American Visual Arts"?

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

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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 Democratic 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 time for the usual review process, 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 fatuity. 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 debasement 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 Appropriations Committee criticized the NEH for conflicts of interest among persons assessing applications and staff pressure on the supposedly independent review panel. The Rockefeller Foundation's Commission 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 increasingly hooked on federal funds. Authors, who used to rely solely on their talents to write salable books, now ask for—and receive—NEH fellowships 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 Americanization 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 Doctrinal Attitudes Toward Male Sexual Aberration."

"These six studies cost taxpayers nearly \$220,000," says Sen. William Proxmire (D., Wis.). "That's every 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 irretrievably lost.

—Sydney J. Harris, Field Newspaper Syndicate