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Helms and the Art of Pragmatism

Jonathan Yardley

Three members of the Senate who had the misfortune to be on the floor of that chamber last Wednesday may have had little choice in the matter, but they certainly did not embrace the Senate's latest Helms attempt to make fools of them. The Republican from North Carolina, as witty and contemptible a character as one could hope to meet in public life, came in from the blue with just the kind of legislation that politicians dread: a bill they can scarcely afford to vote against, yet one that makes them look foolish, and even philistine, for supporting it.

This was, of course, the by-now-notorious amendment to a $10.9 billion appropriations bill, the beneficiaries of which include the National Endowment for the Arts. The Helms amendment, it will be recalled, prohibits NEA support for "material which denigrates or is obscene or indecent," including, but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the mentally retarded, the handicapped, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or material which designates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or race, or material which designates, degrades, or reviles a person, group, or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin. Naturally, the amendment passed by voice vote. What politician, presented with a thumbs-up-or-down decision and no time to contemplate the substantive ramifications, could be expected to vote against it? Like a quarterback deploying his receivers in every area of the secondary, Helms had all his ground covered: Not merely did his amendment force his fellow senators to vote against the arts' need and decency, but it also put them on the defensive against child exploitation, blasphemy and—this coming from a senator who has reaped political hay from the Negrophobia with which many in North Carolina (and, for that matter, other states as well) are still afflicted—racial prejudice.

By the senators' own testimony, Helms left them no choice. Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio, who usually can be counted on to lean toward the liberal positions, rose "to indicate my concern" about "the United States Congress deciding what is or isn't art," but then confessed: "I'm so embarrassed because it's hard to oppose an amendment of this kind because it sounds so right." Thus was another fly caught in Jesse's spider web.

So the amendment passed, in the heat of the moment. No doubt once the temperature goes down and House and Senate meet to iron out the differences between their bills—the House version is far less puritanical than the Senate's Helms—something approximating a reasonable compromise can be reached. Within hours of the amendment's approval, people will be beginning to realize that it is open to interpretations so broad as to forbid NEA funding for just about anything: by the time the arts lobby and its friends on the Hill have finished expounding all the amendment's self-evident weaknesses, Congress is likely to approve a bill that the NEA and its constituency can divide with.

But that will not be the end of the matter. The Helms amendment, shabby though it is, certainly is, has supporters and merely by virtue of the "code words" for motherhood and apple pie, it also appeals to a legitimate concern about the kinds of art that public funds support. Giving voice to that concern is worth while, and noIgnore the underwrite, and the way that allocation is undertaken. There is a widespread sense, by no means restricted to irresponsible or demagogic politicians, that the arts community wants it both ways—generous public support for the arts, but no public voice in how this support is used—and that this consternation is well-deserved. In responding to this public sentiment, the arts community has been both arrogant and naive. The sense of entitlement among artists is, as the Senate's Committee on Appropriations puts it, when you get right down to it, astonishing: The director of the Brooklyn Museum told the New York Times, evidently with a straight face, "A hands-off posture for the endowment is vital," which is to say: Give us taxpayers' money via the NEA, but keep their dirty hands off our spending policies. If a defense contractor demanded carte blanche over its expenditure of federal funds, the public outcry would be ear-splitting, and no one would howl louder than the limousine liberals in the art galleries yet those same people actually expect taxpayers to nod approvingly while tax dollars go to projects approved by no one except artists and their janitors.

As yes, the arts community says in response to public objections, but the public interest is protected by "peer review." NEA grants, the argument runs, must be approved by panels of "experts" in their artistic fields—the same is true at NEA's twin, the National Endowment for the Humanities—who, we are to believe, represent the broad public interest. Nothing could be further from the truth. People who know the workings of the NEA and NEH say that the single most formidable obstacle to responsible allocation of grants is the inability of Congress, for instance, to represent the public's interests, too many of these panels represent those of their own artist constituents. The rest are appointed by the artistic panels to dole out money to allies and proteges, feature their own nests and keep it all in the family.

This most certainly is not what Congress means when it stipulated peer review; presumably it expected that expert opinion could separate the deserving from the undeserving, not that it would be used to circle the wagons around the arts and humanities establishments. But that is precisely what has happened, and the system is now so thoroughly entrenched that prospects of reforming it seem dim at best; Congress can huff and puff as much as it likes about the "fine arts" of Robert Maplethorpe and Andres Serrano, but the machinery is firmly in place to produce more such controversies in the future.

The trouble with that much though it bleats about the Helms amendment, the arts community has had things pretty much to its own liking, if not the public's, at NEA. This is surely a contribution to the arrogance with which it greets any and every suggestion that the public should have a voice in how the public's money is spent. If the NEA's commissioners are anything near as foolish as are the NEA's patrons, the NEA and NEH are even farther from the truth. People nothing could be more certain to go public than by the time the arts community enters the political arena. It seems genuinely to believe that its affairs are "above" politics—that because it deals in what it likes to believe are the exalted precincts of art, it is unaccountable to anyone except itself for its actions. The hard truth, though, is that anyone who deals with politicians does so on their terms: He that lies with dogs, must sleep with fleas. Accountability is the sine qua non of politics, and none can escape it: the representative accountable to his constituents, the senator accountable to his state, the patron, the grant recipient accountable to his donor. It is a rule to which there are no exceptions, as any aspiring politician will tell you, and the sooner the arts community accepts it, the sooner it will be able to cope with reality. But of course, reality may be as alien to it as accountability.