

Testimony on the FY-1999 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Presented to the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by John H. D'Arms, President, American Council of Learned Societies, on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am John H.D'Arms, a classicist whose work is focused on aspects of ancient Roman cities, culture and society. Last year, I succeeded Stanley N. Katz as president of the American Council of Learned Societies, the pre-eminent private humanities organization in the United States, which was established in 1919 and now includes 60 member societies and associations. The purpose of the council is to advance humanistic studies in all fields of learning in the humanities and related social sciences and to maintain and strengthen relations among national societies devoted to such studies. Prior to appointment to the ACLS, I served for many years as professor of classical studies, humanities, and history at the University of Michigan where I also served for 10 years as dean of the graduate school and vice provost for academic affairs. From 1994, until I resigned when assuming responsibility for the ACLS, I was a member of the National Council on the Humanities. I also serve on the board of the National Humanities Alliance.

It is a pleasure to testify before you today. I represent the National Humanities Alliance and its membership of eighty-five scholarly and professional associations; organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, higher education, and state humanities councils; university-based and independent humanities research centers and others concerned with national cultural policies.

First, a word about the Humanities. When we study or write about the Humanities -- works of literature, history, philosophy, religion, art, and music -- we are engaging products of the imagination, of the emotions, of the human spirit. For this reason, the Humanities are the fields most intimate to human beings' sense of themselves in the world. We invest in research in the biomedical sciences out of a conviction that the great breakthroughs will save or prolong life; we invest in the Humanities out of a different human need: because they make a life more meaningful. Unlike the sciences, scholarly interpretations in the Humanities are more personal, more contingent. In the Humanities there always has been -- and always will be -- room for disagreement and dispute in deciding what constitutes scholarship of the highest quality. Therefore, the process by which scholarship is evaluated -- for example the highly regarded peer panel system employed by the NEH -- becomes absolutely critical.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to express support for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the President's request for \$136 million in Fiscal Year 1999. My colleagues in the NHA and I urge the committee to accept and recommend to the House of Representatives \$136 million for the coming federal budget year. At the same time, we wish to go on record also in support of the recommendation of \$136 million for the National Endowment for the Arts and of \$26 million for the museum portion of the budget for the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

The NEH's new chairman, William Ferris, brings to the agency vigor, vision, and a distinguished record of scholarship and institution building. There are two parts to his ambitious agenda. One centerpiece is a plan to establish a network of regional humanities centers which is being presented

under the rubric "Rediscovering America: The Humanities and the Millennium." My colleagues on the board of the NHA and I have had the opportunity to discuss in some detail with Mr. Ferris his plans for the new centers. There is agreement among us that the regional centers, if successful, promise to benefit many Americans including scholars and other humanists in several ways, including:

- Broadening public understanding and participation in the humanities;
- Deepening policy makers appreciation of the fundamental ways in which scholarship and other humanistic activities provide underpinnings for democracy;
- Increasing private support for the humanities activities particularly among foundations and corporations.

Secondly, and equally important, Mr. Ferris is assigning the highest priority to rebuilding and reinvigorating the existing programs at NEH which are so important to the Humanities enterprise and the millions of Americans who benefit from those activities. While NEH continues to be the key base of support for humanities activities in this country, the disproportionate reduction in FY-1996 appropriation to a level nearly 40% below FY-1995 has been continued on in to the present fiscal year, at considerable long-term disadvantage to Americans everywhere. I want to emphasize that we are talking about costs to Americans in terms of preservation of our cultural heritage, in terms of quality of teaching in schools, and in terms of educational films, museum exhibitions, library programs, and other programs aimed at making the humanities accessible to all. The reduced funding for the national scholarly and public programs, and also for challenge grants, have been even more severe due to efforts in Congress to protect funding for state humanities councils and preservation (brittle book filming). While the NHA is especially supportive of both preservation and state councils, in the sub-zero fund game that emerged for NEH in 1995, the protection of those two areas has led to reductions of more than 60% in the teaching and research, and to similar levels of reductions in national public programs. I wish to discuss briefly what is being lost because of the sharp cutbacks:

- Documentary editing projects - Compiling, selecting, and editing the papers of American statesmen and authors is a key part of the preservation of the cultural and historical record of the American people -- and of providing access to these materials. During the 1990s, NEH's American Legacy Editions produced 495 different volumes in these long-term projects on the documentary legacy of such figures as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, and Martin Luther King. Completion of the NEH-supported projects would mean publication of an additional 613 volumes. NEH's downsizing has forced the agency to cut off funding for a number of these projects. Unless the impact of deep cuts can be reversed, these projects will continue to die.

The slowdown and close down of projects so central to our historical legacy has implications far beyond the setback for scholarship. For example, historians have used the NEH-sponsored edition of Lewis and Clark being produced by the University of Nebraska to research and publish more than twenty books on various aspects of the expedition to the American West. Ken Burns used the edition to make his film which aired on PBS last fall. Stephen Ambrose drew upon it to write *Undaunted Courage*, his best-selling biography of Meriweather Lewis, thus helping millions to better understand a important aspect of our history.

- Archaeology has been an area where NEH support, while modest in comparison with other sponsors such as the National Science Foundation, has been particularly important for

providing access. As recently as 1993, NEH support for archaeological projects totaled \$2,116,427. By 1997, support had dropped to \$656,603 of which \$226,565 went to new projects. NEH funding often meant that archaeologists are given time to write up the results of field work, a result that has been applauded by archaeologists as well as scholars in related fields such as biblical studies. If the current trends are not reversed, the NEH will soon have no role in archaeology, and scholarship, as well as the public understanding of the new discoveries from the past, will be the poorer.

- Fellowships are the engine of scholarly production -- The means by which scholars can pursue independent study through a concentrated period of time to write. NEH is the major supporter of national fellowships in the US. The only other national sources of support open to all disciplines are: the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Humanities Center, and, the organization I lead, the American Council of Learned Societies. In fiscal year 1995, the NEH was able to award 200 fellowships in its highly competitive and prestigious program. Since that time the NEH have been able to award only 175 fellowships while its Summer Stipends program has been reduced from over 200 stipends per summer to approximately 130. The endowment's fellowships are of the highest value -- NEH's fellowship recipients have collectively published more than 2,300 books and have received wide recognition including nine Pulitzer Prizes, and numerous other awards. In January, the American Historical Association awarded 13 prizes for excellence in various areas -- Eight of the winners were NEH fellowship or summer stipend recipients.
- Summer Institute and Seminars are a low cost and highly effective way for NEH to address the critical need for better teaching in the US schools and colleges. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future released a report in 1996 called "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future" with this fundamental finding: "What teachers know is the most important influence on what students learn." In the summer of 1996 (i.e., projects funded before the cuts), NEH supported 50 summer seminars for school teachers. These projects attracted 743 teacher-participants from all parts of the country. In the summer of 1998 there will be 20 projects with room for only 300 participants.

The transforming impact that NEH seminars and institutes have on teachers provides benefits to students for many years thereafter. In the summer of 1995, NEH sponsored a total of 167 seminars and institutes, reaching a total of 2,893 school and college teachers. By June of the following year, those teachers reached an estimated 433,000 students, but by June of 2000, they will have reached a total of 1.3 million students. It is close to a national tragedy when these wonderful programs, that both expand teachers' knowledge and encourage teachers to return to their classrooms with renewed vigor and enthusiasm, have been so seriously curtailed. The national public programs have also been reduced approximately 65% in the NEH downsizing. Let us note the areas especially impacted by these reductions:

- Museum exhibitions have been sharply reduced both in numbers and impact. The agency is able to support fewer than a third of the number funded in 1995 and at lower levels.
- Media grants for public television and radio have also been severely curtailed. By the turn of the century, Members of Congress and the public will be able to see no more than two or three programs broadcast per year that have NEH support.

Mr. Chairman, I regret having to dwell so heavily on these losses. In the overall scheme of the federal budget, the reduction of NEH funding by \$62 million -- \$67 million if one counts the rescission in the FY-95 appropriation -- is barely a blip on the national radar screen. But the setback for scholarship and other humanities programming has been sharp and the American people are ultimately the poorer when our national investment in the humanities has been allowed to decline so starkly. The nation deserves better. Appropriating the full \$136 million requested would be an admirable start.