

Testimony on the FY-1996 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 Werner Gundersheimer, Director, Folger Shakespeare Library, on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

March 24, 1995

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Werner Gundersheimer, an historian specializing in the European Renaissance and serving as Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library. I am also a director of the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) and currently serve as Vice President of NHA's board.

It is a pleasure to testify before you today and to represent the National Humanities Alliance and its membership of more than eighty 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 humanities policies.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to express support for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the President's request for \$182 million in Fiscal Year 1996. My colleagues in the National Humanities Alliance and I are aware of the very difficult funding decisions the committee must make and recognize that the NEH is unlikely to escape a reduction -- We ask that the agency not be singled out for cuts more than other parts of the Interior budget.

These are extraordinary times in Washington. We have followed the various initiatives in Congress with considerable interest, and with dismay and consternation the statements of some legislators that the endowments should be done away with or "privatized". We think that the case for federal support for a national program to foster scholarship, education, public programs, and the preservation of the nation's cultural heritage, in other words the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a strong one. A generation ago, when Congress established the endowments, the purposes of creating the new agencies were strong and clear. Those purposes first formulated in 1965 are, if anything, more relevant today as the Congress seeks to delineate the most appropriate activities for federal support. I wish to comment briefly on three of these findings (from Section 2 of the legislation): "that a high civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future".

Although there may be quibbles about size and scope, there has been no one in Congress questioning federal support for the natural sciences -- and rightly so. Over a thirty year period and with very broad bipartisan support, the Federal Government recognized its own responsibilities for the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences. As Congress recognized the contributions of the NEH, appropriations for the agency expanded. And the federal support has paid off handsomely. Therefore, should NEH cease to exist or should it be significantly weakened through deep budget cuts, it would be a major loss in many areas. The question of support for NEH is not one of ideology but rather one of critical support for important national needs such as the preservation of our cultural heritage. The NEH has done much to strengthen the humanities in America and by that I mean much more than the dollars that the agency provides through its

several programs. For example, NEH has provided a kind of non-intrusive coordination that has helped scholars take advantage of technology; linked together various interested groups to make the emerging National Information Infrastructure more accessible and responsive to the needs of scholars and others working in the humanities; and provided a crucial imprimatur for large-scale projects such as presidential papers (i.e., NEH is actually only providing 10-15% support for such projects but actively assisting the scholars in raising the other funds.) "that democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens and that it must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants".

Democracy, the humanities, and citizenship are intimately intertwined. The NEH is the single federal entity that helps to make Americans more thoughtfully aware of the responsibilities as well as the pleasures of citizenship -- from curriculum improvement projects for elementary students through public humanities projects of state councils to outstanding television programs such as "The Great Depression" -- from greatly broadened access to the papers of our leaders through The Library of America to the brittle books filming initiative. "that the world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit".

NEH, by far the largest single funder of humanities activities in the country, has played a useful role in the development of the U.S. as the preeminent nation in terms of the breadth and vigor of its scholarship in a wide range of fields. The committee has heard testimony suggesting that the quality of U.S. scholarship and, in fact, all higher education, has been going downhill. As far as I can tell -- and the breadth and variety of American scholarship is so extensive that broad descriptions (or judgements) of it are extraordinarily difficult to make -- the reverse is actually more likely the case. The hundreds of thousands of students from all over the world who flock to American institutions of higher education would certainly seem to suggest that our scholars and their institutions are widely admired.

We do not claim that all activities supported by the NEH are of equal value -- As I expect one would find that all grants of the National Science Foundation are not of equal value. For much of the work of all fields of endeavor is to investigate the unknown; the discovery of new models of explanation - trial and error. It is not possible to predict in the short term the value over time of work in the humanities.

We do claim that the NEH has over the past 30 years established an extraordinary record of success, from NEH's preservation and access activities that are seen as a model around the world, to its challenge grants with their three-to-one and four-to-one matching requirements that have helped cultural institutions across the country raise hundreds of millions of private dollars and move toward financial stability, to research grants and individual fellowships that have made possible thousands of important studies. NEH's network of state humanities councils have developed over the last twenty years into the premier providers of public humanities in rural and urban areas across the land. In short, the NEH is important, in fact essential, to Americans and the promise of thoughtful, reflective lives. (I should add that although they have not been addressed in my testimony today, NEH's sister agencies, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum Services are of parallel and equal import to life in America.)

In closing, Mr. Chairman, my colleagues and I are appreciative that you have sought to make the consideration of the endowments' budget request for FY-1996 as close to the traditional process as possible, in light of the authorization problem. We see the NEH as a vital element in the humanities

enterprise and will do all that we can to assure the continuation of this federal agency as a lively national program.