

Testimony on the FY-1994 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), Presented by W. Robert Connor, President and Director, National Humanities Center, on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and the Members of the Subcommittee:

I am W. Robert Connor, President and Director of the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Prior to joining the center, I served as Professor of Classics and Chairman of the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University from 1982 to 1989.

It is a pleasure to testify before you today on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance and its membership of seventy-six scholarly and professional associations, organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, higher education, and state humanities councils, university-based and independent humanities centers, and others concerned with national humanities policies.

At a time of major change in Washington including the anticipated confirmation of Sheldon Hackney as chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities -- an appointment I and my colleagues in the National Humanities Alliance endorse with enthusiasm -- in light of the changing demands and perspectives of today, it seems useful to revisit the thoughts of our colleagues a generation ago when the endowment was established.

The landmark 1965 Legislation establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities was the culmination of years of efforts by legislators, scholars, educators, and others concerned that the value and potential contributions of scholarly and other cultural activities to the American enterprise were being undervalued and/or neglected at the national level. Many believe that the catalyst for finally enacting the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 was the decision in 1964 to unify the efforts to establish separate federal arts and humanities foundations. It is worth remembering that in those frantically busy and productive days of seeking to produce the Great Society, this legislation enjoyed the most cosponsors of any in the first session of the 89th Congress.

RATIONALE FOR FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR THE HUMANITIES – 1965

1. Imbalance with science ("a high civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone" [National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, (NFAHA) Section 2, "Declaration of Purpose."]) -- By far the most strongly and frequently asserted reason for supporting the humanities at the time was to "correct the imbalance between science and the arts." [House of Representatives, Report No. 618, 89th Congress, 1st Session, page 8.] Many in Congress argued that despite the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the impact of the national response to Sputnik was to further widen the chasm between federal support for the sciences on the one hand and arts and humanities on the other. "There is at present a serious imbalance between Federal support for the natural or pure sciences and for humanistic research and studies. This imbalance was stressed by the leading witnesses at the hearings, both governmental officials and private citizens. Statements emphasized that continuing support for the sciences is essential to the

national interest, but that support for the humanities is of similarly deep consequence; for the humanities are at the very basis of those qualities essential to achieving the goals of a leading democratic society: Sound judgment, clear understanding, an ability to analyze the past wisely and constructively in terms of the present and future." [Senate Report No. 300, 89th Congress, 1st Session, page 8.]

2. U.S. as a source of ideas and culture for the international community ("world leadership...cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology..." [Cf [NFAHA](#)1965, Sect. 2.]) - Not surprisingly, since it was the early 1960s, there was an overlay of concern about competition in the cold war. But more fundamentally -- and somewhat more in the context of the arts than the humanities -- there was considerable concern about the American place in the world and the negative connotation of failure to nurture the cultural side of life. Then Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley testified in support of the legislation "I sincerely hope that legislation is enacted this year which will enable the Federal Government...to assist...the advancement of the humanities and arts...to the end that the United States demonstrates its high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit." In a 1960 report, President Eisenhower's Commission on National Goals said "In the eyes of posterity, the success of the United States as a civilized society will be largely judged by the creative activities of its citizens in art, architecture, literature, music, and the sciences."

3. Need for an Informed Citizenry ("democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens...it must...foster and support a form of education designed to make men masters of their technology and not its unthinking servant" [Cf [NFAHA](#), 1965, Section 2.]) -- In floor debate prior to a vote on the legislation, Congressman Thompson (D-NJ) quoted from then president of Yale Kingman Brewster's testimony: "...appreciate the importance of having our country reminded of the roots of its culture and the goals of its more fundamental aspirations... the ultimate end is to develop the capacity of all of our citizens for the full enjoyment of their lives intellectually, aesthetically, and to the moral opportunities; all the rest is means. The importance of these ends, will be magnified as we move in what one sociologist has already called the postindustrial era. If we have no intellectual, aesthetic, or moral opportunities as we move into automation, we will be, indeed, a sick society and much of the sickness called delinquency is due to the fact many people lack that purpose which comes from values deeper than power... the peoples representatives in the Houses of Congress should visibly and concretely declare their sense of the importance of the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the moral aspects of life and declare it in a way which everyone can see and hear." [[Congressional Record-House](#), September 15, 1965, page 23080.]

4. The arts and humanities contribute to national progress (and a federal role "to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent") - In a statement accompanying the administration's proposals for the arts and humanities legislation, President Lyndon Johnson wrote: "The humanities are an effort to explore the nature of man's culture and deepen understanding of the sources and goals of human activity. Our recommendations recognize this effort as a central part of the American national purpose" [Senate Report 300, 89th Congress, 1st Session, page 13.]

A GENERATION LATER

In reading the records of almost 30 years ago quoted above, one is struck by the confidence in America's power, resources, and place in the world that characterized the discourse of our political, academic, and business leaders. The intervening years have seen many changes. Within the limitations of the federal role established for it (e.g., "the encouragement and support of national

progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, is also an appropriate matter of concern to the Federal Government [CfNFAHA 1965, Section 2 -- underscore emphasis added.] -- and slower than inflation growth over most of the last twelve years -- the endowment has been effectively addressing many aspects of the concerns voiced by its founders.

1. On the imbalance with science - We find that NEH funds have played a key role in the extremely productive American scholarship in virtually all disciplines over the last two decades. We moved from a situation of virtually no federal support to one in which, outside of universities, colleges, and schools, NEH is the dominant funder of humanities activities. On the other hand, as chart comparing federal expenditures for four agencies -- NEH, NEA, National Science Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health illustrates, the distance between support for science and arts and the humanities continues to grow. I hasten to note that I do not offer this illustration to suggest that public expenditures for science are too high -- in fact my impression is that basic science research is suffering from a relative shrinking of federal support -- but rather to point up the very modest growth allowed the cultural agencies in recent years.
2. America as a source of ideas and culture for the international community - I believe a case can be made that respect for and interest in American scholarship has grown considerably over the last twenty-five years. While this varies considerably among the disciplines, there is a great deal more international scholarly interchange and collaboration than was possible a generation ago. NEH has played a key role in supporting activities that increase American access to libraries and archives overseas. (NEH currently has underway a special initiative to facilitate access to recently -- and perhaps only temporarily -- opened archives in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.) Likewise, in the area of preservation of brittle books -- a challenge in which America leads the world -- NEH has developed a program that is a model for major libraries and archives around the world.
3. Need for a more informed citizenry - Virtually all NEH activities -- from research and fellowships, through education, and public and state programs -- either directly or indirectly are intended to help make Americans more thoughtful and understanding of their own and other cultures. And, by many measures Americans are better informed about their cultures and displaying increased interest in the cultures of others. NEH and its sister endowment for the arts have both contributed importantly to a flowering of U.S. cultures. And facilitating the health and vitality of key cultural institutions that play such a key role in our intellectual and artistic lives must continue to be a concern for federal policy-makers.

HOW TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN LIVELY, STRONG CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?

I would like in particular to focus on one part of the work of the NEH -- the development of strong, independent institutions in the humanities. In many countries throughout the world such institutions -- research libraries, centers for advanced study, learned societies, major archives, historical collections, institutes for archaeological work, etc. are funded almost entirely through a national ministry of culture. My counterparts in other countries often express amazement that there is no comparable governmental sources of support in the United States.

Their amazement is only partially justified. To be sure, federal support is a relatively small percentage of the total for parallel American institutions. In the case of the National Humanities Center, federal funds last year amounted to 20% of our total budget. That percentage however, is

crucial. Federal assistance through the NEH enables us to sustain scholarship of the highest quality, develop innovative programs for strengthening American high schools, and encourage fresh thinking and informed discussion of issues crucial to the future of our nation. In short, we could not carry forward our work in the humanities -- indeed, my own institution probably would not be in existence -- without support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

This mixture of federal and private support for cultural institutions is distinctively American. As members of the committee can well imagine, directors of institutions such as mine would prefer a higher level of support, with more outright funds and more assistance for the basic structure of their institutions. Yet I believe the American practice is, for our country at least, a sound one. It impels our institutions to reach out to their constituencies, communicate their missions clearly, and build a public base of support. I believe that is healthy and in the long run a more secure base for the strength and independence of these institutions.

At this stage in their development most of the independent institutions in the humanities very much need the federal component in that mixture of support. Even with that support, budgets are lean, and the other 80% of the needed funds not easy to raise. In particular, we have found that major private foundations have increasingly set their sights on the alleviation of specific social problems or on research with a technical or narrowly policy-oriented focus. A study a few years ago by President William G. Bowen of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation showed that the total annual support from the thirty largest private foundations for humanistic research was less than \$7,000,000 [William G. Bowen, Testimony to the Interior and Related Agencies Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations, March 17, 1988.]. This is approximately one fifth of the research and fellowship component of the NEH budget in a comparable year. These figures indicate the importance of the NEH in the support of fresh thinking in the fields of history, philosophy, jurisprudence, British and American literature, linguistics, foreign languages and cultures, the history and theory of art and music, the human and ethical dimensions of science, medicine, and technology not to mention related fields such as anthropology, and political theory.

The attrition of support is all the more distressing when one considers the urgency of the perspectives the humanities offer to the understanding of race, ethnicity, nationalism and violence at a time of radical global change. One example out of many may clarify what I mean: the concept of national sovereignty is invoked throughout the world on issues as diverse as biodiversity and ethnic cleansing. In a time when the economy is globalizing and the pressing issues of the environment and AIDS are not confined by national boundaries, the concept of sovereignty clearly needs re-examination, through an international dialogue that involves statesmen, jurists, historians, philosophers, political scientists, and thoughtful people from the State Department, the U.N., and other organizations.

If we recognize the virulence of nationalism as a disease and its effects as ones that exact a terrible toll for human beings around the world, we would demand, I believe, a major effort to understand its causes, and find, if possible, its cure. We would expect such institutions as the National Humanities Center to marshal the best talent in this country and abroad for a concerted effort to deal with the problem and we would not hesitate, even in difficult times, to commit to the effort the level of resources we direct toward the eradication of diseases that affect our individual bodies.

The finest scholars in the humanities and related fields are ready to join with people in government, business, the media, human rights organizations and other walks of life to examine this and other issues in depth, to generate fresh thinking, and new approaches. This is not a luxury, but an undertaking of the highest urgency. Nor should we think of the preservation and public

understanding of America's diverse historical and cultural traditions as a frill, but rather as something essential for the continued strength and vitality of our nation.

I do not mean to suggest that the National Endowment for the Humanities must single handedly take responsibility for all that needs to be done in these areas. Indeed, the distinctively American blend of public and private support to which I have called attention seems to me much better adapted to the needs of this great and diverse country than any centralized plan. But support from the NEH is a crucial ingredient in the mix, not least for private institutions such as ours.

Given the long-term significance of independent institutions in American cultural life, and the distinctively American pattern of support for the humanities, it is distressing to find disarray and lack of direction in the NEH's Office of Challenge Grants. Since their introduction in 1977, NEH Challenge Grants have played an important role in strengthening humanities institutions. The basic mechanism which requires grant recipients to secure three nonfederal dollars for each federal dollar has American philanthropic origins going back to Benjamin Franklin. The flexibility of the grants, which can go into endowment, fund-raising costs, construction, debt retirement, or other areas for long-term growth, has contributed importantly to the financial health of many humanities institutions. In recent years, NEH's challenge program has encountered problems on a number of fronts:

1. In the field, a number of key institutions are ineligible because of an old NEH rule -- unlimited by the passage of time that no institution can receive more than two challenge grants.
2. At NEH in 1991, the staff of the Office of Challenge Grants was reassigned to the divisions of education, research, and public programs in order to address the leadership's conclusion that work of the professional staff in the challenge office lacked "content." Since the core of the challenge grant concept is to permit support for on-going functions as well as long-term financial stability, many in the humanities community have been concerned that fundamental changes in policy in this important area were underway without consultation or the opportunity to comment.
3. At the end of 1992, Harold Cannon, the veteran director of the Office of Challenge Grants retired. No replacement has been appointed with a decision on the continuation of the activity awaiting the new chairman. (Edyth Manza, a seasoned Challenge Grant program officer assigned since 1991 to the education division, is acting director of the Office of Challenge Grants.) While funds have been requested for FY-94, clearly a good sign, we want to register our concern that this important program has been semi-disassembled and set adrift.

Last year, my colleague Werner Gundersheimer testifying on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance, presented the argumentation for federal recognition of the on-going importance to the scholarly enterprise of certain national organizations that provide the infrastructure supporting scholarship in this country. In a sense a longer term problem that may call for a mechanism other than the challenge grant as we know it. While I recognize that it may not be feasible to address this situation at this time, I urge you to review Dr. Gundersheimer's clear analysis of the problem and consider how it may be addressed in the near future.

Finally, my colleagues and I believe that in the context of the excruciatingly difficult decisions that the new administration had to make in its proposals for FY-1994, the recommendations for NEH indicated a respect for the agency and the activities that it supports. We hope that you, Mr. Chairman, and the members of the committee will join us in affirming that the arts and humanities are a central part of the solution to the problems we face in restructuring for a more productive, dynamic, and fair America. Thank you.