

Statement on the FY-1991 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by Catharine R. Stimpson, University Professor and Dean, Graduate School, Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ), Presented on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

May 3, 1990

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

I am Catharine R. Stimpson, University Professor at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and Dean of the Graduate School at its New Brunswick campus. I am currently president of the Modern Language Association. In the past, I have served as chair of the New York State Council for the Humanities and as vice president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. Today I am happy to testify before you and to represent the National Humanities Alliance. Perhaps the most capacious umbrella organization for the humanities in the United States, the Alliance includes over sixty scholarly and professional associations, organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, institutions of higher education, state humanities councils, and other groups concerned with national policy about the humanities.

My subject is funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in Fiscal Year 1991. We urge you to award NEH the full amounts that President George Bush has requested. Each of the activities these moneys are to support is consistent with the purpose of the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965. As for the amounts themselves, Aristotle once said that a virtue was the middle ground between two opposing vices. In general, these amounts occupy a middle ground between a miserliness that would starve the NEH and an abundance that might, no matter how welcome, be inappropriate in a difficult budgetary period.

Permit me now to make four notes about President Bush's request. Two are celebratory. Two are, however, more cautionary.

First, we are very pleased by the request for an increase of \$1.8 million for research programs, particularly for three programs: "Editions," readying edition of the work of historical and literary figures; "Tools," preparing such reference materials as historical and linguistic atlases, encyclopedias, and data bases; and "Access," augmenting the availability of important research collections through manuscript guides, catalogues, and bibliographies. Humanists have sought such a funding increase for nearly a decade. For these three activities are as crucial to our work as statutes to a lawyer or a camera and film to a photographer. Basic research provides the materials for humanistic inquiry, public programs, and classrooms. Imagine scholarship and teaching about language without a dictionary. Imagine scholarship and teaching about literature without an edition of the poems of William Wordsworth or an edition of the work of 19th-century African-Americans. My reference to both Wordsworth and to 19th-century African-American writing makes a point about the research in the humanities in the 1990s. Its growth is bountiful. The humanities are exploring both old and new fields, established and emerging figures, all of which deserve scholarly scrutiny.

Second, we are equally pleased by the request for \$2,500,000 for Foreign Language Education in the Division of Education Programs, and we are grateful to Chairman Lynne V. Cheney for her recognition of the acute importance of foreign language teaching. As teachers and scholars

concerned with communication, we are keenly aware of the economic, political, social, and cultural necessity of bridging differences among people. The health of the United States in an increasingly interdependent world depends, in part, on citizens who can speak languages other than "United States."

Dr. Cheney has drafted a set of new guidelines for foreign language teaching projects that embody a wise analysis of how foreign language teaching is best done. Introduce a student to the cultural setting in which a native speaker uses a language. Let a student learn a language as if s/he were a part of a real context. The new guidelines also call for summer institutes for elementary and secondary school teachers in which these teachers can immerse themselves in both current research on language teaching and in a language itself; for stronger undergraduate language instruction, including teacher education programs; and for imaginative special projects, including, for example, materials about such less commonly taught languages as Japanese.

My third note is more cautionary. We are glad that the budget request increases the stipends of fellowships for individual scholars. If Congress appropriates and allocates the funds, stipends for senior fellowships would go up from \$27,500 to \$30,000; for summer fellowships from \$3,500 to \$3,750. These stipends are closer to the average language teacher's annual salary in a public institution, approximately \$34,000. However, the total amount recommended for fellowships remains about the same. The inexorable logic of arithmetic tells us that increasing the amount of an individual stipend without increasing the total amount available for all fellowships means decreasing the number of individuals on stipends. NEH staff estimate that the increased stipend will reduce the number of academic year fellowships by ten to fifteen.

NEH is one of only three major sources of competitive support for individual humanists. The others are the American Council of Learned Societies and the Guggenheim Foundation. Unfortunately, from 1988 to 1990, the Guggenheim had to reduce its number of United States and Canadian fellowships from 262 to 143. Given this situation, the loss of even ten to fifteen fellowships is significant. It means ten to fifteen less productive careers, ten to fifteen fewer serious books, ten to fifteen fewer chances to alter curricula and classrooms. We wonder what might have happened, without the NEH fellowship awarded in FY 1989, to Donald Tuzin and his project on "Gender, Religion, and Human Values in New Guinea Society" (San Diego State University, California); to Lawrence Lipking and his project on "Samuel Johnson's Moral Vision" (Northwestern University, Illinois); or Janice Carlisle and her project on "J.S. Mill and His Writing" (Tulane University, Louisiana).

Fourth and finally, we are concerned about regrant programs, the funds that NEH awards to organizations that then hold their own competitions and redistribute the money to others in smaller amounts. Typically, regrant programs take up only about 5% of the annual program budget at NEH. Typically, a participating institution receives less than \$100,000 in regrant moneys. Comparatively small though these sums might be, they have gone to some of our most important institutions in the humanities, which are pillars of our cultural infrastructure. They include such independent research libraries and historical societies as the American Philosophical Society and the Newberry Library; such centers for advanced study as the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the National Humanities Center; and such institutions that facilitate national and international scholarly work as the American Council for Learned Societies, the National Academy of Sciences, and the Social Science Research Council.

In a letter of February 2, 1816, to Joseph C. Cabell, his co-worker in establishing the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson articulated an overarching principle of government that might have structured the regrant program. "No, my friend," he wrote, " the way to have good and safe

government, is not to trust it all to one, but to divide it among the many, distributing to every one exactly the functions he is competent to.... It is by dividing and subdividing these republics from the great national one down through all its subordinates, until it ends by placing under every one what his own eye may superintend, that all will be done for the best." Until 1989, the administration of NEH regrants reflected such a commitment to what we would now call, less elegantly, decentralization, pluralism, and the efficiencies that accrue when specialists handle specific, well-defined projects on site. Then, as you know, in 1989, the House Appropriations Committee found it necessary to issue a finding, which the Senate Committee endorsed, that subgranting or regrants by NEH and NEA was not authorized. Respectfully, we submit that the procedures established as a result of this finding have been unnecessary.

My fourth and last point has staked out a conservative position, i.e. if a law, institution, custom, or tradition is doing good and doing well, let it continue. Or, to put the matter more colloquially, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." May I take the liberty of sketching out one more conservative position? We support re-authorization of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities for another five years without restrictions on the content of grants or regrants. We are aware that Congress passed restrictions in the Appropriations legislation of 1990. We are most appreciative of the efforts of Congressman Yates and his colleagues who worked valiantly to ensure that any restrictive language conformed as closely as possible to the original spirit of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965. We now urge members of this Committee to renew their efforts and have an Appropriations bill for 1991 that is free from any restrictive language.

Our urgency arises from a strong conviction. In great part because of their founding legislation, the Endowments have both done good and done well. Section 2 of the 1965 Act is a remarkable declaration of purpose that we sully at our peril. Stating that the Federal Government should support and encourage the arts and the humanities, scholarly and cultural activity, it links democracy and an educated citizenry as firmly as English grammar links a subject and a predicate in a robust sentence. This Section has the courage and common sense to fund freedom, "freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry." Later, in Section 7 (c) (4), the Act has the reach and vision to recognize that cultural excellence and cultural diversity are companions, not cut-throat, cut-purse enemies.

One of the most interesting poets in the literary history of the United States is Edgar Lee Masters, born in Kansas in 1869, raised in Illinois. He died in 1950, only 15 years before the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities Act. His best-known work is *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), a collection of American voices. One of them is Seth Compton, who has built up a "circulating library" for Spoon River. He has "managed" it "for the good of inquiring minds." Seth wants us to read Goethe as well as Longfellow, evil as well as good, the false as well as the true. For, he muses, "... no one knows what is true/Who knows not what is false." After his death, however, the town managers vindictively sell his library "at auction on the public square." The 1965 Act is true to the larger spirit of Seth Compton. It declares that the federal government ought to help support the circulating libraries that feed inquiring minds. We hope that the Congress will neither alter nor abandon one of its most admirable creations.