

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

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

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a pleasure to testify before you today on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance and its membership of more than sixty scholarly professional associations and institutions, organizations of museums, libraries, historic societies and state humanities councils and others concerned with national policies affecting the humanities.

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

Other witnesses will speak in more detail, I am sure, about the overall budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities and its importance for strengthening education, our awareness of the richness and diversity of American cultural life, our understanding of foreign cultures and for the preservation of the American cultural heritage. The National Endowment for the Humanities since its inception has done a great deal to enrich our lives and understanding and there is every reason to feel confident in its ability to do so at an even higher level in the future. With your permission in the time allotted to me I would like to focus on the research supported by the NEH, first analyzing its importance in our current world situation, then describing briefly the way in which NEH funds are used at an institution such as the National Humanities Center and finally addressing the concern for accountability and supervision of NEH "sub- grants".

Humanistic Research in the Context of our Current World Situation

The surprising and rapidly developing events of the past year, not only in the countries of the former East Bloc but in Asia, Africa and the hemisphere in which we live, have underlined the importance of understanding the humanistic dimension of our current world situation. I mean by this more than the usual observations about the importance of understanding foreign cultures and our own, and the need for strengthening education across the board and for larger numbers of specialists in foreign languages and area studies. These are pressing needs, as is the need to invigorate our research and teaching in history, literature, philosophy and the arts. But the events of recent months have brought special urgency to the strengthening of the humanities in American life, for the changes we have witnessed cannot be properly understood in the categories upon which we have relied so heavily. No one would underestimate the importance of economic, geo-political and military factors in these events, but another set of concerns have shaped the way in which these factors have operated. The issues of ethnicity and national feeling, the significance of religion and religious institutions, the role of the individual and of leadership at every level of society have helped shape the course of events and will clearly be of great importance in the emergence of a new world order. These are deeply humanistic issues, and grievously neglected ones in much of the discussion that I read about our current situation.

A humanistic perspective, then, is imperative if we are to respond effectively to these dramatic changes. To approach such change without an awareness of history and its ironies, or of the deeply imbedded cultural patterns, without ears tuned to the nuance of language and the appeal of symbols is, in my opinion, folly. Yet the effort allocated to these concerns is minute in comparison to that directed toward narrowly economic, geo-political and military analyses.

The events of recent months are an eloquent reminder as well of the power of ideas and of language. Vaclav Havel has expressed those centrally humanistic concerns more eloquently than any one else I know: "... those malleable, humiliated, cynical citizens of Czechoslovakia, who seemingly believed in nothing, found the tremendous strength to cast off the totalitarian system within a few weeks in an entirely peaceful and dignified manner. Humanistic and democratic tradition slept on after all somewhere in the unconscious of our nation."

Given the importance of these humanistic factors in world events, it is not surprising that we see a playwright as President of Czechoslovakia, a novelist taking a prominent role in Peruvian politics, a professor of music attempting to steer Lithuania toward freedom, and a graduate of the Philosophy faculty of the State University of Moscow in charge of the Soviet Union. Whatever the success of these individuals may be, and whatever our reactions to their policies, we have been reminded by their words and deeds of the persistent importance of the humanistic factors in international affairs.

Even more important, we have seen the power of ideas in international affairs, not least the demand for freedom in political, economic and personal life and the struggle to adapt democratic tradition to radically different cultural, economic and social circumstances. Has there ever been a moment when it was more important to strengthen the study of democratic institutions, to examine more closely the precedents for democracy in early times, the circumstances that led to the development of a democratic system in ancient Greece, the transformation of it over time and in different settings, the grand philosophical tradition concerning democratic theory, and the historical experiences of states that have made democracies work and those that have failed? This is surely the moment to join in a common effort with honest thinkers throughout the world to understand what it means to live in a "civil society" and how such societies can be achieved and sustained.

Increasingly we are recognizing that economic, military and technological factors do not operate in isolation from the memory of past events, the ties to region, ethnic groups and religious beliefs and deep rooted cultural patterns and values. These are central concerns for the humanities and the related social sciences, and need to be better understood. Those who concentrate on so-called "hard" factors sometimes dismiss these issues as "peripheral" -- as if "peripheral" meant unimportant.

Any society needs peripheral vision for survival. Indeed, I believe it is time to ask whether sufficient attention has been given to humanistic concerns in our thinking about foreign affairs and in the education of our policy makers and our citizenry. Were we not taken off guard, for example, in Lithuania by underestimating the power of nationalist feeling and of ideas of autonomy, freedom and democracy?

These humanistic factors need to be better understood, as do the factors shaping our own pluralistic society. I was delighted to learn that the request this committee has before it contains a significant increase for the research budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The total funding for the humanities in the United States is relatively small. At most five percent of all gifts from the large private foundations is devoted to the humanities in general. Humanistic research encounters an even more difficult funding situation. This can be seen most clearly by examining the two principal sources (excluding direct grants to their faculty members from colleges and universities)

for humanistic research -- the NEH research budget and grants from major private foundations. A study presented to this subcommittee last year by President William G. Bowen of the Andrew W. Mellon foundation showed that in 1986 the NEH research budget (including Treasury, i.e. matching funds) was just under \$21,000,000 and grants for humanistic research from the thirty largest private foundations totaled approximately \$6,770,000. To set these figures into context:

- Our nearest neighbor in the Research Triangle Park, the Burroughs Wellcome company, spent approximately \$300,000,000 on research and development activities in the last fiscal year. Total NEH spending on research was less than the spending of this one major pharmaceutical company.
- Total Federal support for science and technology in a recent year has been estimated at approximately 9 billion dollars. All research related activities in the NEH budget in the comparable year (including fellowship funds etc.) totaled approximately one-third of one percent of federal research support for science and technology.
- In North Carolina alone the National Institute of Health made FY 1989 grants totaling \$209,194,000. NEH grants to our institution, the most broadly based national center for research in the humanities, were less than two tenths of one percent of the spending of this one agency in our state.

Private sources of support cannot make up for federal funds in this area. The ratio between NEH support and that from the major private foundations underlines the importance of the NEH contribution to humanistic research. Although in the past four years the NEH research budget had increased by approximately 1% per year, the ratio to major foundation funding has probably remained roughly constant -- by a ratio greater than three to one research in the humanities depends upon the National Endowment for the Humanities. The full effect of NEH research funding, however, is only evident if we look more closely at the way in which some of those funds are used. In the so called "sub-granting" institutions NEH research dollars create an important multiplier effect, which I would now like briefly to describe.

Multiplier Effect in NEH Research Dollars

In a typical recent year out of the NEH research budget of approximately \$22,000,000 -- roughly 25% direct appropriation and 25% Treasury funds for matching -- 1.5 million (or 7%) would go to centers for advanced study such as the one I head in North Carolina. Our procedures are comparable to most of the other dozen and a half recipients of such funds. Before we receive any of these funds we must "match" them from private sources. In our case we raised \$122,000 to qualify for an NEH grant of \$249,000. We then used a rigorous process of peer review to select 38 fellows out of a pool of over 500 applicants. Of these eleven received NEH fellowships under the "sub-granting" program. The cost to the NEH is an average of a little over \$22,000 per fellow.

These fellows, from a wide variety of American institutions and academic disciplines, typically spend an academic year in residence at our Center in the Research Triangle Park. We provided them with office space, library support, manuscript preparation services, assistance in finding housing and relocating in the area and many other services. All this required additional fund raising since not one penny of the NEH sub-granting funds can be used to provide research support, meet the core operating costs of the institution or cover "overhead" costs.

The absence of NEH support for the core operations of the institution contrasts sharply with the practice of the NSF and most other governmental agencies in meeting the audited costs of the research they fund. Research in the humanities thus suffers both from a low level of overall funding and the constant need to raise private funds for "matching", research services and the basic costs of heating, lighting and maintaining buildings.

During their fellowship year our fellows participate in seminars addressing topics of central concern to the humanities and related social sciences, discuss and exchange their ideas in formal and informal settings, and reach out to colleagues in local colleges and universities and to the community through public lectures and other events. Each fellow also discusses his or her research in a broadcast over our radio program Soundings, a half hour public affairs program that reaches over a quarter million listeners each week. Finally over time we will go back to the fellows who have been in residence at our Center and ask some of them to lead our summer institutes for high school teachers or participate in other public programs.

The effects of an NEH subgrant to an institution such as ours is much greater than might appear from looking only at the dollar amount.

The pattern at the NHC is similar, but not identical to that in the other centers for advanced study that receive NEH research funds. These include the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto California and other more specialized institutions throughout the country. Although the total NEH funds granted to these centers are a minority of their total budgets (in our case 23.4% of our current year revenues), they are crucial to the strength and quality of the major research institutions in the humanities.

The Center I head is now in its twelfth year of operation. As a relatively young private institution it has to work hard to find the resources that will assure our continued strength and quality. The distinctive excellence of American higher education, we believe, depends in large measure on the growth of autonomous, independent institutions with a commitment to excellence. Local universities, North Carolina and national corporations, private foundations and individuals are helping us meet our annual operating costs, support additional fellows and accumulate a modest endowment. NEH support helps us sustain our quality as we gain the resources for long term excellence. The continued support of the NEH is essential to us.

Supervision and Accountability Among the "Sub-Granting" Institutions:

Over the past year the supervision of these so-called "subgrants" has been a matter of considerable concern to all who are committed to high quality research in the humanities. Following the recommendations of this subcommittee last year the Chairman of the NEH, Lynne Cheney, instituted procedures requiring that centers such as ours submit the dossiers of the candidates to whom we propose to award NEH fellowships to Washington for review before any award was made. The procedures also envisioned the sending of NEH observers to attend the final stage of the fellowship selection process. Our Center has complied with these procedures this year but I must report that they are cumbersome and a cause for considerable concern. It is not possible for us to sort out in advance the applicants who are most appropriate for NEH support from those who might receive support from other sources. The schedule is a tight one and the additional stage of submitting dossiers for review in Washington is time-consuming, despite the exceptional efforts of the NEH staff to review them as quickly as possible. Given the tight NEH budget for research, one must wonder whether visits to selection committee meetings were an efficient use of limited staff time and travel funds.

There are wider concerns as well. The Board of Trustees of the National Humanities Center, a group that has included several university presidents, CEO's of major corporations, two former Attorneys General of the United States and many leaders of higher education, rigorously supervises our fellowship program. The Board is strongly committed to high quality, professional standards of selection, strict accountability and the integrity of the fellowship program. In early April during a special session devoted to the new NEH procedures the Board made a careful review of the situation and concluded that such procedures were unnecessary. To the best of our knowledge there has never been a significant problem in the administration of the NEH funds entrusted to these "sub-granting" Centers. The Board also doubted the appropriateness of such intrusion into the life of a private institution. It seemed anomalous to several members of the Board that these cumbersome new procedures should be applied to Centers such as ours while there have been no changes in the supervision of state humanities councils.

Some members of the Board also feared that over the long term there is a potential for abuse through the presence of government observers in the selection of fellows awarded by a private institution. We have the highest confidence in the current staff and leadership of the NEH but believe that we should guard against the chance that under other circumstances the presence of a governmental observer might have a chilling effect on the selection process or result in other unintended problems. We believe that proper accountability can be achieved by simpler procedures.

For these reasons the National Humanities Center welcomes Mrs. Cheney's statements before the Education, Arts and Humanities Subcommittee of the Senate Committee of Labor and Human Resources on the fifth of April in which she noted that the procedures instituted last summer have imposed a heavy burden both on the NEH and on the sub-granting institutions. We support her call for explicit authority to enter into sub-granting arrangements and for simplification of the oversight procedures. We believe the steps instituted last summer are inappropriate and go far beyond what is necessary to make sure that these funds are being properly used. Major private sources of support do not normally ask, and should not be allowed, to have an observer present during the selection of recipients of fellowships which are paid for by their generosity. The potential for abuse in such circumstances is evident. We urge this committee to recognize the need for the NEH to be granted authority to make sub-grants under procedures that are consistent with those used by the mayor private foundations:

1. thorough scrutiny of the quality, selection policies and leadership of the institution before a grant is made;
2. detailed annual reporting by that institution of how the grant has been used; and
3. comprehensive review at the end of each grant period.

These procedures would, in my opinion, ensure strict accountability and proper procedures without the delays, difficulties and expense that the current procedures have imposed, and without the long term potential of inappropriate intrusions into the life of private institutions.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to testify and for the exceptional leadership you have provided in strengthening higher education and in maintaining the quality and integrity of research in the humanities.