

Statement on the FY-1990 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 Roderick S. French, Vice President for Academic Affairs, George Washington University, Speaking as President of the National Humanities Alliance

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Roderick S. French, Professor of Philosophy and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the George Washington University. At present, I am also serving as President of the National Humanities Alliance. It is a pleasure to testify before you today and to represent the National Humanities Alliance and its more than fifty members, including learned and professional societies as well as organizations representing museums, libraries, historical societies, state humanities councils, and other non-profit institutions committed to enhancing the place of humanistic inquiry in American life and to assisting in the development of federal policies for the support of research, teaching, and other humanities activities.

As a practitioner in the academic humanities as well as an administrator, I have a long-term concern for and interest in the NEH and federal policies affecting the humanities. I was a charter member and first chairman of the D.C. Community Humanities Council and later served on the Board of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. My work at my own institution has been generously supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, including a challenge grant of \$800,000 for which I was the principal investigator. Other divisions of the Endowment have supported a variety of curricular initiatives on my campus. The fact of the matter is that the vitality and influence of the humanities in the George Washington University are incalculably greater as a result of the Endowment's assistance over the last twenty years. Beyond the seemliness of acknowledging this debt in this setting, I do so in confidence that the same testimony would be gladly given by my counterparts in countless colleges and universities across the country.

Indeed, we all now recognize that the National Endowment for the Humanities has become our society's largest and most important funder of research, teaching, and public programs in the humanities. Last year in testimony before this Subcommittee, William G. Bowen, an economist serving as President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation reported on his study of the support for humanities provided by NEH contrasted with support by the largest philanthropic foundations. He concluded that NEH is by far the most important single source of funding for the humanities in the U.S. today. "It is no exaggeration to say that the decisions made concerning the budget for NEH (overall size and composition), and the subsequent administration of the funds, have an absolutely decisive impact on the health and character of the humanities in America." Bowen's analysis showed that the 30 largest private foundations in the United States, taken together, make grants to the humanities in a given year that are less than half the grants made by the Endowment.

It is not surprising then that there is widespread interest in NEH's appropriations. Given its impact on so many fields of study and, in many ways, on the quality of public life in this country, the question -- how adequate are NEH resources? -- becomes more than the rhetorical query of a special interest group. It is now a matter of concern to a broad sector of society, in and out of the academy.

Against that backdrop, we are pleased to note that the budget proposal for the National Endowment for the Humanities for the next fiscal year calls for an increase over the current year's appropriation. While the increase is slight, it is nevertheless a continuation of a welcome trend begun last year that broke the recent pattern of consistently proposing reductions. Thanks to you, Mr. Chairman, the members of this Subcommittee and, of course, your colleagues in the Senate, it has been possible to maintain the dollar level of appropriations within the range of the budgets of a decade ago. (In fact, the budget for the current year for the first time exceeds the high water mark of \$151.3 million reached in 1981.) However, we must recognize also the reality of a significant decline in the real value of the appropriations in recent years. Based upon figures made available by the Senate Budget Committee, the Association of American Museums has calculated that the FY-90 funding request for the NEH would have had to have been \$213,330,000 or \$60 million higher than the actual request if the level of funding in 1981 were maintained in constant dollars.

Robert Hollander, Professor of Romance Languages and Literature at Princeton and a member of the National Council on the Humanities recently added an interesting perspective to Mr. Bowen's comparative figures on NEH and foundation support for the humanities. Starting with an estimate that total federal expenditures for research in science and engineering in FY-1988 were \$9 billion, contrasted with an estimate that NEH support for research during the same period was approximately \$30 million, Professor Hollander calculated that the federal government supports research in the humanities at roughly one-third of one percent of the amount provided for science and technology.

To come to specifics, the National Humanities Alliance is especially grateful to the Chairman and members of this Subcommittee for leadership in fully funding the NEH initiative for the preservation of brittle books. Please be assured that the investment at this time is not only of inestimable value to scholars, but also contributes effectively to the expansion of access to our cultural resources for the entire interested public. We urge the Subcommittee to recommend the full increase proposed for the second year of the initiative.

I am obliged to voice as well our concern that the budgets of the other regular programs of the Endowment are in need of additional resources. Their ability to respond to the most urgent needs from the field has become increasingly strained as the real dollar value of their appropriations has declined on average by more than one third over this decade. We urge the Subcommittee to increase funding for these programs minimally to the levels of the current year's budget adjusted for inflation.

Last year, Ms. Cheney, the Chairman of the Endowment, testified that within the general context of the adequacy of NEH appropriations to meet the needs of the highest quality work proposed to the agency, programs in the Division of Research Programs and the Office of Challenge Grants were under the heaviest budgetary stress. Anecdotal evidence gathered by the Alliance and others confirms that this continues to be the case, especially in the Research programs and that, to varying degrees, the problem pervades most of the programs at NEH.

Division of Research Program grant figures show that there is a significant shortfall in funds to support the most highly ranked work. For example, Access program records for FY-1987 indicated that of 168 proposals, 39 were funded: 34 proposals were ranked Excellent but only 26 of these were funded; of 14 ranked Very Good, 4 were funded. (The Access program supports a variety of activities aimed at increasing the availability of research collections such as cataloguing projects, records surveys and the like. Often these projects are important to preservation because the program supports assessments of materials thereby identifying deteriorating materials in need of preservation or conservation.)

Another result of the long-term squeeze on funds at NEH is that many projects are funded but with considerably reduced budgets. Marcus McCorison, the Director and Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), the first national historic society in America and a participant in the Alliance through the Independent Research Libraries Association, wrote to Mr. Yates on this problem. With Dr. McCorison's permission we quote from that letter because we believe it most usefully illustrates the nature and impact of the problem.

"In recent years the Research Division on NEH has not received funding commensurate with the demonstrated need for support in that area. The Research Division administers grants that fund work that is basic to the humanities -- support of library collections and access to them, the publication of reference tools and scholarly editions upon which subsequent scholarship and teaching depends, and the like... In 1985 AAS obtained a grant to fund the cataloguing into a national computerized bibliographical data base of 12,500 books published for American children from 1821 to 1876 (the best collection in existence). As that grant period wound down and having completed the portion of the project in accord with our original plan of work approved by NEH, we applied in 1988 for a three year (1989-91) continuation that would carry the project to completion. Our renewal application was rated in the top half dozen in its review cycle. But, because of the extreme shortage of funds in the Access Category of the Research Division, we were awarded just about half of the submitted budget -- a budget that NEH staff will testify as being honest. This award, as it stands, leaves the project in limbo. When the money runs out we will have reached no rational concluding place within the collection -- either chronological, alphabetical, or what have you.

As it turns out, we believe that NEH staff can make additional Treasury Matching Funds available to us so that we can at least get the project funded to a point where, if we must close it down still incomplete, it can be left where it can be picked up again at a logical place. However, AAS will have to raise \$35,000 from non-federal sources to bring it to that point. If you have ever attempted to raise private moneys for cataloguing books, while conducting the usual drive for the Annual Operating Fund, you know how frustrating such a task can be."

In summary, the NEH is the most important institution in the U. S. concerned with the health and vigor of the humanities. I have stressed today the categories of research and the preservation of the artifacts of creativity in the humanities. I might have spoken quite as forcefully as an advocate for education programs in need of support by the Endowment. Few things are agitating the American people more than their concerns regarding the education of our children and youth in the subject matter of the humanities. The Endowment's rhetorical emphasis on the value of the humanities in the formation of the character of new generations must be matched by resources that encourage excellence in humanities teaching as well as in research and public programs.

We in the Alliance very much appreciate the role that the Subcommittee has played in protecting the viability of the Endowment but we also worry that the steady decline in the real dollar value of NEH's grants is weakening both institutions and individual scholars working in the field.

The preservation initiative begun last year is meeting a critical need and meeting it very well. We encourage full funding of the increase requested for 1990. But we also ask that all of the programs of the Endowment be sustained at least at the current levels with adjustments for inflation. For the humanities constitute a system in the United States -- every part having an impact on the other. That is why the Alliance supports the entire range of activities comprised in the National Endowment for the Humanities -- from fellowships and research through education and public programs.