

Testimony on the FY-1989 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

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Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by Stanley N. Katz, President, American Council of Learned Societies, Speaking on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Stanley Katz, a legal historian on the faculty of Princeton University, currently also serving as President of the American Council of Learned Societies. It is a pleasure to testify before you today and to represent the National Humanities Alliance and its membership of more than fifty scholarly and professional humanities associations, museums, libraries, institutions of higher education, and state humanities councils. I am pleased as well to be able to express my support for the programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

My own association with the Endowment goes back many years. I have served on numerous peer review panels for a variety of Endowment programs. I chaired the NEH-funded American Issues Forum: Chicago Committee (1974-76) and served on the New Jersey Committee for the Humanities (1979-85), and have been fortunate enough to receive support from the Endowment for my own scholarly work. I believe I know the Endowment and its history very well and that I am in a position to speak with some authority on the role that it has played in the past and can play in the future in the intellectual and cultural life of the United States. Moreover, in my current position as President of the American Council of Learned Societies, I have an especially broad acquaintance not only with the programs of the Endowment, but also with the more general domain of research and programming in the humanities. This acquaintance has only reinforced my feeling that the Endowment performs a unique role that is not and could not be filled by any private foundation or any government agency.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is, without question, both the largest and most important funder of research and programming in the humanities in this country. William G. Bowen, an economist currently serving as President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and previously as President of Princeton University, has recently undertaken studies of the support of humanities provided by NEH in the context of support by the largest private foundations. He concluded that NEH is by far the most important single external source of funding for the humanities in the US 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 NEH alone.

Not surprisingly, there is considerable interest in NEH's appropriations. Given its impact on so many fields and, in many ways, the quality of life in this country, how adequate are NEH resources? First, I am pleased to be able to testify before you in this first year since 1981 in which the Committee has not been facing recommendations from the Administration for reductions at the Endowments. Thanks to the members of this Committee and your counterparts in the House, it has

been possible to maintain the dollar level of appropriations for NEH in spite of the difficult budgetary climate and downward pressures. However, we must recognize also the reality of a significant decline in real value of the appropriations in recent years. The American Association of Museums has calculated that the FY-87 funding for NEH would have had to have been \$53 million (38%) higher than the actual appropriation that year of \$138.9 million if the level of funding in 1981 were maintained in constant dollars.

THE PRESERVATION CHALLENGE

The deterioration of cultural records and artifacts is one of the major problems confronting our society. The Endowment has been playing a key role in mobilizing and supporting research and resource development in libraries, archives and other institutions on the front lines in the battle to save books, papers, films, recordings and other cultural records at risk.

Understanding of the enormous challenge of the brittle book crisis in our nation's libraries and archives has increased markedly over the last two years. A consensus has formed among major libraries and library organizations, foundations, the Library of Congress, and most recently the leadership of the National Endowment for the Humanities that a core plan and the institutional mechanisms are in place to begin a massive project to save at a minimum of 3.3 million volumes of the books at risk. (This figure is only a third of the estimated total books at risk and, I emphasize, a minimum.)

Last month, at the request of Rep. Sidney Yates, the NEH developed a capability statement assessing the immediate and long-range funding requirements for a full response to a plan developed by the Commission on Preservation and Access for preserving on microfilm 3 million volumes that are at risk. Lynne Cheney and her colleagues at the NEH are to be commended for the thoughtful and prudent approach. We believe that the NEH plan (copies of which were also sent to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee) forms a sound basis for launching the ambitious program. The NEH plan is flexible in that it seeks to make provision for the numerous preparatory costs and other non-direct filming costs. The NEH plan also gives appropriate attention to other areas besides brittle books (e.g., the national newspaper program, conservation training).

The NEH's capability statement served as a central focus for a hearing chaired by Rep. Yates on April 21 which in symposium fashion brought together an extraordinary grouping of knowledgeable individuals from libraries, foundations, federal agencies, and other institutions concerned with the preservation issue. Lynne Cheney, James Billington, Patricia Battin, William Bowen and others discussed the brittle book problem from three vantage points:

- 1) The plan for large-scale filming of at least 3 million already embrittled volumes;
- 2) The Library of Congress efforts to make feasible massive deacidification of books before they become embrittled; and
- 3) Issues surrounding conversion to publication of books of potential lasting value on permanent or at least alkaline paper.

A major outcome of the hearing was recognition that libraries, foundations and others are ready to move ahead on the filming plan; and that the National Endowment for the Humanities was both in agreement with the general plan and prepared to handle effectively a rapid increase in federal funds for the effort.

We know that finding additional funds is especially difficult this year. Nonetheless, because resolution of this major problem is so clearly in the national interest and because of the importance of a rapid response, we urge the Subcommittee to appropriate at a minimum, the \$8 million in additional resources for NEH's preservation activities in FY-1989.

As indicated, we view NEH's 4/19/88 capability statement as thoughtful and encouraging in that the Endowment is now addressing the preservation funding problem in its own long-range planning on a basis far closer to the required levels. We do not believe, however, that a major national problem, requiring a national strategy, deserves anything less than a major federal effort. By forming the Commission on Preservation and Access, the private sector has taken a major step forward. But even this effort can not succeed without the vigorous and enlightened participation of the relevant federal agencies. We believe that there are several factors which indicate the need for a higher level of funding earlier, and an accelerated schedule. These factors include:

- A strong consensus has formed that we must move rapidly to preserve as much of the published cultural record of the last 150 years, much of which is endangered by the deterioration of the acid-based paper on which it is recorded;
- The goal of saving 3.3 million of the volumes at risk is a minimum "common core" and to the extent possible we should look to saving as much more of the estimated 10 million volumes at risk;
- There are advantages to building the microfilming effort on a faster track (i.e., rather than over a 20-year period, filming the more than 3 million volumes in 15 or even 10 years). The impediments to moving faster (and thus saving more) are limitations in funding not in the capability of affected institutions to carry out the work;
- The front-line organizations (i.e., research universities, other libraries including the Library of Congress, library organizations, and foundations are ready to go;
- The Commission's cost estimates are for filming. There are a number of related costs such as selection of titles, coordination to avoid duplication, and so forth. Universities and private foundations will continue to provide significant help but it is probably not realistic to expect those institutions to be able to find all the funds required to support the work at this new level;
- As massive filming gets under way, economies and new technologies will undoubtedly occur which may lower the costs in connection with the overall effort. These are likely to come in expediting access to the saved material rather than the actual filming, which is necessarily labor intensive;

And perhaps most importantly

- Materials saved on microform are available for inexpensive reproduction on film or other media. In this way it will be possible, as Warren J. Haas put it, to transform cultural assets acquired over many years by a relatively small number of institutions into a truly national asset that will be available to all in the nation who have need of them, regardless of their communities or affiliations.

PROGRAMMATIC NEEDS AT THE ENDOWMENT

The Alliance wholeheartedly supports and, in fact urges, your strong and positive response to NEH's role in the preservation challenge as discussed above. Equally clear should be 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. Therefore, we urge the Subcommittee to reject proposals for reductions below current program budgets and to find ways to begin increasing these same budgets.

(An additional element is the lag in federal support for the humanities in contrast with federal support for the arts. Once rather close, the gap has been widening with the National Endowment for the Arts presently administering a budget more than \$27 million higher than NEH. While we recognize that parity as such between the Endowments is not currently a credible political equation, there is also no reason to believe that the arts contribute more or that they are more in the public interest than the humanities.)

Last month, Lynne Cheney 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 are under the heaviest budgetary stress. This information confirms anecdotal evidence gathered by the Alliance and others although in varying degrees the problem pervades most of the programs at NEH:

- Challenge Grants have proven to be one of the most important mechanisms used by NEH to strengthen the nation's humanities institutions. The matching requirements have been the catalyst for greatly improved development skills at many of the recipient organizations. Competition for challenge grants has always been brisk but an analysis of FY-1987, when 210 proposals were processed, illustrates that the funds are not adequate: 37 proposals were rated Excellent in the peer review process - 31 of these received grants; Of 52 rated Very Good - 12 received grants; Of 28 rated Some Merit - none received grants. This has been the NEH's most effective program for attracting private funding -- The multiplier effect really works!
- Division of Research Programs grant figures also show that there is a significant shortfall in funds to support the most highly ranked work. For example ACCESS program records for FY-87 indicate that of 168 proposals, 39 were funded: 34 proposals 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 cataloging 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.) Likewise, the TRANSLATIONS program received 129 applications and funded 34: All 25 proposals ranked as Excellent were funded; 9 of 14 ranked Very Good. We believe that another result of the long term squeeze on funds at NEH is that many projects are funded but with considerably reduced budgets.

The Research and Challenge Grant programs are only the most pressing needs -- Virtually all programs of all divisions of NEH need larger budgets.

I would like to conclude with a few examples of the importance of current Endowment work to scholarship, education and public life in America.

State Humanities Councils play a critical role in the development of public humanities in this country. I am sure any one of the Councils could document numerous opportunities missed because of the shrunken buying power of their budgets. Recently the State Councils were asked to document all of the education projects supported over the last four years. I am pleased to submit

for the record a copy of the resulting compilation of projects which was reproduced by the NEH Division of State Programs for its "State Councils and Education Conference." The individual reports contained in the document illustrate the rich range and important roles the Councils can and do play in strengthening our schools and in catalyzing public involvement in such issues. It might also be noted that few of the State Humanities Councils receive state funds in contrast to the generous funding provided for State Arts Councils -- Once again illustrating the critical importance of federal support for the humanities.

The Division of General Programs contains the Endowment's other major programs for facilitating the public in participating in the humanities -- especially in understanding and appreciating their cultural and intellectual heritage. Of particular note, I believe, are the Endowment's efforts to encourage stronger and more diverse interactions between university-based scholars and public humanities institutions including historical organizations, libraries, and museums. For example, a recent Endowment grant to the American Association for State and Local History supports planning for two conferences aimed at strengthening history museums as interpreters of American history. A long term benefit of the project is that it is leading to a far clearer picture of the roles scholars play or could play in the work of historical organizations. If the project also leads to a revitalized relationship between university-based scholars and their colleagues in historic organizations, we will all be the richer for it.

In the programs of the Division of Education Programs, the Endowment offers support in thoughtful and effective ways aimed at strengthening formal education at all levels. An area of particular concern to the members of the Alliance -- forging more and stronger partnerships between scholars and higher education institutions on the one hand and teachers and school systems on the other -- has been receiving increased attention at the Endowment. Two examples:

- The PATHS program in Philadelphia has directly organized and/or brokered imaginative collaborative projects between the public schools and various scholarly institutions aimed at improving the teaching of history. For example, a month-long summer institute was held at the American Philosophical Society for public school teachers to study local history. The teachers utilizing the resources of the APS (America's oldest learned society and a major independent research library) worked with a broad mix of scholars ranging from recent PhDs to senior scholars. The teachers were able to return to their schools refreshed and actively engaged in the history of their city.
- The Endowment recently launched a Teacher/Scholar Program which provides funds for sabbatical leave for one elementary or secondary school teacher from each state. Targeted at strengthening the quality of the teaching of the humanities, the program, which is co-sponsored by the Readers Digest Foundation (another example of federal-private partnership) permits the grantees to enrich their knowledge of history, literature or any other area of the humanities through study at academic institutions or as independent scholars.

Finally, the NEH's Division of Fellowships and Seminars provides assistance which benefits the work of all other programs of the Endowment. Last year, through its fellowships for university teachers, college teachers, and independent scholars, NEH invested \$27,500 in each of 247 award winners. (The winners were selected from among nearly 1,600 applicants.) For most of the fellowship recipients, the awards mean the opportunity to research and write for a year. Our experience over more than two decades indicates that NEH fellowships have meant much more. Fellowships have made possible thousands of books and other publications of great value not

only to other scholars but also to the reading public; stimulated renewed and invigorated teaching which in turn has produced better educated and more humane students; facilitated the development of ideas later manifested in public lectures, educational television, and the like. Thus, fellowship support is basic to the humanities. In short, even a small grant from NEH is like a stone tossed in a pond, sending ripples in every direction and benefiting a larger audience than might at first be apparent.

The humanities constitute a system in the United States -- every part having impact on every other. This 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.