

Chapter 1

The Contest for American Culture: A Leadership Case Study on the NEA and NEH Funding Crisis

Cynthia M. Koch
Harvard University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter is an account of the 1995 funding crisis that was written in 1998 when Koch was working at the University of Pennsylvania for the Penn National Commission on Culture and Community (PNC). The PNC was a “think tank” organized by then-university President Judith Rodin to find solutions to problems of failures of leadership, fragmentation of communities, and a culture of intolerance that plagued our public discussions and behavior. The article is, therefore, an analysis of the political and journalistic trajectory that led to the crisis of 1995 and its immediate aftermath.

INTRODUCTION

“The National Endowment for the Arts has always been bigger than life,” Mr. Armey said. “What makes it so big? It is made big by the concerted, well-funded, well-motivated efforts of the arts elite in America who want the focus to be not whether or not there will be funding for the arts but whether or not they will be in control.” Representative Dick Armey of Texas, Republican Majority Leader (Gray, 1998, p. A15).

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The most recent round of the national debate over funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) ended one year later, on July 21, 1998. On that day the House of Representatives approved \$98 million for the NEA for fiscal 1999 and rejected the conservative Republican position that tax dollars should not be used to support the arts. This is the latest chapter in a concerted assault on the arts—and eventually humanities—that has been raging with more or less ferocity since May 1989 when Sen. Jesse Helms, on information supplied by the conservative Christian American Family Association, condemned Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" in an NEA-funded exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

But conservative discomfort with the endowments has existed since their founding; it first received national attention during the Reagan Administration. The real debate is not about money, or accusations of obscenity, or even—as the National Endowment for the Humanities was dragged into the controversy—over disagreements about how history is taught in our nation's schools. There are enduring enmities between those who favor a government role in supporting our national cultural life, and those, who for a variety of reasons, do not. Those in favor point to the record of support by governments in Europe, historical precedent, and the need to foster arts and scholarship in locations and disciplines where such activities would not be supported by market forces or private philanthropy. Opponents often take a libertarian approach, arguing against government involvement at all, or as social conservatives they oppose support for the arts and humanities on moral grounds as part of a broad-based critique of government rooted in religious beliefs that are at variance with prevailing public policy and values.

The philosophical differences between the two sides represent varying views about human nature and its relation to government. Endowments proponents generally hold modern liberal-moderate political views: minimal intrusion on the part of the state in private life combined with confidence in an activist government to guarantee individual rights and broad access to social goods such as economic, educational, and cultural opportunity. This view is opposed by many political opponents of the endowments, but by far the strongest opposition comes from Christian conservatives who advocate elimination of the NEA (and the NEH in the heat of the 1995 funding crisis) as part of their broader social agenda. For them individual rights and free expression, fundamental values in the liberal tradition, are radically at odds with a world view from an older ideology that sees human beings as basically flawed, their capacities for good nurtured only in the strict observance of Christian dogma. A government that fails to enforce these precepts is at odds with their deepest beliefs and must be changed. The Reverend Peter J. Gomes described the fervency of these political convictions in "The New Liberation Theology":

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