PS for 5/10/90

Defund the National Endowment for the Arts

Last week's Senate committee hearing on the annual appropriation for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was carried live across America on C-Span. But C-Span's TB screen did not and could not show the obscene and blasphemous works of alleged "art" which have caused a storm of protest on Capitol Hill.

What brought the issue of NEA funding to the top of the news is the widespread publicity about NEA grants of taxpayers' money spent for products which are offensive to the majority of Americans. These items of alleged "art" include materials which deliberately insult people of certain religions and the God they worship, or deliberately display the obscenity and even child pornography.

Some have proposed that the Congress of the NEA should set up standards which would permit funding to continue to flow to "good" art, while barring it from offensive art. The NEA is refusing to accept any standards and, anyway, this would require a Federal Ministry of Culture (as they have in totalitarian states) to decide which art is worthy of taxpayers' grants and which is not.

The futility of this approach was also shown by a recent exchange of letters in the *New York Times*, wherein a prominent grant recipient objected even to a restriction that the NEA money not be spent for obscenity or child pornography. NEA chairman John E. Frohnmayer responded by practically apologizing for the restriction against obscenity.

Since obscenity (under the Supreme Court's *Miller* decision) and child pornography are prosecutable offenses and have no protection under the First Amendment anyway, the notion that anyone should demand the right to spend the taxpayers' money to produce such materials to show how arrogant the grant recipients have become, and how out of touch and irresponsible is the NEA. Chairman Frohnmayer's own statements show that his is unwilling to exercise responsibility over the money that passes through his hands.

It is unfortunate that the recipients of NEA grants have misrepresented the issue as "censorship." As Congressman Dick Armey put it, "They can do what they want on their own time with their own dime."

But when it comes to the taxpayers' money, we certainly have a right to say how it will be spent. Nobody has a "right" to receive unrestricted grants of the taxpayers' money.

Congress should not be misled by the wide access that recipients of offensive art have to the national media and their phony claims that this is a "First Amendment" issue. The grassroots can see through this deception, and it will not play in Peoria.

The whole idea that a federal agency should be in the business of deciding which artists may enjoy taxpayers' money, and which may not, is offensive. Every grant made by the NEA to one artist involves the rejection of applications by other artists.

Every grant means a taxpayer subsidy to a favored artist and the censorship of others. Many fine artists were excluded from the flow of taxpayers' money when NEA grants were made for products that blasphemed Jesus Christ by portraying Him in unspeakable poses, that glorified aborted baby parts, that trampled on the American flag, and that exploited children for pornography.

Just suppose for a moment that the NEA had funded a Nativity scene. Can't you hear the howls of protest from the liberals about how this would be an unacceptable expenditure of taxpayers' money?

Some would have us believe that the ridiculous proposition that, if we defund the NEA, art in America will cease to exist! Figures from 1987 indicate that Americans are voluntarily generous to the arts to the tune of about $6.4 billion a year from private contributions.

NEA funding is miniscule by comparison, The NEA has only been in existence for 25 years, and we had great art of all kinds in the United States before that; some might say we had greater art in pre-NEA years.

The NEA was born in the mid-1960s when unregulated handouts to targeted constituencies were the passion of the day. That era is over, and examples abound of a new voter sensitivity to unnecessary or controversial spending programs which unbalance the budget and contribute to pressure to raise taxes.

Those examples include the election of George Bush on the anti-tax slogan "read my lips," the political predicament today of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and

the numerous tax and bond-issue referenda in various states and school districts where the voters have turned thumbs down on apparently meritorious proposals.

Since the National Endowment for the Arts receives its money from the U.S. Treasury as a result of appropriations passed by Congress, the taxpayers will not accept the argument that Congress cannot control what is done with the money it spends. The day of passing the buck is over.