

Obama's proposed budget to slash funding for historic preservation, National Park Service

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The Obama administration's proposed 2011 budget, currently under review by the House Appropriations Committee, calls for sweeping austerity measures for social programs and infrastructure.

Among the bill's proposals are massive cuts to historic preservation funding including the elimination of the Save America's Treasures and Preserve America programs. These cuts total \$25 million dollars, with the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) receiving a mere \$54.5 million in 2011, down from the already inadequate \$79.5 million it received in 2010.

The White House is also proposing cuts to the National Park Service's construction budget, which oversees the maintenance of historic structures within the parks, as well as reductions in battlefield preservation grants, Native American Graves Protection Act grants, and Heritage Area funds for the National Park Service.

Obama's budget includes the total elimination of the Challenge Cost Share account, which provides matching funds for National Park Service projects and Bureau of Land Management academic fieldwork on archaeology, historical site assessments, and surveys. Even before taking these latter changes into account, however, the elimination of Save America's Treasures and Preserve America represent the largest reduction in historic preservation funding since cuts made by the Reagan administration in the 1980s.

Obama insists that elimination of Save America's Treasures and Preserve America are needed because they are "duplicative" and "lack rigorous performance metrics and evaluation efforts, so benefits remain unclear." This language is the polar opposite of the 2010 budget proposal, in which the administration

praised these very same programs as "vital" to the National Park Service's role in preserving the cultural heritage of the United States.

Despite the administration's current claims of duplication, Save America's Treasures and Preserve America are the only programs that allot money for "brick and mortar" historic preservation projects, from façade improvement grants for small business owners, to the restoration of nationally significant landmarks and architecture.

The Historic Preservation Fund was established in 1976 by Congress in order to implement programs authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which stated that "the historical and cultural foundations of the nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life," and that "preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest." The fund, with income from fees charged on leases for Outer Continental Shelf oil drilling, provides grants to states, tribes, and local governments to use for activities like education, National Register nominations, federal rehabilitation tax credits, environmental review, and development of comprehensive preservation plans.

The US Treasury takes in around \$6 billion in revenue annually from its Outer Continental Shelf oil leases. Of this, \$150 million, or 2.5 percent, is deposited into the Historic Preservation Fund. Of that \$150 million, Congress usually appropriates less than half of this amount to be distributed to every state, over 100 tribes, and other organizations to administer incentives, protection, and assistance with the rehabilitation of cultural resources.

The funds received by annual appropriations are

matched by state dollars, so the effect of a loss of federal funding for historic preservation organizations is amplified by the loss of a funding match at the state level.

The establishment of the fund in 1976 and the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 signified minor concessions of the ruling elite to the cultural needs of the public at a time when American capitalism could absorb such generosityes. The Historic Preservation Fund, however, has never received funding equal to that suggested by its founding legislation. In fact, funding levels for historic preservation and rehabilitation projects have always been minimal, never rising above 50 percent—less than 1.5 percent of total Outer Continental Shelf lease revenues.

The inadequacy of funding is accompanied by social phenomena indicative of the decline of capitalism, such as the increasing decrepitude of housing stock, the abandonment of historic commercial buildings in city centers, and the destruction of culturally significant sites. That the Obama administration seeks to eliminate the only federal programs, however insufficient, that directly address the physical repair of historic sites shows an increasing level of disdain for the cultural life of the United States and the day-to-day conditions the working class must face.

The current historic preservation funding cut proposals are only a foretaste of the “sacrifices” the American working class will be expected to make, as alluded to in Obama’s State of the Union address. The cuts to historic preservation come alongside sweeping cuts in education, arts programs, libraries, symphonies, museums and countless other cultural institutions. Far from being incidental or superfluous, the erosion of such funding, supported by both the Democrats and Republicans, is part of the broad assault on the conditions in which masses of people live.



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