

# The significance of Trump's proposed elimination of arts, humanities spending

David Walsh  
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Various protests have been organized in recent weeks by arts groups opposed to Donald Trump's plan, part of his budget proposal for 2018, to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The proposal also defunds the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Institute of Library and Museum Service.

The most sizable rallies took place in Washington, D.C., New York City and Boston. In addition, a petition opposing the cuts, organized by various liberal groups, including PEN America, People for the American Way, and the *Nation*, and which warns about "a new Dark Ages in America," has been signed by some 240,000 people to date.

The NEA and NEH are among 19 government agencies, as the WSWWS noted recently, "most of them long targeted for destruction by ultra-right ideologues and Christian fundamentalists," slated for outright destruction.

The two organizations at present receive a pittance, \$148 million each in 2016, a tiny fraction of the nearly \$4 trillion federal budget.

The attack on the endowments, each of which received funding last year the equivalent of the cost of one Air Force F-35A fighter, has primarily political and ideological motives.

In keeping with the administration's thuggish character, Trump officials defended the savage budget plan on the grounds that it was helping move the country "toward fiscal responsibility" and "eliminates and reduces hundreds of programs and focuses funding to redefine the proper role of the Federal Government."

The eradication of the token amount the US government has been spending on culture goes hand in hand with a proposed increase in the Pentagon's budget to a staggering \$639 billion. Money that went to dance companies and libraries and local theaters will go instead to killing people in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, North Korea and other parts of the globe, apparently the "proper role of the Federal Government."

According to the *Hill*, "The proposed cuts hew closely to a blueprint published last year by the conservative Heritage Foundation, a think tank that has helped staff the Trump transition."

Outfits like the ultra-right Heritage Foundation, which do nothing with their time except calculate how every possible

penny of the national income can be shoveled into the pockets of the super-rich, like to posture as friends of the "little people" when it comes to the NEA and similar organizations. "The NEA is welfare for cultural elitists," claims the Foundation. Or, in the words of White House budget Director Mike Mulvaney, "The president finally got to the point where he said, 'Do I really want to make the coal miner in West Virginia, or the auto worker in Ohio, or the single mom in Detroit pay for the National Endowment of the Arts or the Corporation for Public Broadcasting?' And the answer is no."

One can make all manner of criticism of the NEA and NEH, but for the defenders of unending war and repression and billion-dollar boondoggles for giant corporations to complain about the miserable subsidy of the arts and humanities in the US as an example of "elitism" goes beyond obscene hypocrisy into some other, yet uncharted realm.

The hostility of the extreme right toward the NEA has almost nothing to do with what the toothless, thoroughly cowed agency actually does. The fascistic, militaristic right fears art because of what art *might do, has done*. This is the significance of one such attack on the NEA and NEH: "These are all propaganda arms for the far-left. They don't deserve a penny of taxpayer money. Why should American citizens have to pay for globalist, anti-American, socialist propaganda? This budget is urgently needed."

Utterly absurd, but the fears are legitimate. Socially critical art, very little of which the NEA *actually* subsidizes, would challenge the status quo and would almost inevitably be "far-left" and "socialist."

We have commented before: "The assault on art, on the artistic personality itself, by the American political establishment flows from its crisis and its predatory aims. The ruling elite is frightened by everything it cannot control, cannot understand, everything that does not serve the interests of the market. It is instinctively hostile in the US at present to truthful and penetrating depictions of life. Such depictions must show it up for the anti-democratic, authoritarian, rotten husk that it is.

"The ruling elite knows as well that it cannot inspire serious art. In the honest and forthright, it only inspires disgust and loathing. Endless war, a policy of everything for the rich, continuous attacks on the rights of the people—under these

conditions only the most miserable toady and the opportunist gravitate toward the powers that be. The artist, particularly the young artist, must find a new orientation, based on opposition to the status quo in every one of its aspects.”

Every civilized society subsidizes serious art work, which, by its very nature, is not geared toward earning a profit. The production of work that reflects on and brings out the deepest character of the society, including its most serious flaws, should be the responsibility of that society. Any healthy society, that is. As we noted in 2004, and things are far more advanced now, American capitalism is so decayed and rotten that its rulers and their apologists cannot bear to see an honest portrait of life in this country. Hence, the instinctive and relentless desire to stifle art and the artist.

The claim that art should rely on the “market” is not, as is claimed, an argument for letting “the people decide.” In fact, the “people” would have absolutely no say in the matter. The decisions would be left entirely to the handful of conglomerates who already determine much of what the American and world’s population sees and hears on a daily basis.

If one wants to know what the “genius” of the market produces, consider the current fare on Broadway or the films in the “Top Box Office” list in the US, which include *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Boss Baby*, *Power Rangers*, *Kong: Skull Island*, *Logan*, etc. Has such a list ever been more dispiriting? This is what art-by-conglomerate produces, mostly empty bombast. This is the dream of the ultra-right and the American elite as a whole, the suffocation of art as a means of sharpening the critical faculties of the population.

The argument that the loss of public funding would be more than made for up by private sources, even if it were true, reveals the kind of art the American establishment—including figures like the wealthy, preternaturally pompous and smug George Will (“Abolish the National Endowment for the Arts,” March 15)—has in mind: work that is acceptable to wealthy benefactors, produced by artists who are in the humiliating position of being beholden to these “philanthropist” millionaires and billionaires. As we wrote in 2010: “This dependence on the largess of the wealthy is degrading and intellectually restrictive in the best of times. In a period of crisis, it threatens catastrophe. Now the very presence of music, art and drama in a given community may depend on the financial vicissitudes of the ultra-rich.”

The recent protests against the Trump assault on the arts have not been especially large and, if one reads between the lines of the media accounts, not all that inspiring. No wonder, since they are dominated by Democratic Party politicians and their allies.

The New York City rally, for example, was organized by the City Council’s Democratic Party leader, Jimmy Van Bramer. Among those in attendance, according to *Artforum*, were “New York’s Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl, and a number of arts organizations, such as the

protest group We Make America and the Actors’ Equity Association.” Furthermore, “Council members from Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens were in attendance to make mention of the positive effects the arts have on all manner of community, great and small.” Beloved figures, these council members, every one of them!

Van Bramer made a demagogic statement, including these comments: “Just as the President assaulted healthcare for millions of Americans, he’s now assaulting the arts, culture, humanities, and libraries, and seeking to deprive hundreds of millions of Americans the right to experience and express themselves through art and culture. We want to have the same kind of resistance movement against Trump’s assault on the arts.”

The record of the Democratic Party is miserable and right-wing on every one of these counts. The Obama administration presided over unprecedented social inequality, while launching illegal drone strikes and stepping up mass surveillance and attacks on democratic rights. In this regard, the comments of warmonger Representative Nancy Pelosi of California about the proposed arts cuts are especially repugnant: “It’s about enjoyment and inspiration and jobs, but it’s also about our humanity. This is about America and who we are as a nation.”

Going further back, the record of the Clinton administration record on civil liberties and the arts was generally atrocious, from support for the so-called Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996, to strengthening the police ability to obtain wiretaps, to speeding up the death penalty process. It was the Clinton Justice Department that appealed a federal court’s ruling that the anti-democratic law requiring the NEA to consider “general standards of decency” was unconstitutional to the Supreme Court and won, against artist Karen Finley and three others.

The NEA hierarchy itself, establishment to its core, is largely impotent and incapable of appealing to wide layers of the population, having spent the past 30 years or so retreating from the attacks of semi-fascists like Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina and his ilk. The argument of the NEA leadership that its programs are essentially civic-minded and harmless and even generate income will do nothing to arouse popular interest or support.

The arts in America will have to be defended through the emergence of a mass socialist-minded working class movement directed against the foundations of the profit system, the source of the unrelenting assault on art and culture.



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