

# The Great American State Fair and the war on arts and culture in the US

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On Wednesday evening, President Donald Trump opened the grotesque “Great American State Fair” on Washington's National Mall, claiming “There has never been anything like the United States of America, and together we are making it bigger and better and stronger and far more exceptional than ever before.”

The sparsely attended rally was otherwise marked, according to one press account, by “a series of booming flyovers by stealth bombers, music from military bands, and Lee Greenwood singing ‘God Bless the USA.’”

The “Fair” is an element of the administration’s purported celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Its miserable, unpopular character says more about the state of American capitalism—and the condition of its official culture—than either Trump of course, the Democrats or the media would care to admit.

Having been publicly and rudely abandoned by most of the performers originally scheduled to appear at the 16-day event, Trump was obliged to take center stage himself on Wednesday, along with other government officials.

Among those addressing the crowd was Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, who slammed the musicians who backed out while declaring that Trump is “the greatest president that's ever existed in this country since George Washington.” (Associated Press)

If the opportunity to listen to Transportation Secretary Duffy, a former cast member of MTV’s *The Real World: Boston*, in person weren’t enticement enough, “Organizers distributed rectangular cardboard American flags that some attendees used for shade before the sun went down and Trump took the stage.”

In his speech, Trump modestly asserted that

“This is the beginning of the golden age of America” and the “American Dream is alive again. It's something that nobody thought they'd be saying when you went through that last four years of incompetence.”

As for the Great American State Fair itself, an effort to invoke a largely mythological version of small-town, 19th century life in the US, CNN reported:

Until July 10, large white tents decorated with neoclassical columns will house dozens of state pavilions featuring interactive experiences designed to represent each state’s culture, heritage and natural landscapes.

The Arizona pavilion will take visitors through a “sensory journey,” according to an ad agency director. “You start with the warm, cathedral light in Antelope Canyon,” he said. “Then you transition into the cool, dappled light of a Ponderosa pine forest. And lastly, you wander into a Sonoran Desert nightscape, where blacklights subtly illuminate stars and saguaro cactuses.”

Oklahoma’s pavilion will replicate the smells of the prairie and use lighting to show the transition from a sunrise to dark evening. In Minnesota, they’ll win prizes by selecting from a pond full of miniature versions of the North Star State’s official bird, the common loon. Florida’s pavilion will showcase the state’s citrus industry and include a mini-golf putting green. (CNN)

This is all banal, filthy nonsense, which has nothing to do with the ideals and foundations of the American Revolution or anyone’s “culture” or “heritage” for that matter, in any genuine sense.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration presses on with its war on actual, concretely existing arts and culture, in the name of a parasitic establishment that has few serious interests aside from making profits and preparing for war. That establishment includes the Democrats and the trade union leaders, who wave their hands ineffectually while doing everything in their power to smother or prevent militant, politically conscious, anti-capitalist opposition. Anyone relying on those forces, including the Mamdani types, to defend art and culture is deluding him or herself.

If the present White House has not been able to lay waste to each and every arts agency and organization, that has to do with the calculations of those convinced that such wholesale devastation would have unnecessarily provocative and damaging consequences.

Earlier this month, the House Appropriations Committee passed out the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education

bill, which includes reduced FY2027 funding for arts education and for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The Trump administration has made a priority of completely shutting down the IMLS, the only federal agency dedicated to funding library services.

In April, the Department of Justice reached a settlement in the lawsuit filed by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union (AFSCME) and the American Library Association (ALA), agreeing to leave IMLS intact. But, as *Artnet* commented, “the imperiled agency is not out of the woods yet, as the administration’s proposed 2027 federal budget once again seeks to eliminate the IMLS.”

*Americans for the Arts* points out that in the appropriations bill the

Department of Education’s funding dropped by \$8 billion compared to FY2026, falling to \$70.7 billion. ???The bill would negatively impact K-12 education by cutting \$2 billion from Title I Grants and completely eliminating Title II Part A funding for educator professional development.

On June 2, Legis1 posted a piece chronicling the conflicts over federal arts funding and providing the “final numbers” for 2026, published in late May by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). That analysis, according to Legis1, “reveals a landmark standoff between the White House and Capitol Hill over the future of federal arts and humanities funding.”

Trump and company campaigned for the total elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), ultimately without success. The three agencies (including the IMLS) “were funded at roughly the same levels as the year before, with only a modest \$3 million trim across the board. But the story behind those numbers is anything but routine. What Congress quietly accomplished in early 2026 was a direct repudiation of the sitting president’s budget agenda.”

This presents a picture of principled opposition that flies in the face of reality. The CRS notes more candidly that

Arts and humanities funding flows directly to libraries in rural districts, to state arts councils in red and purple states, to museums and universities in virtually every congressional district in the country. The formula-based structure of many of these grants ... makes them politically durable in ways that more targeted federal programs are not.

And even the complacent authors of the CRS study are forced to admit that

The political conditions that enabled that choice [to continue funding the NEA, NEH and IMLS] are not guaranteed to persist. For the millions of Americans who rely on the programs these agencies fund, the margin of survival was thinner than the final numbers suggest.

In any event, it is not simply a matter of dollars and cents. The sword of Damocles hanging over the beleaguered arts organizations may accomplish many of the authorities’ goal by other means. The relentless pressure and threats effectively intimidate and “neuter” the arts bodies that do manage to extract a bit of cash from the federal government. The right-wing politicians and media are ready to pounce on any sign of opposition or criticism from arts group “receiving government money.” This creates a dual condition of de facto official censorship and compliant arts bodies’ self-policing.

The essentially ruthless and barbaric character of US capitalism comes out in these controversies. The amount spent on the arts and education is already derisory. The American ruling class has traveled down a long, dark road to its current location with the gangster Trump at its helm.

Remarkably, US president and former five-star general Dwight D. Eisenhower argued in 1953 that military spending materially damaged human progress. “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.” He went on: “The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. ... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” These comments had an obvious propaganda purpose in the midst of the Cold War, but nonetheless no representative of the US ruling elite today would be caught dead speaking like this even on holidays or other special occasions.

The “cold, hard facts,” the “base truths,” as Lenin termed them, are clear enough. For fiscal year 2026, US government funding for the arts represented roughly 0.02 percent of what was spent on the military.

By other means of calculation, NEA funding in 2026 was \$207 million while the FBI budget was more than 50 times larger, the intelligence community (CIA, etc.) funding level 487 times larger, the Department of Homeland Security funding 845 times larger and direct military spending 4,879 times larger.



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