

Editorial: Arts greatly enrich our society

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With a massive federal debt approaching \$20 trillion, it is understandable President Trump would seek to trim the nonessentials. It is equally obvious that all government spending creates strong constituencies that scream bloody murder about reductions.

Still, it is troubling that Mr. Trump wants to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which cost taxpayers \$741 million a year but greatly enrich our society. The money goes for music, dance, theater, visual arts, museums, historic research and other artistic endeavors that are not adequately funded through purely market forces.

We admit that they do tend to promote "elitist" interests — rather than what is readily available on cable television — but we create our society's leaders of the future by exposing people of all income groups to the richness of the life of the mind.

Of course, one can debate the merits of what this money is spent on. In the past, the spending has come under criticism for promoting deliberately offensive works and left-leaning ideology. Many Americans were offended that they were forced through their taxes to support the work of a photographer who suspended a crucifix in what he claimed was a vial of his own urine. Conservatives were angered by a 2009 conference call in which an NEA official suggested works of art that promoted President Obama's policy agenda.

Sadly, it is almost inevitable that when government gets involved in spending, politics will play a role. To the extent the arts and humanities are overtly politicized to promote one party's agenda, they will lose the willing support of

taxpayers. But that does not mean all arts and humanities funding should be eliminated.

Elizabeth Francis, executive director of the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, notes that her organization has awarded grants totaling \$7.7 million since 1973, and gets about \$600,000 a year through an NEH grant.

"Public access to the humanities — education; exhibitions, tours, performances, and festivals; media; and community and civic engagement — would be severely diminished without the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Humanities Council delivers nearly one-third of our NEH funds directly through grants to people and communities throughout Rhode Island for projects that would not take place without this support," Ms. Francis noted.

The highly successful Providence Children's Film Festival developed through Humanities Council grants. The council's NEH grant supports its staff in working with people in higher education and tourism, and with other funders, to make Rhode Island more culturally vibrant. NEH funding in Rhode Island also has supported such organizations as the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Tomaquag Museum, and the Providence Community Library.

NEA money has gone to the I-Park Foundation of East Haddam, Conn.; the Vineyard Arts Project in Edgartown, Mass.; BalletRox of Jamaica Plain, Mass.; the Boston Children's Chorus; New Urban Arts of Providence; the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Mass.; DownCity Design of Providence; the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts, in New Bedford, Mass.; and the Providence-based Alliance of Artists Communities.

In the Western world, aristocrats and the Catholic Church were traditionally the sponsors of great art. A more democratic society funds the arts with the help of government grants. We hope Congress works to keep enriching our society through the arts.