

State Humanities Councils

Public Works: NEH, Congress, and the State Humanities Councils

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Abstract: The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 is the most ambitious piece of cultural legislation in American history. The story of its creation and evolution is a tangled one that continues to the present day. This essay looks at NEH and NEA in their early years, their relations with Congress, and the process by which NEH fostered the invention of humanities-based “State Committees,” significantly different in concept from NEA’s innovation of “State Arts Agencies.” The circumstances that led to the creation of these grassroots programs ultimately changed NEH itself while popularizing the novel terminology and concept of “public” humanities work. The essay concludes with reflections about the time-bound quality of NEH and the State Humanities Councils and considers their sustainability in a new century.

Key words: NEH, State Humanities Councils, public funding for the humanities

THE HUMANITIES COUNCILS OF TODAY are private, nonprofit organizations. Community dialogue, learning, and humanities content are the Councils’ common ethos. They are the designated state-level agencies of the National Endowment for the Humanities (which provides a significant amount of their financial support, but by no means all). One exists in each state and territorial jurisdiction. Councils make grants that help fund community-based programs, many on historical and literary subjects.

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Councils also plan and carry out public projects of their own, some statewide. They work closely with educators, museums, cultural organizations, libraries, media, and schools as well as colleges and universities. Their staffs are small, typically fewer than ten. Volunteer boards of directors drawn from higher education, business, community volunteers, educators, elected officials, and the nonprofit sector govern the Councils. Locality is paramount among these organizations because each is charged by NEH with developing a strategic plan that is framed by the needs of a state jurisdiction. For all these reasons, each Council tends to represent the history, needs, strengths, vision, and resources of *place*.

This paper focuses on the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965 and the events that led to NEH's creation of the "State Committees" in 1971. Out of these experimental State Committees emerged a new structure, the "State Humanities Council." In essence, councils use the humanities to promote conversational work in the public square. By "conversation" I am including all aspects of learning and participation in organized programs that use, preserve, interpret, or explore humanistic content. Texts are important, as are scholars and others with expertise (including tradition bearers).

Typical "public humanities" programs include formats and activities such as museum exhibitions, radio programs, lectures with an opportunity for dialogue, workshops or tours, library reading and discussion programs, and book festivals. Indeed, the formation of the NEH and the State Committees are important conceptual developments in their own right, for descriptors like "applied" and "public" have been popularized through their programs. This "public" style of work in the humanities was viewed (and generally, still is) as a civic methodology with a democratizing goal, one embodiment of a late twentieth-century faith and confidence in the power of humanities-based dialogue to create just and informed civil societies.

Finally, as anyone who has followed national politics in the last forty years can testify, the arts and humanities endowments have become entangled in the culture wars, contributing personalities to the debate (chairs, staff members, National Council appointees, not to mention grantees) while also becoming ready symbols for politicians, advocacy organizations, and a multitude of talk-radio hosts. Tiny, underfunded, and almost invisible in the nebula of federal programs, the NEH and NEA exert an unusual gravitational pull in American politics. In response, a national "humanities community" has evolved that advocates for the NEH and federal support. I will conclude with some thoughts about the value and sustainability of these twentieth century creations: the NEH and the councils. There is no precise parallel or counterpart in the U.S. or elsewhere. Understanding this can illuminate the impact and influence of NEH and the Councils, unusual experiments in the great experiment of democracy itself.

The Creation of the NEA and NEH

In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, a legislative device that actually created two endowments within the same enabling statute: The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).¹ It was the most ambitious piece of cultural legislation in American history. What prompted the creation of these two unique federal agencies, and why in 1965? Part of the answer is the advocacy of arts patrons like Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York State and Nancy Hanks of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, also in New York, who were well situated to influence national public affairs, and of course a legion of arts enthusiasts, theater and symphony goers, philanthropists, journalists, and legislators. Equally noteworthy were influential Washington policy officials like Arthur Goldberg, President John F. Kennedy's Secretary of Labor, who in 1961 (while successfully negotiating the Metropolitan Opera strike) stated "the nation must come to accept the arts as a new community responsibility."² Jacqueline Kennedy brought a new level of visibility and energy to the arts in Washington, as did Kennedy himself when he appointed Roger Stevens to the first full-time White House advisory position in the arts.

The decisive factor, however, was the leadership of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), which, in combination with the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, in 1963 helped found the Rockefeller Foundation-funded National Commission on the Humanities. One year later the Rockefeller Commission emphatically recommended creation of an independent Federal Humanities Foundation. The Commission and its report, the brainchild of Robert Luminansky of the ACLS and its staff director, Charles Blitzer, brought gravitas to the idea of creating a federal cultural agency. It immediately captured the attention of national media sources like *Science* magazine and the *New York Times*, signaling, "the time has come" for this important educational endeavor. Indeed it had, if the public conversation inaugurated by Ike's solemn farewell address (1961) and the continuing debate on both sides of the Atlantic surrounding C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures* (1959) was any measure.³

From the standpoint of public policy, the founding of the National Institute of Health (1930), the National Science Foundation (1950) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (1958) offered models of highly professionalized and independent national agencies with government mandates. A national humanities foundation would not only respond to

1. "The National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965," P.L. 89-209.

2. Cynthia Koch, "The Contest for American Culture: A Leadership Case Study on the NEA and NEH Funding Crisis," *Public Talk: Online Journal of Discourse Leadership*. www.upenn.edu/pnc/ptkoch.html

3. Stephen Miller, *Excellence & Equity: The National Endowment for the Humanities* (Lexington, KY: 1984), 11-12.

national needs, but also visibly enhance America's intellectual leadership in the Free World, one shocked by the 1957 launch of Sputnik and an enshrouding fear of a nuclear abyss that heightened the need for wisdom and reason.

Anticipating the challenges that waited in the next Congressional session, and after discussions with House and Senate leaders, in the winter months of 1964-65 White House (and former Kennedy) aide Richard Goodwin drafted legislation that would house two agencies, one in the arts and one in the humanities, under a "National Foundation." The plan was clever, for it united arts and humanities advocates behind a single bill. In March 1965 Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-RI) sponsored the bill in the Senate while Rep. Frank Thompson (D-NJ) became the bill's sponsor in the House. If there were any doubts about the real provenance of the legislation, they were resolved by former Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger. In his book of the same year, *The Politics of Hope*, he argued that television's "downward spiral of debasement" made culture a "national concern" that required a "national response."⁴

Remarkably, both houses of Congress sent the bill to the White House by August, where LBJ signed it into law in a Rose Garden ceremony the next month. Creating a new federal agency (two, in fact) in only nine months truly was a feat. By means of comparison, the founding of the National Science Foundation took five years. In the same remarkable session, the Eighty-Ninth Congress also passed the Voting Rights Act, the Higher Education Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It also created the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, an important step in the development of a public broadcasting service that became a reality in 1967.

Beginnings

Because the landmark legislation yoked the two cultural agencies in a marriage of convenience, it should come as no surprise that almost from the very beginning their trajectories diverged. The first chair of NEH was Barnaby Keeney, a decorated WWII veteran, a medievalist, and the president of an Ivy League university in the home state of one of the sponsors of the 1965 legislation, Senator Pell. The first chair of NEA, Roger Stevens, was an advocate and well-known patron of the arts and a Broadway theatrical producer with a background in real estate who had served in the Kennedy White House. President Richard Nixon subsequently appointed Nancy Hanks as NEA's chair, a popular choice because of her widespread support in the arts community as well as her immense popularity with lawmakers (she was the staff director of the 1964 Rockefeller Brothers Fund study that called for the

4. Michael Kammen, "Culture and the State in America," in Casey Nelson Blake, ed., *The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 77. Livingston Biddle, a staff assistant to Senator Pell worked with Goodwin in drafting the legislation and reconciled differences between the House and Senate versions in the course of the hearings.

creation of a national arts endowment). More importantly, she had the ear and the confidence of Leonard Garment, Nixon's domestic policy advisor and the arts endowment's premier advocate inside the administration.

The two agencies quickly enough set up programs that would become their defining features. The first year their combined budget was \$5 million, to be shared equally. The NEH, rooted in higher education through its National Humanities Commission pedigree, which Keeney also had chaired, regarded itself as removed from state and local affairs. Educators, many with PhDs, comprised its professional staff. Both agencies reported to the U.S. Congress, of course, but NEH aligned itself with the national priorities and values of higher education, which included adoption of the expert review panel system for the evaluation of grant proposals, patterned after the "merit review" practices of the National Science Foundation. The Arts endowment also adopted the concept of the merit panel as the perfect antidote to political meddling by Washington politicians. (There was a good deal of cross-fertilization this first year, as both NEA and NEH shared their offices, and even staff, with the National Science Foundation at 1800 G Street NW.)

The two endowments differed of course in their missions. The NEH embarked on a grant making program grounded in research, fellowships, publication, and education in the "disciplines of the humanities" (predominantly history, literature, philosophy and related subject areas) while NEA focused on grant making in the disciplines of music, theater, literature (also), and dance, activities that appealed to large audiences in major cities and states. These initial differences were natural enough, but NEA set an example that the Humanities Endowment was reluctant to follow when it created "state-based" arts programs, a few of which already existed at the time of NEA's founding.

From the very beginning, the NEA's leadership enthusiastically embraced the idea of local programming structures, not unlike colonies in each state. At first these were non-profit committee-like organizations, but in short order state governments absorbed these fledglings by contributing funds from state treasuries that met a minimum federal matching formula. Governors welcomed the political perks that came with their brand new State Arts Agencies (SAAs): the appointment of the executive, the chair, and board members. State politicians also earned political chits through grants made to local arts groups. Because the SAA's widely sprinkled grants comingled federal and state funds, NEA itself gained valuable political capital in Washington too. By 1969 state arts agencies were up and running in every state.

The biggest fan of this development was none other than Senator Pell. Indeed, the inclusion of grants to states had been a long-standing strategy among Congressional arts advocates, appearing first in Rep. Frank Thompson's 1955 bill, "American National Arts, Sports, and Recreation Act."⁵ For all

5. Gary O. Larson, *The Reluctant Patron: The United States Government and the Arts, 1943-1965* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 225-27. Likewise, the New Deal-era WPA used state and local government entities for distributing funds for artists and theater projects.

his support, Pell saw the National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities as a delicate creature in need of nurture, one entirely outside the longstanding traditions in the U.S of private patronage and support of the arts. He and others well remembered what happened to the short-lived WPA cultural programs of the New Deal. Doubters and naysayers lurked in the Congress, he knew, and they would object to any hint of cultural string pulling, wasteful spending, or signs of elitism. For Pell and other allies of the new federal endowments, an interlocking affiliation of national and state governmental agencies was the best guarantee of the endowments' future – precisely what the NEA was doing.

The success of the new arts agency pointed to the validity of Pell's assumption as the combined budgets of NEA and the SAAs grew, surpassing NEH not only in dollars, but in popularity too. This is not surprising. Arts grants served a growing demographic segment with college degrees that lived in cities and suburbs and had the time and resources to enjoy museums, orchestras, and galleries. And of course they paid taxes and voted.

The Invention of the “State Program”

At the outset NEH opposed the creation of any state entities that would parallel or reflect the state initiative of its sister agency. Because scholarship and knowledge are relatively intangible things, NEH leadership could not imagine their fledgling agency as confined by local or state boundaries and certainly not as a partner of state politicians. NEH exemplified a national standard of professionalism, access to ideas and books, and an unimpeded flow of knowledge. Because NEH drew from the traditions of higher education, its approach to programming and grant making relied on scholars who created and interpreted knowledge within the academy. For dissemination it would depend upon established publishers, educators, producers, and exhibition planners.

It is not that NEH leadership opposed public involvement in the development of humanities programs as such; it is that they could not visualize programs originating outside these expert and professional domains. For that reason NEH preferred to “stimulate public interest and activity in the humanities over a period of years,” in the words of its chair, and this was best done by working through prestigious national and regional cultural institutions such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and television producers and broadcasters like the newly-created PBS.⁶ Here was no small, overnight task.

While NEH experimented with its newly created Public Programs Division (1969), Senator Pell announced the time for study had expired. In 1970 authorization hearings before his committee, the Chairman lectured the

6. Quoted in “The State Program of the National Endowment of the Humanities: A Brief History,” (no date), unpublished, 3. See also NEH, *Fourth Annual Report* [1969], 6.

humanities endowment's leadership that the 1965 legislation emanated from a clear civic vision. In Dewey-esque fashion he pointed to the legislation's Preamble calling for a citizenry who would be "masters of technology and not its unthinking servants," a citizenry who would have access (presumably also through NEH) to "wisdom and vision" that were the fruit of humanistic knowledge. These goals gained heightened importance in an era of Cold (and hot) War and national striving. As if to underscore how far afield NEH was drifting from this founding ethos, he quoted the language in the law that called on NEH to develop programs that will "benefit [and] . . . be available to citizens where such programs would otherwise be unavailable due to geographic and economic reasons." The "arts and humanities belong to all the people."⁷

Pell was not a populist, by a long shot. He was a politician who seemed puzzled that the humanities endowment's leadership could not or would not grasp that state-based entities, as in the NEA, would bring in "more grassroots support" and make it "easier . . . to help you help yourself here on the Hill."⁸ So that the message would not be misunderstood, Congress raised NEA's budget above NEH's (where it would stay until the mid-90s) and threatened NEH with elimination if it did not act. The medievalist NEH Chairman and the Rhode Island politician were butting heads. When Keeney's term came to an end that August, he turned the agency over to his deputy, Wallace Edgerton, and a year later became the first president of Claremont Graduate University.

In the hearing's wake and without a full-time executive, NEH senior staff members turned in extreme earnest to finding a solution to a problem that had few antecedents. They rejected the state arts agency model as the wrong fit for a knowledge-based enterprise that needed to stay above the machinations and patronage of state politics. They also recognized that NEH's newly formed Public Programs Division, a clear gambit to satisfy Pell's insistence that the agency "reach the public," fell drastically short of the grassroots model being championed by the Senator and the State Arts Agencies.

In 1971, NEH's senior staff members, after experimenting with different state-based approaches, returned to the idea of the State Committee. Its model, however, was the state-based arts council before local government subsumed it. These were quasi-private beings with no other parallel in federal-state relations. Experimenting with this idea in 1971, using six states as models, NEH refined its ideas and set about creating its own version of non-governmental "committees" in all fifty states (it would take five years).

Unlike the State Arts Councils, these handpicked committees were, in essence, self-perpetuating volunteer governing boards composed of distinguished scholars and citizens who lived within each state's jurisdiction. After

7. The language is from the authorizing legislation.

8. Senator Claiborne Pell, *Joint Hearings on Bills to Amend the NFAH Act of 1965*, Ninety-Second Congress, 2d session, 1970.

an initial period of organization and in close consultation with NEH staff members, these volunteer committees applied to NEH for annual financial support to hire staff members who would administer the NEH's new "State Program."

Reflecting its own experience as a grant-maker, NEH required each State Committee to set up its own grant-making machinery but with these differences: the committees must (1) stimulate *community-planned* projects that (2) *engage humanities scholars in conversation with citizens* on topics related to (3) *public policy*. Without a doubt, NEH was embarking on an extraordinary experiment. In 1971 the agency created a new State Programs section within the Public Programs Division to administer and assay this uncharted advance. Inside this unique local network, humanities scholars moved back and forth between classrooms and the local public square, using the medium of dialogue to help solve civic problems related to the environment, urbanism, ethics, rights and responsibilities, war, and much else.

The State Program was a daring model, though not wholly out of concert with the public purpose behind NEH's own creation. Still, it was an oddity by any measure, out of place with NEH's programs for scholars, educators, and publishers – and even out of place in the Division of Public Programs that housed it (the committees would migrate to their own division in 1978). The difference between the grants made by the State Committees and those of NEH's Washington-based Division of Public Programs could not be starker. NEH's public programs division supported a BBC documentary on the rise of civilization watched by millions, and a travelling blockbuster exhibition on Tutankhamen that broke museum attendance records. The State Program model, on the other hand, was one of community empowerment where project proposals "bubbled up" from the grass roots in vintage Saul Alinsky style, with a dash of "we have federal funds and we're here to help you" thrown in.

In these unique national/local and public/private dichotomies, NEH launched a new model into the federal, state, and nonprofit firmament. The State Program, through its emphasis on humanities-and-public policy grant making to local organizations, inserted the humanities directly into public life at the local level, raising critical issues and concerns where people lived, whereas NEH's Washington-based grant program, refereed by experts from around the nation, made awards in support of research, publication, education, and public programs that exemplified the high standards of national significance and excellence.

Scholars, Publics, and Politics

For sure, by creating the State Program NEH was currying the favor of Congress and, in particular, Senator Pell. Yet Congress still seemed dissatisfied with the direction of NEH as a whole. Seeking to push the agency into greater contact with the public, and using its sister agency as a model, in 1973

Congress added new language to the authorizing legislation that instructed NEH to pay “particular attention to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life” and to “correlate programs . . . with the state humanities agencies to the extent practicable.”⁹ If you are not going to move in the direction of state-agency status for the State Committees, Pell seemed to be saying to the NEH, then do a better job of extending the public work of the State Program throughout the agency as a whole. (Calling non-governmental State Committees “agencies” reveals the degree to which NEA and its State Arts Agencies remained for Pell the proper framework for national cultural policy.)

These were problematic instructions for NEH’s leadership, perhaps an understatement for an agency that still thought of itself as a version of NSF, because they threatened to deflect grant making away from the substance of the humanities and the fundamental national priorities of research, scholarship, and higher education. How does one relate humanistic knowledge to contemporary affairs in scholarship and education without appearing forced, jejune, or purely political? As it was, NEH’s expenditures for public programs rose from 10% in 1965 to 19% in 1973 (it would climb to 50% by 1980). How could it protect itself from further Congressional intrusion and pressuring?

Ironically, inside NEH the State Committees that were part of the threat were also becoming part of the solution: they would become the ballast for NEH’s programs of national significance and intellectual erudition. In this complementary relationship, NEH and the State Committees, in effect, constituted a national public policy of knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination, elite university research and programs for the local VFW, the publication of scholarly books and support for public talk in a Vermont town library, high ideas at a colloquium for scholars, and a prairie Chautauqua in North Dakota. If the humanities were meaningful, the promise of the State Committees was that they would also reach down into communities, engaging grass roots publics.

Embedded in this duality was an evolving civic logic that reconnected the NEH to its founding mission, though not one exactly of NEH’s own choosing and certainly not one that NEH’s second Chairman, Ronald Berman, a Nixon appointee, wished to embrace. The author of a highly critical book on America in the 1960s, Berman expressly took aim at the committees in one of his earliest public statements: “[T]here are many social issues in which the Endowment does not believe itself obliged to participate in. The most liberal definition of the humanities’ interest must necessarily exclude the determination of public policy or the various forms of social advocacy.”¹⁰ Subsequently crossing swords with Pell (who did not support Berman’s

9. P. L. 93-133 (1973). The sponsor was Senator Pell in the Senate, with co-sponsors Senator Eagleton (D-MO), Senator Gravel (D-AK), Senator Javits (R-NY), Senator Mondale (D-MN), and Senator Taft (R-OH). The sponsor in the House was Representative Brademas (D-IN) with thirteen co-sponsors.

10. NEH, *Seventh Annual Report*, p. 7 [1972].

nomination), the NEH Chair warmed up only slightly by 1973, when he worried that “probably no activity of the endowment [as the State Committees] is as arduous, as fundamental, and perhaps as risky.”¹¹

Although there were stunning successes that lived up to the ideal of scholar and community together exploring values, priorities, state needs, history, and practical politics, there were also fumbles, misunderstandings, and jousting about whether such hyper-local initiatives were misguided or trivial. A humanities scholar talking to an audience in Lubbock, “comparing fifth-century Athenian democracy to the political structure and democratic practice in twentieth-century Texas” stretched scholars and audiences.¹² The use of “Madame Bovary to illuminate the problems of doctors in provincial areas” of Massachusetts, according to one critic, “worked, but that’s about as goddamn remote as you can get.”¹³ Nor was it a simple matter to draw the line between “advocacy” and “informing,” as one State Committee learned when it set off a firestorm of national publicity for funding a documentary “with taxpayer money” that was said to be “pro-Sandinista.”¹⁴ One assessment made by a former State Committee director drew the following distinction: well-attended programs are those that “have nothing to do with the humanities” while “real humanities programs” are not attended at all.¹⁵ As director of the National Humanities Center, William Bennett offered this off-hand judgment of scholars who worked with the committees: “boring.”

Not surprising is a contemporaneous report of the Heritage Foundation, a fiscally conservative public policy foundation in Washington, that lambasted NEH for squandering money on programs of dubious quality and benefit for the public. Robert Hollander, a Princeton scholar of literature and member of the NEH’s National Council on the Humanities, singled out the Humanities Committees as symptomatic of a bigger problem: they are products of “weak thinking in Washington and confused acquiescence around the country.” Their “watered down” programs were really “ill-disguised ventures into political and social enthusiasm . . . which more often stir up feelings than produce thought.”¹⁶ Despite the criticisms, in the Committees’ first decade new program ideas, new formats, new ways of working with scholars, new ways of bringing scholars and the public together, and new ideas even about what a grassroots program looked like began to clarify.

11. *Joint Hearings on the NFAH Amendments of 1973, Part I, 93rd Congress, 1st session, 1973*, Appendix 4, 8.

12. James F. Veninga, *The Humanities and the Civic Imagination: Collected Addresses and Essays, 1978-1998* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999), 8.

13. Charles Trueheart, “State Humanities Committees: Difficulties Remain, But They Fare Well,” *Federation Reports* 2:1 (April 1979): 31-37.

14. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (Denver, CO: Focus on the Family, 1994), 17-18.

15. Truehart, “State Humanities Committees,” 13.

16. Robert Hollander, “State Committees Should Emphasize ‘Real Humanities,’” *Humanities Report* 4 (Feb. 1983): 2-3.

Tensions: From Committees to Councils

That NEH had taken the leap in setting up a state program ameliorated some of its Hill critics, but the problems would not go away. In 1976 Congress questioned whether NEH had unnecessarily cramped the committees by limiting their programs to public policy. Both the House and Senate reauthorization committees urged these state entities to broaden their agendas beyond public policy and, once again, to pursue state-agency status. Pell continued to use the more independent state arts councils as his model and suspected NEH of trying to hang on to control. With regard to public policy at least, the committees in fact itched to grow but also to remain both independent *and* connected to NEH, a status they saw as threatened by their conversion into state governmental agencies. They were already moving in new directions, recognizing that public policy programs were a challenge to create even when they worked. In turning back Pell's push, the role and influence of senior faculty members on committee boards cannot be discounted either. As the "experts" of the State Committees, they naturally enjoyed a balance of power that would dissipate in any devolution to state government.¹⁷

By 1980, with the support of Congress and the acquiescence of NEH, all State Committees were permitted to make grants for scholarship if their board members so chose (a few did), as well as for seminars on Shakespeare for schoolteachers, museum exhibitions about Albert Einstein, state commemorative events, and library reading programs. Of course there was nothing to prevent State Committees from continuing to bring a humanistic perspective in the exploration of problems of environmental degradation, ethics, urbanism, political equality, and war. For local audiences the conversation was now becoming worldlier. Likewise, and once again with a push from both Senate and House authorizing committees, NEH began dropping the language of "State Committee" in favor of "State Humanities Council." This was a clear acknowledgement of the Committees' evolution, their transition from a period of ad hoc experimentation necessitating careful tutelage by NEH staff members and the National Council into something more like permanence that seemed to be paralleling NEH's own growth.

Applauding the innovation of humanities councils and as a spur to their continuing development and independence, while still leaving the door open for state-agency status, in 1976 Congress directed that at least 20% of all NEH program funds be distributed by formula to the State Program, precisely as was done for the State Arts Agencies three years earlier. The legislation also entitled the governor of each state to appoint a limited number of members to humanities council boards. Finally, Congress inserted language

17. See, e.g., Kathleen Mitchell's tribute to the founding chair of the Michigan Committee on the Humanities, Richard Sullivan of Michigan State University: "Conclusion: The Academic as Public Historian," in *Medieval Monks and Their World: Ideas and Realities. Studies in Honor of Richard E. Sullivan*, edited by David Blanks, Michael Frassetto and Amy Livingstone (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2006), 195-201.

into the law that protected the new Councils from any undue administrative intrusion or control by NEH.

The year 1980 marked the end of a decade-long period of experimentation and the beginning of the modern era of councils as professional, independent grant makers and program developers rooted in local experience and circumstances, activists in the field of public work that encompasses all disciplines of the humanities. Just as the mandate for programming broadened, the public work dimension did too. The context and experience of 1) humanities content, 2) public conversation, and 3) place remain the dominant modes of Council-funded and conducted programs, giving their work an aura of a movement – or at least to those engaged in it.¹⁸ This sense of purpose across the fifty states and territorial jurisdictions is what unites them in their Federation (the Councils' membership association) and what distinguished council staff and board members from other educational and cultural sectors, including NEH. The full range of these activities is beyond the reach of this essay, but their engagement of grass roots audiences together with facilitated dialogue around core humanities topics is what distinguishes their work. Given the priority of open conversation, Council-based public programs often take place in public space such as a library, museum, historical site, school, college campus, or community commons. Lectures, oral histories, re-enactments, book festivals, community symposia, book discussions, historic preservation projects, institutes for teachers, and digital state encyclopedias stimulate significant levels of public interaction with writers, educators, scholars, and personages.

Although these programs all involve “the humanities,” down to the present day they exemplify quite diverse strategic approaches for expanding audiences: engaging citizens in the civic life of their communities by extending resources through partnerships with senior centers, veterans' hospitals, churches, archives, libraries, and social service agencies; working with state tourism entities to elevate “cultural tourism” in the state's marketing; fostering lasting partnerships among the groups with whom they work, including Native American, African American, and Latino communities; promoting family literacy among new readers by utilizing classic children's literature, to name only some. One noticeable byproduct of the councils' work has been the creation of a substantial base of public support for, and involvement in, the humanities.

The Politics of Culture

Understandably, because of differences between Democrats and Republicans, the academy and the public, the national and the local, tensions on occasion flared. Certainly that would describe Keeney's (1966-70) and

18. Esther Mackintosh, “Engaged Scholarship 101: What Happens When the Academic Meets the Public,” *Western Humanities Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 15-25.

Berman's (1971-77) rocky relations with Capitol Hill committees (Pell de-railed Berman's re-appointment). The same would be true of President Jimmy Carter's choice for chair, Joseph Duffey (1977-81), who critics accused of injecting politics into grant making by favoring labor unions, the emerging fields of social and women's history, outreach initiatives for disadvantaged applicants, and strict agency concordance with equal opportunity hiring guidelines. President Ronald Reagan's appointee, William Bennett (1981-85), raised the volume and garnered intense national publicity in the process when he adopted a verbally combative stance toward "politically tendentious" scholarship as well as scholarship that lacked rigor, a trend that he saw as endemic in higher education and in the work of the humanities councils.

There were tensions external to NEH too as the agency seemed to be moving in a direction quite different from that envisioned in the 1964 National Commission report. The matter of correct balance among various NEH program areas – research, education, fellowships, seminars, public programs, preservation, State Humanities Councils – and grant-receiving constituencies surfaced in the 1980 Congressional reauthorization field hearings in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, when the president of the University of Iowa, who was also testifying as the Chairman of the Association of American Universities, recommended elimination of the State Humanities Councils because they drained money away from his university's own outreach program. "With respect to the future of the humanities, I want to make a typically Iowan comment – let us do it our way . . . I urge you not to mandate a particular form for the organization of our state humanities programs."¹⁹ On the other hand, at another reauthorization field hearing, this one in Indianapolis, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University saw public-oriented programs as the key to the humanities' survival: "The very success of the humanities in our century is working against them. Unlike the sciences, they belong in a real sense to everyone, yet the tendency in academic disciplines is to devise means to make this less true. Humanities are becoming something one does in school, not in real life."²⁰

This same concern about the narrowing and even diminishing of the humanities in national life appeared in a Rockefeller Foundation report issued in 1980, *The Humanities in American Life*. It had been sixteen years since the release of the first Rockefeller Commission Report, which by comparison benefitted from a "straightforwardness and simplicity that can never be attained today." Created because of a "profound disquiet about the state of the humanities in our culture," among the 1980 Commission's many

19. *Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, 1980*: 426. The witness was Dr. Willard Boyd.

20. *Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, 1980*: 192. The witness was Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

conclusions was this one: academic humanists and professional administrators had “abdicated” their educational responsibility by not contributing to the “general discussion of the relationships between education, culture, and life in the community.”²¹ In that same spirit, two of the report’s seven recommendations involved collaboration between education and cultural institutions, precisely the kind of work that state humanities councils were becoming known for promoting.

A 1984 Twentieth Century Fund study, still the only published book-length examination of NEH, described the organization as suffering from an “identity problem.” The author described the state program as “beset by controversy” and “problematical,” while the agency’s funding of popular but expensive radio, film, television, and museum initiatives drew resources away from scholarship, fellowships, research, and education.²²

A New National Humanities Community

The rising national significance of NEH together with the urgency of the concerns and recommendations issuing from a variety of blue-ribbon reports led to the formation of new organizations and “interests” in the nation’s capital that took up the cause of humanities funding. In 1979, the American Association for the Advancement of the Humanities organized as a membership association in Washington, D.C. It was unable to sustain its budget through membership dues, however, and folded in 1983. In 1980 the ACLS and three other organizations spearheaded the creation of the first purely advocacy-based association for NEH, the National Humanities Alliance (NHA). Its stated goal was that of advancing humanities education, research, preservation, and public programs. The stimulus was candidate Ronald Reagan’s proposed cut of NEA and NEH’s budget by 50% (which he promptly endorsed again after his inauguration). In 1986 the State Humanities Councils’ membership association, the Federation, picked up stakes and moved its offices from Minnesota to Washington, D.C. to give public work in the humanities a “greater presence” in an increasingly threatening public policy atmosphere. Other national associations in Washington began to direct their attention to the NEH, including the American Association of Museums, the Association of Research Libraries, the American Library Association, and the Association of American Universities.

If humanities advocacy was sprouting in Washington in the decade of the ’80s, what, exactly, was to be advocated? By what standard could the national needs served by NEH and the humanities be assessed? This was an old bugaboo, one first launched in the 1964 Report. In its introductory section

21. Commission on the Humanities, *The Humanities in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 5.

22. Miller, *Excellence and Equity*, 5, 136.

the Report spoke in vivid terms about the democratic idealism of humanistic learning, which it linked with the national interest:

One cannot speak of history or culture apart from the humanities. They not only record our lives; our lives are the very substance they are made of. Their subject is everyman. We propose, therefore, a program for all our people, a program to meet a need no less serious than the national defense. We speak, in truth, for what is being defended – our beliefs, our ideals, our highest achievements.²³

The drafters of the 1965 legislation incorporated the spirit of this statement of purpose (and a good deal of the language in the Report's introductory section) into the legislation. The main body of the 1964 Report and the extensive appendices, on the other hand, catalogued the infrastructural needs of scholarship, education at all levels, preservation, libraries, collections, and publication. These details formed a blueprint for NEH's earliest programs. Yet for all the eloquence of the Report's forward and the details of that blueprint, the two halves – the public's need for the humanities and the needs of the professional academic community – were not joined. The result would lead to misunderstandings between what Congress thought it was getting in 1965 and what NEH wanted.

Nor were the friends of NEH helped by the fact that its own creation had as much to do with Congress, the Cold War, Kennedy and his White House aids, and arts advocates as it did with the "humanities." The combativeness of NEH Chair William Bennett and his successor, Lynne Cheney (1986-93), both of whom defended President Reagan's proposed cuts to NEH's budget and viewed those who opposed the cuts (such as the National Humanities Alliance and the ACLS) as captive "interest groups," left advocates with little else to do but educate members of Congress, and this had its own challenges.

For one, barely a Congressional hearing went by that the chairman of NEH was not asked to define the word "humanities." At one meeting of the State Humanities Councils, Al Quie, a former member of Congress and a Republican from Minnesota, said that Congress meant no harm to NEH, but it was hard to be helpful in the absence of a basic definition: "I would welcome any of you who would be willing to send me a one-page letter attempting to describe the humanities." Journalists freely admitted that in covering the NEH their default descriptor was "arts" because "we're really saying the same thing in a different way, I suppose."²⁴ But the problems were deeper than simple misidentification. Rep. Sidney Yates of Illinois, the ranking Democrat on the appropriations subcommittee responsible for NEH, pointedly wondered about the "elitist attitudes" of NEH's peer review panels that suggested a "closed circle" of insider grant making (he wanted to know why community colleges were not better represented on NEH's peer review panels). To NEH chair Joseph Duffey he posed this question: "Do you

23. The Commission on the Humanities, 1.

24. Miller, *Excellence and Equity*, 55.

consciously or unconsciously accord special status to the people of academia, and do you thereby give short shrift to those who do not hold prominent roles in the humanities constituency?”²⁵ His provocative question was but a shade of difference from Pell’s own concern that the “street corner” or “natural” humanist was being shut out. In the face of a somewhat hostile NEH leadership, together with the erosion of bipartisanship on Capitol Hill and the ongoing confusion among members of Congress (including even a few present at the agency’s creation) about that word “humanities” and NEH’s direction, there were plenty of good reasons for the scholarly-led NHA and the public-oriented Federation of State Humanities Councils to be in closer conversation.

First, there were differences to be sorted out. Councils did not have the same kind of independence (or perhaps loyalties) as did learned societies, because of their funding and legislative ties to NEH; learned societies did not have the access to Congressional offices that Council members and the Federation enjoyed (Councils funded projects in all Congressional districts). The Federation and NHA did not have the same legislative priorities either: the Councils protected their state program budget on Capitol Hill, on which their lives depended; NHA watched after research, education, preservation, and public programs, with research and education high priorities. As long as one part of the NEH budget did not grow at the expense of another, there would be peace.

But differences could be overstated too. A healthy and growing NEH appealed to the Councils’ own self-interest. Scholars were vital to the Councils’ future, not to mention the health and vitality of scholarship: scholars served on all Council boards, participated in most if not all council programs and as often as not chaired the Board of the Federation. The Federation’s senior staff members were PhDs in the humanities as well, as were a great many state executive directors at the time. Moreover, some of the strongest statements made in defense of the public humanities and the work of the State Humanities Councils emanated from the most distinguished minds in universities as well as the leadership of ACLS. Stanley Katz, the president of ACLS and formerly on the faculty of Princeton and a speaker or participant in many public humanities programs, received the Federation’s highest service award in 1988. Charles Frankel of Columbia University put the matter this way: “Nothing has happened of greater importance in the history of American humanistic scholarship than the invitation of government to scholars to think in a more public fashion, and to think and teach with the presence of their fellow citizens in mind.”²⁶

No less important was the convening of an ACLS-Federation “National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities” in the late 1980’s,

25. Miller, *Excellence and Equity*, 42-43.

26. Charles Frankel, “Why the Humanities Matter,” in Kenneth W. Tolo, ed. *Government and the Humanities: Toward a National Cultural Policy*, (Austin, Texas: Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, 1979), 23.

inspired by Stanley Katz (ACLS's president) and Douglas Greenberg (its vice president) that did a great deal to promote conversation and the exploration of areas of common interest at a critical time in the Councils' development. Two Council executive directors delivered the keynote address, James Quay of California and James Veninga of Texas, and after two days of work the ACLS-affiliated scholar participants, Council directors, and board members arrived at an agenda for the future that is revealing in its details and in its anointment of the value of "public humanities scholarship." In the face of understandable tensions in the Washington advocacy community, the ACLS-Federation initiative modeled a unifying vision that connected scholarship and public learning.²⁷

The timing of this coming together of the public and the academic humanities was fortunate. Rep. Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" campaign in 1994 brought a Republican majority to the House and Senate for the first time in four decades. That electoral upheaval threatened the elimination of both endowments, as well as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Department of Education, the much talked about priorities of the 103rd Congress. Former NEH chairs Bennett and Cheney reunited on Capitol Hill in 1995, both saying that NEH (and the Department of Education) were hopelessly politicized and beyond saving.²⁸ Political party affiliation was rearing its head on these matters as never before.

It was a coalition of arts and humanities advocacy organizations and their vigorous lobbying of the 104th Congress that finally saved both endowments. The advocacy included meetings with Congressional offices in Washington, D.C. and in their home districts by Humanities Council public board members and representatives of colleges, universities, and learned societies. Such a blanket approach can be effective, but luck plays a role too. The intervention of the trustees of the Atlanta-based High Museum of Art and Emory University led fellow Georgian and House Speaker Newt Gingrich to pull back from the hard-core position of eliminating NEA.²⁹ Another set of conversations, these with Ralph Reed, the head of the Christian Coalition, convinced him to remove NEH from the Christian Coalition's "target list" (NEA would stay). In

27. *National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities*, American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 11 (1989).

28. The two former NEH heads were not a natural pair, however. Bennett, a philosopher with legal training, was more an intellectual who opposed popularization and the intrusion into scholarship contemporary trends like feminism, African-American studies, and social history. He was not particularly a friend of the humanities councils or public programs for the general public, and was suspicious as well of the leanings of independent filmmakers, some of whom depended on NEH for support. At the time of his appointment by President Reagan he was a registered Democrat and was not active in the presidential campaign. Cheney was a populist, a life-long Republican, the spouse of a senior Administration official, and a popular writer with a PhD in literature who clashed with scholarly organizations, believing them remote from the public and self-serving. She was, unlike Bennett, a proponent of the state humanities councils. What Bennett and Cheney shared were their perception of the academy as left leaning and their relish of using the chairmanship of an agency as a bully pulpit, at which they excelled.

29. Source: the author.

Reed's case, the meeting included Humanities Council representatives with ties to the Christian Coalition. These representatives also carried a personal letter to Reed from his doctoral advisor at Emory, Dan T. Carter.³⁰ Both meetings and others like them, though separate and sub-rosa, helped diffuse what seemed like an inevitable rising tide of opposition.³¹

There was, however, a cost. When the dust settled, NEA's budget was halved, while NEH fared only slightly better, the inevitable result of their connection by statute. The two agencies instituted painful staff reductions, deep budget cuts in programs, and organizational restructuring (Congress reserved its steepest cuts in the federal budget for its two cultural agencies). However, President Bill Clinton's appointed Chair of NEH, Sheldon Hackney (a member of the 1978 Rockefeller Commission and former president of the University of Pennsylvania), chose not to cut the Councils to the extent of other divisions inside that agency, a nod to the importance of their grassroots programs in virtually every Congressional district. The net result was a de facto shift in proportional funding that elevated the State Humanities Councils beyond the statutory floor of 20% set in 1976, and not to the satisfaction of everyone. This outcome resembled that of the arts in 1989, when Congress deliberately increased the proportion of NEA's program funds going to the State Arts Agencies (from 20% to 40%) as a protest against the national agency's funding of objectionable art exhibits that included (among others) the homoerotic photography of Robert Mapplethorpe.

A Sustainable Future?

In hindsight, what began as an experiment forced on a reluctant NEH by an expectant Congress culminated not only in the invention of the State Humanities Councils and an associated methodology of public work, but also in the transformation of NEH itself. A maturing NEH, its leaders and members of Congress were learning, could not function as an agency remote from the circumstances of national public life – or the most recent national election. It was dangerous for NEH to be (or be seen as being) captive of any single “interest group” or ideology in post-modernity's age of fracture and culture wars.

30. Source: the author.

31. Why did Gingrich and Reed agree to pull back? At the time these were two important figures in the campaign to eliminate both endowments. That they would be working together is not a surprise. Reed and Gingrich, both Georgians, knew each other well and cooperated in the “Contract with America” campaign (Reed and Pat Robertson labeled theirs “Contract with the Family”). Reed and Gingrich attended high school and college in Georgia, where both majored in history. Both also had ties with Emory University in Atlanta, where Gingrich received his BA and Reed his PhD. (Gingrich's doctorate was from Tulane.) Emory University had close ties with the High Museum, with each organization historically sharing trustees – and together both would have carried considerable weight with Gingrich. Gingrich, in short, was not at heart an opponent of NEA, nor was Reed at heart an opponent of NEH.

The Councils too saw the writing on the wall. They could not ignore the civic needs or problems of their communities and expect to remain effective in their states, or for that matter, hold on to Congressional support. What Congress could make it could also undo. The threat of NEH's elimination in the mid-90's placed new urgency on private-sector fund raising and state legislative support for the Councils, new priorities of state and local partnerships to extend the impact of their public work, and much closer alliances in the world outside academe, especially in the corporate and state legislative sectors. Today many Council governing boards have more in common with the local United Way than with higher education, though this reflects funding and resource needs more than any change in mission. The public work of the humanities remains the heart and soul of the State Humanities Councils.

The realities of national politics and Congressional funding have left their marks. Since the mid-1980s NEH and NEA have been drawn into a national spotlight that is not always welcomed: in the arts, a handful of controversial grants going back more than twenty years have galvanized a national anti-NEA opposition that still persists on Capitol Hill, while a continuing era of culture wars occasionally laps onto the humanities professoriate that is portrayed as out of step with mainstream values, spilling over onto NEH.³²

Recognizing this, NEH Chairs are mindful of adapting agency priorities and activities to significant commemorative events, opportunities, and national needs. Every NEH chair that testifies before a Congressional budget committee in support of the president's budget request, Republican or Democrat, points to some public urgency as justification. Typically, new chairs of NEH are quick to respond to a perceived concern in society or within education through a national initiative. Likewise, every Federation of State Humanities Council public witness before the same Congressional panel paints a vivid picture of towns, suburbs, neighborhoods, and inner-city communities where Council-funded humanities programs have tangible contact with daily life. The two program methodologies of state and national are interdependent, though often we seem not to recognize that. The endowment (and the academy) needs the public work of the State Humanities Councils just as the Councils depend upon the intellectual vitality of scholarship.

The Humanities Councils today are among our most effective advocates of Congressional humanities funding and, more broadly, of the value of the humanities. They also help buffer NEH from fallout when controversies erupt in Washington over questionable national grants (by either NEA or

32. The degree to which NEA persists as a lightning rod on the conservative blogger watch list, whatever the issue of the day may be, is Michelle Malkin's 2009 column, "The National Endowment for the Arts Squeals for its Bailout," that labeled projects that NEA supported using Federal stimulus funds as "smut". With regard to NEH, in 2011 a controversy erupted in Hawaii around the NEH-funded program on the subject of WWII, convened by the East-West Center. Wrote one blogger: "Once again, the progressive[s] are launching their latest psy-ops campaign from their unsinkable battleship, Hawaii. What you are observing below [in the Hawai'i Free Press] is the beginning of what will become a sustained campaign to re-write the history of 'The Good War' and 'The Greatest Generation' to fit the mold of social-democratic propaganda."

NEH) or when presidential appointments to the National Council or even to the chairmanship of the agency go awry. The quiet power and effectiveness of the Councils' public work draws from the wide diversity of people involved in council programs and governance: community volunteers, professionals, poets, college and university faculty, school teachers, writers, independent scholars, business men and women, conservationists, preservationists, higher education institutions, community volunteers, nonprofit organizations, county commissioners, and former U.S. Senators and Representatives. By remaining nonpartisan even as they may wade into politically sensitive programming, by staying attuned to the needs of their states and the diverse communities within them, by structuring programs in and around the content of the humanities, and by communicating regularly with lawmakers, State Humanities Councils help support civil and civic conversations that advance the public good.

Despite the advances and growing sophistication in fifty-years' time, the work today of the Humanities Councils and the NEH is not unlike a photograph frozen in time. Both are set in a national vision that harkens back to the second half of the last century, connecting artistic and intellectual achievement with the values of liberty, self-government, and national idealism. NEH was born in an era of big science, national ambition, and material advancement, but also one burdened with a responsibility of leadership in a nuclear world. What does it take to be a good leader? What is good citizenship? What are the ingredients of national greatness? The humanities offer a guide, or at least a means of taking perspective, of exploring context and lessons of the past. In helping to answer these questions and others, the humanities remain valuable beyond themselves in this fractious era. The mid-60s era that called NEH into being was itself one of cultural, societal, and political change and reaction.

In hindsight, the U.S. Congress created the NEH and NEA without understanding quite what those two agencies were to do. The 1965 authorizing legislation was an act of faith in culture, creativity, and the life of the mind. These also were seen as inseparable from greatness: "for as our cultural life is enhanced and strengthened, so does it project itself into the world beyond our shores," is the way Senator Pell put it before Kennedy's death.³³ But that was a long time ago. In 1965 commercial television was in its golden age and there were only three national commercial broadcasting networks. Walter Cronkite brought us the news and Edward R. Murrow entered his final year of life. The Civil Rights Act turned one year old, Americans still mourned Kennedy's death, and Khrushchev's alleged shoe-banging incident at the U.N. remained fresh in the nation's consciousness. It was a locally owned newspaper that was dropped at our door, sometimes with the option of a morning or evening edition. Browsing the local bookstore was just that – local. The most exciting

33. G. Wayne Miller, *An Uncommon Man: The Life and Times of Senator Claiborne Pell* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England), 119.

purchase we could make without leaving the comfort of home involved a Sears Roebuck catalogue. The world of the rotary phone is the one that welcomed the NEH and the Humanities Councils into being. In all, the founding legislation entered a world that seemed to respect, even defer to, the life of learning and believed in the utility of knowledge. Sandwiched between the crises of JFK's assassination and the deluge of Vietnam, the arts and humanities endowments found their opportune moment, or should we say the moment found them.

Certainly that vision, that energy was also an inspiration to those who led and staffed the NEH in its early years. Most especially this civic purpose became very real for those grass roots State Committee inventions of the 1970s that bumbled and soared, as any toddler will. Today the Councils are mature nonprofit organizations working to stay abreast of the times, hatching new programs and methodologies in serving their publics, entering new kinds of partnerships with other entities, and foremost continuing to bring people together (civilly) to discourse on important historical, literary, and contemporary affairs using all variety of texts and media. On the other hand, the financial and budgetary challenges are greater than at any other time since the founding of NEH. Councils must expand their private-sector resource base if they are to remain effective or, possibly, even survive.

While political challenges to both cultural agencies likely will not disappear, NEH's own fate in this second decade of the twenty-first century may be inseparable from that of the economy. The original appropriation of \$5 million, shared by both agencies, occurred in a time when Social Security payouts were still in their infancy, when the massive transfers of Medicare and Medicaid payments were yet in the future, and the interest on the national debt was a blip. In 1970 combined mandatory spending (including Social Security and Medicare) accounted for 38% of the federal budget; the balance remaining was reserved for distribution to discretionary programs like NEH and NEA. By 2010, mandatory spending rose to 61%, leaving discretionary programs to compete for a vastly reduced slice of the pie.

Funding aside, the current state of public discourse will not make the councils' or anyone else's work easier. Our nation's Founders believed that republican governance depended on public education. This same conviction propelled a good deal of the education reform in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw history, literature, languages, and critical thinking as preparation for civic life civic and a basis for national pride. The founding of the arts and humanities endowments was a product not only of the unique circumstances of the '60s, but of the strain of thought that elevated personal and national possibility with education and creativity. Can this vision remain real in a time filled with blurring realities, nanosecond calculations, a national budgetary meltdown, and enough skepticism to go round for everyone? That literature, history, biography, books, scholarly research, the written or spoken word are for the elite or are remote from the circumstances of daily life is an absurdity in a nation whose people still are likely to see their country

as an idea and themselves, increasingly, as high tech communicators and learners.

NEH has been more ignored than judged by Congress. Members of Congress complain they do not know what the term “the humanities” means. In fairness, it lacks clarity even within higher education. Although the 1964 Rockefeller Commission Report deserves the lion’s share of credit for Congress’ decision to create the NEH *and* the NEA, that same report also set the stage for NEH’s subsequent rocky relations with Congress when it promised 1) national progress and civic advancement in return for 2) public investment in humanistic research, education, publication, and infrastructure. Were the humanities oversold?

At the root of this bargain was the ultimate question of who and what NEH served: the public or universities, scholars or citizens, questions that inevitably arise when government commits public funds. Being paired, and subsequently compared with the arts endowment did not help matters. It was the National Science Foundation that the humanities endowment and its advocates aspired to in those early years, but being tied to NEA made comparisons with the arts – always more public – inevitable. NEH’s founders and leaders “settled for what we got” as the agency did its best to respond to each new complaint by creating another new division or subdivision or specialty program at the same time it kept an ear to the ground about needs “in the field.”³⁴ Inevitably, given the need for public support and visibility and to satisfy Congress, beginning with Ronald Berman (who actually remained a skeptic of public programs) NEH chairs began undertaking highly visible and politically popular initiatives like bicentennial commemorations and education reform.

The Humanities Councils were the byproduct of these inchoate Congressional-NEH tensions and they remain the NEH’s insurance policy, or what the author of the 1984 Twentieth-Century Fund study called “the bait” for the continuation of federal humanities funding. Certainly the Humanities Councils and their brand of public work is one of the NEH’s most creative (if politically convenient) acts in its almost 50 years of history: being both governmental and nongovernmental, national and local, populist and academic, the Councils are hybrid organizations straddling centralized power and localized free choice.³⁵ But the Councils may offer something else

34. *Hearings on Appropriations for Department of Interior and Related Agencies for 1980, 96th Congress, 1st session* (May 8, 1979), 829. Statement of Robert Lumiansky.

35. On choice and the “fracturing” of structures and power, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Rodgers points to the early 1970s as the “critical hinge point” in the break from the forces of consolidation of the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, measured by disaggregating trends in all sectors of life (law, economics, ethics, sexuality, race, family, and politics). Bruce Schulman, in *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (DeCapo Press reprint, Cambridge, MA: 2002) likewise sees this period as one of reaction to centralized powers and a growing reliance on private associations and the free market. He refers to this process as an “implosion of American public life” because it reconstructs “the nation as part of a congeries of separate private refuges,” not at all unlike the “choices”

still. In their developing public work, might they model the next stage of NEH's national service to the nation, through the mediation of scholar and citizen, university and community, nation and place, knowledge and experience, self and society, past and present?

"Relevance" is a broad term that has also served as a Congressional prod. The conviction of those who work in the Councils as well as in universities is that the humanities matter. The humanities shed light on and provide context to moral quandaries, they feed humankind's innate curiosity and search for meaning, they arrest our reliance on the purely material or entertaining, they introduce us to each other through shared stories that build mutual respect for and recognition of where we live and work.

A fascination with the unfolding stories of humanity is what propels the public work of the fifty-six Humanities Councils. When connected with the values of freedom and self-government, "local" public work becomes a powerful rationale for NEH's support nationally. Arguably, it is only together that NEH and the Humanities Councils embody the idealism of the 1965 legislation: "Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens."³⁶ True to that promise, the humanities preserve and illuminate how we build just societies. They use past lessons and contemporary stories to teach us how to knit ourselves together as a nation, as a global village, as communities. We best govern by continuing to learn, sharing this knowledge with all citizens, in all sectors of this nation. As in the turbulent '60s when the first Rockefeller Commission convened, the humanities again may become one of our best hopes in this new century.

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Rodgers describes (xvi). The emergence of the NEH State Program in the early 1970s as localized, private, nonprofit organizations (in essence, the disaggregation of NEH into locally-established parts) is wholly – even surprisingly – consonant with the timing of these larger cultural changes.

36. Michael Kammen, reflecting on the comparative historical development of public support for culture in the U.S. and Europe arrives at a similar conclusion: "I feel certain that solutions to the complex interaction between culture and the state in the United States can be found in improvised institutional and organizational relationships – connections that belong under a rubric what might be called cultural federalism." Kammen, "Culture and the State," in Nelson, *The Arts of Democracy*, 89.