



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

**Remarks by David Skorton, President of Cornell University
“Briefing on the Humanities in the 21st Century: Addressing National Security &
Other Global Challenges Through Cultural Understanding”**

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There has never been a time when the humanities have been more important to our national life and to the security of our nation. Not since the mid-1990s have they faced such drastic reductions in federal funding.

There has never been a more critical need for their support. And so we hope this briefing will help us all better understand what is at stake — and why support for the humanities is a wise investment in the future of the U.S. The fiscal realities facing our nation have put a vast array of federal programs in jeopardy, but the humanities more dramatically than most.

Most of us in this room, I assume, agree that federal expenditures must go down. And that a sustainable budget cannot be achieved without pain — and the setting of priorities. Nonetheless, the humanities are a very small part of the federal budget — and their funding has already been cut by a third in inflation-adjusted dollars since 1994, proportionately much more than most other major research programs.

And last month’s FY11 budget compromise cut National Endowment for the Humanities funding even more — by approximately \$12.5 million, or 7.5%, to \$154.69 million. For FY12, the President’s budget would cut the Endowment again, to \$146.3 million. We recognize as well that the humanities have been a tempting target for those seeking to demonstrate their — seriousness about reducing the federal budget or those seeking to advance specific social or political agendas.

Let me be clear: yet more funding cuts for the National Endowment for the Humanities — and of course its elimination — would throw the baby out with the bathwater, with real and far-reaching consequences not only to our understanding of our history, culture, and civic values, but also for our economic competitiveness and national security.

As we all know, NEH is the federal agency that funds research on our national history, our cultural heritage, and our ethical values. It is not truly an endowment, but depends on annual appropriations — just like other federal agencies. The endowment’s competitive peer-review process ensures that the

highest quality projects are funded, with demand far outpacing available funds.

NEH grants go to every state and territory, reaching rural and underserved areas — especially hard-hit by the recession — through digital educational resources, films, television and radio programming and traveling exhibits. NEH also funds our local museums and libraries and state humanities organizations that support local, community-based programming. More than 2.5 million Americans are engaged in a broad range of humanities professions — K-12 teachers, college and university professors, museum curators, librarians, translators, news analysts and more. And many of the analysts at our national intelligence and security agencies were educated as humanists and social scientists.

Let's talk about national competitiveness.

Two ingredients critical to innovation and competitiveness in the 21st century, I would submit, are investments in education — to fill the talent pipeline — as well as research and development to develop new products, processes, and industries. Of course, these investments are almost entirely in the realm of science and technology, from biomedical research to the physical sciences and engineering.

As a physician and scientist, I applaud such investments. But make no mistake: our most pressing and complex problems — worldwide — will not be solved by science alone. As just one example, local cultures and values hugely impact the willingness of people to embrace scientific discoveries, from genetically modified foods to vaccines — and the understanding of these cultures and values is the domain of the humanities and the social sciences.

Course work in the humanistic disciplines is often promoted, legitimately, as a way to teach basic skills of critical — and contextual — thinking, communication, and ethics to scientists, engineers, business people, and those in other applied professions. As they provide a foundation for success in a wide range of careers, humanities serve as well as a prerequisite for responsible citizenship.

It is in the nation's interest and essential to our global competitiveness to have the up-and-coming generation, from all backgrounds, educated broadly, humanistically, and well. We want our children to have a sound ethical foundation that complements the moral foundation that most parents endeavor to instill.

The most wretched non-monetary consequence of our nation's economic distress over the past two years, in my view, is an acceleration of our country's loss of values. Witness, for example, the nastiness of the recent midterm elections, which demonstrated our collective loss of the ability — or even the desire — to understand and respect each other.

As James Leach, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and former U.S. Representative, has said: The temper and integrity of the political dialogue are more important for the cohesiveness of society than the outcome of any election. But lately we seem to have lost our way. To be sure, jobs, regional economic development, and careful control of expenditures in the public and private sectors are keys to a robust recovery.

But we got where we are in part through a loss of values, a lack of understanding of the lessons of history and, increasingly, a loss of civility and of the sense of fair play. This is the domain of the

humanities, which are at once timeless and timely. Whether we're discussing the headlines relevant to regulation of financial institutions, cloning, or the appropriate use of new social media, a thoroughgoing understanding of ethics, as provided through humanistic study, is critical.

How about national security — which has many of us in a state of perpetual unease as we watch events unfold on the world stage?

What separates people around the globe — often violently, it seems to me — is poor understanding of the cultures, languages, histories, religions, and values of others. From the — person on the street in our cities and towns, to the soldiers in Afghanistan, to expats working in Egypt, Libya and Bahrain — our best hope for a secure future is understanding and engagement, not just military strategy and strength.

When our generals and diplomats speak of winning the hearts and minds of the people, they are talking about understanding the language, culture, religion, and values of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and elsewhere, endeavors supported by the NEH.

In fact, recognizing that there was a shortage of men and women with the expertise the nation needs, the Bush administration established a National Security Language Initiative (with programs in the Departments of Education, State, and Defense and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence) to increase the number of Americans learning such — critical needs languages as Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, Russian, Chinese, and others.

At Cornell, one NEH grant funded an online preservation tutorial in Arabic; another funded a Southeast Asian literature microfilming project. The Minerva Project is another example of the link between the humanities and social sciences and national security. This initiative was launched by the Department of Defense to improve its understanding of the social, cultural, behavioral and political forces that shape regions of the world that have strategic importance to the U.S. The current upheavals in the Middle East have brought the need for such understanding of critical languages and culture to the fore once again.

And lest we forget, NEH is a research agency — which awards competitive grants for research projects and critical analysis in the humanities that are valuable in their own right and on their own terms. Indeed research-related expenditures account for about one-third of the NEH budget and are vital to scholarship in our colleges and universities.

The impact of the humanities as a critical endeavor is evident in the study of literature, the arts, history, philosophy, law, linguistics, religion, and other humanistic disciplines, which can help us grasp where we come from, and why, in order to lead us into the future.

Today immigration is a major national issue. An NEH grant to the San Jose State University Foundation funded a project called “Before Silicon Valley: A Migrant Path to Mexican American Civil Rights,” which might help inform our debate.

The funding we allocate to the humanities through our government has never come close to the value the humanities add to individual lives and to the life of our nation.

It should be — it must be — unacceptable, to Democrats and Republicans alike, to further reduce that

support. Even in times of austerity, especially in times of austerity, sound investments must be made.

I am encouraged that — in response to a bipartisan request from U.S. Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Mark Warner (D-VA) and Representatives Tom Petri (R-WI) and David Price (D-NC) — the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has formed a special Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Conceived by American Academy President Leslie Berlowitz, this commission is a promising and far reaching development. The commission is chaired by Richard Brodhead, president of Duke University, and John Rowe, chair and chief executive officer of Exelon Corporation.

Most immediately, amidst uncertainty about how the FY12 budget debates will play out, where do we stand? We are a long way from achieving national consensus on what the appropriate funding level might be in FY 2012.

The Administration's proposed FY2012 federal budget reduces funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities to \$146.3 million, down \$8.4 million from the current \$154.7, with comparable reductions for the National Endowment for the Arts. Let's aim for funding of NEH at the FY10 level of \$167.5 million.

- A push for funding at the FY10 level is a realistic approach, based on the level of cuts in the President's FY2012 budget request and the overall fiscal situation, although it falls far short of the appropriate level of federal support for the humanities through NEH.
- Despite — and perhaps because of — stark budget realities, we must have the political will and discipline to support the humanities.
- It's good for our children, it's good for our security, it's good for America.

[Back](#)