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Bread, Roses, and the Republican Anti-Art Agenda

BY BEN DAVIS | FÉVRIER 03, 2011

Get ready for government arts funding to play its customary starring role in the national conversation: as a pretext for conservatives to go on a vicious campaign to slash other needed government programs.

Given the political conjuncture in D.C., it came as little surprise that the Republican Study Committee's [deficit cutting plan](#) — [already setting the tone of the debate in the budget-battles to come](#) — released in late January proposes completely eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities (budgeted at \$167.5 million each) as part of a broader offensive against government.

Nothing surprising there, of course. The Tea Party movement that the Republicans frantically courted to claw their way back into office is not exactly known as a hotbed of love for the avant garde. A [press release](#) sent out by one entrepreneurial Tea Party artist last year featured a realist depiction of a tea pot, noting that the image was "painted in a most conservative and traditional style" — perfect as a symbol for a conservative movement. Now there's a sales pitch!

What's notable, however, is that the Republican Study Committee's hit list is front-loaded with arts and culture. The number one target is the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; the NEA and NEH are five and six, respectively, strategically spotlighted near the top. This despite the fact that government arts funding is already so stingy that completely eliminating it doesn't get the bloodthirsty pols

even close to their goal of cutting \$2.5 trillion over 10 years (to do this requires such conjuring tricks as raising \$15 billion by auctioning off government properties).

After fulminating endlessly about the need to cut the deficit now, now, now — having first let it go vertical under Republican hero Ronald Reagan and then cheering it to new heights after George W. Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy — Republicans have [notably fallen silent when asked to name any programs that they would actually cut](#). Art spending, it seems, is the obvious example when it comes to illustrating the evils of wasteful government.

Conservative ire towards the NEA is, of course, a rich vein to mine. And the new NEA-killing proposal naturally turns thoughts to the last time that Congress attempted to de-fund the NEA, during [the 1990s "NEA Four" controversy](#), which ended with the loss of the Endowment's key grants for individual artists.

This spat left behind an inchoate halo of outrage around the NEA, which continues to blot out all else about it. It doesn't matter, for instance, that the NEA's centerpiece initiative of late has been [promoting free admission to museums for military service members](#). The Republican/Tea Party base still passionately believes that the main service provided by the NEA is state-sponsored Bible desecration. Given that the entire conservative political strategy for 30 years or so has been to promote a pro-banker agenda by tapping into evangelical ire, this kind of trumped-up storyline will always have a ready audience — as the recent Catholic League-led assault on David Wojnarowicz amply demonstrates.

But more illustrative still, when it comes to the current threat, is the more recent history of NEA demonization. Arts funding played a key role in the first stimulus debate, back in 2009. Amid the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression,

the administration rushed to pump a (too small) adrenaline shot of funds into the crashing U.S. economy, including a measly \$50 million in emergency arts money through the NEA. Conservatives saw the arts funding as an easy way to ridicule the entire bill as a boondoggle. Republican congressman Eric Cantor infamously [said \(again and again\) that the NEA funding meant that supporting the stimulus amounted to supporting sculpture upkeep in Florida.](#)

All of which brings us to the latest showdown. The NEA, founded as a symbol of Kennedy-Johnson liberal idealism — and hamstrung in the era of Reagan-Bush-Clinton libertarian reaction — is these days so anemic that it is hard to be truly passionate about. Nevertheless, the mere existence of government arts funding is symbolically important.

But attacks on the arts, it's important to remember, are not just about the arts; they're part of a bigger political picture, and partly have served as a Trojan Horse. If the history of the debate around the 2009 stimulus is any guide — Republicans first included an amendment ruling out arts funding as "non-stimulative," only [to cede the \\$50 million boost in the final hours](#) — the threats on the arts will soak up a lot of the conversation. "Save the Arts" campaigns will be launched, and passionate Op-Eds will defend culture as a job creator and the mark of an enlightened civilization. Meanwhile, other items on the chopping block that don't have such glamorous constituencies, like legal representation for the destitute or maintenance of crumbling public housing, are likely to be far more imperiled.

It shouldn't be an either/or. As [the old protest slogan goes](#), we should be able to demand bread and roses, essential services and healthy funding for arts. But to make that case, one must think beyond slogans like "Save the Arts," and frame the question in terms of a battle over wider priorities. Is it really so outrageous to think of cutting a bloated military budget, or taxing the smooth-talking cabal of bankers who got us into this crisis in the first place, rather than letting ourselves

be pitted against each other fighting for their scraps? The conservative art-slashers have their bigger agenda. Why shouldn't we push ours back?

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