



The Center for Civic, Family, and Societal Progress

# POLICY PERSPECTIVES

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## David vs. Goliath: We Must Slay the NEA

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*So, are you a David?*

I love that question. I ask it to whoever will listen anytime we stroll past a random sculpture in a city square of a well-endowed man slumped over, lost in thought. Then I wonder, often aloud and to the amusement of those in the pleasure of my company, “Geez, I wonder how much *that* cost us....”

Conduct a quick search on the Internet and you will find dozens of articles arguing against continued funding of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). Some offer appeasement solutions by playing the middle ground. Others call for slowly cutting the budgets until it becomes privatized. Still others call for deep, dramatic, and immediate cuts; the kind that raise the ire of leftist “arts leaders” like Alec Baldwin. They somehow argue that our friends Franklin, Madison, and Washington intended that in the year 2004 we would enjoy a constitutional right to federally-funded pictures of the Virgin Mary covered with elephant feces.<sup>1</sup> Talk about artsy-fartsy.

In 1964, two years before Lyndon Johnson applied his Great Society logic to his love of the arts and created the NEA, public opinion was decidedly against the idea. At that time, a mere one in twenty Americans believed the federal government should provide assistance to artists and their organizations. About the same felt that states and local governments should take that role, and the other 90% believed that either private industry should lead the cause or that no action was needed—period.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes people get it right, but the government just doesn’t listen.

In classic Johnson form, he ignored the numbers and created the NEA, dumping 2.3 million dollars in its coffers and wished it well. Then, like all other government programs, it grew like cancer, jumping to \$8.5 million the very next year and ballooning to \$175 million during the Clinton presidency.<sup>3</sup>

The Gingrich revolution stepped forward and volunteered to take their shot. They attacked valiantly, hitting its legs and slicing its budget by almost 50%. A tragic death-blow? Not hardly; today we find it recovering nicely. In 2004 the NEA will receive 121,000,000 of our taxpayer dollars and next year it jumps another \$18,000,000 to \$139,000,000.<sup>4</sup> They must think at some point we’ll lose track of all those zeros.

Imagine if taxpayers ran the NEA’s marketing campaigns: “No one in the real world liked your art well enough to buy it. But no worries, Uncle Sam will.” Not exactly bumper sticker material.

The message of federal arts funding is rife with pessimism. Being forced to rely on the United States government (read: anonymous taxpayers) to fund your art should be viewed as a slap in the face. But this year, artists and art program administrators will elbow each other out for more taxpayer money to fund what in most cases the private sector would not.

Consumers scoop up compact disks, flood movie theatres, and buy books by the millions every day. Savvy, talented artists who choose to make a living marketing their craft are wise to provide what the market demands. Those who fail should continue pressing on, adapting to the market or producing their own brand of art for

their own enjoyment, something not to be minimized.

Take my wife. Scattered at her whim around our home and porch are several pieces of art that we paid for—with our own money—and that we deem valuable. However, I am quite confident that my grouchy next-door neighbor likes none of it. I am as likely to appreciate his ode-to-beer-cans, as he is to appreciate my collection of yard gnomes. But the beauty of our co-existence is that we don't expect one another to pay the other's art tab.

Better yet, take my mother. She and a friend are longtime members of a square dancing club. They perform at old folks homes and the occasional school assembly. But her dream is an all-expenses paid tour around the country to introduce Americans to the lost art of the square dance call. Should government step in when she steps out? I say no, and not just because I've seen the outfits.

In the year 1506, Leonardo Da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa, arguably the most beloved and cherished painting of all-time. Was it a labor of love? Was it paid for by benevolent Italians? Neither. It was commissioned by Florentine businessman, Francesco del Giocondo. He saw value in opening his own wallet and funding this now classic masterpiece.

During one of the greatest periods of artistic impression the world has ever known, governments were mostly silent. Great art happened when the customer/connoisseur and the business/artist were allowed to flourish in a fairly unregulated marketplace of ideas and services. Neither Michelangelo's brilliant *David* nor his

magnificent ceiling in the Sistine Chapel were funded by government pocket-picking.

In the late 1460s, the Medici family commissioned Verrocchio to cast his own version of the young *David*. At the time, Florence was one of the smallest, but richest city-states in Europe. The shepherd boy David, powerful in spirit and mind but small in stature, was a popular symbol in Florence. As a small power on Italy's political stage, the city viewed itself as a young David contending with powerful Goliaths like the Pope, the Duke of Milan, and the King of Naples.

Even novices on the government art dole must appreciate the tasty irony.

*David*, a tremendous and time-tested accomplishment, was not funded through strong-armed coercion. It was commissioned, in the private marketplace, to represent the struggle of the small yet powerful against the world's Goliaths.

How might David have fared had he only wounded the famous giant of Gath? The story has a happy Hollywood ending because he dropped him to the ground and smote off his head. He ensured that Goliath would never again be a threat to the people.

It is time to slay the NEA. A Goliath has been created, and only an army of David's can put an end to it. Hitting it in the forehead with a rock simply is not enough. We've got to flatten it, lop off its head, and forgive LBJ for ignoring us in the first place.

*So, are you a David?*

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<sup>1</sup> "Sensation," Brooklyn Museum of Arts, 1999

<sup>2</sup> Roper Center for Public Opinion Research

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.arts.gov/about/Facts/AppropriationsHistory.html>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*