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## Arts and Humanities: Background (1975-1995): News Article 04

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Journal

FRANK RICH

# Saviors On the Right

If Charlton Heston could part the Red Sea, can he also save the N.E.A.?

He just might. Though Newt Gingrich has blasted the National Endowment for the Arts as "patronage for an elite group" and Dick Armey has said it "offends the Constitution of the United States," they have not heard yet from Mr. Heston and many other conservative Republicans, who beg to differ. While N.E.A. demonizers like William Bennett and George Will would have you believe that the agency's defenders are mainly liberal esthetes, the hidden story is the rescue posse forming on the right.

"I know all this stuff — I played Michelangelo," said Mr. Heston with a laugh from his home. Having been both "an art maker, if you will" and the head of two cultural institutions supported by the N.E.A., he feels he's "the only conservative with extensive experience on this issue." And he cites historical precedents to argue passionately that arts patronage is "a legitimate function" of government.

If called, Mr. Heston will testify in Washington for the N.E.A. It's a role the actor has played before; in 1981, he ended up championing the Arts and Humanities Endowments after Ronald Reagan appointed him co-chairman of a Presidential task force that was widely thought to seal their doom.

Mr. Heston is hardly alone. In conversations this week, Republican arts patrons with political clout defended the N.E.A. by making the same arguments Democrats do — that the imprimatur of a Federal grant is essential to attract cautious

## Conservative arts patrons gear up to defend the N.E.A.

private money to the arts and that the poorest audiences and smallest cultural organizations, not the wealthy, will suffer if the N.E.A. dies. "Elite is a very flexible word," said Mr. Heston, dismissing talk of an "elite" N.E.A. "It primarily means someone you disapprove of."

Even David Christopher, a board member of the Pittsburgh Symphony so conservative he was one of 10 delegates to vote for Mr. Reagan over Gerald Ford at the '76 convention, says flatly that the Federal Government must encourage the arts as part of "the quality of life." Patsy Collins, a KING Broadcasting heir whose contributions to the Seattle Opera more than triple those of the Federal Government, shrugs off past N.E.A. controversies; while she found Robert Mapplethorpe's photos "disgusting," she loved the gay epic "Angels in America." Another Republican stalwart, Thomas Barrow, a Texas oil man who is president of the Houston Grand Opera board, says, "There are N.E.A. grants I don't like, but I don't like where every military base in the U.S. is located, either."

Mr. Barrow will make his case strenuously to his longtime acquaintance Tom DeLay, the powerful new House G.O.P. whip and N.E.A. opponent. Lyn Grinstein of Fort Worth, who is on the executive committee of the Van Cliburn Competition, intends to do the same with Mr. Armey, whom she knows and regards as "very smart" and "open-minded" but in need of more information about the endowment.

And what about the new Speaker? John Wieland, the biggest home builder in Atlanta and the board chairman of that city's High Museum, plans to tell him in person why the destruction of the N.E.A. would be "a great tragedy for the country." Mr. Wieland, who has been a Gingrich supporter and contributor for a dozen years, says that the Speaker is "one of the best thinkers of our time" and is "willing to say 'I made a mistake.'"

While no one expects any agency to emerge uncut in the new Congress, some conservative Republicans I talked to feel that the endowment should take a modest hit at most. Many find the whole controversy a counterproductive distraction from the real Federal downsizing promised by the "Contract With America," and wonder why time is being wasted arguing about the N.E.A.'s tiny \$167 million when there's \$16 billion in farm programs on the table.

The answer, of course, is politics: The N.E.A., as caricatured by its opponents, is red meat for the religious-right. But as the arts' powerful Republican friends loudly join the other bipartisan forces mobilizing to save the N.E.A., they may yet force the new House leadership to choose between getting down to business or getting mired in a symbolic culture war that no one can win. □