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Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): Response or Comment 02

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In defense of the humanities program

TO: The writer of the unsigned editorial in the Our Opinion column of the January 25, 1981 Grand Forks Herald. The column was titled "Federal Funds for Humanities Need Review."

I would love to talk to you over a cup of coffee, but not knowing exactly who you are, I'll address you from my desk.

When Sputnik went up back in 1957, someone, somewhere, through the press, was able to convince the American nation that all our educational efforts must be turned to science. The arts and humanities were to be the victims. And they were.

However, soon they began to creep back into curriculums all over the country. Americans just didn't want to raise their children to be illiterate — and to be uneducated in the arts and humanities in the 20th century industrial world, is to be illiterate.

Now we have the Reagan administration wanting to save money. And the press or you Dear Editor, suggesting that maybe the easy way to do it, once again, is to cut those unessential arts and humanities.

In your editorial you suggested that "we are not convinced that the state humanities program is worthwhile" and that the Reagan administration might save money by getting rid of it. You also stated that while the "national humanities officials praise it (the North Dakota program) as a model for the rest of the nation," they are not to be listened to because "those individuals have an obvious interest in continuing the program."

Now if I, Laurel Reuter, were at the head of the North Dakota high school athletic program and it was about to be wiped out for political reasons, I would not plead my case publicly with an evaluation by the director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

Instead, I would get it evaluated by the nation's experts in secondary physical education, and I would ask the head of the President's Council on Physical Fitness (or his counterpart in 1981) and the likes of Dave Osborne, UND's former star pro football player who grew up in North Dakota's high school athletic programs, to present my case to the public.

So, to begin with, Dear Editor, I am what you would call a professional in the field, and I am completely biased in favor of public support for the cultural life of North Dakota. As a North Dakota native, I have an obvious and publicly-stated interest in seeing the North Dakota Council for the Humanities survive. Its funding comes from the

Laurel Reuter



National Endowment for the Humanities which I see as one of the most important cultural forces in today's America.

I was impressed — but not surprised — when the pros in Washington compared the North Dakota program with those in the other 49 states and said it was a model of excellence.

You said in your column that, "The humanities program was begun as a way to involve scholars in discussion of public policy issues, but it has become a closed network that benefits only a few people." Furthermore, "The state humanities council had \$120,000 in grant funds to supplement their incomes last year." The way you arrange those words, Dear Editor, does make it sound like fraud.

However, a news story published in the same issue says, "Council executive director Everett Albers estimates that about \$120,000 was available to pay humanists for council work." That is not the same thing as council members feathered their own pocketbooks with \$120,000 in public money last year.

I have run many a program funded by the North Dakota Humanities Council, being one of those "300 North Dakotans who qualify as an academic humanist," and I have yet to receive a cent for myself.

I did, however, pay two of the salaries that came from that \$120,000 last year. Both were to people who worked on the North Dakota art project: William Lubitz received \$5,600 for six months work and Marilyn Fundingsland received \$1,500 for two months. Neither was on top of another salary.

In your editorial you claim that only those two benefited from their salaries. Let me tell you something of the program.

Last spring, I went to the Humanities Council with a state-wide folk arts proposal. We would collect, exhibit and record the art of the common people of North Dakota.

They gave me \$5,000 and told me if I could raise up to \$25,000 in private money they would match me dollar-for-dollar through the federal gifts-and-matching program. Amoco Foundation, Inc., in their first major grant to North Dakota, gave \$25,000 to the project.

The show was installed in the mobile gallery. Twenty thousand people, mostly from North Dakota's rural areas, saw the exhibition. Now two major publishing concerns are bargaining with me for rights to publish the accompanying catalogue, potentially an important document in North Dakota's history and one that will be read by thousands more as it becomes part of every library in the state. The show will also be seen by thousands of additional people when it opens in Grand Forks in March and then in the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck in June.

In addition, as a direct spin off from the initial \$5,000 grant from the State Humanities Council, last week Target Stores gave the University Art Galleries \$11,900 to commission a photo survey of the state's environmental folk art. This will also be viewed by many, many ordinary North Dakotans.

And how can one estimate the value of that exhibition in the lives of the 50 artists from the state who were in the show. To start, read Sylvia Paine's full page review "Treasures From Dakota Wife" in the Oct. 5, 1980 issue of the Fargo Forum.

Yet your article infers that Lubitz and Fundingsland pocketed their salaries, to no one's benefit. In your column you say "The programs provided by the North Dakota Humanities Council often reach few people outside the academic community." You don't convince me, and if we in North Dakota are lucky, you won't convince many others.

You cite failures as supporting evidence: "an energy program that drew so few people in 1979 that it was abandoned" and "a television series on North Dakota history that has never been broadcast." The same issue of the Grand Forks Herald contains an article on the 3.6 billion dollar Nekoma ABM missile boondoggle. Likewise, Calvin Trillin covers its failure in the current issue of The New Yorker.

Yet you don't suggest we save money by not building bigger weapons to fight bigger wars. Rather we should wipe out the \$156.3 million budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities, \$323,000 of which is earmarked for North Dakota.