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# Reauthorization: Hearings and Reports (1990): Speech 06

James F. Veninga

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TESTIMONY

of

JAMES F. VENINGA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TEXAS COMMITTEE FOR THE HUMANITIES

on behalf of

THE STATE HUMANITIES PROGRAM

REGARDING FY 1989 APPROPRIATIONS

to the

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

before the

APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

of the

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MARCH 17, 1988

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am very pleased to appear before you to discuss the vitally important work of the state humanities councils.

My name is James F. Veninga, and I have served as Executive Director of the Texas Committee for the Humanities since 1975. I have had the good fortune of observing and participating in the growth and development of this national program. What began as an experiment in public humanities has become an institutional reality. This remarkable program is serving the humanities well. More importantly, it is serving American democracy well. I am pleased to offer thoughts as to why this is so.

A very useful report was published this past November by a group of nationally-recognized scholars, writers, and educational administrators, titled The Humanities and the American Promise. Over the course of eighteen months, the Colloquium on the Humanities and the American People met at the University of Virginia on four different occasions to "discuss the relationship--as it has been and as it should be--between adult Americans and those areas of intellectual activity known as the humanities."

The report underscores the progress that has been made in our country in providing learning opportunities in the humanities for adult Americans. While the Colloquium did not set out to examine or evaluate any particular institution or program, it did devote considerable space in its report to

state humanities councils. The report notes how the state councils have "given shape to a curriculum in the humanities [that] appears to satisfy a real social need, even a hunger, felt by many adults." Every year, according to the Federation of State Humanities Councils, upwards of twenty-five million Americans take part or benefit from approximately 4,000 humanities programs--conferences, symposia, library reading programs, lectures, exhibits, film, and special radio and television programs.

But what, one must ask, is the shape and content of this curriculum, and in what ways does this curriculum and the programs that flow from it serve the humanities and American democracy?

The shape is wide and deep. The curriculum encompasses all the traditional disciplines of the humanities as well as newer interdisciplinary studies, including women's studies, Black Studies, Mexican-American Studies, Native-American Studies, medical and environmental ethics, film studies, and folklore and folk culture. The curriculum includes concern for traditional subjects--the history of ideas in Western culture, major themes in American and European literature, the history of American politics, and so forth. But it also includes concern for newer subjects and interests, including, for example, the impact of television on American society, ethical issues arising from advances in medical technology, land use and other environmental concerns, civil rights, and the problem of punishment vs. rehabilitation in recent American penal theory and practice.

As with the case of curricula in schools or universities, this curriculum for public humanities in America can best be described by application--particular projects that provide learning opportunities for Americans. I begin with a few examples of projects funded by the Texas Committee for the Humanities.

Last October, 2,500 citizens from San Antonio and surrounding cities attended the third annual Inter-American Bookfair, established to highlight contemporary literature south and north of the United States-Mexico border. In conjunction with the Fair, in which 70 presses displayed 1,000 new book titles, there were lectures, readings, and discussion programs. Writer and actress Maya Angelou gave a dazzling presentation to an audience of 600. Her theme was the power of poetry, the ability of words to lift the human spirit and to understand the human legacy. Chilean novelist Isabel Allende, who has lived in Venezuela since the Pinochet coup in 1973, read passages from her latest novel and discussed its social, political and cultural background. As noted by a San Antonio newspaper, "Allende's slight, trembling voice gave evidence to the horror of the book's inspiration, almost as if she could not bear to read the words she had written."

Literature was also the focus for a project in Dallas--but this time the focus was on classical works. The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, a remarkable community-based organization founded a decade ago, sponsored, with support from the Texas Committee, the NEH, and local

donors, an intensive four-week summer institute for secondary school teachers in the North Texas area. Fifty-two teachers of English participated in a rigorous course of study in tragedy and comedy, focusing on great works of literature in the Western tradition. Evaluation reports received from the participants are moving and give hope for the further renewal of the humanities in our schools. "I discovered anew the love of teaching that drew me into the profession in the first place," wrote one teacher. Another: "I think that I can say, without a doubt, that every one of us has been transformed in a profound way by our experience here at the Institute." And another: "The reinforcement received sent us back to our jobs with a renewed sense of excitement and commitment."

Part of the strength of the curriculum that underlies the state humanities program has been a deep concern for the relationship between the humanities and issues of contemporary public life. Last fall, the Institute for the Humanities at Salado, with major funding from the Texas Committee, sponsored a three-day conference entitled "Understanding Evil." The Salado Institute, located in a small village 40 miles north of Austin, has emerged as a symbol of the growth of public humanities in the state and nation. The conference, attended by 250 citizens--the maximum number that local facilities could handle--brought together an extraordinary group of scholars, writers, and thinkers--psychoanalyst Rollo May, former Member of Congress Barbara Jordan, author and professor of history Jeffrey Russell,

author and Rockefeller Foundation president Richard Lyman, professor and minister Samuel Proctor, holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg--to name a few--to cast light on this darkest of subjects, what Sir Laurens Van der Post, speaking to the audience on film from his home in London, described as "the greatest problem of our time."

What an extraordinary event--250 Texans, from all walks of life, willing to give up a weekend to learn what some of the world's greatest thinkers--past and present--have to say about the nature of evil. This conference was covered by most of the major daily newspapers in the state and by the Boston Globe and the Chicago Tribune. And on the 28th of this month, a 90-minute documentary film of this event, narrated by Bill Moyers, will be broadcast nationally on PBS.

I believe these Texas programs are representative of the state program nationally and representative of the components of a very rich national curriculum for adult Americans.

For example, the Maine Humanities Council is devoting considerable resources to a multi-faceted project focusing on the history of exploration and settlement in the Northeast region from 1498 to 1700. This project is drawing on the insights of scholars from multiple disciplines in developing a traveling exhibition of maps, a symposium, an international conference, and other public programs.

In the Midwest, the Great Plains Chautauqua, sponsored by humanities councils in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and

Kansas, is in its 10th year. The heart of the Chautauqua program is the nightly open-air tent performance in which an historical character--Thomas Jefferson, Abigail Adams, Henry Adams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among others--delivers a 35-minute monologue followed by a 50-minute dialogue with the audience. This program continues to expand, to generate spin-off programs, and to gather such a following that families plan vacations around the programs and communities compete vigorously for the privilege of hosting the scholars who play these historical figures.

The Illinois Humanities Council, with funding from the NEH and the MacArthur Foundation, continues its remarkable six-year program emphasis on "Inventing Illinois." The Council is supporting projects throughout the state that explore each year a range of topics--the settlement of the state, working in Illinois, and the nature of leadership.

These and thousands of other efforts sponsored each year demonstrate the extent to which this curriculum and program are of, by, and for the people. The program is of the people in that state councils respond to worthy project ideas of local, community-based organizations and institutions. The program is by the people in that all councils are governed by volunteer citizens and all councils call upon interested citizens and various constituencies in developing program plans. And the program is for the people in that the mission of all the councils is to enhance public understanding and appreciation of the humanities.



Yet it is true that from time to time the state humanities program has had its critics. There have been those who believe that the humanities belong inside the academy, and that endeavors in the humanities outside the academy are somehow inferior. And there have been those who tend to believe that the work of councils, like the work of scholars in the academy, should shy away from controversial issues of contemporary life, that scholars in the humanities have little to contribute to analysis of policy concerns. Fortunately, the work of state councils proves these critics to be wrong.

Indeed, it can be demonstrated that this national curriculum in public humanities has enriched immeasurably scholars in the humanities and the academy itself. I think particularly of the work of state councils on state and regional studies, on women's history, on minority history and culture, on folk culture, and on other subjects that have called for interdisciplinary work. These efforts have had a most positive impact on our schools and colleges and universities.

One of the great challenges facing the next generation of scholars will be that of integration and synthesis. In the development of public school and university curricula, in the writing of history books and in the editing of readers and anthologies, much work needs to be done to incorporate scholarship in the newer disciplines into traditional studies, courses, and programs. In meeting this challenge, these

scholars will do well to look to the state humanities program where integration and synthesis form the heart of what we do, melding the old and the new, relating the past to the present, the traditional with the non-traditional, the known with the unknown, the comfortable with the uncomfortable.

The charter for the NEH includes the mandate to help create and sustain a climate that encourages freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry. It gives me great pleasure to report that the state councils are hard at work meeting this mandate.

Although much has been accomplished, we know that our work to advance public understanding of and appreciation for the humanities has only begun. We also know that recent accomplishments would not have happened without the strong support of this Subcommittee.

During the past seven years, state councils have labored in an environment that threatened greatly reduced federal support. Indeed, despite the diligent efforts of many, the amount appropriated in outright funds for state councils for FY 1988, \$21.3 million, is \$500,000 less than the amount appropriated for FY 1984 and \$2.6 million less than the amount appropriated for FY 1981.

State councils continue to make dramatic progress in securing corporate, foundation, and individual contributions --as well as state appropriations--to support their programs, although Treasury Matching funds, our best stimulus to private

giving, have not kept pace with the expanded opportunities that have come with a maturing program; indeed, there have been reductions in these funds.

Councils in a number of states that have not benefited from generally good economic times have been particularly hard hit. Texas, for instance, remains in a deep recession, and the total revenues of the Texas Committee for the Humanities, compared to 1984, are down by approximately 30%--a percentage that reflects declines in both federal and private funding.

To ensure a strong and vibrant state humanities program and to move the program forward, I endorse completely the proposal of the Federation of State Humanities Councils that the state program be funded at \$25 million in fiscal year 1989.

I also believe that steps should be taken this year to ensure that the National Endowment for the Humanities, by fiscal year 1991, achieve funding parity with the National Endowment for the Arts. I know of no sound argument that can be put forward as to why the present imbalance in funding for the arts and the humanities should continue.

One finds in the authorizing legislation for the NEH a vision of America as a learning society. One finds a vision of citizens in touch with history and culture, a vision of citizens understanding the world about them, and a vision of citizens translating this understanding into civic action. This vision is as important today as it was in 1965. Perhaps it is more important, for the world continues to grow in complexity.

The well-being of the nation and of our democratic institutions depends on a thoughtful, reflective citizenry.

The curriculum that I have been describing and the projects that flow from it undergird and carry out this vision. This curriculum, unique in the history of the nation, is, as I have noted, of, by and for the people. It draws its strength from the imagination and creativity of the American people.

Our goal is to help weave the humanities into the social fabric of America. State councils are planning now the programs, emphases and projects that will take them into the 1990s, efforts that involve nothing less in intent than the opening of the American mind. The humanities, like life itself, are inherently forward-looking. We must continue to dream of a wise and visionary citizenry in touch with the realm of ideas and of the human spirit. We are doing that, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the distinguished members of this Subcommittee, for your continued commitment and support.