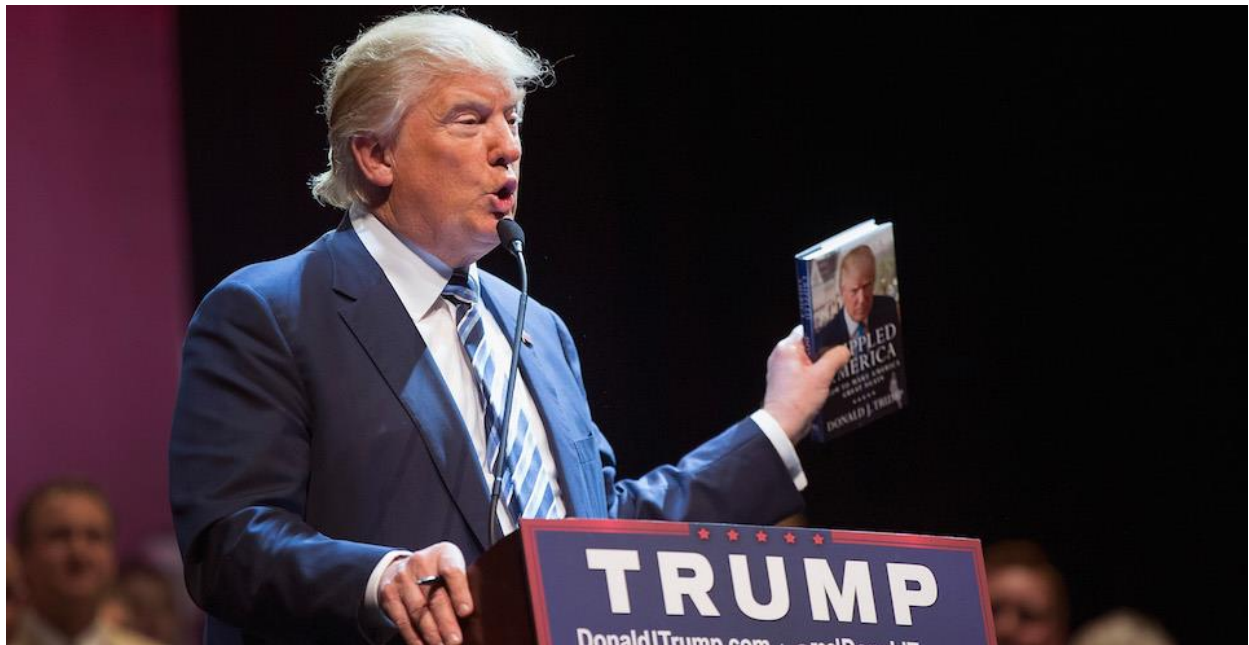


## [Donald Trump's Assault on the Enlightenment](#)

The new administration is looking to cut federal funding for arts and humanities education. It's not cost savings; it's an attack on reason itself.

- By [Suzanne Nossel](#)
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Last week, [reports surfaced](#) that President Donald Trump will propose a federal budget that would defund entirely the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The reasons for cutting these agencies cannot be fiscal; combined, they constitute less than .01 percent of the federal budget. Rather, Trump's declaration of war on the arts and humanities must be seen in the context of his repudiation of the American ideals — grounded in the Enlightenment — of self-expression, knowledge, dissent, criticism, and truth. These proposals are an early effort to entrench within the machinery of the U.S. government his elemental disdain for intellectuals, analysts, and experts. Seen this way, they deserve to be rejected even by conservatives who have gleefully targeted these agencies in the past. If Donald Trump makes our venerable federal arts and humanities agencies disappear, it will represent a victory for his illiberal agenda, one conservatives and liberals must unite to defeat.

The NEA and NEH were both founded in 1965 through legislation passed with strong bipartisan support. In recent years, they have supported thousands of projects in the arts and humanities in every U.S. state and territory, including writing and arts programs that engage war veterans, efforts to preserve genealogy records of enslaved African-American families, and children's programs run by the Oklahoma City Ballet.

Trump's salvo on the NEA is hardly without precedent. Ronald Reagan took aim at the agency in 1981, only to have a task force including Charlton Heston investigate and conclude it was too important to dismantle. In 1989, explicit photos by Robert Mapplethorpe and controversial artworks involving Christian symbols juxtaposed with urine triggered a new firestorm, with Sens. Jesse Helms and Alfonse D'Amato rallying against the agency alongside Pat Robertson and the Christian right. Their efforts to defund NEA failed in Congress. In 1994, Newt Gingrich renewed the irruption, broadening his sights to include the NEH and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. His arguments centered on controversial art and scholarships but also claims of government waste. Although the overall crusade failed, Gingrich succeeded in ending NEA grants to individual artists.

According to the *Hill*, Trump's latest proposal to scrap the agencies derives from a budget blueprint proposed by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. The [Heritage report](#) argues that government funding for the arts and humanities is so dwarfed by private philanthropy as to be negligible. The blueprint cites the group Citizens Against Government Waste, which has declared that "actors, artists, and academics are no more deserving of subsidies than their counterparts in other fields." The report further proclaims: "Taxpayers should not be forced to pay for plays, paintings, pageants, and scholarly journals."

But, as arts advocates have argued for decades, funding the arts and humanities is an essential part of what all great nations do. It is neither trivial, wasteful, nor quixotic. All 56 U.S. states and territories provide arts funding, a mark of the wide recognition of the need and value of these resources. Thriving arts sectors are proven educational and economic assets, as well as catalysts for tourism and urban renewal. They are essential transmitters of cultural heritage and national identity. Philanthropists are key, but their proclivities need to be augmented with public-interested support for projects that may not attract private money.

In 2013, the case for support for the humanities was boosted by a [bipartisan, congressionally instigated study](#) on how to "maintain national excellence in humanities ... and to achieve long-term national goals for our intellectual and economic well-being." Commissioned by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and carried out by an ideologically diverse, nonpartisan group of scholars, business leaders, and former politicians, the study argued that strong humanities education is essential to producing future generations of successful Americans who are knowledgeable, analytical, and worldly. The report recommended increased funding for NEH and was welcomed by Republican congressional leaders, including Tennessee Sen. Lamar Alexander and then-Rep. Tom Petri of Wisconsin.

The decades-old culture war arguments take on a deeper and more sinister cast under Donald Trump. During the campaign and their early days in office, the Trump team has shown contempt for Enlightenment values shared by liberals and conservatives alike. Concepts like the search for

truth, the open exchange of ideas, and the esteem for culture may read like empty platitudes etched in the walls of ivy-covered universities. But they are principles that undergird not just a liberal arts education but also the Common Core curriculum taught in hundreds of thousands of U.S. public schools. Unlike principled politicians on both sides of the aisle, Trump does not consider evidence that contradicts his views, concern himself with the lessons of history, or bring intellectual curiosity to the task of governing. He has not read any biographies of past presidents nor read much at all because, as he [said](#) last summer, “I’m always busy doing a lot.” The process of exploration, evidence gathering, and reasoning that forms the basis of the quest for truth in any academic discipline seems to be alien to Trump. For him, being called out, rebutted, and even ridiculed for purveying falsehoods is cause not for remorse or retraction but rather reinforcement of the lies and reproof of those who dare challenge them.

As was to some degree true for Richard Nixon, Reagan, and George W. Bush, Trump’s campaign and philosophy of governing aim to associate art and intellectualism with out-of-touch elites who have broken the trust of rural and less educated populations. But prior Republican presidents’ fervor in this quest was tempered both by ties to avid cultural patrons — people like New York society doyenne Brooke Astor and, more recently, the Koch brothers — and by links to conservative thinkers including Allan Bloom and William F. Buckley, who championed particular American intellectual traditions. Trump holds no such allegiances. He personally has a long history of denigrating the arts, dating back to his 1980 decision, when building Trump Tower, to [destroy a set of art deco reliefs](#) on the site that he knew were sought after by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Trump is right to argue that economic stratification risks leaving tens of millions of Americans behind. But his lies and hypocrisies seem to beg voters to suspend the critical faculties essential for a functioning democratic citizenry.

Trump’s assault on truth, though novel and shocking to many Americans, is a tactic that has been tested and proved effective in repressive countries around the world, as many Russian thinkers and other experts on authoritarianism have recently pointed out. “Autocratic power requires the degradation of moral authority — not the capture of moral high ground, not the assertion of the right to judge good and evil, but the defeat of moral principles as such,” [wrote](#) Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen in the *New York Review of Books*. The principles that Trump aims to defeat include the bedrock tenets of the Enlightenment and of American democracy — that rational thought, informed debate, and measured discourse form the basis of good government. Trump’s affinity toward Russian President Vladimir Putin and indifference toward the Russian leader’s repression of independent writers, artists, and thinkers suggest that, for him, the Heritage playbook is just an opening chapter in more intensive efforts to defund and delegitimize artists and intellectuals. This is another perennial favorite of dictators the world over — disabling the intelligentsia because their reasoned, thought-provoking arguments pose a serious threat to the authoritarian regime.

As the American Academy’s study noted, “the humanities—including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts—foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds... [T]hey help us understand what it means to be human and connect us with our global community.” The study of the humanities is an antidote to the bleak, reductionist, and insular worldview proffered by Trump in his inaugural speech.

In its [mission statement](#), the Heritage Foundation describes itself as dedicated to conservative policies based on “the principles and ideas of the American founding,” including “individual freedom.” The think tank emphasizes providing “timely, accurate research” and employs many dozens of staff described as scholars, researchers and experts. Although Heritage and other conservatives’ hostility toward the NEA and NEH might have been consistent with their small-government principles in years past, they cannot square their stated purposes with the far more insidious current campaign to dismantle the role of inquiry, creativity, reason, and truth in American society. For the Trump administration, the attacks on NEH and NEA form part of a wider assault on intellectualism itself. Rather than providing ammunition to the opponents of reason, Heritage should help roll out its tank in defense of thought itself.

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[http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/26/donald-trumps-assault-on-the-enlightenment-nea-neh-funding-cuts/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=FP%202-3&utm\\_term=Flashpoints](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/26/donald-trumps-assault-on-the-enlightenment-nea-neh-funding-cuts/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=FP%202-3&utm_term=Flashpoints)

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