

A black and white portrait of Winton Malcolm Blount, an older man with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

You never know about art. It has a way of coming back around. It connects us; it provides the ligaments and the ties that bind, holding the species together along the trajectory of its evolution. In that sense, among many, it can be said to perform a public function, in the purest sense of the word.

—Winton Malcolm Blount, 1995

LET ME SAY THAT I COME BEFORE YOU

tonight as an industrialist, not as a lobbyist for the arts and culture. Given the current environment, I want to be very clear about that.

It is a great honor to have been asked by the friends of Nancy Hanks and the American Council for the Arts to share some thoughts on the arts and public policy at this most critical time, as we celebrate a remarkable person who put real life into the National Endowment for the Arts in the early 70s when President Nixon started increasing dramatically federal funds for the arts.

Along with so many of you here this evening, I had the good fortune and the great pleasure to become acquainted with Nancy Hanks during the Nixon years, and my respect for her deepened over the years as I became increasingly involved at the nexus between business and the arts.

Among my recollections of Nancy Hanks, and her many qualities, was the informed common sense she brought to her work. And, it was to that recollection that I found myself returning again and again as I considered what I might be able to contribute on this occasion.

What would she have said about the first Republican-led House of Representatives in over 40 years leveling its sights on federal funding for the arts — one of the few federal programs that has both bipartisan support, and the overwhelming majority approval of the American people? Programs which have had the support of Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Bush, as well as our Democratic Presidents Carter and Clinton.

I don't know what she would have said; your imagination in this regard is as good as mine. I have always been suspicious of those holier-than-thou contrivances about what someone else would have said or done or wanted done in a particular circumstance. I would only say that I wish she were here today to lend her common sense, her keen insight, and her uncommon energy to the current, and rather peculiar, debate on federal support to the arts.

It is a rather variable debate. Just when one thinks one has the sense of it, it pops up in some other place, in some quite other guise. It is almost as if those who launched the debate in the first place aren't really sure what their position is — or whether they want to be

associated with it entirely. On any particular day, one may think the issue is privatization, or obscenity.

Just when that notion is coming into focus some person never previously known to have been a constitutional scholar is arguing against subsidies on constitutional grounds. Which constitutional grounds? Well, one is never sure, and the objection is never spelled out. The Constitution is right there with the Bible as writings which are widely cited and rarely read.

A whole different faction insists that federal assistance to the arts is really only a hand-out for elitists whose personal pleasures are being subsidized by the taxpayer. The issue, of course, is none of the above. We all know what is the real issue.

And we will come to that presently.

But along the way, I would like to offer my own perspective on the matter of public support to the arts. Looking back on the names of those who have been honored on this occasion in the past, one sees an extraordinary assortment of abilities and accomplishments — prominent historians; a poet; an attorney, musician, and high White House official; a former CEO of a leading communications company; a leading academic and former member of Congress.

One imagines that no one would protest strongly the suggestion that the liberal view has been well and amply represented here, or that the greater number of my predecessors at this podium would fare better than I if they were being rated by, say, Americans for Democratic Action. It is with this in mind that I refer to my own perspective. Privatization is as good a place as any for a conservative businessman to begin.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the more

1995 Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy

March 13, 1995

The John F. Kennedy Center
for the Performing Arts,
Eisenhower Theater

Washington, D.C.

Sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

Winton Malcolm Blount

general acknowledgment that there are things business can do better than governments, the concept of privatization has acquired the illuminating power of a sudden vision. Privatization is the new philosopher's stone that will turn lead to gold. The very word itself has acquired symbolic significance.

As it happens, I can speak with some authority on the matter of privatization. I oversaw the partial privatization of the U.S. Post Office Department. It was quite a wrench; one day I was a Cabinet officer; the next day I was a has-been. Like most has-beens, I am an expert on the matter.

At the heart of privatization is the proposition that those who receive a benefit should be the ones to pay for it. If you use the mails, or phone services, or utilities, you should pay for them. To assure that you get the best service at the best price, these services should be delivered in a free market, where competition will provide incentives for good service at fair prices.

But we, as most nations, also recognized that free market processes will not always work to the advantage of the nation as a whole. The national interest was served by a broadening of our agricultural base, and that would not be achieved rapidly by the invisible hand which allocates capital. So we subsidized, for example, rural electrification, and the taxpayer in our cities got his investment back through a better selection, at lower prices, on the dinner table.

The same rationale justified subsidizing the postal service for much of our still brief history. The postal service preceded our Constitution, and the Founding Fathers saw nothing wrong with underwriting an activity which benefited the private sector, seeing that it also gave benefit to the whole nation.

So there is ample precedent for using public moneys to underwrite activities which benefit some directly and others residually. This is not a relationship governed by rigid laws. There may come a time when subsidies can be dispensed with, and wisdom resides in knowing when those times have come. It resides as well in knowing when they have not come, and may never come. dispensed with, and wisdom resides in knowing when those times have come. It resides as well in knowing when they have not come, and may never come.

I did my privatizing in a rather interesting building

on Pennsylvania Avenue. Part of the charm of that building was its art. It was publicly funded art. Not by the NEA, but by the WPA. By the Federal Art Project of the Work Progress Administration. There were murals in the public spaces and, in retrospect, it is a pity we didn't do more to pull the public in off the street to look at those works, because they belonged to the people, after all, and many of them were quite good. In fact there are many buildings in this town filled with art, much of it subsidized by the government, such as the National Archives Building with their wonderful murals and many others.

Still, I don't think they were wasted. The money that subsidized them helped the artists survive in a difficult time, while doing useful work. And the chance to do his or her work may have helped that work to improve. And we don't know whether any of that will someday be taken down off those walls and offered up someplace where it can better be appreciated. You never know about art. It has a way of coming back around. It connects us; it provides the ligaments and the ties that bind, holding the species together along the trajectory of its evolution. In that sense, among many, it can be said to perform a public function, in the purest sense of the word.

HAD WE NOT SUBSIDIZED those artists, in that time, who would have done so? Would we have had a hiatus in the evolution of American art in the Depression era? Perhaps. At any rate, it is difficult to imagine much private money going to new artists for works that would be available to the public.

These programs — and, as all of you know, the Federal Art Project was only one; there was a Federal Music Project, a Federal Theater Project — and they did not simply subsidize practicing artists, writers, composers and playwrights. They even provided lessons! They taught some how to make art, and others how to appreciate it.

Alternatively, they may have helped a few would-be artists discover that their talents might better be employed in the field of cardiology, or welding, or home constructions. Was this not a beneficial thing from the standpoint of civic maturation? Indeed it was. It was as essential to the synthesizing of a distinctive national culture as the Civil War was to the synthesizing of a distinctive national form of government. The

federal government, by broadly supporting creativity, helps to increase cultural production and the skills associated with that production.

These publicly funded programs made art democratic. If there is to be a debate over the utility of that objective, then let the debate be couched in those terms, rather than in economic terms and demagoguery. To suggest that the arts should rely solely for their health on private funding is a form of snobbery; it implies that those without means are incapable of producing art, or of appreciating it, in the first place. If we accept this proposition, we must accept its concomitant, which is an America irretrievably divided by economic class. Were we to accept that, we wouldn't really need a Constitution, would we?

SO, IT IS IMPORTANT that we not let the terms of this debate be defined by ideology. The arts are not the preoccupation of a narrow elite; they are the defining sinews of the good society, and, as they serve a public good, they are properly subsidized by public resources.

Neither should we allow ourselves to be put on the defensive over this matter of privatization. The proper allocation of public resources is a vitally important issue, but the argument against public funding of the arts is a reduction to the absurd which obscures the importance of that issue. Federal support of the arts yields multiple public benefits, including local economic revitalization. With arts education you get improved work force characteristics. Youth who are involved with the arts are less prone to become engaged with crime and violence. Therefore, at a time of scarce federal dollars, policy makers should be looking to allocate resources where they can generate multiple public benefits for the same dollar.

What is wanted is a degree of intellectual rigor and consistency which is now missing in this debate. And, along the way, we may also get a more accurate definition of elitism in America, and who among us are the most privileged when it comes to the allocation of public resources.

While we wait for that happy day, we may be excused for taking a look to see what really is at issue here. It is not whether the arts and humanities should be subsidized, but rather how they have been subsidized. It is on this point that one discerns something

between intellectual sloth and political cowardice on the part of those who want to eliminate federal funding for the arts.

I have read and re-read the arguments, as all of you have, against federal funding, and for privatization. I have yet to find, anywhere, this issue defined on the merits. The issue, purely and simply, is whether the arts contribute to the commonwealth. Is art an inevitable component of the good society? If there are those who believe it is not, let them say so. And let them offer us examples of nations which have achieved greatness while turning their backs on art.

One sees in all this a great, lost opportunity. Our friends who would disestablish the National Endowments for the Arts, the Humanities, IMS and public broadcasting, and would require zero public funding for the arts, are good people, men and women with distinguished records of public service, some of considerable learning. The role of the arts in our national life is a matter of no less consequence than the role of science, of health care, education, or the national defense. A fairly met debate on the arts and public policy could be, and ought to be, an enriching, edifying contribution to our national life.

We have not seen this. Every op-ed piece, every speech, every public objection to public funding of the arts begins and ends not with a consideration of the role of the arts, but with finger-pointing at what is seen as the inappropriate funding of certain artists and their projects. Fair enough, as far as it goes. But it goes nowhere. Or rather it goes nowhere near the issue of the significance or insignificance of the arts in public life.

To suggest that the arts should rely solely for their health on private funding is a form of snobbery; it implies that those without means are incapable of producing art, or of appreciating it, in the first place.

It goes, rather, to the settling of old scores. To getting even. Let there be no mistake about it, this is a partisan issue. And, more often than not, it is a matter of personalities.

Henry Kissinger once said that the reason academic politics are so sordid is because the stakes are so low. So it is in the art world, when politics is the arbiter of taste, and the allocation of public funds becomes a means for expressing contempt for the values and convictions of segments of our population. Let there be no mistaking the fact that influential elements in the arts community bear major responsibility for the embarrassing occurrence in which we now find ourselves, and for the jeopardy of public funding for the arts. There is an organized political constituency which opposes the principle of federal support for arts and culture. They systemically look for projects that may offend common good taste and tarnish the NEA with them. As long as those groups exist, they will manage to find one of two controversial projects — those groups actually thrive from those controversies by using them to raise money from their constituency.

There is a fine line between challenging public taste and offending it. It is the responsibility of those who administer public funding for the arts to assure that line is not crossed. Still, the elimination of funding is not the appropriate response to the crossing of that line.

Rather, let us be bold to say that we do not approve, or at least some of us don't, of some of the uses to which public moneys have been put. It is true that if we pitch the argument on those grounds, we open ourselves to charges of cultural ignorance, of smugness, even of supporting censorship. But is it preferable to hide behind specious arguments about fiscal responsibility, budgetary necessity, and free market principles, than to risk being ridiculed for admitting we do not see the artistic merit in the Mapplethorpe photographs?

It is difficult to believe that anyone honestly sees the harsh imperatives of economics as compatible with the refining evolution of a culture. Yet the argument for privatization depends on such a belief. If you doubt that a variant of Gresham's law functions in the shaping of a culture, turn on your television. Left to its own devices, bad entertainment drives out good entertainment. Bad art will drive out good art.

Yet, even on its face, the claim that fiscal prudence militates in favor of privatization is transparently faulty. In what other area of federal funding does one federal dollar generate 11 more dollars from the private sector? And some of these dollars flow back to the federal treasury. Thus, if deficit reduction is the objective, then it is obvious that we should be spending more, not less, on the arts.

In government, as in most aspects of our lives, we tend to reason from the exceptional. And it is the exceptional abuses of public trust in the funding, however infinitesimal a part of the whole, of those who offend public decency, which underpins the argument for eliminating all federal funding of the arts. Part of what makes this both a travesty and a tragedy is the fact that nothing would be more gratifying to those few who express their contempt for our values than for them to be the agents of disestablishment.

It does not seem to me beyond the competence of men and women of good will to correct the abuses in the public funding of the arts, and to retain the greater good which flows from the government's proper role in these endeavors. It is precisely the opportunity to devise such corrections that is being squandered today.

WE DO HAVE THE RIGHT and the obligation to demand accountability from those who dispense federal resources for the arts. We do have the right to impose sanctions on those individuals and organizations which offend public sensibilities by abusing public support. It is reasonable to consider the merits of a cultural impact statement as part of the grant process. It is reasonable to demand corrections in the peer review process. It is to these corrections that we should be directing our attention now. Jane Alexander has effectively addressed many of these issues. She is doing an outstanding job as the Director of the National Endowment for the Arts, as is Sheldon Hackney, Director of the NEH.

The history of holy wars is strewn with the bodies of the innocent. We may eliminate funding for the arts in order to avenge ourselves on the self-indulgent and the contemptuous few who caper on the edges of the arts community, and we may take whatever satisfaction is to be gained from that. But along the way, we will deny millions of our people affordable access to the pleasures of the arts. We will affirm that art is, indeed,

the exclusive province of the wealthy. We will announce that the value of art is a function of what those who can pay and will pay for it, and not a function of its ability to instruct, to exalt, to leaven, and to unify a people.

Consider the relish of these new saviours of the public welfare if they could crucify Van Gogh, or even Shakespeare, or Henry Moore, and try to consider the emptiness in our souls if artists like this had not been permitted to live their lives.

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival is a beneficiary of the National Endowment for the Arts. We are grateful for that support, but we will not perish without it. Others, however, will. I take strong exception to the idea that the arts are the province of the elite. I take exception to the word itself. I would invite our friends in the Congress on any day to come to see the children, the elderly or the temporarily disadvantaged who come to our theater and museum, just one of hundreds across our nation, and point out for me which among these Americans are the elite — and, more to the point, which are not. It is a pleasure to watch their faces as they enter the theater and the museum. But it is an astonishment to see their faces as they come out. They are, in their shared experience, new people, aware of things they only dreamed before, or did not dream at all. Art has done its job. Those who bring them to it have done theirs.

THERE HAS BEEN AN EXPLOSION of support for the arts in cities and towns all over this country following the appointment of Nancy Hanks as the second director of the NEA. With the federal government giving seed money, the private sector has responded with many times the support given by the endowments. To dramatically change or reduce this support would be a tragedy in many places over this country.

We are, take us altogether, a rough people, we Americans. Bred to adversity, we know the rigors of war and want and doubt and debt. Always we have stepped up to necessity, to the defense of our values and the betterment of our people. Always, ultimately though often painfully, we have rejected those things which divided us. Always, though often reluctantly, we have embraced those things which united us.

Our edges are softened, and our nature gentled, by

the shared difficulties of perfecting our democracy. The art we create, or borrow, or recreate is one expression of our progress. It is one measure of our progress. And it is one engine of our progress, helping us, in the words of Tennyson...

“...by slow prudence to make mild A rugged people,
and thro’ soft degrees
Subdue them to the
useful and the good.”

If history is to be the judge of our achievement as a nation, what will it say about those who would determine that art was merely an indulgence of the wealthy, and should be available only to the wealthy; that the whole people did not need it, and ought to be denied it by reason of their means?

My family, along with so many others over the years, worked to build this nation. Not some of it, but all of it. I served, along with so many others over the years, to defend it. Not some of it, but all of it. I was raised to believe and, in my final years, continue to embrace, the proposition that a nation advances and grows strong by allocating its opportunities not to some of its people, but to all of them. I believe I am in good company. ■

Winton Malcolm Blount

Winton Malcolm “Red” Blount has been widely acclaimed for his achievements in both the public and private sectors. Through his personal commitment to making the arts accessible to his community and nation, he has successfully created dynamic partnerships among the business, government and private sectors. Former Postmaster General of the United

Our edges are
softened, and our
nature **gentled,** by the
shared difficulties of
perfecting our
democracy.

The art we create, or
borrow, or recreate is
one expression of
our progress.

States and Cabinet member under President Nixon, Blount is chairman of the board of Blount, Inc., an international manufacturing and construction company, and a patron and member of the board of the internationally renowned Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

From president of the Alabama State Chamber of Commerce to president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, his civic contributions link his business acumen and philanthropic philosophy. His benefaction to the state of Alabama, a cultural center complex which is the home of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, was one of the largest donations given by an individual to a single arts organization in the nation. In 1992, Blount testified on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts before the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee in 1992. A former member of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and past national chairman of the Business Committee

for the Arts, he lends support to numerous business, civic, educational and religious organizations including the Friends of American Art in Religion, the Alabama Foundation for Education Excellence, and is a member of the Court of Governors, Royal Shakespeare Theater, Stratford-on-Avon, England.

Blount holds several honorary doctoral degrees, and is the recipient of many prestigious awards and honors including the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges' 1991 Distinguished Service Award, the 1991 National Endowment of the Humanities Charles Frankel Prize, the 1992 National Governor's Association Distinguished Service Arts Award and two Papal medals from Pope John Paul II for his role in bringing the first-ever touring exhibition of Vatican Art to the United States. The cumulative effect of his efforts has helped to redefine the way many Americans perceive the arts. He was born in 1921 in Union Springs, Alabama and lives in Montgomery, Alabama.