

aid, and he wrote poems intended to prick the American conscience. In "The Question" (1916), he asked:

*Brethren, how shall it fare with me
When the war is laid aside,
If it be proven that I am he
For whom a world has died?*

During the 1920s and '30s, when the British government labored in vain to reverse the isolationist tide of public opinion in America, such Kipling hymns to the imperial spirit as *Gunga Din*, *Elephant Boy*, and *Captains Courageous* were made into Hollywood films. It was perhaps inevitable that in the autumn of 1943, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was urging

Winston Churchill to free India from British rule, Churchill should send his American counterpart two previously unpublished Kipling poems, as if to ask whether the Americans were ready to assume the burdens of empire.

By then, however, the game was up for Britain. That very autumn, Harold MacMillan, the future prime minister, made his famous remark suggesting that Britain's role in the future would be to play Greece to America's Rome. That was not how Kipling had hoped things would turn out. But Hitchens suggests that "given the transmission of British imperial notions to the Legates of the new Rome, he was not so quixotic a figure as Churchill's gesture makes him seem."

Subsidizing The Muses

"Subsidies to the Arts: Cultivating Mediocrity" by Bill Kauffman, in *Policy Analysis* (No. 137), 224 Second St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003, and "The Dutch Dole" by Susan Tallman, in *Art in America* (July 1990), 575 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

Amid all the controversy over the congressional effort to prevent the National Endowment for the Arts from underwriting obscene works, says novelist Bill Kauffman, the real issue has been overlooked. Should the \$171 million NEA continue to exist?

He thinks not. The Endowment was created in 1965 after decades of lobbying by a curious alliance of liberals and Cold Warriors. Each group hoped to enlist artists in its own crusade. "The Soviet drive in the fine arts field finds the U.S. at present without a counteroffensive," warned a government commission in 1952. Many artists of the Beat era opposed subsidies. Painter Larry Rivers said, "The government taking a role in art is like a gorilla threading a needle. It is at first cute, then clumsy, and most of all impossible." As the poet Robert Lowell explained in turning down an invitation to read at the White House in 1965, "Every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments."

Kauffman has other objections to the NEA: that it encourages cronyism among

artists; that it favors artists in New York and Los Angeles and ignores regional talents; that the arts flourished long before there was an NEA. His basic argument, however, is summed up by something William Faulkner once said: "The writer doesn't need economic freedom. All he needs is a pencil and paper. I've never known anything good in writing to come from having accepted any free gift of money."

That point of view would not find many backers in the Netherlands, notes Tallman, a New York writer, but even there some subsidies have provoked controversy. In 1987, the Dutch government pulled the plug on its highly publicized Visual Artists Arrangement, a de facto welfare program for virtually anybody who could put paint on canvas. Through the Arrangement, the Ministry of Culture purchased artists' works for sums based on the artists' needs (determined by marital status, number of children, etc.) rather than on the works' merits. By the time of the program's demise, the Dutch government had purchased 220,000 works of art, most of which were stored in warehouses. Even

many artists were glad to see the Arrangement go. Among other things, they complained that it supported traditional modes of painting and sculpture. By the 1980s, Tallman reports, "it had become a mark of self-respect in the serious art world to get by without [Arrangement] subsidies. . . . Rather than a safety net, the [Arrangement] was seen as an all-too-comfortable bed from which it became increasingly difficult to arise."

Tallman hastens to add that Dutch artists gladly accept other government sup-

port—commissions, direct grants, and purchases for the national collection. Indeed, public subsidies for the arts remain far more generous than they are in the United States: \$33 per capita annually, versus 71 cents. Dutch art—often criticized as boring and repetitious—may not have improved since the abolition of the Arrangement, Tallman allows, but, in what seems a dubious defense, she says that the greatest defect of the Arrangement has been remedied: Art is no longer stored away in warehouses but is exhibited for all to see.

OTHER NATIONS

The 'Higher Lights' Of France

"The Longest Run: Public Engineers and Planning in France" by Cecil O. Smith, Jr., in *American Historical Review* (June 1990), 400 A St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

France has not always been the bastion of benign statism and central planning that it is today, but it has for centuries harbored an institution that quietly kept such ideas alive. The Corps des Ponts et Chaussées, created during the 18th century to design a national system of highways, is an elite group of state engineers that claims as its legacy the nation's railroads and canals, as well as such modern achievements as the supersonic Concorde and France's unparalleled nuclear power system.

The Corps, writes Smith, a historian at Drexel University, is itself without parallel. It embodies "public administration in the general interest and planning on a national scale," an ideal fostered during the 17th century by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who was King Louis XIV's finance minister. Its members were dubbed *lumières supérieures* (higher lights) more than a century ago by Louis Navier, a professor of Transcendental Analysis at the nation's leading school of engineering, the École Polytechnique. As Navier's exalted title suggests, France's "national engineers" did not think of themselves as mere tinkers. "Our predecessors," one self-assured student of Navier's day wrote, "were like the English engineers of today: completely

ignorant of theory."

The Corp's distinctively French belief in the superiority of theory and logic to experience led predictably to some serious blunders. During the 1820s, on the eve of the railroad age, the Corps committed France to a costly new system of canals. And Smith wryly notes that when Navier was appointed to run the Corps' railroad operations during the 1830s, his plan of attack was based on fairly abstract reasoning: The railroad's "self-evident advantage over existing means of transportation was speed; therefore, the railroad's natural function was to carry passengers and light goods long distances at high speed." It would help unite the nation. Most freight would travel by canal barge. Following this logic, the railroads were laid out on a pattern called, after the head of the Corps, the Legrand Star, with all lines radiating from Paris. The engineers scorned considerations of short-term profits, convinced that the public good would best be served by gold-plated construction.

The Corps sneered at the helter-skelter railroad development in Germany and other countries, often carried out by private entrepreneurs who used gimcrack construction techniques. But the weak-