

## FROM THE CENTER

For the past several months, the Woodrow Wilson Center has been engaged in a struggle for survival. Earlier this year, the House of Representatives voted to cut federal support for the Center from the current \$5.8 million to \$1 million, in effect the amount needed to close down. The Senate has voted to continue funding at the current level. By the time these words are published, the issue of federal support for fiscal year 1998 may well be decided. It amounts to a choice between extinction and, after several years of budgetary stringencies, difficult leanness.

During these months of debate, a gratifying number of supporters have come to the Center's defense, including prominent individuals in public life as well as important institutions. The *Washington Post* called the Center "a unique memorial to one of the great American presidents whose particular legacy—the connection between learning and the national life—endures to this day," and said it "attracts some of the best minds and has richly earned taxpayer patronage." George Will hailed the Center as "irreplaceable." The *Weekly Standard* described it as "one of the few havens for disinterested scholarship in the country." In September, an editorial in the *New York Times* declared that the fate of the Wilson Center is "a matter of unusual interest to the global republic of letters." The *Times* called the Center "a zone of civility during political and cultural wars, and a refuge for those persecuted elsewhere."

Even if, as we have reason to hope, the Center survives the current crisis, there will remain strong pressure for it to become more "relevant" to immediate issues of public policy. Yet those of us involved in the creation of the Wilson Center, including Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D.-N.Y.), have long emphasized that in establishing the

Center Congress did not intend to create yet one more "think tank" in a city already generously supplied with such institutions. First-rate scholarship not only is valuable in itself but has a vital, though often indirect and deferred, role in contributing to the solution of issues in public policy. Saving the Center's appropriation at the cost of destroying the very quality that has made it so valuable would be an empty triumph.

The *Times* put the issue well:

The center's House critics fault it for lacking "a public policy function" by overemphasizing scholarly pursuits. This seems perversely to miss the point.

Washington is amply stocked with policy think tanks, and the center was never meant to churn out position papers. The hope instead was to provide a forum where politicians and officials might encounter those more alien muses of history, philosophy and literature.

That such a forum is needed was suggested by a senator's inept award several decades ago of a "golden fleece" to a Wilson scholar for writing a paper on how Russia's czars persecuted nomadic minorities centuries ago. This theme was not remote or irrelevant to the author, Bronislaw Geremek, the Polish medievalist who was to play a pivotal role in the Solidarity movement. In the humanities, as in the natural sciences, ideas often spring from improbable intersections.

Few dispute that the center has stimulated prize-winning books, animated innumerable public workshops and published a lively quarterly. Every federal dollar appropriated for the center is matched by a private donor, but federal support has been the essential catalyst. Though Congressional hackles were raised by the center's plain-spoken director, Charles Blitzer, he has just resigned and is no longer a source of contention.

In a Capital addicted to surface froth, it seems gratuitous self-injury to put in jeopardy a center devoted to inquiry that reaches deeper than an inch.

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