



General Advocates Congress on Behalf of the Arts

Apr 15, 2010

Los Angeles Times

[Los Angeles Times - Culture Monster](#)

April 13, 2010

The United States government should start thinking of the arts as a tool, if not exactly a weapon, in the nation's military campaigns and diplomatic initiatives, a recently retired Army brigadier general testified before Congress on Tuesday.

Nolen Bivens, who served 32 years in the Army, including a year in Iraq during 2003-04, was [an unusual enlistee in arts supporters' annual "arts advocacy day" deployment to Capitol Hill](#) in a push for an elusive objective: ample funding for the National Endowment for the Arts.

"It has occurred to me, and perhaps you, that my background in the military is quite different than the others testifying before you today and in the past," Bivens told the House subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, whose purview includes the NEA budget. Americans for the Arts, a leading national advocacy and service group, issued the [text of his and others' prepared presentations](#); the group coordinated testimony that also included more typical figures such as star actors Jeff Daniels and Kyle MacLachlan, and Charles Segars, chief executive of the Ovation arts television network.

Bivens went on to outline how it behooves the nation to enlist the arts in a new era when "our forces are adjusting to

a new state of warfare...which demands new and innovative approaches."

He cited the April 2003 looting of the unprotected National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad as an example of a setback in winning Iraqi public sentiment, a vital component in the new anti-insurgency tactics the U.S. military has since adopted in both Iraq and Afghanistan. While the looting of the antiquities museum [did not turn out to be as complete as initially feared](#), it made headlines that suggested unpreparedness or neglect by U.S. forces that had occupied Baghdad.

"Future conflicts should be approached with a better understanding of how a nation values its cultural heritage and its arts," Bivens testified, and the NEA could help link the armed forces with experts on foreign culture who could help prepare U.S. units to make the right moves toward winning hearts and minds.

Bivens testified that cultural exchange programs could further U.S. interests: "They are so valuable because they impact the lives of people, which in turn affects their attitudes and perceptions." On the home front, Bivens said, the arts have a role to play in the morale of troops and their families. He suggested NEA-coordinated help with existing arts initiatives geared toward veterans, and envisioned it "brokering opportunities whereby local artists and bands could combine" with military personnel and their families who already engage in music and art on their bases.

MacLachlan reviewed his own career from the beginning, noting how the little community theater in Yakima, Wash., where he got his start as a volunteer at age 10, contributed to bustle and economic activity in the town. He highlighted the importance of the arts education he got at the University of Washington and spoke of the need for NEA funding in regional theaters such as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, where he got his first professional job en route to his star turn in "Twin Peaks" and roles in "Sex and the City" and "Desperate Housewives."

Daniels hammered on the economic benefits the arts can bring, focusing on the story of the Purple Rose Theatre Co. he launched, amid considerable local skepticism, in 1991 in his hometown of Chelsea, Mich., after having made his name in films such as "Terms of Endearment" and "The Purple Rose of Cairo."

When the theater opened, he said, "if there were 25 businesses in town, half were empty or just getting by. Soon, a town with two stoplights was suddenly getting 40,000 new people a year walking down Main Street," and restaurants, shops and hotels sprang up. "Because of the arts, my sleepy little hometown is now a destination."

Daniels' point dovetailed with a new initiative that NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman hopes to launch, dubbed "Our Town" after the classic play by Thornton Wilder. It calls for dividing \$5 million a year among up to 35 communities for arts projects designed to "enliven civic spaces and engage citizens."

The bottom line urged Tuesday by Americans for the Arts and congressional witnesses is \$180 million for the NEA's 2011 budget, up 7.5% from current funding. President Obama has proposed a 3.7% cut to \$161.3 million.

-- Mike Boehm

Photo: Brig. General Nolen Bivens (USA-ret.) with Americans for the Arts CEO and President Bob Lynch at the Arts Hearing before the Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations, April 2010. Photo used courtesy of Americans for the Arts/Andrew Snow.