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# Funding the Arts and Humanities is Worth Fighting For

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# Funding the Arts and Humanities is Worth Fighting For

## **Abstract**

There's an old story about Winston Churchill that is not true but is worth repeating. When approached about cutting funding for the arts so the money could go to the war effort during World War II, Churchill supposedly replied: "Then what are we fighting for?"

As far as we can tell [Churchill never actually said this](#), but you can be forgiven for being taken by the sentiment. This apocryphal quote still makes the rounds because it suggests that even in times of war art can help us realize what it is, exactly, that's worth defending. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Winston Churchill, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Donald Trump, arts funding

## **Disciplines**

American Politics | Education Economics | Education Policy | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education

# Opinion: Funding the arts and humanities is worth fighting for

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*Promoting and preserving our culture should be hallowed ground for all Americans*



*Getty Images*

This is where we should draw the line: Preserving our heritage should be a bipartisan issue.

By **Dave Powell**

There's an old story about Winston Churchill that is not true but is worth repeating. When approached about cutting funding for the arts so the money could go to the war effort during World War II, Churchill supposedly replied: "Then what are we fighting for?"

As far as we can tell [Churchill never actually said this](#), but you can be forgiven for being taken by the sentiment. This apocryphal quote still makes the rounds because it suggests that even in times of war art can help us realize what it is, exactly, that's worth defending.

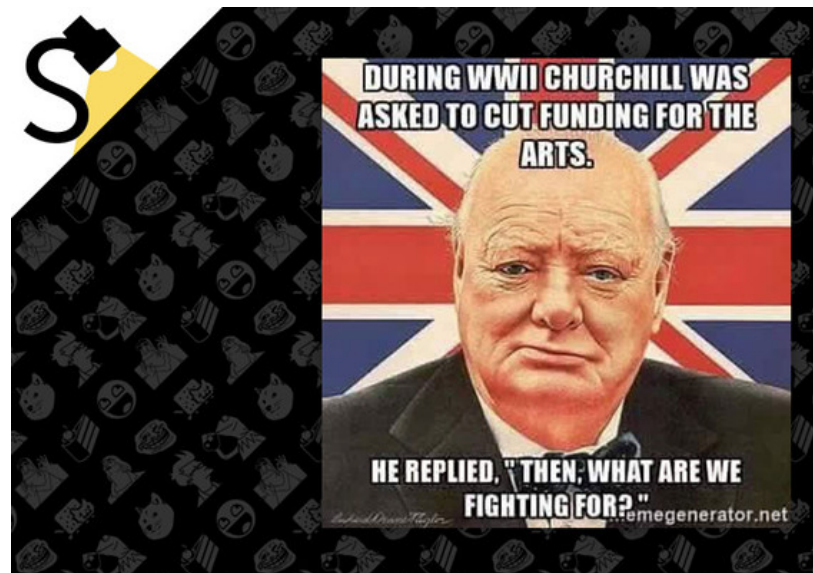
Churchill understood Britain's struggle in World War II to be a struggle not only for democracy in the face of fascism but also a struggle for British identity and culture. He understood, correctly, that an attack on British democracy was an attack on the people of Britain, and it's widely believed that he said this because he understood art to be a pure expression of cultural identity and the way we make meaning in a world that does not always make sense.

We are facing a crisis of Churchillian proportions ourselves these days as it has been reported that the Trump administration is considering [eliminating funding](#) for the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as part of its efforts to "drain the swamp" in Washington.

Far from being nonessential federal expenditures, though, these three programs provide Americans with opportunities to understand their heritage in ways that few other programs do. They deserve to be protected.

Two years ago I had the privilege of being project director of a program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities that brought 79 teachers from all over the country to Gettysburg to spend a week immersed in study of the most significant battle ever fought on American soil.

We would have invited 790 teachers to come here if we could have. They went home to Virginia, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Iowa, Puerto Rico, Georgia, California, Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, and everywhere in between, to share what they learned with the students they teach.



*Snopes.com*

Churchill never said this, but he should have!

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Gettysburg and the impact a visit to this historic place can have on the sensibilities of anyone, American or otherwise. "Gettysburg" is a word that means something in almost every language: it stands for justice, equality, democracy, and

freedom. It stands for government of, by, and for the people, and nothing reinforces that more than being in this hallowed ground.

These teachers had opportunities to learn about the battle and the way it continues to resonate in our lives from scholars who have dedicated their lives to understanding our past so we never forget where we came from.

The teachers walked in the footsteps of George Pickett's men. They experienced twilight at Little Round Top, where Col. Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine held off Col. William C. Oates and his Alabamians on the second day of the battle.

They toured the countryside around Gettysburg and considered the lives lived by former slaves and freedmen eager for a fresh start just north of the Mason-Dixon line. They visited the room where Lincoln slept the night before he delivered the Gettysburg Address.

They talked long into the night about what America is and what it could be, and they built relationships with each other that have continued to flourish since. Many have returned to experience this place again, some with students in tow.

It was federal funding for the arts and humanities — the generosity of the American people — that made it all possible. It's true that artists, writers, and even historians sometimes do their work on the edges of society and change our perceptions of the world in unexpected ways, which can make conservatives uncomfortable.

It's also true that protecting their work long after they are gone is an act of preservation that keeps us tethered to the people who came before us. Ironically, conservatives bent on denying funding for the arts and humanities seem unable to realize that the argument for protecting these programs is a profoundly conservative one. Why anyone would want to prevent Americans from exploring their past and sharing their knowledge with others is incomprehensible to me.

Churchill may not have wisely protected funding for the arts with a sharp statement in the darkest days of World War II, but he did, when addressing the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1938, say this: "The arts are essential to any complete national life," and added: "The state owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them...Ill fares the race which fails to salute the arts with the reverence and delight which are their due."

He couldn't have said it better, and surely every American can agree: our history and culture are worth fighting for. Let's hope the Trump administration gets the memo.

Dave Powell is an associate professor and chair of the education department at Gettysburg College.