

***Amazing Grace: The National Endowment for the Arts, The Clinton Presidency and Defining American Culture.***                      **Timothy Willmot**

*“Through many dangers, toils and snares...  
We have already come.  
T’was Grace that brought us safe thus far...  
And Grace will lead us home.”*

President Clinton departed the church still hearing the strains of *Amazing Grace* as he entered his car to return to The White House. That afternoon he called Jane Alexander to ask her if she would become Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. He later recalled that the Arts (...and song like that very special *Amazing Grace*...) could be of great value in expressing the best in people during complex times.

A new era was to start and a new definition of culture in America would be crafted. The next years would be used to build and redefine the role of the Federal government in the arts with the President and Congress at odds on how to craft the design. The NEA would celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary during the first term of President Clinton but the NEA would face its most severe challenges. The challenges centered on the very organization and existence of the NEA. At the end of the struggle with Congress, the NEA would emerge as a national model of creativity in working with the arts and humanities for the American people as they entered the new millennium. President Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union address *...encouraged America by the year 2000 to be not only a nation of liberty but one of creativity...*

The paper will center on the role of the Clinton Presidency in developing a plan that would allow the Federal government to contribute to the development of the Arts and Humanities.

The paper will show how developing partnerships with public and private organizations, state and local governments and individual artists in all areas of expression were established as part of the NEA. The American model was not to rely on the establishment of a Ministry of Culture that is reflected in most European nations but on a collaborative Federal system of outreach to all parts of the nation.

The American model would be the development of an integrated system of partnerships between groups that encouraged, in all ways, individual creativity while sharing the result of the work with all types of communities from the local to the national landscapes. The NEA would develop a system that would provide some funding opportunities, but it would also act as a broker of opportunities in the development of action-oriented programs for those artists not involved in an administrative or business system.

The world of arts and culture in the United States is extraordinarily complex and fertile. People who enjoy the arts can choose from a wide array of drama, visual art, dance, music and literature available in local theaters, museums, libraries, universities, performance halls and nightclubs, as well as radio and television. The NEA during the Clinton Administration helped to expand opportunities for citizens to enjoy the arts while establishing protocols of funding and review that would allow for greater success by programs that offered a varied agenda. Not all projects would succeed but others would thrive, and a federal system would survive and would support new opportunities for new times. This would be a legacy that would go beyond the Clinton Presidency.