

Comments on Andres Serrano by Members of the United States Senate

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About the Authors: Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato was a Republican representing New York. Senator Jesse Helms was a Republican representing North Carolina.

Paragraph numbering below has been added to facilitate class discussion. It was not included in the original publication.

Congressional Record Senate - May 18, 1989

#1. Mr. [Alfonse] D'AMATO [of New York]. . . Mr. President*, several weeks ago, I began to receive a number of letters, phone calls, and postcards from constituents throughout the Senate concerning art work by Andres Serrano. They express a feeling of shock, of outrage, and anger.

#2. They said, "How dare you spend our taxpayers' money on this trash." They all objected to taxpayers' money being used for a piece of so-called art work which, to be quite candid, I am somewhat reluctant to utter its title. This so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity. The art work in question is a photograph of the crucifix submerged in the artist's urine.

#3. This artist received \$15,000 for his work from the National Endowment for the Arts, through the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art.

#4. Well, if this is what contemporary art has sunk to, this level, this outrage, this indignity - some may want to sanction that, and that is fine. But not with the use of taxpayers' money. This is not a question of free speech. This is a question of abuse of taxpayers' money. If we allow this group of so-called art experts to get away with this, to defame us and to use our money, well, then we do not deserve to be in office.

#5. This is why, Mr. President, I am proud of the members, who in literally a matter of minutes - over 20, about 25 - joined me in signing a strong letter of protest to the endowment. Here is a picture, and the title is "Piss Christ." Incredible.

#6. To add insult to injury, after this group of so-called art experts picked this artist for this \$15,000 prize - of taxpayers' money; we paid for this, our taxpayers - I do not blame people for being outraged and angered, and they should be angered at us, unless we do something to change this. If this continues and if this goes unrectified, where will it end? They will say, "This is free speech." Well, if you want free speech, you want to draw dirty pictures, you want to do anything you want, that is your business, but not with taxpayers' money. This is an outrage, and our people's tax dollars should not support this trash, and we should not be giving it the dignity. And after this piece of trash and this artist received this award, to make matters worse, the Awards in Visual Arts, this wonderful publication was put together; and who was it financed by, partially? By none other than the National Endowment for the Arts. What a disgrace.

#7. They not only see this garbage, they can say we did not know he engaged in this kind of filth, but then they see fit to distribute it through the Nation and brag about it and allow their names to be used, instead of calling and saying, you get our name out of that. . . .

#8. The purpose for which the Endowment was established, and I quote, "to support the survival of the best of all forms that reflect the American heritage in its full range of cultural and ethnic diversity and to provide national leadership on behalf of the arts."

#9. Mr. President, I submit this is a distortion of those purposes. It does not reflect on the full range of cultural and ethnic diversity; rather, it is a perversion of those principles. If people want to be perverse, in terms of what they recognize as art or culture, so be it, but not with my money, not with the taxpayers' dollars, and certainly not under the mantle of this great Nation. This is a disgrace.

#10. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the letter to the National Endowment for the Arts be printed in the RECORD.

#11. There being no objection, the letter was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. Senate, Washington, DC, May 18, 1989

Mr. Hugh Southern, Acting Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC

#12. Dear Mr. Southern: We recently learned of the Endowment's support for a so-called "work of art" by Andres Serrano entitled "Piss Christ." We write to express our outrage and to suggest in the strongest terms that the procedures used by the Endowment to award and support artists be reformed.

#13. The piece in question is a large and vivid photograph of Christ on a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. This work is shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving of any recognition whatsoever. Millions of taxpayers are rightfully incensed that their hard-earned dollars were used to honor and support Serrano's work.

#14. There is a clear flaw in the procedures used to select art and artists deserving of taxpayers' support. That fact is evidenced by the Serrano work itself. Moreover, after the artist was selected

and honored for his "contributions" to the field of art, his work was exhibited at government expense and with the imprimatur of the Endowment.

#15. This matter does not involve freedom of artistic expression - it does involve the question whether American taxpayers should be forced to support such trash.

#16. And finally, simply because the Endowment and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) did not have a direct hand in choosing Serrano's work, does not absolve either of responsibility. The fact that both the Endowment and the SECCA with taxpayer dollars promoted this work as part of the Awards in Visual Arts exhibition, is reason enough to be outraged.

#17. We urged the Endowment to comprehensively review its procedures and determine what steps will be taken to prevent such abuses from recurring in the future. We await your response.

Sincerely,

#18. Alfonse D'Amato, Bob Kerrey, Warren R. Rudman, Rudy Boschwitz, Dennis Deconcini, Pete Wilson, Bob Dole, Chuck Grassley, James A. McClure, John Heinz, Wendell Ford, Howell Heflin, Harry Reid, Richard Shelby, John W. Warner, Larry Pressler, Conrad Burns, Tom Harkins, Trend Lott, Jesse Helms, John McCain, Arlen Specter, Steve Symms.

#19. Mr. HELMS. Mr. President, the Senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation and in his description of the blasphemy of the so-called artwork. I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk.

#20. Let us examine exactly what this bird did to get \$15,000 of the taxpayers' money through the so-called National Endowment for the Arts. If they have no more judgment than that, it ought to be abolished and all funds returned to the taxpayer. What this Serrano fellow did, he filled a bottle with his own urine and then stuck a crucifix down there - Jesus Christ on a cross. He set it up on a table and took a picture of it.

#21. For that, the National Endowment for the Arts gave him \$15,000, to honor him as an artist.

#22. I say again, Mr. President, he is not an artist. He is a jerk. And he is taunting the American people, just as others are, in terms of Christianity. And I resent it. And I do not hesitate to say so.

#23. I am not going to call the name that he applied to this work of art.

#24. In naming it, he was taunting the American people. He was seeking to create indignation. That is all right for him to be a jerk but let him be a jerk on his own time and with his own resources. Do not dishonor our Lord. I resent it and I think the vast majority of the American people do. And I also resent the National Endowment for the Arts spending the taxpayers' money to honor this guy.

#25. This program, supported by the National Endowment, is administered by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. They call it SECCA. I am sorry to say it is in my home State.

#26. After Mr. Serrano's selection, this photograph and some of his other works were exhibited in several cities around the country with the approval and the support of the National Endowment.

#27. Horsefeathers. If we have sunk so low in this country as to tolerate and condone this sort of thing, then we become a part of it.

#28. The question is obvious. On what conceivable basis does anybody who would engage in such blasphemy and insensitivity toward the religious community deserve to be honored? The answer to that is: he does not. He deserved to be rebuked and ignored because he is not an artist. Anybody who would do such a despicable thing - and get \$15,000 in tax money for it - well, it tells you something about the state of this Government and the way it spends the money taken from the taxpayer.

#29. So no wonder all of the people calling my office are indignant. The constitution may present the government from prohibiting this Serrano fellow's - laughably, I will describe it - "artistic expression." It certainly does not require the American taxpayers or the Federal Government to fund, promote, honor, approve, or condone it. None of the above.

#30. Mr. President, the National Endowment's procedures for selecting artists and works of art deserving of taxpayer support are badly, badly flawed if this is an example of the kind of programs they fund with taxpayers' money.

#31. I have sent word to the Endowment that I want them to review their funding criteria to ensure abuses such as this never happen again. The preliminary report we got from one person with whom we talked was sort of "down, boy, we know what we are doing."

#32. Well, they do not know what they are doing. They are insulting the very fundamental basis of this country. I say again I resent it.

*"President" here refers to the presiding officer of the United States Senate.