

Historic Southern Indiana

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The Politics of History in Contemporary America

Presented By Lawrence Friedman

Under normal conditions, those who work in the humanities (museums, historic sites, archives, academic history, etc.) live "on the edge." Their salaries and support conditions are barely sufficient to carry on their responsibilities. Beginning in late 1994, with the right wing Republican take-over of Congress, conditions moved beyond "the edge." Important museum exhibits like Smithsonian's on the US bombing of Hiroshima and the Library of Congress exhibits on Freud were severely censored, and the entire museum community has been intimidated since. The budgets for the NEH and the NEA have been reduced drastically and their survival is at risk. In colleges and universities, tenure is under siege and underpaid temporary faculty have come to predominate. A climate of fear and intimidation came into place.

Owing to a new activism on the part of agencies like the National Council on Public History, the state humanities councils, ACLS, the Organization of American Historians, and other bodies, the dangers have eased somewhat since 1997. For now the NEH and NEA will survive, if on skeletal budgets and rather demoralized. In October the Library of Congress will open the Freud exhibit. Yet the situation remains precarious. No new or hard-hitting humanities museum exhibit has been planned. Talk of eliminating NEA persists. In sum, we fell off "the edge" in the middle 1990s and are not yet back. Our obligation is to remain vigilant and take seriously our citizenship obligations as humanists.