Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 17, 2026

Michael McDonald
Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
400 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Chairman McDonald:

I am writing to seek information regarding the concerning use of taxpayer funds for a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)-sponsored junket called "Classical Foundations and Moral Authority[1]" at the Palazzo San Macuto in Rome, Italy

According to The New York Times, the two-day conference featured nearly a dozen Anglophone academics, most of them conservative critics of universities, modern secular liberal democracy, or both.[2] Speakers also included the president of a Budapest think tank closely aligned with former Hungarian President Viktor Orbán. Recordings of the panels were posted on an Italian government website, yet NEH chose not to publicize the conference in advance or while it was happening.

The fact that NEH has not highlighted this conference itself raises even more questions about whether you would prefer this event was kept under the radar. But such a seemingly exorbitant trip requires transparency and accountability to the American taxpayer and justification for its purpose.

Historically, NEH funding has reached thousands of towns and communities, supporting local organizations and providing access to humanities for all Americans. During your tenure, NEH has gutted funding for public programming in favor of large dollar sole-source grants. You have also canceled or significantly rolled back all programming for veterans, Humanities Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence, and educator professional development, among other topics.

Even more disturbingly, you are siphoning off tens of millions of dollars towards President Trump's vanity projects[3], including his proposed Triumphal Arch, the Garden of Heroes, and other so-called beautification efforts in the District of Columbia.

Under your leadership, NEH has laid off more than 100 employees and unlawfully terminated more than 1,400 grants to support scholars, research institutions, and humanities organizations[4]. I find it inexplicable that you would convene a conference—which has resulted in no specific

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py35A-oFNP8

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2026/11/16/arts/national-endowment-humanities-rome-conference.html

[3] https://www.neh.gov/program/national-garden-american-heroes-statues, https://apportionment-public.max.gov/Spend%20Plans/FY2026%20NEH%20Spend%20Plan.pdf

[4] https://www.historians.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/291-Memo-opinion.pdf

policy or program—in a Roman palazzo while simultaneously eroding the reach and capacity of the Endowment to support everyday Americans.

Please provide a response to these questions and the requested information by December 17, 2026.

- Provide all documentation related to this conference, including the purpose and a breakdown of costs, including airfare, lodging, per diems, honoraria, etc.
- Provide the source of the funding within NEH's budget that was used to support these expenses.
- In your opening remarks at the conference, you express "profound gratitude" to the Wilson Center and its President, Natasha Jacome. Specifically, what support did the Wilson Center provide? Was it financial, and if so, provide a complete accounting of the funds.
- Provide a list of attendees of the conference and the justification for each person whose attendance was covered by NEH or Wilson Center funding.
- Provide a breakdown of the NEH's travel budget for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.
- Do you intend for this conference to be a one-time event, or recurring?

Sincerely,

Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress
Ranking Member,
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related
Agencies