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The Kennedy Center's history was marked by cooperation and independence — until now

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED



Bob Mondello

5-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



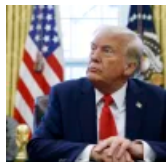
The Kennedy Center in a photo taken along the Potomac River in an undated photo.

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

The arts world was shocked when President Trump announced, three weeks into his second administration, that he was taking over the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Within a week he had purged the Center's bipartisan board of its Biden appointees, fired long-serving board chairman David M. Rubenstein and Center president Deborah Rutter, and installed himself as its new board chairman.

Trump told reporters that he was doing all this because Kennedy Center shows were "terrible" and "a disgrace," though in almost his next breath he conceded he had never seen one.



PERFORMING ARTS

Trump plans to become chair of the Kennedy Center. Here are 3 things to know

All of this is without precedent. The Center's prior history had been marked by cooperation and independence. Those qualities were, in fact, baked into its conception from the moment in 1955 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower first proposed building a new auditorium — singular — to show off American artists.

It would take four presidents — two Republicans and two Democrats — and 16 years to get the Kennedy Center up and running in 1971. (It was named for JFK after his assassination.)

Former President Eisenhower told the crowd at a 1962 fundraiser that as he led Allied troops in World War II, he learned that America had global respect for its might and industry, but that in terms of culture, it was not uncommon "to hear our country spoken of as one of the colonies, and it was in sort of a condescending tone."

The solution, he decided, was to build a national cultural center that would put Washington on even footing with other world capitals – an "artistic mecca that would be open to visitors from every land."

An artistic mecca

President Kennedy also spoke at the 1962 fundraiser for the Center, arguing, just one month after the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, that culture had great practical value in an age of conflict.

"The encouragement of art," he told a glittering crowd that included opera singer Marian Anderson, comedian Danny Kaye, and an 8-year-old cellist named Yo-Yo Ma, "is political in the most profound sense, not as a weapon in the struggle but as an instrument of understanding of the futility of struggle."

"An American Pageant of the Arts" with JFK, Yo-Yo Ma, Newhart, Be

The Trump Kennedy Center



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Noting that even at the height of Cold War tensions, millions of Soviet citizens read Mark Twain and Robert Frost, just as Americans read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he said, "Art knows no national boundaries. Genius can speak in any tongue, and the entire world will hear it and listen."

The logistics of letting it listen, though, were complicated. The Center was established as a public-private hybrid. The federal government is responsible for upkeep of the building — Congress appropriates money for that. Center programming is funded through a combination of ticket sales and philanthropic or private donations.

In short, apart from requiring a broad range of performances, both classical and contemporary, as called for in the act that established the Center, the government would not have a direct say in what played there.

From the outset, that independence was tested. Jacqueline Kennedy had commissioned Leonard Bernstein to create a theater piece for the 1971 opening of the Center, and his "Mass," which premiered at the Center that September to a thunderous ovation, had a strong anti-establishment, anti-war message.



Some performers canceled their Kennedy Center shows. Here's why W. Kamau Bell didn't



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As Trump takes over leadership at Kennedy Center, some protest through dance

With fighting raging in Vietnam, that would have made it an uncomfortable sit for then-President Richard M. Nixon. He was publicly diplomatic, saying he felt the night should really belong to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and that he would attend the National Symphony Orchestra's first performance in the Center's new concert hall instead.

Subsequent presidents have also been hands-off, except in appointing the Center's board of trustees, who have historically been evenly balanced between Republican and Democratic appointees.

The actual booking of the center's attractions is handled by non-federal staff who juggle schedules for more than 2,000 performances that, in recent years, have played to 1.6 million patrons annually.

The Kennedy Center has hosted dance, music and theater from all over. Its fourth season included the first joint American appearance of Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet and Bolshoi Opera.

And just three years later, as if to banish doubts about its commitment to the cultural diplomacy President Kennedy championed, the Center hosted the first U.S. appearance of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba — an event fraught with symbolism since Kennedy had tried to topple the Castro regime with 1961's Bay of Pigs invasion.

The Center has also co-produced shows that have gone on to great success elsewhere, including the musical *Annie* and Aaron Sorkin's play about a military court martial, *A Few Good Men*. Its recent world premiere of a stage version of Apple TV's *Schmigadoon!* may also be headed for Broadway.

In short, the Kennedy Center has remained true for more than half a century to the conception of culture as a democratic ideal that its namesake articulated at that fundraiser back in 1962: "The mere accumulation of wealth and power," said Kennedy, "is available to the dictator and the democrat alike. What freedom alone can bring is the liberation of the human mind and spirit, which finds its greatest flowering in the free society."

Correction

Feb. 12, 2025

The broadcast version of this story incorrectly says the National Park Service is responsible for the upkeep of the Kennedy Center's facilities. The Park Service operated the center until 1994, when the center's Board of Trustees took over that role.