

1985

## Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Speech 04

Edward A. Curran

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STATEMENT OF  
EDWARD A. CURRAN  
FOR CONFIRMATION AS  
CHAIRMAN  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES  
UNITED STATES SENATE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

October 2, 1985

Mr. Chairman, members of the Labor and Human Resources Committee:

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to be here today as President Reagan's nominee for the position of Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I look forward to your consideration for this distinguished appointment.

When the President reaffirmed his support for the humanities and for NEH in December, 1982, he said:

"We must never forget that it is the humanities--their study, their preservation, and their growth--that provide the intellectual underpinnings for our values as a civilization, and deepen our understanding and appreciation of truth, beauty, adventure, art and, yes, peace."

He also said:

"I want to express my personal commitment to the humanities and to reaffirm the Administration's support of the National Endowment for the Humanities."

I heartily agree with these remarks, as must anyone, I think, who looks at the valuable work which NEH has been doing.

According to the founding legislation of the agency, NEH was created to promote humanities scholarship, to strengthen teaching, and to encourage greater public awareness of the importance of the humanities. I will certainly work to see that it continues to fulfill that legislative mandate. Although, as the legislation also notes, advancement for the humanities is "primarily a matter for private and local initiative," it is clear that NEH can and should assert leadership by visibly encouraging support for the best in scholarship, teaching and public awareness of the humanities. I will actively look at each of the NEH programs to see whether we can deliver on that promise more effectively.

Let me say a few words about my background. While growing up on a small farm in rural Vermont, I attended a three-room schoolhouse, and then graduated from a public high school in neighboring Massachusetts. As a teacher, as a counselor, as a college guidance officer, and as an administrator, I have spent most of my adult career in education, and thus I know from personal experience the importance of encouraging understanding of the humanities in children, in young people, and in adults.

I think that my background may be particularly useful in leading NEH at this time in history. Without wanting to slight in any way the variety of roles which NEH performs, I want to

take particular note of one of those at this time. It is clear from A Nation at Risk and the other national reports that our elementary and especially our secondary school systems have not been performing adequately in the humanities. Most of the States, as well as NEH, are responding to the problems. The major effort for reform must continue to come from the localities themselves, with NEH giving support and providing ideas for that effort.

Now we must turn to an additional task, and build on these recent initiatives at the elementary and secondary levels by encouraging greater exposure to, and understanding of, the humanities in higher education. More recent national reports such as NEH's To Reclaim a Legacy have made clear that the humanities are no longer central to the curriculum at many colleges and universities. Ignorance of American literature and history, not to say those of other countries, is now widespread among our young people and adults. Colleges and universities must decide what constitutes their vision of an educated person and be sure that all of their students are properly exposed to the core of studies which can help create such a person. Because of my own background, I am particularly aware of the harmful effect on secondary school instruction when universities and colleges drop humanities requirements. I will work diligently to encourage that the humanities return to their rightful place at the center of institutions of higher learning.

I want to emphasize again, however, that I am very well aware that NEH does and should continue to provide leadership in a variety of ways. American scholarship must continue to be the best in the world, and NEH should maintain its support in that effort by providing research funding for humanities research of the highest quality. The NEH State programs can have a positive influence in making our people aware of the books, ideas, and values of the humanities and are thus a significant part of NEH activities.

Libraries, museums, and historical collections are all means of reaching a wide public with the humanities and, increasingly, centers for research, so that NEH leadership here is important. NEH-supported media productions are valuable because of their ability to reach large audiences, while colleges and universities, along with secondary schools, can benefit from the Endowment's programs supporting faculty development. In addition, NEH supports valuable efforts to help resolve the problem of deteriorating humanities books, papers, and other resources; and it provides highly effective matching funds to encourage private sector giving to humanities institutions of all kinds.

I have respected and admired what the National Endowment for the Humanities stands for, and what it has done to further the cultural ideals of this country. I will give my utmost to ensure that it is a visible leader in supporting and encouraging the best of America's effort in the humanities.

2 October 1985

Testimony for the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources

by Theodore J. Ziolkowski, President, Modern Language Association of America

For over a century the Modern Language Association of America has worked to promote education, advanced study, and research in the modern languages and their literatures and to further the common interests of students and teachers of these subjects.

The MLA has 26,000 members. Most of them are college and university professors; some are independent scholars, businesspeople interested in language and literature; some are elementary and secondary school teachers.

Since 1884 the association has published PMLA, a journal that carries articles of interest to those who study and teach languages and literature. It is one of the leading journals of scholarship and criticism in this country.

Since 1922 we have published annually a comprehensive bibliography of scholarship on languages, literature, and folklore. Since 1956, this bibliography has been international in scope. Since 1976 it has been available online and is the largest humanities database in the world.

In addition, we publish approximately twenty books a year, a majority of which aim at improving college teaching. We are also known as the publisher of the MLA Handbook, which is used by college students throughout the country as a guide in the writing of research papers.

We work closely with organizations representing the teaching of languages and literature in the elementary and secondary schools. For example, in the 1950s, the MLA led the national effort to strengthen and improve the quality

of foreign language instruction at all levels. Similarly, in 1958 and 1961, we participated in two projects that shaped the teaching of English in this country at all levels during the post-Sputnik era: the Basic Issues Conference was funded by the Ford Foundation; Project English was supported by the United States Office of Education. Right now we are working with representatives of English associations on the design of a conference to be held in the summer of 1987. At this conference an equal number of representatives from the elementary, secondary, and college levels will consider the way English should be taught in light of the current needs of American students and in terms of current developments in humanities research.

These jointly organized conferences of teachers and scholars stand, we think, as models of the kind of bond that should exist between scholarship in the humanities and teaching at all levels. After a century of experience we know that without the solid foundation that careful scholarship provides, we build on sand. We were pleased to note that the members of this committee, in recommending reauthorization, applauded the NEH's "continuing support for the bedrock of advanced scholarly research in the humanities on which all other work in the humanities depends." We are convinced that weakening the bond between scholarship and education would drastically weaken the Endowment's effectiveness.

During the summer we testified with other members of the American Council of Learned Societies that the NEH "has been crucial to the excellence of American work on language and literature during the past twenty years" (210). And we were gratified to learn that members of this Committee also judged that the Endowments "are operating very much as the Congress had envisioned



when the authorizing legislation was first passed. In fact, the leveraging force of Endowment grants on the improvement of cultural life in America has far exceeded original expectations." (2)

We think that leadership has played a key role in the success of the National Endowment for the Humanities. From the start people with training and experience in the humanities have provided this leadership, just as people with training and experience in the sciences have led the National Science Foundation. We think that this tradition should be continued. When we talk about people with training and experience in the humanities, we do not mean that the person who chairs the NEH must have a PhD or indeed any other advanced academic degree, but we do have in mind people whose intellectual interests at some point in their careers drew them to scholarly speculation and the desire to share the results of that speculation with others, or people drawn to think and write about some of the issues that concern humanists, about the definitions and purposes of a humanities education, for example. We seek someone who has earned the respect of the humanities community and who can speak to the American people on behalf of the humanities. We seek someone who can provide the broadest kind of intellectual leadership.