

1985

## Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 23

Orrin G. Hatch

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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND  
HUMAN RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 9, 1985

RONALD F. DOCKSAI, STAFF DIRECTOR  
KATHRYN O'L. HIGGINS, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

Mr. O. B. Hardison, Jr., Chairman  
The National Humanities Alliance  
P.O. Box 2293 Hoya Station  
Washington, D.C. 20057

Dear Mr. Hardison:

Thank you for your thoughtful comments and for forwarding the copy of Professor Kristeller's letter. As are you and Professor Kristeller, I am very concerned about the future of the NEH. Since you have been open and have shared your concerns with me, I would like to share some of my impressions and concerns about the NEH and its direction with you.

If you recall, the authorizing language for the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, in the Declaration of Purpose, Section 2(3), makes the statement that "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." As you do, I share this commitment by the Congress to educational excellence in federal arts and humanities programming. Parenthetically, I want to assure you that I support the other statements in the Foundation's Declaration of Purpose including the provision that support for the humanities is "an appropriate matter of concern to the Federal Government."

Furthermore, the authorizing legislation for the NEH, in particular Section 7(c)(1), states that the Chairman is authorized to develop a program for the "promotion of progress" in the humanities as well as promotion in "scholarship." This language authorizes a dual program, and as Chairman of the authorizing Committee, it is my duty to ensure that the dual nature of Congress' intent for NEH programs be followed.

However, from a report by the past Chairman, now Secretary of Education William J. Bennett, humanities programs apparently are not making "progress." Last November, while Chairman of the NEH, Secretary Bennett issued a report, "To Reclaim A Legacy," in which he detailed the steady decline of humanities enrollments in our nation's colleges and universities. Secretary Bennett stated that since 1970 the number of majors in English has declined by 57 percent, in philosophy by 41 percent, in history by 62 percent, and in modern languages by 50 percent. This trend is obviously alarming; the future strength of our democracy depends on whether our younger generation learns to value our heritage. Again, the Declaration of Purpose for the NEH recognizes that a "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." I believe this statement means that all

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citizens, not just those in the academic community, should have a chance to gain the "wisdom" and "vision" that the study of the humanities can impart.

Part of the reason for the decline in enrollments in the humanities seems to be caused by the failure of scholars and research-oriented professors to introduce students and the public to the simple, natural appeal that the humanistic disciplines have held for ages. Some critics claim that many academics have gone to the extreme of teaching the humanities as science, dissecting in tiresome detail our literature, history, and language. As Wordsworth reputedly said, scientists must "murder to dissect." I do not want academics in their quest for needed scholarship, to unwittingly "murder" the humanities for the uninitiated. Apparently, when professors and teachers use a highly analytical approach to teaching, many students lose interest in the humanities. On this subject, I have enclosed a copy of a letter I sent to the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History. For further reference, I refer you to an essay "The Great Conversation," by Robert M. Hutchins, editor of the Great Books of the Western World. In this essay Mr. Hutchins makes this cogent observation:

We have built up around the "classics" such an atmosphere of pedantry, we have left them so long to the scholarly dissectors, that we think of them as incomprehensible to the ordinary man to whom they were originally addressed.

I am concerned about the fact that our young people are not enrolling for humanities courses in our colleges and in universities. And I am concerned that our educational practices for teaching the humanities may not only be ineffective but perhaps are turning our young away from the study of the humanities.

Regardless of the possible causes for the decline of the study of the humanities disciplines, we certainly could agree that some change is essential if the study of these disciplines is to be revived. In my opinion, Mr. Edward Curran is the right person at the right time for this job. The criticisms I have heard against his nomination are not only unfair but unwise if we are to get young Americans studying the humanities again. Mr. Curran's twenty-five years in the secondary education community can be an excellent complement to the expertise in higher education of Secretary Bennett. As you know, Secretary Bennett successfully brought into focus many NEH programs and started the revival of the classics, and I believe Mr. Curran will build on Secretary Bennett's good work. Furthermore, Mr. Curran's experience as an educator gives him the skills needed to work with parents and the public whom the NEH must certainly enlist if it is to successfully improve the status and condition of the humanities.

You are correct in noting that Mr. Curran's experience is different from that of previous chairmen of NEH. It is my understanding that

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previous chairman have had extensive experience in post-secondary education. However, from my understanding of the purposes of the NEH, there is no reason to assume that persons with experience in the post-secondary community should necessarily be the only ones considered for this very important post. The NEH was created for the benefit of the American nation not for any single vocational constituency. Furthermore, no constituency with legitimate ties to the humanities should have their members excluded from consideration for this national post. I believe persons with extensive service and experience in the primary or secondary education systems are as worthy of consideration as persons from the post-secondary system. I firmly believe that the NEH will in the long run be best served by leadership that reflects the pluralistic nature of our educational system, of our private enterprise system, and of our people.

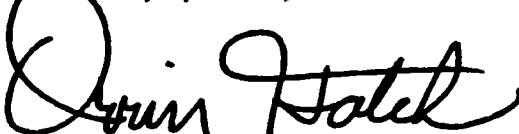
I believe that the NEH today needs a person at its helm who has broad experience both with the humanities and with people. After all, most of our culture's great literature was written for the general public. If we are to reclaim the legacy that the humanistic writers left to the public, I believe that we are obligated to return the federal administration of humanities' support activities to a leader with general rather than specialized expertise and experience. I believe Mr. Curran possesses the leadership skills worthy of this very important agency.

In conclusion, Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has summed up the current crisis our humanities' disciplines face:

Our twentieth century has seen a crippling of the human spirit. Fragmentation abounds. Students are directed to one narrow branch of knowledge, thereby losing a larger vision. Even the arts have become so separated that students of music, or painting, or literature fail to see connections. Humanities students specialize in "periods" - Renaissance, Baroque, Modern - and are hardly conversant with traditions outside those little boxes.

I agree with Mr. Boyer, and I would like to use my influence as Chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Committee to end this fragmentation of our humanistic heritage. I would like to see a Chairman at NEH who does not have a fragmented view of the humanities. I sincerely appreciate your letter and hope I have answered some of your concerns. Please feel free to contact me again if I can help further.

Sincerely yours,



Orrin G. Hatch  
Chairman

OGH:cs1

Enclosure