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The Threat of Politicalization of the Federal Arts Program

By HILTON KRAMER

A specter is haunting the arts and the humanities in the United States today—the specter of a catastrophic shift of government policy in cultural affairs. In museum offices and university conference rooms, in the inner councils of music, dance and theatrical organizations the country over, but especially perhaps in New York, and among the artists and scholars who have been the benefi-

aries of Federal policy in the arts and the humanities for nearly a decade now, ever since the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities began dispensing their funds with uncommon intelligence and discrimination, there is a widespread anxiety that we have come to the end of an era.

The Carter Administration, while remaining something of an enigma in this, as in other fields of public policy, has so far done nothing to dispel this anxiety and much to exacerbate it. The warn-

ings about political interference, issued this week by Michael Straight, acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, have amplified what many others have feared. No one knows exactly what change await us, but few knowledgeable people doubt that change on a significant scale is on the way, and many fear that it will be change of the most baleful sort—that indeed, a new era marked by an aggressive politicization of Federal cultural policy is now imminent.

The reasons for this feeling are easy enough to identify. Foremost among them is the crass political manner in which the Carter White House, after floating various showy lists of prestigious names for the public to study and be impressed by, actually made its appointments to the endowment chairmanships. The naming of Joseph D. Duffley as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and of Livingston Biddle Jr. as

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chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts—the latter appointment still pending—may, of course, prove to be a great benefit to the cultural life of the nation. We all earnestly hope so. But the circumstances of their selection do not—to be blunt about it—inspire much confidence. Both appointments bear the stigma of a cynical political convenience, and both of the new chairmen, therefore, will face an uphill fight in attempting to establish their independence and disinterestedness in the fateful decisions that await them.

It is well-known that these appointments have been made in response to the campaign waged by Senator Claiborne Pell (Democrat, R.I.) against the alleged "elitist" biases of N.E.H. under its former chairman, Ronald S. Berman. As one of the original sponsors of the legislation that brought the endowments into being, Senator Pell enjoys great power and prestige in this particular realm of government policy. The election of a Democrat to the White House was bound to enhance that power, and give to Senator Pell's views a special force. This, apparently, suited the Carter White House perfectly. Senator Pell's campaign against "elitism"—not ways distinguishable from an outright attack on mind—was quite in keeping with the President's "populist" ideology, and so the way was cleared for appointments that would insure the implementation of this dubious new policy.

The immediate consequence of this unholy meeting of minds was reflected in the memorandum drafted at the White House to instruct the search committee that had been organized to find a new chairman for N.E.H. This illustrious document put the committee on notice that "the Ivy League, academic and scholarly establishments" were now to be paid less attention, and that the "new chairmen should probably be familiar to organized labor, ethnic organizations, community and junior college organizations, and principal educa-

tional broadcasters, as well as more familiar non-academic humanities groups like major research libraries."

This memorandum further stated that "the endowment's most important initiatives will almost certainly be in non-traditional and public areas, while its base remains in academia." The code words are unmistakable in their meaning: In "art, numbers—rather than quality, knowledge or distinction—are now to be the touchstone of achievement. When the search committee's recommendations did not appear to endorse this revisionist interpretation of the humanities, the White House ignored its candidates and appointed Mr. Duffley, an energetic supporter of the Carter candidacy whose job in the State Department had just been abolished.

Senator Pell has now scored again in effecting the appointment of Mr. Biddle, his former administrative assistant, to the chairmanship of N.E.A. It looks like a clean sweep for the anti-"elitist" forces in both the Senate and the White House—assuming, as I think we can, that Mr. Biddle's appointment will be confirmed by Senator Pell's complaisant colleagues.

What is the significance of this anti-"elitist" campaign, anyway, and what is it going to mean for the future of Federal policy in cultural affairs? Are we really prepared to sacrifice quality for numbers in a realm of human endeavor—the arts and the humanities—in which quality is not an incidental attribute but the very sum and substance of what is achieved? Are we really prepared to endorse Senator Pell's philistine notions of culture, and President Carter's apparent politicization of it, as official national policy?

The truth is, the whole concept of "elitism," as it is now applied to public discussions of cultural policy, is disgracefully evasive, euphemistic and demagogic. It is used to signify snobism and special privilege, and thus something anti-democratic and more or less threatening to the common good. It suggests conspiracy and unearned advantage, something restrictive and forbidden and vainly villainous. So return

has this word now become in political parlance that it has been emptied of its intellectual content and made to serve the purposes of an ideological myth.

For in the real world of culture and the arts, it stands for nothing more or less than the influence of acknowledged achievement of a high order. According to the latest dictionary to reach my desk—the Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary," published just this year and itself anything but an "elitist" publication, an elite is the "best and choicest part, as of society or a profession," and elitism is the "belief in the leadership of an elite." It is against this "leadership" of the "best" that we are now being invited by the government to seek redress. And in the name of what? Supposedly some grass-roots concept of culture that in actuality is likely to be little more than the old political pork-barrel dressed up to look like a quaint horn of plenty.

What is at once laughable and tragic about this anti-"elitist" policy is that it errs—and errs egregiously—in supporting and enlarging upon the very weaknesses that have plagued the programs of the endowments, and of the many state arts councils too, since they first came into being. There has always been a great deal of money wasted on programs that clearly had no other claim to existence but demographic—which is to say, political necessity. (David Dempsey's article on the New York State Council on the Arts in this issue makes this abundantly clear.) Everyone in the field affected knows this is true, but it is politically convenient never to speak of it openly, especially in the presence of legislators. It is one of the grimmest ironies of the situation that we allow the term "grass roots" to be applied to programs that have their roots in nothing any deeper than the machinations of political bureaucracy.

Despite this and other weaknesses, however, the endowments have by and large done an outstanding job in upholding the "leadership" of the "best" in both the arts and the humanities. In this sense, but in no other, they have indeed been elitist—and at times, perhaps, not even elitist enough. This is why they have earned our respect and gratitude. They have been a great success, and their loss would have terrible consequences for our culture. This is why so many are now so anxious about the new era we are entering.