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Nomination Hearing (1975-1976)

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1975

# Berman, Ronald: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1975-1976): Correspondence 06

Ronald S. Berman

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JUN 5 1975

**NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES**

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20506

**THE CHAIRMAN**

June 5, 1975

The Honorable Claiborne Pell  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

I received a copy of your legislation to extend the authorization for the Endowments after it was introduced last week. I wanted to write to you now, prior to the hearings on the legislation, to emphasize my personal appreciation for your remarks on the floor. I know that you will also understand, however, that I must share with you some fundamental concerns about the amendment which would mandate state humanities councils.

Your remarks on the floor were particularly appropriate and I hope that they will set the tone for the discussion which will follow on this legislation. Your cautionary remarks about anti-intellectualism and negativism were especially well put, as were your comments about our history on the question of the possibility of Federal control of culture in this country. I hope that your colleagues will follow your enlightened leadership on those points.

I also appreciate that your remarks make clear that the amendment which would mandate state humanities councils is aimed essentially at generating discussion.

I should like to be the first to take you up on that!

It appears to me that the amendment would fundamentally change the method of doing business for this Endowment; and it would also fundamentally change the way in which the nation's humanists have worked during the twentieth century.

The amendment proposes the establishing of state humanities councils analogous to the state arts councils. These latter have always assumed similar functions to those of the Federal parent agency (NEA) as defined in Section 5.c.; because the role of the Arts Endowment and of the State Arts Councils is to generate and sustain the practice and availability of the arts, it is natural and appropriate that it should be so. The extension of the authority in Section 5.c.

to state arts agencies did in fact increase public participation in the arts. But humanistic activity is of a different order. For despite our proper association with the Arts, this Endowment is in some respects more closely comparable with the National Science Foundation. That has been implicit in the legislative history, as well as in the Report of the Commission on the Humanities (chaired by Barnaby Keeney) which preceded your introduction of legislation to establish the Foundation ten years ago.

The National Endowment for the Humanities--like its counterparts in science and medicine, the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health--is responsible for increasing the nation's stock of knowledge, for encouraging research in areas of national interest, for encouraging the professional growth of the nation's educators and of leaders in the non-humanistic professions, for shoring up the nation's humanistic resources, for supporting the development of exemplary humanities curricula and projects in institutions of education so that they may set patterns or solve problems in ways suitable for emulation throughout the nation, and for the development and support of national programs (in museums or through the media, for example) which can make humanistic knowledge available to the American public as a whole.

These functions are analogous to those performed by NSF and NIH; they are not analogous to those performed by the National Endowment for the Arts. They require, it has always seemed, policy and grant decisions at the national level, based upon considerations and standards which are understood and acceptable on a nationwide basis. Throughout this century, the tendency of scholarship and teaching in this country--in the humanities as in the sciences--has been to achieve new levels of strength by national exchange of personnel and ideas, by national standards of measuring significance, and by nationally based efforts to contribute to new knowledge in the humanities.

Use of state agencies for decisions about the provision of Federal funds to basic humanities projects would truncate the "peer review" process which we have relied upon since our inception. Like NSF and NIH, NEH has simply no way to reach sound and fair judgments save by seeking a broad spectrum of national opinion among experts in the field. A peer review process which takes the bounds of a state as its perimeter will not have the confidence of the humanistic community, and will not ensure that the Federal taxpayer's dollar is spent in maximally effective ways on the projects which are most in the national interest.

In short, such state agencies could tend to parochialize support for teaching and support in the humanities, and could easily lead to a gradual dismantling of national strength in the humanities by

tending to fragment the national effort into the confines of 50 separate jurisdictions not traditionally responsible for fostering the humanities in the United States. To my knowledge, no national government in the world has fragmented support for the humanities or the sciences in the way that the language of the amendment proposes. I know that these results are not those which you intend, but I believe that they would be the inevitable result of the bill which extends to the states the responsibilities described in Section 7.C. of the authorizing legislation.

The Humanities regrant programs through committees in each state, which have been developed by the Endowment under your oversight, concentrate upon one single purpose: services to the general adult public--the bringing of humanistic knowledge to bear upon the interests of citizens in communities throughout the states. It is difficult, however, to conceive of the state passing legislation limiting the proposed state agencies to this "public program" area; and the language of the amendment, indeed, would not ask them to do so. Consequently, such mandated state humanities agencies would almost certainly drain Congressionally appropriated funds away from the public area into precisely those areas which the Congress has traditionally encouraged us to de-emphasize--basic support for the academic community in the humanities.

As you know, the development of genuine public programs in all the states has been most challenging, even with the resources of the Federal government. I do not think it will be easy for individual state agencies further to develop, or to sustain, this kind of activity. Indeed public programs may well be given low priority by such agencies; thus, ironically, the extension of the 7.C. mandate to officially constituted state agencies may well lead to a reduction of public programming in the humanities. With your continued support, the Endowment has, over the years, increased its input into the public area--so that presently approximately 40 percent of our funds are designated for such activities. I should particularly regret it if the establishing of state humanities agencies were to lead to a reduction in this total, while at the same time placing the responsibility for the disbursement of Federal funds to other humanistic activities at the state level, where it cannot be handled effectively in the national interest.

Moreover, even if it were possible to devise language which would make state agencies responsible only for public programs, such an amendment as that proposed would almost certainly lead to confusion, even competition, between existing state agencies and a new one. Or worse, the Humanities effort could well be absorbed by existing agencies with their own already urgent priorities: such agencies would inevitably either be diverted from these priorities, or give lower priority to the humanities.

Finally, apart from these fundamental considerations which have to do with the nature of the Endowment's responsibilities in supporting both professional and public activities, there remains a general practical issue. The proposed amendment would mark the end of an experiment in government which I believe has been extraordinarily successful. Back in 1970 when the State-based Program was initiated by the Endowment at the urging of Congress, we viewed it as a high-risk effort. There were important administrative questions. Could we, as a Federal agency, expect as much from volunteers as this program, which makes state committees quite independent, would demand? Could we, as a Federal agency, manage not to be bureaucratic in our grant-making? Could we, while being a responsible public agency, really permit them to be as independent as we proposed? There were substantive questions, too. Were humanists prepared to address their disciplines to questions of public policy? Were they prepared to do this for adult, non-scholarly audiences? Was the general public ready for humanities programs?

We no longer have these worries. The experiment of 1970 has led to a carefully developed partnership between the Federal government and many volunteers in the states. There are, after all, more than 800 members of the State Humanities Committees in the 50 states. They come from all walks of life and have done a splendid job of grant-making to bring the humanities to the adult public of their states. Working strictly as volunteers they have now supported more than 3,500 public programs in the humanities. The agency's evaluation is that they have done a first-rate job of relating the humanities to local public policy issues. I know that these committee members will be disheartened by the proposed amendment, which must seem to call into question the activities of the Endowment and of its partners in the states over the past five years. The program can speak for itself in terms of its accomplishments and I am sure that the state committee members will want to be heard when you hold hearings on this matter. I fear that the proposed amendment will cause alarm among the existing State Humanities Committees, as well as in the National Council on the Humanities.

I should be very glad to discuss this with you further at your convenience. Our friendship and your strong support made it obligatory for me to express my concern on this matter to you now, so that we may continue to share our thoughts in the months before formal testimony is offered.

With kindest personal regards.

Sincerely,



Ronald Berman  
Chairman