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# Berman, Ronald: Memoranda (1975-1984): Memorandum 07

Claiborne Pell

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MEMORANDUM

TO: THE PRESIDENT

FROM: CLAIBORNE PELL AND JOHN BRADEMAS

RE: THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

1. What are the humanities?

The humanities are generally agreed to include the study of languages, literature, history and philosophy; the history, criticism and theory of art and music; and the history and comparison of religion and law. *Add in study & application*

*humanities to the human environment.*

The humanities are the people-centered disciplines; they are about people and should be for people. They help us look at the human experience and to ask central questions about it.

2. What difference have the humanities made to America?

a. They provided the basic intellectual training for the Founding Fathers of our country. Deep grounding in history, political philosophy, religion, literature, languages and rhetoric gave them the intelligence and imagination to create the world's first new nation and most original constitutional system.

b. They are the basic vehicle of educating a citizenry that can exercise freedom with responsibility. They involve the subjects which teach values, judgment, wisdom.

c. They are part of the American dream: to enjoy mental and spiritual freedom, the right to criticize and the opportunity to create.

3. If the humanities are so important, why don't we hear more about them?

a. The humanities do not, for the most part, produce a tangible product, like the sciences (a spaceship) or the arts (a symphony). Their "product" is the enrichment and ennobling of human lives and of societies as a whole.

b. The humanities and their practitioners cannot command the attention of the media in the same way the arts can.

c. The enormous number of dedicated Americans who are doing fine scholarship and teaching at all levels--with handicapped children, in urban high schools, in community colleges and in the large universities--have not received the symbolic or substantive support they deserve.

Just as we need a government as good as our people, so we need a National Endowment for the Humanities worthy of our best traditions and our present best practitioners in the humanities.

4. Why are the humanities of genuine importance to President Carter's Administration?

The humanities mean both great opportunities and possible dangers to the President.

Having dramatically placed moral concerns and human values back on the international agenda, the President has a unique opportunity--and a logical need--to reaffirm at home the American commitment to the creative exercise of free minds in a free society.

The President's unique combination of religious conviction and authentic empathy with others gives him a capacity to be both credible and effective in encouraging renewed attention to the moral component of learning which some of our leading educational institutions have ignored.

There is a hunger, especially among the young who have lived through the turmoil of the last fifteen years, for values to live by that are not provided by educators who have lost confidence about transmitting values.

5. How can the National Endowment for the Humanities become more vital and relevant

a. The leadership of the National Endowment for the Humanities must make clear that the humanities are not the sole preserve of professional academics and intellectuals but that they can and should be shared by the wider populace. The NEH should help democratize access to the humanities by making them more fully available to persons not presently able to share in them, through greater use of such measures as:

TV, including courses and degrees for academic credit;  
continuing education, courses for adults, including programs for working men and women not normally exposed to higher education in the humanities;

local community involvement, including incentives to major universities to relate better than they now do to community colleges and secondary schools in the community; and

greater use of local cultural institutions with authentic community roots, e.g. churches, synagogues, fraternal organizations, museums.

b. A strategy should be adopted that is focused on people, as distinguished from institutions. Money should be directed to people for performing a mission, doing a job, rather than sending block grants to institutions seeking subsidies for what they ought to be doing anyhow.

c. Focus should be placed on the good things that the NEH is already doing while at the same time setting criteria for improved program priorities.

Mobilize the people already involved in the humanities for greater commitment:

National Council -- take them off for a long retreat to get their ideas, establish consensus on goals, commitment to realizing them.

Endowment Staff -- require them to spend a week or two outside Washington with persons engaged in local programs or state committees to bring back ideas and break the Washington-centered mentality.

State Committees -- encourage regional meetings to pool experiences and resources; bring some local members to Washington for periods.

d. Reach the imagination of people with no interest in scholarship at all. NEH has already done this directly by

exposing people to the achievements (King Tut exhibit) and aspirations (Adams Chronicle) of other people.

Other possibilities include:

A television series on the great cultures of the world.

National television/town meetings involving great debates and dialogues with leading scholars on major issues of the day.

Sponsor contests and awards at various levels to encourage and reward good writing, serious thinking and inventive applications of historical and philosophical perspectives to practical problems. State and national awards would give humanistic undertakings the status they symbolically lack and would enable NEH to provide national recognition that is now far more commonly available in the sciences and the arts.

Danger. Having educated so many people, we have raised expectations at home. Our kind of system requires a citizenry both mentally competent and morally responsible. But we may be producing and alienated intelligents -- one that insists on its freedom without recognizing its responsibilities -- the forerunner of internal troubles.

There is a special danger in making no effort to reach out to the young generation of students and teachers who cannot find jobs despite the fact that they are brighter, more creative and more morally sensitive than many who ran our educational institutions during the years of postwar expansion.

6. What is essential for successful NEH leadership?

- a. The confidence and support of the President and the Administration.
- b. The confidence and support of key Members of Congress.
- c. Personal qualifications in and commitment to the humanities as a matter of both understanding and conviction.
- d. The intelligence and vision to articulate "a national policy in the humanities" that will be based on commitment to both (1) supporting activities of quality; and (2) broadening access to the humanities to more people.
- e. The political and managerial skills capable of putting together a team and plan to implement program objectives effectively.

7. Should NEH be merged with the National Arts Endowment or some larger umbrella organization

Almost certainly not:

- a. Humanities are different in nature and function from the arts, the sciences and other subjects with which they might be merged.
- b. Consolidation in this sphere raises specters of increased government control (fears of over-centralization) among intellectuals who are particularly sensitive and articulate in the humanities. Small tactical gains in efficiency could lead to large strategic losses in credibility and even political support.
- c. Any possibility of contributing to dealing with such important national problems as citizen education, the missing moral

component of learning, etc., would be lost if these subjects were subordinated to anything but a discrete agency dealing only with the humanities on a relatively nonpolitical basis.

d. A larger organization would inevitably tend to view the awarding of grants in terms of overall considerations of political balance, interest groups, etc. rather than of specific contributions to specific missions. The humanities have an opportunity to make a cumulative impact on the big intangible questions which would be lost if the sense of inner purpose were diluted.

e. The humanities have a special need in our society to encourage pluralism and diversity of institution and approach while at the same time insisting on quality.

f. Many of the efficiencies promised by reorganization into some larger entity could almost certainly be accomplished by simply tightening the structure and management of the Endowment itself.