

1976

Berman, Ronald: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1975-1976): Speech 05

John Brademas

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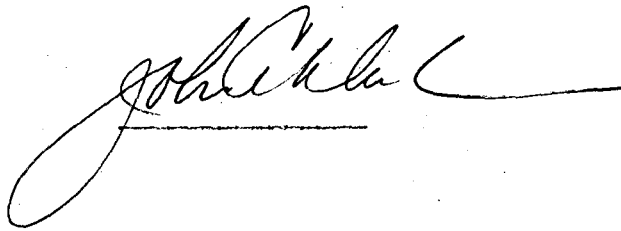
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PROXY FOR SENATOR FELL

I hereby appoint you my proxy on any and all matters relating to the consideration by the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare of the nomination of Ronald Berman to be Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John F. Kennedy", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and extends to the right of the line.

Sept. 29, 1976



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20506

THE CHAIRMAN

August 9, 1976

Honorable John Brademas
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear John:

Perhaps one should not interfere when matters are in conference. But although Senator Pell is obviously deeply committed, his remarks on Friday are so at odds with the facts that I thought you would want to read through the enclosed.

I am sending a similar package to Al Quie.

Sincerely,

Ronald S. Berman
Chairman

Enclosure

We share Senator Pell's conviction that the Humanities programs in the States should be free from any kind of "cultural czarism" or political control, and should be developed by representative groups of ordinary citizens, and should be available to as many of the same kinds of ordinary citizens as possible throughout each state. But Senator Pell apparently does not understand that these goals have been more effectively achieved by the volunteer State-Based Committees in the Humanities than by the State Arts Agencies. The Senator's comments on this subject on Friday included genuine errors of fact, as well as observations which, being incomplete or only partially true, gave a less than accurate impression of:

1. The control (political or cultural) of the State Committees;
2. The composition of the State Committees; and
3. The Mission of the State Committees.

Each of the attached three papers addresses one of these subjects. And since Senator Pell also included reference to the question of parity of funding between the two Endowments, a fourth page is included on this subject.

I. Cultural Czarism and Political Control

1. The Chairman of the Endowment appoints the Chairmen of State Humanities Committees. False! Neither the Chairman, nor the National Council, nor the Endowment's staff has ever appointed the Chairman of a State Committee.

2. Members of State Committees are appointed by Washington. False! Membership of State Committees has never been dictated from the Endowment. (Five years ago the Endowment asked two or three people in each state to see if they could start such a program: thereafter the programs have been completely autonomous).

3. State-Based Humanities Committees are more subject to political influence than the State Arts Councils. False! There has been no criticism, at any level, of the composition, procedures or grants of existing State Committees on these grounds. Among State Arts Agencies, however, there have been enough instances of direct political interference to give serious pause:

--Gov. Brown has abolished the California Arts Council and replaced it with an organization more reflective of his approach to state affairs and needs

--Gov. Thompson of New Hampshire has recently over-ruled a poetry grant of the New Hampshire Arts Council on grounds that it struck him as silly

--ex-Gov. Carter of Georgia abolished the Georgia Arts Council, and replaced it with an official in the Governor's office (the Council subsequently was re-established by the present Governor)

--Gov. Carey has recently fired the head of the New York Arts Council, and this has resulted in complete recasting of the Council's programs

--after a change in parties in the Governorship in Idaho, the entire membership of the Arts Council was replaced

--the Arizona Arts Council is under attack by the legislature in Arizona on grounds that it is a waste of money

In each of these instances, momentum has been lost, political confidence has been lost, and ordinary people have suffered cruel disappointments as the programs of the State Agencies shifted for political reason.

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State operated humanities agencies would be even more vulnerable than the Arts. The Humanities are more sensitive politically at any level because they deal with the most basic questions of human value, and because they deal with the moral dimensions of human life--to which all political actions appeal.

At the Federal level, the Congress has created extraordinary protections against the politicization of grants made in the humanities. Congress established guidelines as to what kinds of persons could serve on the National Council on the Humanities. It forbade the Chairman of the agency from making grants without a prior recommendation of the 26 private citizens who serve on the National Council. It has consistently encouraged the Endowment to have a process of review which involves expert and politically disinterested evaluators and panelists from a wide range of experiences and with wide geographical spread in order to ensure that the National Council and the Endowment were protected from the temptation to make grants or policy by whim of a political appointee. The oversight committees and the appropriations committees have earnestly and consistently examined the process to make sure that the intent as well as the letter of the law was fulfilled. This has served the country well, it has served the humanities well, and it has saved the Endowment on a number of occasions from improper political pressure from the executive and legislative branch.

37 { The U.S. Constitution forbids the establishment of a State church for reasons which seemed obvious to the founding fathers who sensed the threat to both religious and secular freedom which a State church implied. The humanities are, by their very nature, more like institutions of religion than they are like arts institutions, and their enshrinement as a State agency could corrupt their purposes and value beyond retrieval.

II. Composition of State Committees

1. Existing members of the State Committees are "fancy people;" ordinary citizens "could never hope to be on these Committees as they presently operate." The reverse is true! Here are some random examples of members of State Humanities Committees:

Harriet Montgomery (South Dakota) widowed wife of a hardware store owner in Aberdeen

Raymond Collins (Alaska) missionary in the bush country from McGrath, Alaska

Carolyn Demientieff (Alaska) Indian, ex-Welfare Mother from Anchorage

Phyllis Smith (Idaho) owner of a small bookstore in Idaho Falls

Cletus Grosdidier (Kansas) dairy farmer in Eudora

John Scharff (Oregon) retired park ranger in Burns

William Osborne (Vermont) granite quarry hoist operator in Barre

Bennie Mae Collins (Indiana) Black, Welfare Mother in Gary

Alvina Alberts (North Dakota) Indian from the Fort Totten Indian Reservation

Elliot Bayley (Colorado) operator of a wind-powered radio station in the Rocky Mountain back country

John Ward (Arkansas) editor of the Log Cabin Democrat, Conway

Jade Snow Wong (California) travel agent in San Francisco

2. State Arts Agencies have a broader and more representative membership. The reverse is true! Comparison of membership of State Humanities Committees with State Arts Agencies indicates that the number of members from labor, from minorities, and from the ordinary occupations of life is far higher on State Humanities Committees than on State Arts Agencies. Out of 850 private citizens on the State Committees, over 100 are members of minorities, over 250 are women, and over 250 cannot be identified by occupation or by status as other than ordinary citizens.

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3. The composition of State Committees will be less politicized if they are like State Arts Agencies. The reverse is true! The only way that ordinary people can serve on such Committees is if their appointment does not have to make sense to Governors' appointments staff. The number of members with identifiable political connections, or with great wealth, is lower on State Humanities Committees than on State Arts Agencies.

4. Objections to the Senate legislation spring from members of State Committees afraid of losing their membership should they become State Agencies. False--in two respects! Most present members have indicated that they will not serve in a politically tainted context, and will refuse membership under Senate legislation. Major opposition to the Senate legislation, however, comes from segments of the public with no direct connection to the State Committees, and from virtually the whole leadership of the Humanities in the United States.

Funding Needs in the Arts and the Humanities

Senator Pell has said that needs in the Arts are vastly greater than in the Humanities. The reverse is true!

1. Humanities institutions vastly outnumber those in the arts: the 3,500 local historical societies, the 150 research libraries and centers for advanced study, the many hundreds of museums which are not arts institutions, the colleges and universities, the countless national and community organizations which concern themselves with moral issues, the public broadcasting stations whose humanities programming is second only to public affairs programming, the 200,000 teachers receiving inschool programs--all of these claim part of humanities funding.

2. These institutions are essential for the deliberative study of human issues and value choices, perhaps more needed by the nation now than ever. While the arts are important and enjoyable, the humanities play an essential educational role in society, providing individual citizens and elected leaders with a kind of knowledge, a sensitivity to ethical value questions, and vision of justice, which is the essential foundation for informed decision-making in a democratic society.

3. The institution supporting this critical process have at present unusual financial problems because of their generally fixed endowments and the inflation of personnel and plant costs.

4. Statistically the Arts Endowment is at present able to support three times as many applications as the Humanities Endowment can, and is able to satisfy 28 percent of the requests it receives, while the Humanities may satisfy only 19 percent.

5. Private funding is always much more available for highly visible and popular arts activities.

In the last resort, however, these distinctions are irrelevant, because the Federal government does not aim to sustain, but rather to encourage and express its concern for the Arts and Humanities. It is because funds proposed fall so far short of ultimate needs in both the Arts and the Humanities that principle of parity in funding has always been maintained in authorizing legislation. It is a principle, which expresses public concern but does not begin to match the precise needs of either arts or humanities institutions throughout the country. A case might be made for unequal Appropriations in a given year--according to the relative efficiency of one Endowment or the other, or because of temporary, demonstrable need in one area. But when the funds available are so inadequate to the ultimate needs in either area, and when those ultimate needs are demonstrably greater in the Humanities than the Arts, it is not proper to authorize more money to the Arts than to the Humanities.

III. The Mission of State Committees

State Committees only make grants connected with public policy issues. True! Their mission is to make grants at the grass roots level to local institutions and organizations, bringing the humanities to bear on issues of broad public concern in the community and the state--exploring the historical and philosophical background of present problems (exactly as discussed by Mr. Quie and Mr. Javits in reference to the "Rockefeller proposal").

There are three reasons for this.

1. In reauthorization hearings in 1970, the Senate instructed NEH to develop experimental programs of this kind for the general public in each state, and inserted language calling for "particular attention to the relevance of the humanities to the conditions of national life" to authorize such activities. Like the National Council and the nation's humanists, they perceived that the humanities are at the core of any effort to maintain and strengthen the ability of all Americans to bring intelligence and moral values to bear upon the great choices for this country in our time. This perception was present at the creation of the Endowment in the first instance, and was controlling in establishing autonomous, politically uncontrolled State Humanities Committees in every State.

2. The Council, the Humanities constituency, and (at that time) the oversight committees believed that this mission must be achieved without fragmentation of the nation's strength in the humanities. For a century, every major advance in the humanities, like the sciences, has resulted from collaborative effort of scholars and teachers in a national, even an international, context; and it was in order to advance this capacity for national sharing of effort and resources that the Endowment was established. It has always seemed to the humanities community (and, until now, to all of the oversight committees) that funds intended seriously to advance knowledge and teaching and public appreciation are best used in a context (and a competition) which does not stop at the border of states. But the objective of relating the humanities and their moral dimensions directly to issues ordinary Americans face, as individuals and citizens, in their daily lives can best be accomplished by autonomous State Committees.

3. A "Great Books" or "Plato" or "Shakespeare" program in the States would not have reached beyond a small few already interested. A program addressing history, philosophy, ethics, etc., to deeply held concerns of the public could interest more people in the importance of the humanities, and raise the quality of public life. The State programs would not have reached the 20 million people whom they now involve had they started as general programs.

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(If it should now be appropriate to consider ways of broadening the mandate of State Committees, it would surely still not be appropriate to determine the investment of funds for major research, fellowship, education, exhibition, or television production on a State-by-State basis).