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George F. Will

High Culture And Basic Politics

Considering the variety, universality and astringency of today's criticism of the federal government, you might think politicians would cherish their successes. Yet one success, the National Endowment for the Humanities, is receiving unwarranted criticism from an unlikely person, Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), who deserves substantial credit for the birth of NEH a decade ago.

You may not have heard of NEH, which is to its credit. Under the direction of Dr. Ronald Berman, an outstanding Shakespeare scholar, NEH has avoided institutional flamboyance, secure in the knowledge that conspicuousness should not be a characteristic of the world's largest source of support for humanistic studies. NEH is that, although it will dispose of only \$90 million this year, a sum spent every 80 minutes by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

President Ford has gratified almost every interested person by nominating Dr. Berman for a second four-year term. But Pell is opposed because Dr. Berman opposes Pell's plan for making NEH something less than it now is.

NEH offends some political sensitivities because it bestows benefits in a non-political way on the basis of merit. Currently 20 per cent of NEH resources are awarded on the basis of proposals submitted in nationwide competition by voluntary state humanities organizations, which operate with minimal overhead costs. Pell wants the money to go in block grants as a matter of right, not merit, to paid state agencies, appointed by governors.

Pell complains that NEH's sister organization, the National Endowment for the Arts, "has generated more momentum," a phrase more appropriately used by Howard Cosell when describing the Pittsburgh Steelers. When Pell praises NEA for its work at "the grass roots level," he comes close to philistinism. The arts endowment and NEH are not quite comparable.

Events in the performing arts sponsored by the arts endowment generate more publicity than, say, Prof. Dumas Malone generates as he finishes, with NEH support, the sixth and final volume of his masterly biography of Thomas Jefferson. Moreover, the arts endowment has adopted a broad (and politically convenient) definition of "art." This enables it to spread its somewhat haphazard benefactions broadly. Not to put too fine a point on it, few congressional districts are left out.

Pell has wistfully but not wisely hoped that NEH would wind up supporting "lumberjacks" and "grocers" and "shoemakers." The arts endowment can do that: Anyone can dabble at watercolors, or weld car bumpers into something the arts endowment considers art. But NEH can hardly give a lumberjack \$500 to dabble at, say, historical research.

This is not to say that scores of millions of Americans have not benefited directly from NEH projects. It has funded numerous museum and gallery exhibits, and "Classic Theater," "War and Peace" and "The Adams Chronicles" on public television. NEH provides about an hour a week of public television—often the best hour.

NEH operates on the premise (resoundingly confirmed by such projects) that there is a substantial audience for superior entertainment. Still, there is no blinking the fact that NEH is elitist. It is biased in favor of excellence.

So, much of its support goes to an elite of promise and achievement. It uses the guidance of 5,000 experts who are the (dare one use the words?) "best and the brightest" of the nation's humanistic scholars. But there is nothing objectionable about this. NEH's mission is to help sustain high culture in a commercial society.

That is an old problem. In a poem addressed to "A wealthy man who promises a subscription to Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved that people wanted pictures," Yeats invoked Guidobaldo, the Duke of Urbino, a Renaissance patron of the arts:

*And Guidobaldo, when he made
That mirror-school of courtesies
Where wit and beauty learned their
trade
Upon Urbino's windy hill,
Had sent no runners to and fro
That he might learn the shepherds'
will.*

Yeats's point is that there never is a popular clamor for high culture. The general public demands from government hospitals and highways and other goods and services that sustain the everyday life of the average person.

But a government need not apologize for using agencies like NEH and persons like Dr. Berman to attend to matters of the non-scientific mind. Although less narrowly utilitarian than most government concerns, they are at least as important.