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Edward A. Curran

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STATEMENT OF  
EDWARD A. CURRAN  
FOR CONFIRMATION AS  
CHAIRMAN  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES  
  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES  
UNITED STATES SENATE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

October 2, 1985

Mr. Chairman, members of the Labor and Human Resources Committee:

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to be here today as President Reagan's nominee for the position of Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I look forward to your consideration for this distinguished appointment.

When the President reaffirmed his support for the humanities and for NEH in December, 1982, he said:

"We must never forget that it is the humanities--their study, their preservation, and their growth--that provide the intellectual underpinnings for our values as a civilization, and deepen our understanding and appreciation of truth, beauty, adventure, art and, yes, peace."

He also said:

"I want to express my personal commitment to the humanities and to reaffirm the Administration's support of the National Endowment for the Humanities."

I heartily agree with these remarks, as must anyone, I think, who looks at the valuable work which NEH has been doing.

According to the founding legislation of the agency, NEH was created to promote humanities scholarship, to strengthen teaching, and to encourage greater public awareness of the importance of the humanities. I will certainly work to see that it continues to fulfill that legislative mandate. Although, as the legislation also notes, advancement for the humanities is "primarily a matter for private and local initiative," it is clear that NEH can and should assert leadership by visibly encouraging support for the best in scholarship, teaching and public awareness of the humanities. I will actively look at each of the NEH programs to see whether we can deliver on that promise more effectively.

Let me say a few words about my background. While growing up on a small farm in rural Vermont, I attended a three-room schoolhouse, and then graduated from a public high school in neighboring Massachusetts. As a teacher, as a counselor, as a college guidance officer, and as an administrator, I have spent most of my adult career in education, and thus I know from personal experience the importance of encouraging understanding of the humanities in children, in young people, and in adults.

I think that my background may be particularly useful in leading NEH at this time in history. Without wanting to slight in any way the variety of roles which NEH performs, I want to

take particular note of one of those at this time. It is clear from A Nation at Risk and the other national reports that our elementary and especially our secondary school systems have not been performing adequately in the humanities. Most of the States, as well as NEH, are responding to the problems. The major effort for reform must continue to come from the localities themselves, with NEH giving support and providing ideas for that effort.

Now we must turn to an additional task, and build on these recent initiatives at the elementary and secondary levels by encouraging greater exposure to, and understanding of, the humanities in higher education. More recent national reports such as NEH's To Reclaim a Legacy have made clear that the humanities are no longer central to the curriculum at many colleges and universities. Ignorance of American literature and history, not to say those of other countries, is now widespread among our young people and adults. Colleges and universities must decide what constitutes their vision of an educated person and be sure that all of their students are properly exposed to the core of studies which can help create such a person. Because of my own background, I am particularly aware of the harmful effect on secondary school instruction when universities and colleges drop humanities requirements. I will work diligently to encourage that the humanities return to their rightful place at the center of institutions of higher learning.

I want to emphasize again, however, that I am very well aware that NEH does and should continue to provide leadership in a variety of ways. American scholarship must continue to be the best in the world, and NEH should maintain its support in that effort by providing research funding for humanities research of the highest quality. The NEH State programs can have a positive influence in making our people aware of the books, ideas, and values of the humanities and are thus a significant part of NEH activities.

Libraries, museums, and historical collections are all means of reaching a wide public with the humanities and, increasingly, centers for research, so that NEH leadership here is important. NEH-supported media productions are valuable because of their ability to reach large audiences, while colleges and universities, along with secondary schools, can benefit from the Endowment's programs supporting faculty development. In addition, NEH supports valuable efforts to help resolve the problem of deteriorating humanities books, papers, and other resources; and it provides highly effective matching funds to encourage private sector giving to humanities institutions of all kinds.

I have respected and admired what the National Endowment for the Humanities stands for, and what it has done to further the cultural ideals of this country. I will give my utmost to ensure that it is a visible leader in supporting and encouraging the best of America's effort in the humanities.

Senator Pell

School Curriculum

Question 1: Do you support former NEH Chairman William Bennett's suggestion that the literary curriculum of the schools should consist primarily of the classics of Western literature?

If your answer is yes, given the diversity of students in elementary and secondary schools today, isn't it appropriate to take a broader view of literature that responds to this diversity?

Answer: I agree with Mr. Bennett that there are basic texts which form the foundation of our cultural heritage. Mr. Bennett and many other educators correctly observe that our nation grew out of and reflects the Western tradition. I think it is absolutely essential that our youth be given the opportunity to study and learn the principles of this great tradition.

It is my understanding that Mr. Bennett never said that only the classics should be taught. He and I are in agreement that there is room for diversity in the curriculum. Such diversity is, in fact, consistent with the true spirit of the humanities. But I am firmly convinced that education in the classics of Western civilization should take precedence over the teaching of other literature in our nation's elementary and secondary schools.

Senator Pell

Summer Institutes and Seminars

Question 2: -If you are confirmed as Chairman of NEH, do you intend to continue the summer institutes and seminars for college faculty and elementary and secondary school teachers?

Answer: NEH-sponsored institutes and seminars have made important contributions to recent improvements in teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools and in institutions of higher education. The Endowment's efforts in this area have been exemplary, and I certainly plan to continue them.



Senator Pell

Humanities and Higher Education

Question 3: What are the humanities needs of higher education? How can the Endowment best respond to those needs?

Answer: In his incisive, and I think compelling, study To Reclaim A Legacy, William Bennett describes a pervasive decline in the quality of higher education in this country. He makes several recommendations, which I fully endorse. They are:

- The nation's colleges and universities must reshape their undergraduate curricula based on a clear vision of what constitutes an educated person, regardless of major, and on the study of history, philosophy, languages, and literature.
- College and university presidents must take responsibility for the educational needs of all students in their institutions by making plain what the institution stands for and what knowledge it regards as essential to a good education.
- Colleges and universities must reward excellent teaching in hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions.
- Faculties must put aside narrow departmentalism and instead work with administrators to shape a challenging curriculum with a core of common studies.
- Study of the humanities and Western civilization must take its place at the heart of the college curriculum.

Mr. Bennett's report was primarily directed toward the faculty and administrators of the nation's institutions of higher education. It is they, and not the federal government who must implement the recommendations of the report and address other problems in higher education.

The Endowment is working on the problems, however. For example, I understand that the Central Disciplines program in the agency's Education division supports the efforts of colleges and universities to:

- restore the humanities to a central place in undergraduate education;
- reward excellent teaching in making promotion and tenure decisions;

- require that students study original texts, and
- insist upon high standards of achievement.

The Exemplary Projects and Summer Seminars programs, through faculty institutes and seminars:

- assist efforts to strengthen the knowledge and thus the teaching potential of faculty in the humanities, and
- reinforce the notion that excellent scholarship and effective teaching are complementary goals.

I understand that the Endowment is in the process of contacting those institutions and individuals who requested copies of To Reclaim A Legacy to determine the impact of the report on curricula, graduation requirements, etc.

As I mentioned in the hearing, if confirmed, I plan to meet with representatives of the higher education community. Following these discussions and after I have had a chance to become more familiar with the Endowment's current activities, I am sure that I will identify other areas of concern and have additional recommendations and solutions.

Senator Pell

Decline in Humanities Enrollments

Question 4: What in your view were the causes of the decline in enrollments in the humanities in the 1970's? What are the strengths and weaknesses of American higher education?

Answer: Once again, I would cite To Reclaim A Legacy. The report finds many reasons for the decline in humanities enrollments. These include: the surrender of introductory and lower division courses to graduate assistants on part-time faculty; the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the curriculum; the tendentiousness and ideological character of some teaching; the steady erosion of the place of the humanities in undergraduate education; and the relinquishing by faculty and administrators of the intellectual authority to say what an educated person should know.

The weaknesses of American education are all too apparent in William Bennett's report. Among higher education's strengths are resilience and resourcefulness. I am encouraged by the growing spirit of reform that is increasingly evident in colleges and universities throughout the country.

Senator Pell

Secular Humanism

Question 5: Please define "secular humanism".

Answer: "Secular humanism" sometimes refers to a contemporary philosophy which, while disregarding or rejecting religious belief, asserts the centrality of man and often emphasizes the power of reason and science.

"Secular humanism" is sometimes confused with "Renaissance humanism," which refers to the revival of classical letters and the flowering of nonecclesiastical (i.e., secular) learning, primarily in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Occasionally, "secular humanism" is confused with the humanities. In the act that established the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the term humanities includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following disciplines: history; philosophy, languages; linguistics; literature; archaeology; jurisprudence; the history, theory, and criticism of the arts; ethics; comparative religion; and those aspects of the social sciences that employ historical or philosophical approaches.

Senator Pell

"Politicization"

Question 6: If you are confirmed, what steps will you take at NEH to assure that the process of awarding grants, administering programs and making "Chairman's Grants" are protected from politicization?

Answer: Grants are awarded at NEH through a universally praised peer review process. I fully endorse this system. As Chairman, I will be guided in funding decisions by the accumulated wisdom of panelists, specialist reviewers, and members of the National Council on the Humanities. These individuals have been known throughout the history of the Endowment for their dedication and professionalism. I will ensure that merit, and not political considerations, will continue to be the basis for all grants awarded by the Endowment. "Politicization" also will have no place in the administering of programs.

I understand that under Mr. Bennett the term "Chairman's Grants" was replaced by the term "Emergency Grants." The new title more accurately reflects the true nature of this special grant mechanism. As I said in the hearing on October 2, such grants have been made only in response to extraordinary and emergency needs that arise between meetings of the National Council on the Humanities. I will continue this practice and exercise my authority only in emergency situations.

Senator Pell

Limiting Indirect Costs

Question 7: The granting of indirect costs as part of a NEH grant award has to my mind often exceeded reasonable limits. What is your view to the recent Committee recommendation that the indirect cost rate be limited to 35% in the future?

Answer: I understand that NEH has discussed this complicated matter with your staff and is prepared to do a study on it. Without knowing much about this area, I would agree with you in principle that indirect costs charged by institutions to NEH grants should be reasonable. At this point, I do not think I have enough information to decide what a reasonable level might be. I would want to see the results of the NEH staff study on this issue before coming to a final decision on the question.

Senator Pell

Abolishing NEH

Question 8: If the President asked you to advocate abolishment of NEH, what would be your response?

Answer: I have no reason to think that such an occasion would ever arise. As I noted in my testimony, in December of 1982, the President said, "I want to express my personal commitment to the humanities and to reaffirm the Administration's support of the National Endowment for the Humanities."

However, since you raise this hypothetical situation, I think I would respond as follows. I would seek to discuss this matter with the President and hope to persuade him and his advisors that NEH should be retained.