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American Dreams

Alexander Haig still has trouble with political parlance. The man once known for nuancing this or caveatling that now hints he might run for the Republican nomination for President in 1988. But he doesn't want to discuss it. "I don't want to be pushed prematurely into a lame-duck status."

He's got his jargon backward. We have always understood lame duck to refer to officials who have been elected but are now finishing their last term and whose influence is thus eroding steadily. Mr. Haig is in the reverse position. Having held no office since resigning as Secretary of State in 1982, he must try steadily to build influence en route to winning his first election.

That situation makes Mr. Haig's tiptoe posture seem as odd as his locution. Considering the influence already enjoyed by Vice President Bush, Howard Baker, Bob Dole, Jack Kemp and other likely Republican candidates, it would make sense to start now to run hard and try to build momentum, and a following.

Mr. Haig has distinguished credentials. Beyond his experience at State, he served in the highest military commands, and he knew the White House intimately as Richard Nixon's chief of staff.

Then why so coy? Running for President is Basic American Dream material, not so different, say, from Donald Trump's wanting to build the tallest building in the world. But at the moment, Mr. Haig demonstrates there is one difference between those two ambitions. Mr. Trump owns the property he wants to build on.

Humanism, Humanities

It's hardly surprising that a Senate committee voted 8 to 7 to reject the appointment of Edward Curran as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The surprise is that he was even nominated.

The least of Mr. Curran's disabilities is his lack of a Ph.D. and his weightlessness as a scholar. More serious was his bad faith as director of the National Institute of Education. To get the post, he promised the Senate he would do his best to further the agency's research programs for higher education. In office, he impugned the institute as leftist and called for its abolition.

To prevent a second double-cross, Vermont's Republican Senator, Robert Stafford, joined with Democrats to block Mr. Curran's confirmation for the National Endowment. job. Why did the White House court rejection by failing to propose a candidate of more stature? A likely answer is pique over Congress's refusal to cut spending for cultural programs that supposedly cater to the elitists and "humanists," a suspect term to fundamentalists.

This scorn is unwarranted. Few Federal agencies have yielded more for less than the Humanities Endowment. With an annual budget of $140 million, it has stimulated giving by others for major publishing ventures like the Library of America or major exhibitions like "The Age of Caravaggio." And if encouraging teaching of foreign languages is "humanism," we need more of it.

Surely the Reagan Administration can find someone for this job who believes in it.