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For the Honourable Claiborne Pell
United States Senator from Rhode Island

(through the safe hand of Mr. John Slocum of Newport)

Dear Senator Pell,

Please forgive this intrusion into your arduous schedule but your advice now could help us surmount a serious crisis and go on to reshape the attitude of U.S. schools towards the past and to non-western cultures.

As John can explain, the Semitic Museum has been trying valiantly to lift itself "by our bootstraps" from 20 years literally underground to share both our long-hidden treasures and the actual work of unlocking the mysteries of Near Eastern Civilizations with the U.S. public.

Through a 1977/78 NEH pilot educational grant we have launched a teacher-training program called WHENCE? (Worldwide Historical Enquiries: News of Current Explorations) to develop accurate curricula for ancient history -- by linking U.S. schools with the real questions explored and raised by expeditions-in-progress.

Now that WHENCE?'s life or death will be decided at the February NEH Council, we seem to find ourselves (despite warmly favourable reviews of our goals, strategy, expertise, and achievements) victims of some puzzlingly paradoxical prejudices:

-- The "curse" of Harvard's name (visions of vast endowments and elitism seem to obscure our Museum's actually stark poverty which requires us to scrape together every penny and shamelessly exploit volunteered talent -- such as John's numismatic expertise -- in efforts to bring out of ivied towers our long-lost artifacts and the fascinating tales they tell to children (and adults) eager for light on the mysterious East)

-- "Non-replica-bility:" the suspicion that our pilot year's considerable educational success locally could not be repeated in other sections of the country (in fact, our strategy leads children to explore their own family roots and immediate cultural heritage -- on the model of the methodology used by archaeologists/anthropologists at remote sites -- in ways not only applicable in every community but with the assistance of an as yet totally untapped educational resource: the local chapters of A.I.A., the 160 U.S. member institutions of the A.S.O.R., and other experienced field archaeologists throughout every state)
Confusing "embarrassment of riches" which distracts from the utter simplicity of our proposal for 3 annual teachers-institutes (in reading about the cultural richness of our content matter and the exciting overseas projects which WHENCE? can channel into U.S. schools, reviewers often have misinterpreted our basically humble purpose -- to develop and test effective case-study-units thoroughly in local classrooms before nationwide application. Instead of realizing that discoveries will continue not to filter down into school texts but remain for decades the property of an intellectual elite without WHENCE?'s link between expeditions and classrooms, reviewers constantly become distracted by our summaries of quests underway.)

A prejudgement that an offer of reduced support would be "insulting" (while such an opinion is a tribute to the tightness of the budget which we have submitted, in fact, refusal fo NEH funds now would deal a fatal blow to momentum we have strained to sustain through 10 months without funding. Even fractional support would permit us to scrounge elsewhere for funds. Without NEH support, our great start would dissolve and with it a unique opportunity to make practical use of many NEH-funded research projects by channeling them into classrooms for U.S. children to share)

In the accompanying note and memo to the NEH program director (himself deeply appreciative of our results and promise) I have tried to summarize recent developments and address prejudices as directly as I dare. But how does one dispel subliminal misconceptions?

I suspect if one can't come and see for oneself one must depend on a frank report from a trustworthy source. John can tell you who and how we are as well as what we're doing and how terribly hard we're trying.

Besides officially serving as Chairman of the University's Visiting Committee, he actually labors himself in our sweltering cellar and guides our cataloguing in areas of his own scholarly research, so John knows our plight, our industry, and our hearts.

Please advise us through John at this critical moment.

Sincerely yours,

C.E.S. Gavin
Curator

enclosures