Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 01

Edward A. Curran

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The President  
The White House  
Washington, D. C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Ever since you appointed me to head this agency, I have been determined to work for the goals affirmed by your election. After seven months here, I have concluded that the best way to advance those goals is to abolish the agency, as was proposed by your Office of Management and Budget and Domestic Council staffs last December. I make this proposal for the following reasons:

1. Research on education would continue without Federal funding through the thousands of university departments, private foundations, scholarly journals, and other institutions which flourished before NIE was born. In fact, I would submit, the most daring and interesting studies of American education have been pioneered outside the government-funded research establishment.

2. NIE is based on the premise that education is a science, whose progress depends on systematic "research and development." As a professional educator, I know that this premise is false.

Education does not begin to have the conceptual rigor and compelling explanatory power of a genuine science. Its most fundamental questions are inescapably value-laden, and I would assert that federal agencies should not be in the business of formulating values.

America's schools are in sad shape not because we don't know how to make them effective, but because we lack the will to apply what we already know. Effective schools are actually harder to sustain today than they were a generation ago. One reason is that federal agencies like NIE have mobilized an army of outside "experts" with a license to tinker but with no responsibility for results.

3. This agency wastes money. As Donald Lambro observed in his book Fat City, NIE "is still throwing its money into vague, often esoteric research and experimental education projects which have nothing whatsoever to do with the everyday reality of educating our children." Taxpayers simply do not need a $99,000 survey on professors' political attitudes, or a $37,000...
study of New York City School Board elections—especially not in today's climate of budgetary restraint.

Obviously, I intend to use my authority as Director to eliminate wasteful projects wherever I can. At present, however, more than half of NIE's budget lies outside my direct control and in the hands of seventeen "labs and centers" located in various sections of the country. These institutions are curious hybrids of the public and private sectors which in many ways combine the worst of both worlds: they are shielded not only from free-market competition, but also from accountability to elected officials. Their lobbying has succeeded to the point where Congress treats them like so many dams and bridges—public-works projects which receive favored treatment in Washington as long as they provide employment back home. Just last month the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to continue such favored treatment.

4. All government agencies are subject to political pressures, but the pressures on NIE seem to work overwhelmingly in only one direction: toward the left.

Under President Carter, NIE produced and marketed a television series explicitly designed to change children's values about traditional sex roles. NIE's studies on desegregation have historically been heavily tilted toward the pro-busing and pro-reverse discrimination camp, both in the choice of scholars to subsidize and in the conclusions those scholars have reached. Even some nine months after your Inauguration, the agency hosted a seminar on tuition tax credits in which the overwhelming majority of the invited lecturers were anti-tax credit.

I have taken only some of the steps needed to restore balance, but I have already been publicly accused of trying to turn the agency into a conservative propaganda mill. My successor, if there is one, will know from the day he arrives that the easiest way to pacify the Washington-based interest groups is to encourage, or at least tolerate, the ideological agenda which flourished under President Carter.

In the long run, the public interest will be better served if the Federal Government simply drops NIE's mission and concentrates on the neutral collection of factual and statistical data on education. The interest groups would lose, but the values of pluralism, democracy, and freedom would all gain.

If you would care to discuss any of these issues at greater length, I would be honored to do so.

Sincerely,

Edward A. Curran