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top stories

The topmost story of this particular moment in the cultural history of our nation is composed of elements of hearsay, conjecture and seeming threats. I cannot verify it completely. I am convinced by my informants that, in fact, it actually occurred, but the details of it and the degree to which it should be taken seriously are somewhat problematical.

With this disclaimer, here is the story as told to me by three separate individuals, two of whom were present at the event.

Mary Ann Tighe, Deputy Chairman of the NEA, was invited to speak to a national conference of foundations taking place in Texas. She dutifully appeared and gave her usual talk; she spoke with enthusiasm, charm, and was articulate and informative according to reports. At the end of her prepared speech she asked for questions and several were forthcoming from the 2-300 foundation executives present. Then, suddenly, a man rose in the back of the room and began addressing the assemblage in rather rousing prose. According to reports his opening statement was close to the following paraphrase of it:

"I sincerely hope this audience will not be misled by this charming and articulate young woman who has just spoken to us. Her enthusiasm covers the fact that she is working for a man who has done more harm to the arts and humanities than any president in history."

The man continued by saying the Carter Administration had willfully harmed the cultural life of the country through its policies aimed at gaining political advantage by distributing grants without regard to quality. He praised the policies and people who served under the Nixon-Ford Administration and claimed that the Democrats had done nothing good and the Republicans, under Nixon, had done nothing bad.

After some time, an anonymous voice in the audience asked the speaker to identify himself. He paused and then said: "Why, I thought everyone here would know who I am. I am Ronald Berman, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities." Soon afterwards the speaker retired and the meeting progressed.

This story would have no real point if it concluded here and it would have no credence if the first part were not told.

Later in the day several people managed to talk with Ronald Berman to learn why he was at the meeting and why he felt called upon to speak out so vociferously.

In sum, here is his statement, according to persons who actually heard the conversations with him. When asked which foundation he represented, he replied that he represented no foundation but was in Texas to raise money for Ronald Reagan and saw the opportunity to "set the record straight" on the Carter Administration. He said he was raising money for Reagan so that *when* he was elected president, Reagan had given his solemn promise to appoint Ronald Berman as Chairman of both the Arts and the Humanities Endowments, combining the two. He further said that when this has taken place, he would stop "all this nonsense of giving the money to the have-nots at the expense of the haves."

These are the parts of the story I have verified: Ronald Berman did rise to harangue the Carter Administration and praise the past under Republican leadership; he did assume everyone knew who he was. The statements about his reason for being in Texas and his claim to be the returning czar of both endowments I cannot verify completely. So, take it all with the attitude with which it is presented; not believing and not not believing.

I can only say that if it is true, or should come to pass, everybody loses. The "haves" will find a disintegrating base of constituent support, the "have nots" will suffer and grow militant, the NEH will become a hodge-podge of narrow programs and the Congress will turn from being an advocate of the programs to an adversary. Of course such a plan could not be put into effect without full approval of the Congressional committees that provide the funds and the authorization, and unless the Congress has a drastic swing to the right in this election, and the ruling Democratic leadership is defeated or encapsulated, Mssr. Berman doesn't stand a chance. And then, the election of Ronald Reagan is still a matter of if and by how many votes. But it is a frightening prospect nevertheless.

Congressional Update

Nothing much will happen now in the Congress during the remainder of the summer. First, the conventions will take all energies, then the frantic part of campaigning. The House Appropriations Committee has passed the NEA money bill for next year at $160 million and the full House vote should come during the short session between the conventions and/or the summer recess. The Senate is waiting for the House action, as usual, but should also get around to passage before the Labor Day Recess.

There is no point in discussing the reauthorization legislation until the House and Senate versions as passed are ironed out in Conference Committee. The Senate is waiting for the House, which should take action sometime this summer between recesses. As both the bills now stand, the House version authorizes $200 million for the NEA for FY '81, while the Senate stands at $175 million. The House version of the future calls for "such sums as may be necessary," while the Senate opts for a 15% increase each year for three years. Since funding ceilings have little bearing on reality, the difference between the versions makes little difference.

The discussion of the reauthorization in both Houses is mostly in generalities about the need to support our major institutions and the need to support "cooperative efforts undertaken by state arts agencies with local arts groups," by which is probably meant local arts councils. So take your joy or sorrow from ambiguity.

The most salient language reflecting a new bit of thinking pops up in the House