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Reagan and Congress Fight Over the Fate Of Tiny Arts Agency

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Institute of Museum Services,
Which He Fails to Abolish,
Teems With His Friends

By BRUCE INGERSOLL

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—The Institute of Museum Services is "sort of a freckle on the federal landscape," in the words of Susan Phillips, who once headed it.

The institute, indeed, may be the only agency that at full strength has more staff members (15) making policy than staff members (14) carrying it out. But for a federal freckle, the agency commands an inordinate amount of attention from the Reagan White House.

President Reagan has been trying to rub out the independent agency and its puny \$21.5 million budget ever since he took office, but the Congress hasn't cooperated. The White House meanwhile has filled much of the institute's National Museum Services Board with California backers of the president and friends of Nancy Reagan. Half of the appointees to the board since 1981 have come from the president's home state. And although three Californians have left the board since last fall, five of the 13 sitting members are Californians, with a sixth waiting to take one of the two vacant seats.

Outcry From Illinois

Democratic Rep. Cardiss Collins thinks this is "outrageous." Her home state, Illinois, isn't represented, and she asserts that Congress never envisioned such a lopsided board when it created the institute 10 years ago to provide operating grants to U.S. museums and zoos. The House has just passed a bill to limit representation from any state to three members.

In cultural circles, a seat on the museum board is a plum, albeit a nonpaying one. It adds luster to the resume and provides opportunities to travel at taxpayers' expense to Washington meetings and to museums and zoos around the country.

The job of staff director, the agency's operating chief, is also filled by political appointment, and it has some of the perks board members enjoy. Lilla Tower, who had a stormy reign as staff director in the early 1980s, likes to talk about the time she was "kissed by a tiger, not once but twice," on an official visit to the St. Louis Zoo. "I put the back of my hand up to the bars and, all of a sudden, he lapped that gigantic rough tongue all over my hand," Mrs. Tower recalls. Her husband, John Tower, then a Republican senator from Texas, was aghast, she says, but she was so "enraptured" she let the tiger do it again.

Basic Requirements

Board appointments have the added advantage that they don't require too much work. The full board gets together only four times a year (and the administration wants to cut it to three). The board meets in a remote chamber in Washington's Old Post Office, tucked behind an array of boutiques. "Two or three members do all the thinking for the board—the others do their nails," says a former staffer at the institute. "Their meetings aren't too animated. The staff has to stoke themselves with coffee to stay awake."

Untrue, says Ms. Phillips, the former agency director, who once described herself as the board's "den mother." The members are "very professional," she says. "They conduct their business in a constructive, responsible manner." The disproportionate number of Californians on the board doesn't concern her, either, says Ms. Phillips, now a White House aide.

A White House spokesman says Mr. Reagan is "within the bounds of the law" in naming so many Californians to the board; he adds, "Of course, it's not a patronage haven."

Still, there is some puzzlement about the selection process. Dorothy Tyson, a former board member from San Diego, Calif., isn't sure why she was picked. "What qualified me to be there? I'd be darned if I know," says Mrs. Tyson, who describes

Please Turn to Page 28, Column 3

Reagan and Congress Fight Over the Fate Of Tiny Arts Agency

Continued From First Page

herself as one of the Reagan faithful.

During her term, Mrs. Tyson had a somewhat spotty attendance record. But she also had an excuse: It isn't easy to show up for board meetings when you are an ocean away, serving as social secretary to the U.S. ambassador to Austria. "I asked the State Department, should I resign? I was told, don't resign unless you have to," Mrs. Tyson recalls. So she didn't. But because of a congressional fuss, she resigned a year ago after missing meetings for more than 15 months.

Anne Carroll Badham, wife of California Congressman Robert Badham, doesn't rate a gold star for attendance, either. She was named to the board after serving as a "surrogate speaker" in the 1980 Reagan campaign. Confirmed by the Senate in October 1982, Mrs. Badham didn't attend a single meeting for the first year, according to the institute's records, and since then she has showed up only twice. Mrs. Badham declines to comment.

Pauline Naftzger from Beverly Hills, Calif., is a board newcomer. She was so eager to serve that she did volunteer work for the institute. She also joined a fat-cat group called the Republican Eagles, whose membership fee is a \$10,000 contribution to the Grand Old Party. Another member is Caroline Hume of San Francisco, who is on a first-name basis with the First Lady.

Mr. Reagan's latest nominee for the board is Glen A. Holden, chairman of the Holden Group, a major insurance and financial-services conglomerate based in Los Angeles. Mr. Holden, a Reagan loyalist, who has yet to be confirmed, has donated more than \$190,000 to Republican campaigns since 1981. But he doesn't see his nomination as a reward for generosity.

"I'm sure the president and his people pick people, I hope, for their talents," says Mr. Holden, who has long been active in cultural and civic affairs.

Not all of the board members come from California, of course. Alice Algood, who was reappointed to a five-year term, hails from Tennessee. She was the 1984 co-chairwoman of Women for Reagan-Bush in Tennessee, and she is still vice-chairwoman of the Republican State Executive Committee. Mrs. Algood, former chairwoman of the Tennessee State Museum Association, takes the appointment seriously. She is never too busy to show up for board meetings, and she doesn't sit mute and let the board chairman, Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, do all the talking.

Turmoil began at the agency soon after the Reagan administration took over. The turnover and the menacing waggle of the Reagan budget ax was unsettling for the institute's staff. In 1981, the institute went through four staff directors. During Mrs. Tower's tenure the staff fell to three members partly because people expected the agency to close down and partly because of internal conflicts, former staffers say. At one point, they add, it took months to reimburse board members for expenses.

"It has been like a hexed agency," says Leila Smith, a former grants specialist at the institute who says she wants a button that proclaims, "I survived Lilla Tower."

Mrs. Tower's reign, from December 1981 to July 1983, began with talk that her senator husband got her the job, which she denies. It peaked with a flap over her wholesale rejection of grant applications. Mrs. Tower's critics say her objections were petty; she says the applications had glaring gaps. Whatever the case, one arts magazine, *New Art Examiner*, called her "the James Watt of federal cultural funding."

"I ran an efficient agency, without waste, without supernumeraries, as if it was my dollar I was spending," says Mrs. Tower, a onetime real-estate broker, who returned part of her salary to the Treasury.

Mrs. Tower's successor was Ms. Phillips, former research director at the Conservative Caucus, headed by her brother, Howard Phillips. Ms. Phillips didn't endear herself to museum directors by urging Congress to scuttle the agency she headed. Yet, politics aside, even adversaries regarded her as a fair and effective administrator. While the White House seeks a new \$68,000-a-year staff director for the institute, the agency is being run by Monika Harrison, who is on loan from the Education Department.

If it weren't for one powerful congressman, there probably wouldn't be an agency. Since 1981, the administration has wanted to abolish the institute and let private philanthropy pick up the slack. But Democratic Rep. Sidney Yates of Illinois, chairman of a House appropriations subcommittee, has stymied the administration every time. It looks like the institute will get \$21.5 million in the current fiscal year, the same as last year.

"As long as they have Sid Yates," says a Senate staff member, "they basically have nothing to worry about."