Curran, Edward: Confirmation Hearing (1985): Correspondence 02

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Senator Claiborne Pell  
Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
Russell Building, Suite 335  

29 September 1985

Dear Senator Pell,

I am 70, Professor Emeritus of English at the George Washington University; I have a B.A. (and a D. Litt.) from Cornell College, Iowa, an M.A. from Harvard, and a D. Phil. from Oxford. Though "retired," I remain active as a poet, as a novelist, and--especially--as a scholar. I have published three books of poems; the first appeared in the Yale Series of Younger Poets forty-nine years ago. I have published the translation of a prize-winning French novel with Random House (1942) and a novel of my own with Putnam's (1962).

As a scholar I am editor for prosody of A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton (Columbia University Press and Routledge, Kegan Paul, 6 vols., 1970--). I have contributed reviews, papers, articles, encyclopedia entries, etc., to national and international publications. I was a Rhodes Scholar. I received two Fellowships, for imaginative writing, from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and a Fellowship from the Fund for the Advancement of Education, Ford Foundation, for the teaching of writing. I have been a Fulbright Professor (in the Netherlands) and a member of the Council for International Exchange of Scholars. For the continuation of my own scholarly work I have received fellowships and grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Huntington Library, and the Center for Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, Connecticut. I have held major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I have been listed in Who's Who in America for almost twenty years, for longer in Contemporary Authors and the Directory of American Scholars. My biography appeared in several issues of Marquis' Who's Who in the World.

If it were suggested to me that I should serve as Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, I should feel that someone far more eminent than I should hold that position.

I cannot help questioning Edward Curran's qualifications to serve as head of the NEH. Curran may well be a fine man, more than usually able as a teacher and administrator at the secondary school level. The humanities may well be dear to him. But advance in the humanities requires study, profound and often wide-ranging; it is a long, slow process; it needs not patience alone but judgment, wisdom; it also requires brilliance--the ability to perceive, in the fragments of knowledge that can be collected, a possible whole form, the form of a truth that may lead others to useful understanding. Of course there are people who, for purposes of self-aggrandizement, mimic "research," and, ignorant of its values, cheapen
them. In the humanities, it is the function of the NEH to support work of genuine worth, distinguish between such work and pedestrian or commercial or dishonest imitations. From Edward Curran's vita it would not seem that his studies, his training, have been extensive. It is hard to imagine what he knows, or thinks, of research. Surely it would be unwise to commit to him, without the most careful inquiry into his understanding and his values, the direction of an organization which stands before the world as supporting carefully evaluated programs of important humanistic research by American scholars.

The NEH has, I recognize, additional aims, and a responsibility to the American people to further the cause of the humanities here in all useful ways. But it takes, not merely a competent administrator, but a man or woman of the highest intellect, training and cultivation to recognize all the ways in which the humanities may be served, to arrive at a balance of fruitful programs for an organization with the high aims of the NEH, and to provide for that organization leadership that is neither mere caretakership nor the pursuit of change for its own sake--or for the sake of a goal less worthy still.

That the chairmanship of the NEH may legitimately be treated as a political plum, that it may be awarded in return for helpfulness in the campaigns of party leaders, seems to me hopelessly inappropriate, and almost inevitably damaging; if it were possible for the Congress to amend that situation, I would hope it might do so. If the situation cannot be changed, I take comfort in the belief that the NEH has distinguished bipartisan backing in Congress, from Senators and Representatives who understand its true aims and its potentials. Among great scholars or other intellectual leaders in America who might be considered as having the status and the ability to provide estimable service as head of the NEH, there must be many worthy Republicans, as there must be many worthy Democrats. There is no reason why a Republican should not now be chosen. But let him be worthy. That there is a National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States is a credit to our country's leaders. If a careful interview with Mr. Curran shows that there is doubt about his qualifications to serve usefully--indeed, with distinction--as the Chair of the NEH, I hope the Congress will refuse to agree to his appointment.

Sincerely yours,

Edward R. Weismiller

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My telephone number is (202) 223-0333; I am willing to be consulted further about this matter or comparable matters, if anyone should think that worthwhile.