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JEFFREY HART

Sen. Pell's Scheme

The front pages of the daily newspapers display for us the more flamboyant examples of congressional misbehavior, but Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) has meanwhile been busy with a particularly nasty little operation of his own. In its arbitrariness and cynicism, Pell's performance is actually more typical of the arrogance of power in Washington than the publicized extravagances of Wayne Hays, Wilbur Mills, and other gargoyles of that sort.

Established under the Johnson Administration, and, indeed, with Senator Pell as one of its principal sponsors, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) disperses some $30 million per year to assist various kinds of cultural activities: art museums, libraries, scholarly research. It also sponsors high-grade popular productions like the recent television "Adams Chronicles."

The NEH is supposed to be non-political — and, remarkably enough, has actually been so under both Democratic and Republican administrations. The $30 million spent by NEH was probably too small a sum to attract the attention of the leading pork-barrellers.

Two years ago, however, Senator Pell carried up with a scheme to skim off millions of dollars of NEH money and distribute it to local politicians at the state level.

At present, grants awarded by NEH must pass before non-partisan committees of experts. The standards maintained have been high.

Pell wanted the local politicians to get into the process and distribute large sums of money themselves. The various states would receive the Federal funds as a matter of legal right. No nonsense about "merit" would intervene between the Federal treasury and the state-level politician.

The present chairman of the NEH, Dr. Ronald Berman strenuously and correctly opposed Pell's scheme. Other senators found Berman persuasive. Berman's stand had practically universal academic support.

As a result, however, Senator Pell has been pursuing a personal vendetta against Dr. Berman.

Berman's first term as chairman expired last December. After canvassing a wide range of opinion, and finding universal satisfaction with the job Berman had done, the White House resubmitted his name for a second term. Now, six months later, Pell has succeeded in blocking a hearing on the matter by the pertinent committee of the Senate, Labor and Public Welfare.

Except for Pell, no one on the committee has expressed any opposition to Berman. The National Council of the Endowment, which includes members from both parties, backs Berman 20-1. Well known throughout the academic and scholarly world as a Shakespeare scholar, Berman has proved to be a fair-minded and able administrator. So far as I can tell, acclaim for his performance among those in a position to know is virtually universal.

For six months, however, Pell — alone — has blocked a hearing, aware that Berman would be overwhelmingly approved.

As the Wall Street Journal summed up this matter in a recent major editorial:

"The sex scandals have had the effect of picking up the rock of Capitol Hill, and giving the public a glimpse of what scurries underneath. The problem is not so much sex as it is the atmosphere of arrogant pettiness. As an example of the normal workaday pettiness so completely tolerated in the Congress, it is worth considering the little vendetta Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island is running against Dr. Ronald S. Berman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities."

The entire matter now rests in the hands of Sen. Harrison Williams of New Jersey, chairman of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. He can agree, at long last, to hold hearings on the Berman confirmation. The predictable result would be that Berman would be confirmed overwhelmingly. Or, out of so-called senatorial "courtesy," he can defer to the arrogance of Senator Pell's power and penalize a fine public servant for doing his job.