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Council Reappointments (1984)

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National Endowment for the Humanities: Council Reappointments (1984): Correspondence 06

Paul Simon

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COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

320 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

SUBCOMMITTEE ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

AUG 1 1988

The President
 The White House
 Washington, DC 20006

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to you out of grave concern over your recent recess appointments of seven individuals to the National Council on the Humanities. As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education, which has legislative jurisdiction over the National Endowment for the Humanities, I am keenly aware of the important decision-making role played by the Council, and the need for highly qualified Council members. I believe that your recent appointments will serve to diminish the stature of the Council and impair its ability to make sound evaluations of applications for grants from the Endowment.

From the first appointments to the Council in 1966, until the appointments you made in 1982, the appointees consistently bore strong academic credentials. Those appointees who have not been from the ranks of academe have earned recognition for outstanding community participation, and most importantly, demonstrated commitment to the humanities. For example, of the nine people that you appointed in 1982, seven are affiliated with colleges or universities, one is a researcher at a 'think tank', and one is with a research foundation. Moreover, they were a group of individuals who are solidly grounded in the humanities.

If excellence in grantmaking by the Endowment is desirable, as it assuredly is, then excellence in the qualifications of the appointees to the National Council on the Humanities is a prerequisite. Unfortunately, your recent appointees have largely inappropriate and insufficient credentials. None of the seven are primarily grounded in any of the four disciplines that are central to the humanities: history, philosophy, english, and foreign languages. Three of the appointees, in particular, lack both academic credentials, and any demonstrated service to the humanities. One is a self-described "homemaker, civic leader, and volunteer arts administrator." Though she has been involved with local art groups, she lacks any academic or professional experience in the humanities. Another's primary credential is

that she is publisher of the Yale Literary Magazine, which is currently embroiled in a legal dispute with Yale over the magazine's use of the University's name. She, too, lacks any substantial demonstration of commitment to the humanities. The third describes herself as a political and civic activist, architectural and planning consultant, and performing artist. Although she has served the arts community for many years, she has had literally no involvement with the humanities. My concern is that these deficiencies in their qualifications will limit their ability to represent the public interest in the humanities, and to participate effectively in the evaluation of scholarly proposals.

Consider the following example: if the understanding and appreciation of academic excellence and the standards of evaluation of one of these three are such that she says of Richard W. Lyman, "I wouldn't say his credentials are outstanding" (as quoted in the May 30, 1984, New York Times), then one wonders whom she will deem worthy of Endowment grants. Mr. Lyman is President of the Rockefeller Foundation, a former vice-chairman of the National Council on the Humanities, a former President of Stanford University, a former Fulbright Fellow at the London School of Economics, and has earned degrees from both Swarthmore and Harvard.

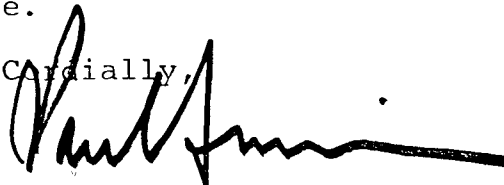
The 1965 legislation that created the Endowment specifies that members of the Council ". . . shall be selected on the basis of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity and in a manner which will provide a comprehensive representation of the views of scholars and professional practitioners in the humanities and of the public throughout the United States." As a whole, the seven members that you recently appointed do not appear to meet those criteria. In particular, the three individuals noted above fall far short of both these criteria and the level of quality of the credentials of past appointees.

This is not a partisan issue. Both Democratic and Republican Presidents in the past have made excellent appointments to the Council. What is at issue here is the questionable ability of these individuals to contribute significantly to the activities of the Council. I do not object to your selections because of their political affiliations, I am merely calling for excellence and appropriateness in the qualifications of those chosen to facilitate progress and scholarship in the humanities in the United States.

For the first time in the history of the Endowment, a substantial number of voices have been raised in opposition to Council appointments. In the past, the confirmation process has usually proceeded pro forma. Yet, in this instance several Senators expressed a reluctance to confirm your nominees and a desire to

carefully examine their qualifications. By appointing these individuals during a brief Congressional recess, and thus circumventing the confirmation process, you prevented the Senate from fulfilling its constitutional advice and consent responsibility. Such actions are a disservice to the humanities community and to the citizenry as a whole.

Cardially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Simon", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Paul Simon
Chairman

PS/lng