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Beginning of a 'Cultural Policy'

By Ruth Dean

Washington Star Staff Writer

A little "persuasion" may be necessary, White House assistant Aram Bakshian Jr. conceded. But the White House is confident that once big business is enlisted to give generously to the arts and humanities, the response will corroborate President Reagan's belief the private sector will take up the slack left by federal arts budget cuts.

Bakshian, who is White House special assistant for the arts and humanities, addressed a weekend meeting of the National Council on the Arts, which is the policy-making arm of the National Endowment for the Arts.

President Reagan's announcement last week of a blue ribbon White House task force on the arts and humanities, he told the council, in itself signals "the beginning of a cultural policy for this administration."

"Culture," Bakshian promised, "will be given a priority that was not the case before." Was this an abrogation of Budget Director David Stockman's earlier statement that the arts had a "low priority" in the administration's assessment of national choices? The statement stirred up a hornet's nest of reaction in the arts community and in Congress. Not answering directly, Bakshian explained the task force represented the administration's "starting off in a new direction" but that it did not negate the urgency for stringent spending cuts including the arts.

Council members asked Bakshian what the funding would be for the task force and why there is no congressional representation on it. Both questions were asked last week by Rep. Sidney Yates, D-Ill., during hearings on the arts endowment's \$88 million budget for 1982.

So far, there is no funding for the task force, Bakshian said, explaining it will be a "catch as catch can" operation. "We intend to draw on the expertise of both endowments," he said, "and even some of the staffing will come from both endowments."

Nor did he rule out the possibility of some working relationship with the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, which acts as a liaison with arts functions in other government agencies, and is still headquartered in White House offices. The council works with a staff on loan, as needed, from both endowments.

Besides exploring priorities and

the functions of both endowments, Bakshian said the task force would be exploring arts funding, "not only for the glamour projects, but local funds too. There's an awful lot of untapped money out there. If engaged, it would cover a wide range of programs," he promised. "We feel President Reagan has the resources to draw upon business for his programs."

The reason no members of Congress were asked to serve on the task force was because it is designed to have a "non-governmental" thrust, Bakshian explained, but this does not rule out their participation or advice at some point along the line.

Bakshian said the attempt on President Reagan's life six weeks ago "slowed up our schedule," but that even before announcement of the arts task force, the president showed his commitment to the arts by his attendance at the Ford's Theater benefit, and by using it as a platform from which to make a statement about private support for the arts. This action, he pointed out, inspired "large contributions from donors like Armand Hammer" and other philanthropists who otherwise might not have given to that particular benefit.

However, the White House arts adviser said, the administration thinks support for the arts should "come from the life blood of the community . . . millions of people giving hundreds of dollars, and hundreds of people giving thousands of dollars."

The arts council was challenged from an unexpected quarter by its 15-year-old partner, the state arts councils, which annually receive 20 percent of endowment program funds. Kitty Carlisle Hart, chairman of the largest of the state units, the New York State Arts Council, said she was "disturbed" the endowment chose touring and artists in the schools as expendable. "They're vital to our efforts; to abandon them is serious," she told the council.

Another state chairman, Peggy Cooper, head of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, went even further. "You're about to hand over your mantle," she told the council. "You'll have to adjust to what is, and what is the key under this administration are the states." Cooper said she felt the states should have more autonomy "because they're more responsive to the polyglot nature" of the culture of their individual areas.