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Reagan's Low-Key Arts Teams

By Ruth Dean

Washington Star Staff Writer

Last spring, President-elect Ronald Reagan confidently wrote in a national arts magazine, that if elected, "I will end as soon as possible the politicization of the National Council of the Arts so conspicuous during the Carter-Mondale administration."

Then-candidate Reagan also told Alliance for Arts magazine readers he'd select council members for their artistic skills "rather than their political connections." He

would also designate a White House liaison for the arts, reviving the precedent set by President Richard Nixon when he appointed Leonard Garment in that capacity.

Reagan said he'd shift the grant award process directly to the arts institutions to "assure that merit and merit alone is the criterion for making a grant." He said he also favored new ways of making private sector support for the arts attractive, perhaps by tax checkoff, and getting the arts out of social welfare.

Now with the campaign behind him and the transition in full

swing, Reagan's transition task forces for the national endowments for the arts and for the humanities, are exhibiting a cautious demeanor not quite commensurate with the firebrand boldness of those promises.

Some of the transition rhetoric does indeed echo what was said during the campaign. Talk of "a return to excellence in the arts" persists, and "cutting out the fat," if there is any left to cut, from administrative overhead.

There are even reports from some quarters that transition people re-

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Reagan Arts, Humanities Transition Teams Maintain Low Profile

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requested and were refused a look-see at personnel records. "They thought we had more Schedule C positions than we have; they were surprised we have so many career staff," said an official at one of the endowments.

This somehow revives memories of the old "populism vs. elitism" debate that raged so heatedly in the U.S. Senate four years ago. That's when former National Endowment for the Humanities chairman Ronald Berman's nomination for a second term was contested by Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I.

Pell accused Berman, a Nixon appointee, of "elitism" at the NEH, and the debate, often acrimonious, dragged on for months until a Carter election win made it a moot point, and Joseph D. Duffey was named as Berman's successor.

Not too long ago, Berman appeared in print again, three times in fact, to refute as "a lie" a prediction attributed to him that the Reagan administration would merge the arts and humanities endowments and make him chairman. "It just won't die; it keeps popping up," said Berman from his San Diego home. None of the Reagan people have called him, he said, but apparently his old Democratic enemies don't want to forget him either.

The Reagan arts transition teams are keeping a low profile, it appears, for good reason. During these first weeks of what they hope will be a peaceful transition, they have had to cope with some divergent influences in their own party while not disavowing general party principle on the arts.

The Berman flap was just one of their headaches. Then came columnist James J. Kilpatrick's now famous crack on an "Agronsky and Company" telecast. When Carl Rowan asked him how he'd fund the national arts agencies if the money was going for defense, conservative Kilpatrick is supposed to have answered with genial glee, "Just abolish them!"

The first thing Richard Bishirjian, director of the transition task force for the National Endowment for the Humanities, did when he hit town, was to call the newspapers to disavow the Kilpatrick jibe.

Coupled with the report from the Heritage Foundation, a far right Republican think tank whose "conservative's view" of a potential government reorganization includes virtual dismemberment of the endowments, the Reagan people had their work cut out for them.

Given the in-party pressures that beset them, the cultural transition teams are proceeding quietly. No fanfare. No press conferences. They stick to generalities and imply the

real dope will be in reports that go to transition headquarters. A preliminary report was due Monday; final reports Dec. 22.

There will be no announcement of the contents of either report, said Robert Carter, head of the team for the National Endowment for the Arts. "We have been told both reports are confidential to the president-elect." Reagan, who arrives in Washington today for a working visit, is expected to meet with his transition staff at week's end.

Not even a hint as to what changes the transition staff might suggest? "Maybe we'll find everything is fine and recommend no changes," said Carter. Indeed, Livingston L. Biddle Jr., whose four-year statutory term as NEA chairman, doesn't expire until November 1981, says he'll stay on. He wouldn't be setting a precedent. His predecessor, Nancy Hanks, a Nixon appointee, finished out her term six months into the Carter administration. And comments Biddle, he hopes his stay is an example of "the bi-partisanship that has always characterized the endowments since they were created."

Michael Straight reads the tea leaves differently. Straight is a former deputy NEA chairman in two administrations and author of "Twigs for an Eagle's Nest" which was highly critical of the Carter arts bureaucracy, and reflective of President-elect Reagan's campaign views on the arts. He has also been an adviser to the arts transition team.

Straight said it was too early to make predictions, but he couldn't conceive of continuing the status quo given Reagan's campaign mandate. "They're under pressure from three directions," he said. "One, cutting government back to its essential function, which never gave the arts high priority. Two, supporting excellence in the arts — period. Or, three, continuing public support of the arts at present funding levels, but in different ways so that the arts reinforce, not supplant, what is important in American life."

Straight said he supports the third view, and guesses it may reflect the Reagan arts team view as well.

And the "pressure" is there. It comes from the Republican extreme right. The man who chaired the arts and humanities task force for the much talked about Heritage Foundation report, is on Bishirjian's transition team for the humanities. He is Dr. Michael Joyce, executive director of the John M. Olin Foundation, a philanthropic organization.

The Heritage report severely reproves what it sees as "the every-

thing for everybody" philosophy of the Carter administration arts bureaucracy and its "cloned images" in state and community arts agencies. It suggests that NEA policy be stripped down to a low profile, which "modestly acknowledges that great art is always superior to the source of its support." In other words, the marketplace principle. "I see no reason why it shouldn't apply to the arts as well," said Joyce when asked if the report language should be taken that literally.

The report advocates that matching grants "must be ended." It charges the NEA with individual grant-giving "to the serious and trivial alike," and of funding "politically powerful groups who expect . . . an amount commensurate with their strategic electoral strength."

Obviously the report task force wasn't in tune with the American public as revealed in the recent Harris poll on the arts when a 59-39 percent majority rejected the claim that "the arts can only be enjoyed by a privileged few."

The people in the Harris survey would be surprised to read that the Heritage task force feels that the Arts Endowment should "accept the sad fact that . . . the enduring audience for art is largely self-selecting, a relatively small public marked by the willingness to make sacrifices of other pleasures for the sake of artistic experience." The Harris poll showed that if anything, interest in arts shows a slight increase over a 1975 survey, with a proportionate decrease in other leisure pursuits like gardening and sports event attendance.

What sounds like a wrecking crew strategy for NEA is mild compared to the scenario for NEH. Short of expunging the agency, the advice is that programs dealing with public media and public programs be abolished and their funds reallocated to "worthy individuals and institutions" for pure scholarship.

Although no specific mention was made of exhibitions like the magnificent Tut display from Egypt's tombs which drew record crowds in cities throughout the nation, and the exquisite Han dynasty artifacts from the People's Republic of China, nor television programs like the Adams Chronicles and the American Short Story — all partially funded by NEH — there was no mistaking the intent of this paragraph in the report:

"The fascination with public media and public programs, which has often led to the spending of large sums on projects of limited intellectual contribution to the education of citizens, must be reversed."

Though he hadn't seen the re-

port, Bishirjian said if this is a correct interpretation, he would disagree with its conclusion, since he feels these particular exhibits and public television programs were "worthwhile and pertinent" to NEH's mission. Joyce's presence on his task force, he explained, was as "an old friend" he'd known "long before" Joyce headed the Heritage Foundation project. Nor does he feel bound or influenced by the foundation recommendations. "Our instructions are to gather information and assess the programs of the NEH firsthand," he said.

One of the Reagans' intimates is Caroline Leonetti Ahmanson, widow of Howard F. Ahmanson, multimillionaire insurance executive and arts patron. Caroline Ahmanson, who is also a trustee of the Los Angeles County Museum, was involved in negotiations that resulted in bringing over the Great Bronze Age of China exhibit presently appearing in the United States.

Reached at her Beverly Hills home, she said she had not seen the Heritage report, but certainly would question its conclusion as read to her over the phone, that the exhibitions were a "limited intellectual contribution."

Ahmanson, who it is rumored will be a leading force in the arts in the Reagan administration, if not a candidate for Liv Biddle's job when his term is up, bristled at the allegation. "The NEH is charged with the interpretation of various cultures, and that's what these large exhibitions have done. How many people can travel to China to see these things firsthand?" she asked. "I think this is a wonderful way of educating people about other cultures."

So far, Ahmanson said she hadn't been asked to play a role in the new administration, but the arts transition teams had sought her "advice and input."

"President-elect Reagan's view is to respond to what the people really want," she said. "He wants people to participate (in the arts) as they have in the past." Paraphrasing an address he made recently at the Los Angeles Music Center, she said he "spoke about how the United States is unique in the world, in its private sector support of the arts." She added, "I think we should strive for the best, but we should not be elitist in the (narrow) sense of limiting our appeal to art people."

Carter, a longtime Washington publicist, said that eventually a search team will be organized to find a successor to Biddle, but right now it's essentially "a hand-holding operation to assuage fears among endowment people that Reagan is

going to tear the NEA apart."

Bishirjian said a search plan was not in the works, for NEH, even though Duffey's term expires next September, a full two months before Biddle.

If the transition team is not thinking of new blood at the top at NEH, some of the National Council on the Humanities members are. One of the conservatives on the council, who preferred anonymity, said, "A few of us would like to see someone of the caliber of Robert Hollander selected as the next chairman, but I wonder if he'd want to leave his scholarly work to serve." A full professor of literature at Princeton University and a noted Dante scholar, Hollander served as the vice chairman of the council

until his term expired a year ago.

An educated guess as to what the actual Reagan administration posture towards the arts might be, would be a compromise between the moderate and conservative factions in the Republican party.

Nancy Hanks, whose advice has also been sought by the transition team, says it best. "I have no concern about the Reagan administration," she said confidently. "They're very forward looking. They're quite interested in making substantive contributions to the growth of the arts." However, she thinks the new Republican Senate "needs some educating. A number of the new members simply are not focused on the arts," she explained. "We need to make them more aware."

Even-Handed Congress Is Anticipated on Arts

When Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, was hearing budget testimony from the arts agencies in the last couple of sessions of Congress, he'd periodically ask why it was that the Eastern establishment and the big cities seemed to get the lion's share of the arts dollar.

It was the bone that perpetually stuck in the throats of most Western legislators, whether Republican or Democrat. Why is the less populous hinterland short-changed?

Some think November's Republican landslide may have changed all that. Look at the leadership assignments. Stevens is now assistant majority leader, and a number of other Republican legislators from west of the Continental Divide have influential committee assignments, some of them affecting the arts.

One thing they're saying in some congressional quarters is that this decidedly Western tilt suggests neither the Eastern arts establishment nor the big cities will get it all when 1982 arts dollars are being dispensed.

The presidentially appointed 26-member councils for the arts and for the humanities have the final say on grants requests, however, and it is expected they will continue to be "non-partisan" when it comes to exercising that judgment.

A recent session of Congress approved Carter appointments to fill seven vacancies on the humanities council and six on the arts council. The remaining vacancy on the arts council is expected to be filled by a Reagan appointee.

Nevertheless the incoming ad-

ministration feels the arts have been politicized to suit Democratic purposes, and so do many conservative Republicans who were elected to the Senate and House.

One of the party's most influential conservatives, Sen. James A. McClure, R-Idaho, not only will chair the Republican Policy Committee which chooses committee assignments, but will head the appropriations subcommittee which oversees arts and humanities funding.

McClure has a reputation for fiscal stringency, which he exhibited in advocating an abortive legislative attempt for repayment of the Kennedy Center's Treasury debt — a sore point with Roger Stevens who feels the center should have no part in paying what amounts to "an inter-governmental debt." But in some quarters, McClure is considered a caring friend of the arts.

Lending balance to the arts' appropriations future in the Senate are the presence of two old friends of the arts and party moderates, Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., the new appropriations committee chairman, and Stevens, who was ranking minority member on the arts and humanities subcommittee in the last session of Congress. Another longtime friend of the arts, Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., will be the ranking minority member on the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, to be headed by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah. The committee oversees reauthorization for the cultural agencies.

— Ruth Dean