National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): News Article 03

Ruth Dean
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-
Reagan Arts, Humanities Transition Teams Maintain Low Profile

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quested and were refused a looksee at personnel records. "They thought we had more Schedule C positions than we have," they were surprised to find a "lot of political staff," said an official at one of the endowments.

The Washington Post reviewed the old "populism vs. elitism" debate that raged so heatedly in the U.S. Senate in 1967, when former National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman Ronald J. D'Amato resigned. The second term was contested by Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., and Rep. Charles Berman, a Nixon appointee, of "elitism" at the NEH, and the debate, often acrimonious, dragged on for months. In the end, Sen. Pell won the election and made it a moot point, and Joseph D. Duffey was named chairman.

Not too long after, Berman appeared in print again, three times in one week in the Post's distinguished letters section, as a form of protest against the appointment of Arts and Humanities Endowment administrator, made it a point, and Joseph D. Duffey was named head of the new agency.

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