Hearings Begin on Berman's Post; Pell Still Balks

By Phillip M. Kadis
Washington Star Staff Writer

For some time, the suspicion has been growing on Capitol Hill and elsewhere that the nomination of Ronald Berman to a second term as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities was going to be ignored to death. Deliberately.

His nomination was sent from the White House to the Senate in February, nearly three months after his term formally expired.

Yesterday, seven months after the nomination was received, the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare opened hearings on whether the former Shakespeare scholar and historian of American intellectual history in the 1960's, is fit for another term.

There was little that occurred during the hearings to dispel misgivings about Berman's chances of getting an up or down decision before the scheduled adjournment of Congress in two weeks.

The principle opposition to Berman — some say the only opposition — was Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I.

Pell made it clear to the White House that he would fight Berman's reappointment if the President declined, as he did, to forward Berman's name to the Senate.

THE SENATOR'S expressed dissatisfaction with Berman, everyone knew, was not to be taken lightly. It was simply that Pell is chairman of the Senate's special subcommittee on arts and humanities which is responsible for scrutinizing the performance of the arts and humanities endowments to see that they respond to the intent of Congress.

Pell's displeasure carries even greater weight because the humanities endowment was in large part his creation 10 years ago. His committee assignment is by enthusiastic choice not chance. He is a staunch advocate of the humanities, not their detractor.

So when the hearings opened yesterday, some 10 months after Pell initially let it be known that Berman, in his view didn't measure up, everyone might have expected the senator would lay out the specifics of his opposition to Berman.

Instead, Pell repeated in an opening statement the broad accusations he made on several occasions since last November that Berman has done a "passable" but not "excel-

lent" job, that he has permitted the arts endowment to outstrip the humanities endowment in grass roots impact and support, that he is an elitist, that he has further centralized the selection and distribution of humanities grants in Washington, and that he is well down the road to becoming a czar of the nation's intellectual life.

"A professional football coach who reads his team to only a passable, 50-50 won-lost season knows full well that the odds on renewal of his contract are also only 50-50," said Pell.

WHEN PELL FINISHED his statement, Sen. Jacob Javits of New York, the ranking Republican on the subcommittee, made an ominous observation that hushed the committee room in expectation. Javits said he had advised Berman personally that matters taken up during the hearing might be harmful to Berman's career.

Berman offered his own short statement which said in effect, "Not guilty," and recited the list of grass roots programs and projects funded by the endowment that have long been part of the record of authorizing and appropriations committee hearings.

Formalities over, the contest was supposed to begin.

But what followed were a series of requests for additional information about the number and kinds of grants made by the endowment, which has been raised in matching non-federal funds for humanities activities, and the like.

Berman asked about a grant of $40,000 to Harvard for a scholarly catalogue of Byzantine seals. Berman explained that it actually went to the Harvard-administered Dumbarton Oaks museum in Georgetown which has one of the largest collections of seals from the Eastern Roman Empire and is heavily visited by the public. Pell agreed that the grant was useful.

The senator asked about a $17,000 grant to the University of California for a study of the joint-family system in the 14th, 16th and 19th centuries.

BERMAN CONFESSED to being a little vague about the grant, but then suggested helpfully that "the anthropologists were no doubt up to their usual business there and might find greater social utility in the project than you or I might perceive."

Pell asked about a grant to Yale University to someone who had supported Berman when he was first nominated for the post of humanities chairman. Berman cited someone in Chicago who had received a similar grant and who did not support him.

Throughout the hearing, Pell kept comparing the operations of the humanities endowment with the arts endowment, making invidious distinctions.

When he began to compare the size of the average humanities grant in fiscal 1975 ($50,000) with the size of the average arts grant ($22,000), Berman found it hard for the first time to contain himself.

"Senator," he said, "the arts endowment — blessed be its name — is very separate from the humanities endowment. They do very different things." Some years, the grant average may be higher than others because of a few large grants, Berman explained.

"I always thought that if you do it, it's the arts," said Pell. "If you study or write about it, it's the humanities. They're not all that different."

WHAT SOON BECAME apparent was that there was not much difference between the confirmation hearing and a regular, reauthorization hearing of the subcommittee.

"I don't know if this is a painful procedure or not," said Sen. Harrison A. Williams, verbally scratching his head. The New Jersey Democrat is chairman of the Labor and Public Welfare committee, and had promised Berman that a confirmation hearing would be held as soon as endowment legislation emerged from conference.

"We'd like to do more of this oversight-work," said Williams, implying that the confirmation hearing was not the proper forum for it. "This isn't a painful business is it?" Harrison asked Berman.

"No," Berman replied.

The hearing was recessed soon after to be resumed sometime next week at the call of the chairman Williams.

In the meantime, Berman will get the additional information to Pell and Pell will presumably try to round up some witnesses to testify against Berman, an effort that has been unsuccessful so far, he said, because potential witnesses are fearful of antagonizing the dispenser of grants.

WHETHER ALL THIS can be completed so the full Senate can vote before the 94th Congress adjourns sine die on Oct. 2 remains to be seen.

Javits said yesterday that he intended to press for a decision.

More important, Sen. Jennings Randolph of W. Va., ranking Democrat on the full committee, sent a letter to Pell saying that he also favored a vote before this Congress wound up its affairs and set out to get re-elected.

Berman supporters are confident that he will win a committee vote on confirmation, and therefore a vote on the Senate floor as well.

If the hearings drag on without a vote before adjournment, Berman's renomination will die.

And if the Democrats win the White House in November, Berman, a Republican, will not be nominated again.