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Senate Committee Rejects Curran for Top Post at Humanities Fund

By ANGUS PAUL

WASHINGTON

The nomination of Edward A. Curran to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities was rejected by the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources last week, on a tie vote.

The committee voted 8 to 8—first on the nomination itself and then on the question of whether to send the nomination to the Senate floor without the committee’s recommendation.

Republican Sen. Robert T. Stafford of Vermont joined the seven Democrats on the panel in voting against Mr. Curran, whose nomination had dismayed many Senators and scholars.

Mr. Curran’s confirmation hearing last month was marked by charges that he had inadequate scholarly credentials and by questions about his stormy tenure as the director of the National Institute of Education.

“We’re obviously disappointed,” said a White House spokesman. “We had felt he was a well-qualified candidate.”

It was not yet known, the spokesman said, when President Reagan would submit the name of another nominee or who that nominee will be.

Mr. Curran, deputy director of the Peace Corps, could not be reached for comment, but he was expected to continue in his job

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at the Peace Corps, at least for the time being.

One of the scholars who testified against the nomination, Theodore J. Ziolkowski, was heartened by the outcome. 

"It suggests that the Senate cares about an agency as important as the N.E.H.," said Mr. Ziolkowski, dean of the graduate school at Princeton University and president of the Modern Language Association.

He and other scholars who had questioned Mr. Curran's credentials were "very pleased that the White House now has the opportunity to make another nomination," he said.

"There are excellent people out there who would represent glowingly the humanities," he said.

Mr. Ziolkowski had testified that while he did not believe that a doctorate was an essential requirement for the chairman of the endowment, the candidate should be someone who had demonstrated his qualifications as a humanist "through speaking, through writing, and through other activities." Mr. Curran had not done that, he said.

Mr. Curran, who has a master's degree from Duke University and a bachelor's degree from Yale University, has never taught at a college or university.

Stafford Cites NIE Record

In a statement, Senator Stafford said that his opposition to the nomination was based primarily on Mr. Curran's brief tenure, from 1981 to 1982, as director of the National Institute of Education. Soon after accepting that post, Mr. Curran urged the President to abolish the institute, saying it had been ineffective and was subject to undue pressures from "the left."

"The record shows," Senator Stafford said, "that Mr. Curran did everything possible to undermine the program and to embarrass then Secretary of Education Terrel Bell."

"In light of Mr. Curran's past actions, I could not be confident he would perform the duties of N.E.H. chairman in a manner the American people have a right to expect," said Mr. Stafford.

Sen. Lowell P. Weicker, Republican of Connecticut, had expressed strong reservations about Mr. Curran during his confirmation hearing, but voted in favor of the nomination last week, with, he said, "great trepidation."

Aides to Mr. Weicker said he felt that Mr. Curran had presented a strong enough case to be given a chance to serve as chairman of the humanities endowment.

The endowment continues under the direction of John T. Agresto, the acting chairman.