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SPECIAL GUEST COLUMN:

"PRESIDENT REAGAN AND THE ARTS"
by Michael Straight

(Mr. Michael Straight is the former Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts).

I have not encountered Ronald Reagan since the days when he stood, a little to the left of me, in the American Veterans Committee. I do not know who his advisers on the arts may be. I read his campaign commitments on the arts and I applauded them. I have no way of knowing how he will carry them out. I do not think we can tell the President-elect what he must do about the two Endowments. Nor do I think that we can sit back and wait to see what happens. History is shaped by those who know what they want, and who exert themselves. With that in mind, I offer these thoughts to the readers of GOVERNMENT & THE ARTS.

1. The two Endowments are in trouble. They have not been reauthorized by the Congress. Their appropriations for the current fiscal year have not been approved. From now on, federal agencies, save for the Defense Department, face budget cuts. The Arts and Humanities Endowments have lost spokesmen and friends in the Congress. The incoming Republicans are not known as advocates of public funding. Their hostility has been intensified because the chairmen of both Endowments identified themselves, and, by inference, their agencies, with the partisan, political purposes of the Carter Administration.

2. The two Endowments have been further weakened by drift and stagnation. I have read every word of every position paper that has come out of the Arts Endowment over the past four years. I cannot remember one that contained a new and exciting idea. After reading each one, I wanted to repeat the analyst's comment, after listening for hours to Portnoy. "Vell," he said, in the concluding lines of Portnoy's Complaint, "now vee must to begin, yes?"

3. Despite these weaknesses there is no reason to be disheartened. For the weakness is in one, small sector of the federal government; it is not in the nation at large, or in the arts. Some works of painting and sculpture have created widespread scepticism, because they are incomprehensible and preposterous. Yet arts institutions and organizations are accepted now as national resources. In Knoxville, in San Antonio, in scores of towns and cities, the arts are flourishing. And, for every fanatic on the Republican Right who demands the abolition of the Endowment, there is a Reagan supporter who serves on the board of a symphony or a museum. The days when Representative Gross and his friends could ridicule "the belly dancers" are over. Where opposition to government funding of the arts arises, it represents opposition to government, not to the arts. It reflects a conviction, which many of us share, that government is a clumsy mechanism at best, and that it has been funding the arts in inappropriate ways.

4. Lame Duck sessions of the Congress are traditionally tumultuous. The first six months of the next Congress will be even more tumultuous, given the reorganization of the Senate, and the determination of the incoming President to act promptly on major leg-

islative matters such as energy, education, and defense. Senator Byrd, I believe, can be relied on to carry through the arts and humanities appropriations, since they are integral parts of his Interior and Related Agencies bill. As for re-authorization, we can, I think, look to our departing spokesmen, Jacob Javits, John Brademas, and Frank Thompson to see the bills through. When they meet in Conference, they will, I trust, delete the obnoxious 1976 amendment to the original Act which requires Senate confirmation of Presidential appointments to the two National Councils. The threat of political interference by the Congress will be present for as long as this provision remains in force. Its elimination would advance the President-elect's commitment to put an end to the politicization of the two Endowments.

5. The Transition Period for the Arts Endowment may last until November 1981 when the new Chairman, if there is to be one, may be sworn in. The Transition Period between the Ford and Carter Administrations was a time of great uncertainty. Its problems were accentuated, as I remember well, by the immaturity and inexperience of the Carter Transition Team. Mr. Biddle has indicated that he will stay on until his term expires in November 1981. His task will be greatly eased if the President-elect follows through on his campaign commitment to appoint a senior staff advisor on the arts. Leonard Garment served brilliantly in this capacity, under President Nixon, because he was a sensitive artist, a tenacious advocate and a senior member of the incoming President's staff. Those qualifications will, I fervently hope, be met by the President-elect's appointee. The early appointment of this individual could help immeasurably, in regaining the standing which the Arts Endowment once held in Congress, and in setting priorities for the future. It is worth remembering that the Endowment's programs and priorities for President Reagan's second year in office will be shaped by August 1981, when the Fiscal 1983 budget is submitted to the Office of Management and Budget.

6. The search for a new Chairman of the Arts Endowment has by now begun. As it continues the leaders of the arts institutions and of the State and community arts agencies must wonder what their roles in the selection process should be.

There may have been agitation on this score in the ten months that followed President Nixon's election in 1968. As one who worked closely with Leonard Garment in the long process that ended in the appointment of Nancy Hanks, I can only say that I was never aware of any pressures that may have been brought to bear upon the White House. The selection process that followed Miss Hanks' retirement in 1977 was, by way of contrast, more like the election of a leader for Tammany Hall. No doubt the increase in funds expended by the Arts Endowment made some jockeying by contending pressure groups inevitable. Yet I doubt if anyone will point to that period with pride. If the State agencies, the symphony orchestras, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and others feel reticent about participating as campaign managers in the upcoming contest, that is understandable and probably all to the good. Their role, I believe, is to impress upon the President-elect the importance of this appointment. The search committee, if there is to be one, must be manned by men and women of mature judgement. Their assignment, if they are to be given an assignment by the President-elect, must be responsive to our central roles and responsibilities, in contrast to the propaganda handout which President Carter gave to his search committee on the humanities. The next Chairman of the Arts Endowment, if there is to be one, faces formidable tasks: to restore the non-partisan, non-political standing of the Endowment; to regain the confidence of the Congress and of the constituency; and to assess the developing needs and potentialities of the arts within the framework of the incoming President's beliefs. Without acting as king-makers, as they did in 1977, the spokesmen for the State and community agencies and the arts institutions can assist the President-elect in bringing forward the names of men and women who meet these rare qualifications for leadership.

7. Continuity in administration is important if the arts constituency is to be well served. In the first instance, it turns on the Endowment staff. The deputies will presumably depart with the Chairman; employees who are fully protected by Civil Service will remain. As for the program directors, the Five-Years-And-Out rule established by the current

Chairman always seemed to me to be suitable for the Peace Corps but wholly inappropriate for the Arts Endowment. I hope it will be set aside.

8. Despite the freeze on hiring, which is bad enough, the President-elect is not, as far as I know, encumbered by any commitment as foolish as Mr. Carter's campaign pledge to wipe out the government's advisory panels. They are, of course, essential in identifying excellence and in responding to developing needs. The much-touted reform of these panels, separating policy-making and grant-giving, and accelerating turnover, seems to me to be destructive. Governor Reagan's campaign commitment to excellence suggests to me a return to smaller and more experienced panels in which the intertwined roles of policy-making and grant-giving are once again combined.

9. The Endowment over fifteen years has, I believe, confirmed the federal government's ability to identify artistic excellence through its professional advisors. It has largely failed in its task of determining what kinds of action are appropriate for a federal agency. The panels, made up of artists, arts administrators and critics, are plainly unqualified to determine what government can and cannot do. The Congressional oversight Committees have not been able to provide consistent and continuous advice. The National Council is plainly the body best able to assist the Chairman, but it has been a reactive body and very few of its members have brought to its deliberations a profound knowledge of government, or even a sense of order. In appointing new members to the Council, President Reagan may be criticised if he emphasizes knowledge of government, and managerial ability, rather than artistic standing. But while basic issues are under consideration as to the role of government, these qualities are urgently needed in Council members. In the past four years, Council members have been given added assignments on task forces and special committees. While this is sound in principle, Council sessions, in my opinion, still tend to veer between the miniscule and the banal. A re-definition of the Council's role, and of its procedures, seems necessary.

10. I am in no position, as I've said, to speak for the President-elect. But, I would assume that an Arts Endowment which acted in accordance with his well-established approach to government would take up these continuing issues:

*** Sorting out Roles and Responsibilities. After fifteen years and endless meetings, the Endowment and the State arts agencies have yet to make any rigorous and precise assessment of the respective roles and responsibilities of the federal government, the regional associations, and the State, county, and municipal authorities, in advancing the arts. There must be some reason for their failure. A symphony manager, confronted by an alcoholic conductor, an apathetic orchestra, a militant union, an alienated audience, and an indecisive board can hardly be blamed if he seeks security in five sources of funding rather than one. But, in his campaign to eliminate waste in public spending, and to establish permanent patterns of patronage in place of makeshifts and compromises, the President-elect would be fully justified, I believe, in knocking a few heads together.

*** Dispersing the Patronage Power. The President-elect has said: "I would shift the awarding of individual grants to the various arts institutions to assure that merit and merit alone is the criterion for making the grant." Some concern has been voiced as to what this means. To me, it means what it says, and it is exactly right. Instead of playing God, and arrogating to itself the right to identify, anoint, and reward talented poets, painters, sculptors, novelists, composers and playwrights, the Endowment would offer matching funds to publishers, museum directors, symphony orchestra conductors, and theatre and film producers to commission, purchase, exhibit, and present works of high quality by living Americans.

*** Reinforcing the Private Sector. Under the guise of advancing all of the arts, the Endowment, at present, spends a good deal of its energies attempting to impose its judgements upon private organizations and institutions, and offering inducements to

entrepreneurs, impresarios, gallery owners and others to shift from a profit-making to a not-for-profit status. The judgements of panelists, working for a few weekends a year, are superimposed upon those of editors, directors, producers, and other practitioners of the arts who work throughout the year at their tasks. Instead of making its own awards and hoping that these practitioners will bring them to fruition, the Endowment, if it adheres to the general approach of the President-elect, would encourage the practitioners to come to it when they need assistance in producing, publishing, or presenting works of high quality but limited appeal.

*** Moving into the Mainstream. The governing statute of the Arts Endowment limits it to grant-making in support of the non-profit sector of the arts. This limitation tends to separate the Endowment from the Mainstream, supporting cottage industries while mass-produced works reach out and capture the majority of citizens. No such distinctions are enforced in Europe. There, governments do what they can to advance artistic excellence in literature, in film, in the theatre, in the decorative arts, and in design, whether or not the organizations which are assisted seek to earn profits. I would think that the President-elect would seek to move the Endowment in this direction, without undermining standards of excellence, or subsidizing commercialism as such.

*** Encouraging Local Initiatives. After years of indecision, the Endowment seems to be leaning toward the funding of community arts councils through the States. That, presumably, is the kind of decentralization that the incoming President would favor. Should the Endowment's decision be further delayed, it will invite the Congress to act on its own, inserting a line item for the community agencies in its next appropriation bill. That, I believe, would be an error.

*** Re-ordering Priorities. The Endowment emphasized institutional support in this year's budget submission. The budget examiners wondered aloud what next year's gimmick would be. If the new Administration holds that support of national institutions is the primary role of the national government, it will nonetheless, I hope, continue to provide working capital for new and innovative endeavours which are of national significance. Among these, I would think that the establishment of a National Design Center, so long delayed, would accord with its concern for strengthening the private sector in the arts.

*** Increasing Cultural Exchanges. In late October, when the two candidates were outbidding each other in promising more military expenditures, I was in the mountain town of Montepulciano. The proprietor, the staff, and all of the guests in the hotel moved to the parlor after dinner to watch television (as did most Italians). What did we see? An old Perry Mason movie.

We can do better. Mr. Carter failed utterly to carry out his campaign commitment to make the arts a major means of bringing about a better understanding between our nation and all others. As a onetime film actor, President Reagan may have a better grasp of just how important this role for the arts can be.

"Vell, now vee must to begin, yes?"