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NEH Nominee Under Fire

Senators Question Curran Qualifications

By Mary Battiata
Washington Post Staff Writer

Edward A. Curran, the Reagan administration's controversial nominee for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities, yesterday found his credibility, commitment and qualifications under question in confirmation hearings for a job often described as "the nation's leading humanist."

Curran, a former headmaster of the National Cathedral School for Girls and present deputy director of the Peace Corps, made headlines in 1982 when he wrote to President Reagan suggesting the abolition of the National Institute of Education. Curran was director of the institute at the time, and his letter, which criticized the federal agency as a tool of the political "left," came just months after he had assured the same Senate confirmation panel that he would do his best to promote the institute's work.

It was that seeming inconsistency, as well as his stormy tenure at the Department of Education and

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the Peace Corps, that prompted a lineup of senators, including Claire Pell (D.R.I.), Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), Beth Schroder Dodd (D-Conn.), Lloyd B. Weicker (R-Conn.), Paul Simon (D-Ill.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.), to question Curran and ask him about his plans for the humanities endowment.

"There's a saying that goes 'Once shame on you, twice shame on me,"' Weicker told Curran. "What's at issue . . . testimony before this very committee that is clearly at odds with subsequent events. And now here we are again, and I'd like to make statements sup-

portive of the National Endowment, but . . . God knows if you won't get in there and find more members of the Senate and occasional and abolishing the agency is the way to deal with this thing.

The hearing appeared to raise as many questions as it answered, and is likely to prolong the controversy over a nomination that has been stalled for months. The NEH dis-
tributes more than $100 million in federal money each year for schol-
arily studies in the nation's schools.

Curran, who 10 days ago of glasses of water for the audience and the wait-
ning, told the members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Com-
mitttee that he had been working through channels since sending the Reagan letter, and pledged to "give my utmost best effort to the en-
dowment "is a visible leader in sup-
porting and encouraging the best of America's effort in the humanities." Curran's supporters have included committee Chairman Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), who have maintained where he got to his four-hour hearing, to succeed William. Ziolkowski, the director of the NEH.

Curran's critics have pointed out that he lacks a Ph.D. Yesterday's objections, however, appeared to have little effect on the relatively few academic credentials (he has an MAT from Drexel Univer-
sity) than his limited experience in scholarly research or writing and his record at the Department of Education and the Peace Corps.

Curran was forced to resign his position at the National Institute of Education after he claimed with his boss, the late Education Secretary Terrel Bell, over the letter to Rea-
gan. At the Peace Corps, Curran has crossed swords with his boss, Di-

rector Loret Ruppe, on numerous occasions. Their dispute has been described as personal and ideological, and reached a nadir last year when Ruppe was discovered to have secretly tape-recorded a conver-
sation she had with Curran about the continuing rancor in their rela-
tionship. Since then, Ruppe reportedly has given her letters and ex-
ceptions and excluded him from most key meetings.

Curran's response to question-
ing yesterday seemed to do little to enhance his standing among testifying and in the audience. "The hearing was disturbing," said O.B. Hardison, chairman of the board of the Wash-
ington-based Humanities Alliance, an association that represents more than 100,000 humanities scholars. "We feel that some grave questions were raised, and our concern is deepening.

Senators Pell and Kennedy said they had received more than 100 letters between them from constitu-
ents and humanities groups con-
cerned about Curran's nomination. Pell said it was difficult to recruit academics to testify against Cur-
ran's nomination, because they fear loss of NEH money should he be con-

mmed. The White House named Curran nine months ago to succeed William Bennett, who the chairmen voted to become secretary of education. Since then Curran's nomination has languished, stymied by senators, both by congression-
ally stalled by congressional moder-
ates and humanities groups.

Curran, 52, became headmaster at the National Cathedral School in 1968 after working as a teacher at a private boys' school in Houston, where he got to know Vice Pres-
ident George Bush. In 1980 he worked as a volunteer on the Rea-
gan-Bush campaign before becom-
ing associate director of presidential personal at the White House. Curran was accompanied yesterday by his wife Nancy and his most- sen and a aunt, remained in the committee room for the entire four-hour hearing, sitting without interference from influential sena-
tors, said they were influential sena-
tors, certified that they could not sup-
port his nomination.

"There are lots of distinguished professors without PhDs," said Theodore J. Ziolkowski, president of the Modern Language Asso-
ciation in Princeton, "but we wouldn't worry about them because we know their values from their [scholarly] works."

"Irene Schaefer, executive vice chancellor of UCLA, echoed those sentiments. "I believe the presiden-
tial nomination is insensitive and inappropriate. No matter how any one of my colleagues might have felt about Joe Duffy or Ron Berman [both chairmen under presidents Carter, Nixon and Ford], both had a record as outstanding teachers and outstanding scholars, and because of that the endowment was accept-
abled and nourished by the scholarly community."

It was unclear at the close of the hearings when Curran's nomination will come to a vote.