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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

See CURRAN, D6, Col. 1
The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is likely to prolong the controversy generated by letters between them from constituent and humanities groups concerned about Curran's nomination. Senate leaders, who have received more than 100,000 humanities scholars' letters expressing concern, believe the presidency's endorsement of Curran is insensitive and suspicious.

Edward A. Curran's response to questioning yesterday seemed to do little to dispel doubts that key senators are not fully satisfied with his answers and have raised concerns about his plans for the humanities endowment.

"There's a saying that goes 'Once shamed on you, twice shame on me,'" Weicker told Curran. "What's at issue is testimony before this very committee that is clearly at odds with subsequent events. And now we are here again, and you've made statements supportive of the National Endowment, but ... God knows if you won't get in there and find more members of the Senate and your colleagues and abolishing the agency is the way to deal with this."

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 distributes more than $100 million in federal money each year for scholarly activities in the nation's schools.

Curran, who dozed 10 glasses of water before the hearing, told the members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee yesterday that he had planned to work through channels since sending the Reagan letter, and pledged to "give my utmost effort to ensure that the endowment is a visible leader in supporting and encouraging the best of America's effort in the humanities." Curran's Committee Chairman Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), has maintained that Curran's nomination, which would have required a vote, is "deeper than the school board," and urged the agency to raise its profile among congressmen and humanities groups concerned about Curran's nomination.

Weicker said it was difficult to recruit academics to testify against Curran's nomination, because they fear loss of NEH money should he be confirmed.

The White House named Curran nine months ago to succeed William Bennett, who left the chairmanship to become secretary of education. Since then Curran's nomination has languished and has been stalled by the White House.

Curran, 52, became headmaster at the National Cathedral School in Washington in 1968 after working as a teacher at a private boys' school in Houston, where he got to know Vice President George Bush. In 1980 he worked as a volunteer on the Reagan-Bush campaign before becoming associate director of presidential personnel at the White House.

Curran was accompanied yesterday by his wife, Nancy, and his aunt, Terrel Bell, over the latter to Reagan.

At the Peace Corps, Curran has crossed swords with his boss, Director Loret Ruppe, on numerous occasions. Their dispute has been described as 'personal and political,' and reached a nadir last year when Ruppe was discovered to have secretly brought a campaign contribution she had with Curran about the continuing rancor in their relationship. Since then, Ruppe reportedly has given up major responsibilities and excluded him from most key meetings.