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A scholar and the Hill

John P. Roche

The trouble with saying something nice about Dr. Ronald Berman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), is it can get me into all sorts of trouble with deans, vice presidents for development and other university officials. To be specific, after this column, it would be absurd for me to apply to the foundation for a grant even for the most brilliant project. It would obviously be seen as a pay-off.

Also, to prevent any misunderstandings in the sunshine era let me note that I theoretically supervise a National Endowment grant at the Fletcher School in the area of civilization and foreign affairs.

Berman’s reappointment to his National Endowment position has been hanging fire on the Hill since the first of the year. It has not been overtly opposed—it has simply been ignored by the Senate subcommittee on Education of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee.

Now committee and subcommittee Chairman Harrison A. Williams Jr. of New Jersey has finally announced that a hearing will be held Wednesday on Berman’s fitness.

Let us hope this time Berman, who has other things to do with his life than watch the Senate play games, gets the simple justice he deserves: either thumbs up, or thumbs down.

Opposition to his reappointment has come from Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, who was the original force behind the creation of the NEH. I hold Sen. Pell in high regard and have attempted to discover his objection to Berman through personal correspondence, but to no avail.

It may be that he knows a number of things that I am unaware of, but the appropriate manner in which Berman should be evaluated is a subcommittee hearing where Pell’s views can be judged on their merits and Berman given an opportunity to reply openly to any charges.

As a member of the National Council on the Humanities from 1968-70, I had an opportunity to see the NEH at work in the pre-Berman period. A new program designed to fund various humanities projects understandably had a difficult teething period. Every tin-cup artist in the “humanities” descended on Washington. It took some time to reach even a ballpark definition of “humanities,” and establish monitoring standards. Indeed, meetings of the presidentially appointed council, which approves all grants, resembled sessions of the American Sociological Association.

I met Prof. Berman for the first time when he became a trustee of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars—a federally sponsored memorial to President Wilson which resembles a “think tank.” With Dillon Ripley, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Berman and I shared the dreadful burden of evaluating applications for fellowships.

One of the rumors about Berman suggests he is a “conservative”; another that he is an “abrasive elitist.” Let’s look at these charges. If “elitist” means that he would vote against a fellowship for an illiterate hustler, he is one, but such “elitism” should be a prerequisite for passing out academic grants.

“Abrasive?” I thought he was an admirable man to work closely with. Whether you agreed or disagreed, you always knew where he stood (and no wasted words). Finally, the roster of Woodrow Wilson fellows should demonstrate the total absence of any ideological bias: We were all opposed to the center becoming a halfway house for intellectual cripples whether liberal, conservative or vegetarian.

The experience I have had with Berman’s administration of the NEH confirms my high opinion of his talents. He has chosen a first-rate staff and with them runs a tight ship. In short, he should be confirmed enthusiastically—and there goes my last chance for a $3 million grant.