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Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 06

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The Honorable Claiborne Pell  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510  

Dear Senator Pell:  

Although I was not questioned on the matter, a good part of the discussion at the recent reauthorization hearing for the National Endowment for the Humanities touched on the intellectual and administrative background appropriate for any prospective chairman of NEH. Because I've seen the Endowment both as an academic scholar and as its Deputy/Acting Chairman, let me offer you my own views of the issue.  

A substantial percentage of the teaching, learning, and research within the humanities in this country involves pre-collegiate teachers, administrators, principals, superintendents, and, of course, students and the general public. At the NEH, and throughout the country, there have been major efforts in the last few years to enhance the image of secondary school educators, both in their own estimation and in the estimation of scholars. NEH has done much to prove to members of the secondary school community that they have vital interests in the realm of ideas and deserve the respect of the academic community. The message has gone out that high school teaching is important. Given that, I would be hesitant to say that a noted secondary school educator should de facto be precluded from serving as NEH chairman. Such an argument might risk reinforcing negative notions of provincialism within the higher education community without helping the efforts to raise up the vital work being done at the pre-collegiate level.  

At the NEH, we are committed to promoting excellence in all facets of the humanities. As you know, the Endowment's mission includes humanities education programs, programs which foster public understanding and appreciation of the humanities, and programs for scholarly research in the humanities. In fact, considering the broad range of projects supported in our program of Summer Seminars for Secondary School Teachers, General Programs, State Programs, Education Programs, and Challenge Grants, it would be fair to say that most of NEH's funds are awarded for projects which do not principally involve scholarly research.
One last point: the heads of many agencies often are not technically skilled in specialized areas under them but rather are administrators. This is true for most Cabinet officers and other high officials in virtually all administrations. The chairman of NEH is a senior public administrator as well as a national leader in all aspects of the humanities. He must possess a breadth and diversity of experience and a variety of skills—not just those of a scholar. I should also say that no matter how widely read or well educated, no one person can be knowledgeable about all the fields of the humanities; no single chairman can be an expert judge of the significance of all projects submitted for the review of the Endowment. William Bennett, whom we all agree was an excellent chairman, has a superior knowledge of philosophy but would not claim to know linguistics or Greek. That chairman, or any chairman, properly relies for judgment upon the Endowment's peer review process—on the recommendations of panelists, reviewers, staff, and members of the National Council on the Humanities.

What is most important for a chairman of the Endowment is the capability to lead the agency and to be a thoughtful spokesman for the humanities. There is every reason to presume that these qualities may abide in a leader from secondary education just as they may abide in an academic scholar. I think that we can agree that the humanities need not be perceived as the sole property of the academic scholar. Such a perception by others might impair the work which we all have attempted to do to make the humanities more central in the lives of all Americans.

Sincerely,

John Agresto
Acting Chairman

cc: Members of the Committee