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Letters: Outgoing (1990-1994): Correspondence 16

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March 3, 1993

Senator Claiborne Pell
Capitol Office
335 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

I am writing in regard to the upcoming reauthorization of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Recognizing that there has been some controversy about the NEH, along with the National Endowment for the Arts, I want to voice my strong support for both agencies. I hope that the controversies, which were blown out of proportion to the general workings of both agencies, will not undermine their ongoing support. I can only speak from personal experience on behalf of the National Endowment for the Humanities, where I worked as a Program Officer for three years. During the course of these years I came to recognize not only the value of the programs that were being funded but also the quality of the NEH staff. The Agency assemble a group of people who are absolutely dedicated to their work and are professionals of the highest order. The staff often changes, as it should to keep fresh blood into programs that help determine the intellectual life of the country in the humanities. Yet, the tone of the Endowment is such that the quality remains consistent: bright people with devotion to their work as federal employees.

I can also speak as a recipient of awards given by the NEH. These have consisted of participation in NEH sponsored workshops for teachers and a personal research grant. While I was most grateful for the research grant in the Travel to Collections program, I would emphasize even more the tremendous impact of the Summer Institute for Teachers. I taught in this program for two summers some years ago at Tufts University. A native of Boston, I was also raised in a family of teachers so was particularly responsive to the needs and demands of pre-collegiate teaching. As I recognized from my own family and my experience in these institutes, teachers often are so entangled in heavy teaching loads and paper work that the actual subject matter comes to be neglected. Fortunately, the NEH recognized the seriousness of this problem and established the Teacher Institute program. Through this program, teachers were literally revitalized and brought that revitalization into their classrooms. Even after ten years, when I first taught in the Institute, I receive communications from teachers expressing their gratitude for the opportunity to steep themselves in the content of the material that they present to young minds. Needless to say, this is just one example of the kind of program that has tremendous benefit to our society as a

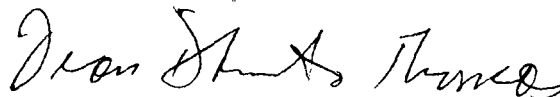
whole. Others could be cited as well in every area of American intellectual life.

If the reauthorization is granted, as I firmly hope, I would also recommend that the original legislation for the National Endowment for the Humanities be reassessed. In 1965, when the original legislation was written, I do not believe that legislators dreamed of the impact that the NEH could have on the intellectual life of the United States. Largely as a result of the dissemination of public programming in the humanities, the effect of the National Endowment has been a matter of public interest and has guided the course of the humanities for both the general public and the academic community. Yet the review process has remained virtually stagnant during this period. As a consequence, the Chairman of the NEH has sole control over funding, despite a very elaborate and very expensive review process. I believe that it is time that this system become more responsive to the import of the humanities in American life. To allow such control over the intellectual life of the United States, where freedom of thought has been the earmark of our democracy, seems to me to violate the founding principles of our republic and the spirit of the First Amendment.

Specifically, I would recommend that the unilateral power of the Chairperson be cancelled and that some system of appeal be implemented to realign the control of one person over such a crucial area in our culture. Personally, I have seen this power abused, both in cases of funding against recommendations from every level of the review process and, conversely, in denial of funding to grants recommended by the review process. I do not think that a more equitable system would be so difficult to devise that the logistics would outweigh the potential benefit to freedom of expression and intellectual endeavor in the United States.

If you wish further information or ideas, please contact me through the Louisiana Scholars' College at Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana 71497, or at the address indicated above (Tel. 318/357-1429). Thank you for any consideration of my concerns.

Sincerely,



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