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Conferees Stumble Into Endowment Bill Agreement

By Phillip M. Kadis
Washington Star Staff Writer

Somehow the solons got it all together and ironed out the details of the arts and humanities' bill. They scrapped and haggled to the end, spilling water on the conference committee table in agitation.

Acoustics in the cramped and stuffy House meeting room were so bad, they could hardly hear each other. They tried in vain, at first, to assert the authority of office to silence an unhearing but garrulous staffer who held the telephone, their sole link to the Senate, where attempts were under way to head off another filibuster, this one on the Senate floor.

And after she finally handed the phone, kept ringing to summon and resummon Sens. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., and Jacob Javits, R-N.Y., who began to look like Olympic finalists as they hurtled the outstretched legs of committee staffers and onlookers after more than a month of false starts, acrimony, postponements and wrangling — and the conferees were anxious to wind it up and move on to more important matters like education and anti-trust and taxes.

The compromise reached last week, after private conversations between conference chairman Pell and chief House conferee John Brademas, D-Ind., did not become unstuck. It was simply fleshed out and modified slightly for a minor point that was ironically a little too sticky.

The final one had to do with a Bincentennial challenge grant program in the Senate bill at the behest of Javits but absent from the House bill. Challenge grants are those which permit the arts and humanities endowments to draw on the U.S. Treasury for additional funds if outside matching-funds are obtained.

The problem was that a Bincentennial challenge grant program was the brainchild of philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III, who in handwritten slip of paper, proposed language that would preserve some of the broader concerns envisioned in the Senate version, including a phrase calling for "citizen participation" in decision-making processes.

The phrase clearly upset the ranking House Republican conferee, Albert H. Quie of Minnesota, who in previous conference committee sessions had thrown cold water on suggestions that Humanities Endowment funds be used to clean up pollution and old beer cans or to "chase out crooks" from the municipal governments.

THIS TIME, HE ACCIDENTALLY knocked over a glass of water as he reached for the note containing Javits' proposed language.

"The word "citizen" makes him nervous," said Javits laughing, then requesting that his remark bestricken from the local elected officials. Those were the words "participation," and the specter it evoked of the controversial and highly-charged experiments under the Office of Economic Opportunity which federal funds were used to challenge decisions of local officials.

The programs were dismantled under the Nixon Administration.

"I am less sensitive than the congressman about these matters," said Brademas diplomatically, "but I am sensitive to his sensitivities." Javits also wanted a waiver of a glass of water matching grants until at least 20 percent of the funds, at least for the Rockefeller Bincentennial program.

The Senate considered two compromises. Javits, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

"CAN WE PUT DOWN "provided the Rockefeller Foundation will pick up the matching money,?" he asked.

They dickered and finally settled on $12 million and $18 million with a 15 percent waiver. Only, said Brademas, because he wanted to bring the conference to a successful end, and because the waiver applied to a discretionary item. "Citizens" stayed in. "Participation" was removed.

Just as Brademas was about to review the final agreements, Javits requested a moment to make a phone call to "a friend.

"He's going to call Rockefeller," said a staffer, with several others chiming in.

Javits returned in a few minutes, all smiles.

"Language approved. Deal sealed.

The nation's artists culturocracy could breath a sigh of relief. The myriad of programs funded by both endowments would not be abandoned.

Tomorrow, some of the same conferees will take up a $36 billion education bill.

"You watch," said one veteran of legislative affairs, "they'll wrangle that one up in four hours."