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Be Fair To Dr. Berman

The trouble with saying something nice about Dr. Ronald Berman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), is how it puts 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 payoff. But then I console myself with the statistical probability that no more brilliant projects will come to mind before they gently lead me off to pasture.

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. (I say theoretically because with congenial, concerned colleagues the program really runs itself.) This was awarded to Fletcher before I joined its faculty and before Berman became chairman of the NEH. It is not renewable.

Now to Dr. Berman and his problems. To make a long story short, Berman's reapportionment to his national endowment position has been hanging fire on The Hill since the start of the year. It has not been everly opposed — it has simply been ignored by the Senate subcommittee on education of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. Now committee chairman (and subcommittee chairman) Harrison A. Williams Jr. of New Jersey has finally announced that a hearing will be held Sept. 15 on Berman's fitness.

Hearings have been promised at earlier dates, but somehow vanished into the legislative mist. 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 reapportionment 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.

Without trying to prejudice the results of a hearing and subsequent Senate action, let me set forth my views for the record. 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 Assn.

I happily lost touch with these seminars when my appointment expired and met Professor 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 that 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?" Maybe there are misguided souls who consider me abrasive, maybe Berman and I are Brooklyn boys understand each other, but I thought he was an admirable man to work closely with. Whether you agreed or disagreed, you always knew where he stood (and he wasted no 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.