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Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman  
Nomination Hearing (1993)

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## Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 07

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*A compendium of news, views, and marginalia*

**F**OR MONTHS, the rumors had been circulating, and on April 12, they ended with an announcement: Dr. Sheldon Hackney, president of the University, had been nominated by President Bill Clinton to head the National Endowment for the Humanities. A week after the announcement from Washington, Hackney had one of his own: he was resigning by June 30, at the end of nearly 12-and-a-half years in office.

Then, on April 21, Alvin V. Shoemaker, '60 W, chairman of the trustees, announced that the executive committee of the trustees had selected Dr. Claire M. Fagin, former dean of the School of Nursing, to serve as interim president. She will assume that office on July 1 and move into Eisenlohr Hall, the president's house, later in the summer, according to the news release announcing her appointment.

Hackney's initial response to the White House announcement was somewhat low-key. "I am honored that President Clinton intends to nominate me for the National Endowment for the Humanities chairmanship," he said

in a prepared two-sentence statement, "and, if I am confirmed by the Senate, I will be honored to serve."

That is not an insubstantial *if*. The chairmanship of the N.E.H.—most of whose budget is used to fund and match contributions to humanities projects that involve scholarship, research, museums, historical organizations, libraries, and archives—has become something of a political weather vane. Hackney, whose political views have, on the whole, been somewhat left of center, could face some opposition from conservatives on the subcommittee charged with conducting hearings on his nomination.

*The New York Times* described Hackney, one-time president of the Mercer County (N.J.) Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, as an "outspoken advocate of freedom of expression," and the *D.P.* reported that Hackney is "proud that, during his years as president of Tulane University and [Penn], he has allowed such

## SHELDON HACKNEY RESIGNS; CLAIRE FAGIN IS NAMED INTERIM PRESIDENT



Sheldon Hackney: *"If I am confirmed, I will be honored to serve."*

controversial speakers as King Hussein of Jordan and [the Nation of Islam's Rev.] Louis Farrakhan to come to campus."

In 1989, Hackney publicly defended the decision of Penn's Institute of Contemporary Art to mount an exhibition of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, some of which (the homoerotic ones) some members of Congress had called obscene. That exhibition, which moved on to other galleries around the country, became the focus of a bitter battle between those who favored freedom of artistic expression and those who wanted to withdraw Federal funding for art they deemed obscene.

In his brief announcement of Hackney's nomination, Clinton praised Hackney and focused on the noncontroversial aspects of the job. "The National Endowment for the Humanities plays a vital role in encouraging and enhancing a better understanding of our country's rich heritage," said Clinton: "Doing just that has been the work of Sheldon Hackney's life."

The ideological bonds between Hackney and Clinton were evident even before the election. Hackney openly favored Clinton's candidacy and joined a group of college and university presidents who took out newspaper ads supporting the Clinton-Gore ticket. (The *D.P.* also reported that the Hackneys had contributed \$1,000 to the Clinton campaign.) His wife, Lucy Durr Hackney, was a member of the board of the Children's Defense Fund when the fund's president was one Hillary Rodham Clinton—who, it was just announced, will be Penn's Commencement speaker this year.

After Penn, which has a budget of \$1.5 billion and a student population of about 22,400, the N.E.H.'s budget of about \$177.5 million and staff of fewer than 300 may seem trifling. (As may the \$123,100 salary, less than half of what Hackney draws at Penn.) But the agency, which awarded 2,199 grants last year, is said to carry considerable weight in the academic community.

The 59-year-old Hackney has been holding the University's reins since February of 1981—a lengthy tour of duty by today's standards, longer, in fact, than

that of any other incumbent Ivy League president save Dr. Frank H. T. Rhodes of Cornell University.

Much has changed since the tall, gentle-spoken Hackney first came to Penn from Tulane, where he served as president from 1975 until 1981. Academically, there has been a renewed emphasis on undergraduate education. Penn's endowment has more than quadrupled, from \$218 million to more than \$1 billion, and in 1989, the University launched its highly ambitious five-year Campaign for Penn—which has already received pledges of \$955 million toward its goal of \$1 billion, with more than a year to go. Hackney also sought to improve Penn's relationship with the West Philadelphia community and maintained a residence on campus. And he presided over Penn's impressive 250th anniversary celebration, which brought world figures to campus.

Hackney has dealt with a number of controversial issues at Penn, including the

attempts to diversify Locust Walk, campus security, an abandoned effort to make over Irvine Auditorium, plans to demolish Smith Hall, and the possible removal of the Reserve Officer Training Corps from campus, which stemmed from the discrepancy between the armed forces' stated policy that a homosexual lifestyle is incompatible with military service and Penn's stated policy of not discriminating against homosexuals. Having lobbied the United States Defense Department to change its policy on homosexuals, Hackney—who also said that he would prefer that R.O.T.C. stay on campus—admitted that he was relieved when Clinton promised to try to reverse the military's ban on gays, thus taking him off the hook. (Hackney himself served a five-year stint in the Navy as an ensign and lieutenant.)

It was also during Hackney's watch that the University sailed through the treacherous political shoals of state funding and the controversial Philadelphia Mayor's Scholarship program.

A native of Birmingham, Ala., Hackney earned his bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University, and, before turning to college administration, wrote about the South. (His 1969 book, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*, garnered the Albert J. Beveridge Prize as the best tome on American history that year.)

He earned both his master's degree and his Ph.D. in history from Yale University, and in 1965, he joined the faculty of Princeton University, where he became a professor of history. He began a three-year stint as Princeton's provost in 1972. In 1975, he was named to the Tulane post. He

continued to teach a course in American history while at Penn.

"I think he's going to go down in history as one of the great presidents of the University of Pennsylvania," Alvin Shoemaker told the *Gazette*: "I think that the legacy that Sheldon will leave has been one of excellent planning, and the expansion of financial resources of the University has been tremendous under his tenure."

In a press release, Shoemaker said the trustees expect to announce a permanent successor to Hackney by mid-1994.

Hackney will be the fourth of the top four officers of the University administration to leave Penn this academic year. In September, Dr. Marna C. Whittington, the



executive vice president, left to take a position in investment management; she was succeeded last month by Janet Hale. Dr. Michael Aiken, the provost,

Marvin Lazerson is leaving to become the chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on July 1; Dr. Marvin Lazerson, the George and Diane Weiss Professor of Education who serves as dean of the Graduate School of Education, has been chosen as the acting provost. Frederick C. Nahm, the senior vice president for planning and development, is also leaving in June to become president of Knox College; Virginia Clark was named to succeed him.

In the meantime, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is conducting a background check on Hackney, and the Senate confirmation hearings are expected to take place sometime during the summer.