1976

Berman, Ronald: News Articles (1976): News Article 31

Phillip M. Kadis

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_11

Recommended Citation

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Berman, Ronald: News Articles (1976) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.
Pell vs. Berman: A Bruising Draw After Round 2

By Phillip M. Kadis
Washington Star Staff Writer

It was round two in the Pell-Berman humanities championships. The contenders emerged in a draw, but only after a few body blows had connected. If Pell can keep the fight going for a few more rounds, Berman will be out on a TKO.

As the Congressional adjournment clock ticked on, the second day of Senate confirmation hearings on the renomination of Ronald Berman as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities ended without resolution. Just as it seemed the Senate Labor and Public Welfare committee hearings were drawing to a close, clearing the deck for a vote on Berman’sfitness to serve a second term, an acrimonious exchange between Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., and Berman again raised the possibility that the hearing might be expanded by calling witnesses.

If it is, chances become even slimmer that the committee will vote soon enough for the nomination to reach the floor before Congress’ scheduled Oct. 2 adjournment.

THE FLARE-UP started with an item Pell said he left last in his interrogation of Berman because it was “the least important.”

It had to do with newspaper accusations that Pell was attempting to “politicize” the National Endowment for the Humanities, to turn over control to “political hacks” through restructuring of state humanities councils.

Pell asked Berman if he considered those views a fair assessment of what the senator was attempting to do.

Berman said he did not, adding that it was “possible for the press to exaggerate … we have seen that in the past few years.”

Pell, who is one of the legislative founding fathers of the humanities endowment, then asked about references to “grocers and lumberjacks” and whether they might also benefit from the humanities. “Aren’t these references really symbolic of a non-elitist position that we are all seeking?” asked Pell with seeming innocence.

BERMAN AGREED that even lumberjacks and grocers can benefit from the humanities.

“Everyone can,” said Berman. “I take that very seriously.”

But, Pell pressed on: “You would prefer that funds not go to state bureaucracies for lumberjacks and grocers?”

Berman said that was not an accurate view of his position.

It was then that Pell said these were the very words Berman had used in covering letters sent out to members of the academic community along with newspaper editorials and columns attacking Pell’s position.

Would Berman like to put the covering letter in the record? asked Pell.

“There was no letter sent that was for publication,” replied Berman.

“I’m glad you said ‘not for publication,’” Pell said.

The phrase in the covering letter to which Pell objected read: “Implicit is the attempted politicization of the agency. Pell objects to the professional use of Endowment funds. He prefers that NEH funds go to state bureaucracies, and then be disseminated to grocers and lumberjacks to enable them to practice the humanities.”

PELL THEN ASKED if Berman felt the refusal of witnesses to appear against Berman because they allegedly feared a cutoff of endowment funds was a reflection on Berman’s chairmanship or on their courage.

More a reflection on their courage, replied Berman, who angrily denied that he had ever threatened the withholding of funds or had given cause for anyone to think they might be withheld.

Maybe the accusations should be made public, indicated Berman, so that they might be contested in public where libel and slander laws apply.

“Well,” said Pell. “Maybe we should have public witnesses, after all.”

At the end of the day, it was not clear when and if another hearing would be held. According to one staffer, if the committee fails to vote on the nomination this week, it will be too late to get the matter to the Senate floor in the glut of legislation before adjournment.