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October 2016

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Recommended Citation

Will, George F., "Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 34" (2016). *Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982)*. Paper 40.
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George F. Will

An Endowment That Should Stay 'Elitist'

The name of Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) will not dominate the histories of our age, but he has left a mark. Thanks to him, President Carter was able to nominate a new head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the foundation most important to American scholarship.

Pell's importance to the life of the mind in America flows from his chairmanship of the authorization subcommittee, which is sovereign over NEH. Pell's most notable recent exercise of sovereignty was in blocking for more than a year (until after the 1976 election) a vote on President Ford's nomination of Ronald Berman for a second term as head of NEH.

Brought to a vote, the nomination, which enjoyed broad and distinguished support in the academic community, would have been approved overwhelmingly. But Berman is a scholar and a Republican. To give Pell his due, he was offended by the former, not the latter.

Without being usefully specific, Pell thinks NEH funds too many "esoteric" scholarly projects that do not "reach out to the length and breadth of our country." He sometimes seems to think scholarship is esoteric. He thinks NEH should be more like the National Endowment for the Arts, which Nancy Hanks runs in a way designed to win the admiration of Congress.

Surely, Pell is pleased at least by the fact that NEH spent just \$500,000 to bring the Egyptian exhibition of the treasures of King Tut to six million American museum visitors. NEH spent just \$250,000 to bring BBC's "War and Peace" to 20 million television viewers. That is 0.0125 cents per viewer, a statistic that should satisfy Pell and others who think such cost analysis is a sufficient criterion for evaluating investment in culture.

Pell falls easily under the spell of statistics and is powerfully affected by the fact that in a recent 18-month period the Arts Endowment issued 5,000 grants totaling \$115 million while NEH issued only 2,045 totaling \$111 million.

Perhaps Duffey will be inclined and able to make Pell understand that the aim of NEH under Berman was excellence, whereas under Banks one aim of the Arts Endowment seems to be the

"Duffey's mandate includes cleansing NEH of what Carter calls its 'elitist image.'"

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Joseph Duffey, 45, is the only supporter of Carter's candidacy. Duffey's mandate includes cleansing NEH of what Carter calls its "elitist image."

Duffey, 45, describes himself as "a political person." He is a minister from Connecticut, where he received a Ph.D. from Hartford Seminary. He taught there and, briefly, at Yale before running unsuccessfully for the Senate, administering the American Association of University Professors and serving as an Assistant Secretary of State. His wife is an Assistant Secretary of Commerce. It is possible Duffey is "the best" or just the best person to please Pell.

Pell thinks NEH has been a "pale shadow" compared with the Arts Endowment, which he says has "generated more momentum" at the "grass roots." Pell thinks NEH should offer grants to "lumberjacks," "grocers" and "shoemakers." Presumably (Pell is a bit vague on this point) each would do his thing in the humanities field of his choice.

to be subsidized when paying the recorder. The Arts Endowment can rationalize this in terms of a populist, democratic doctrine that "art" is almost any instantaneous enjoyment of "self-expression." Needless to say, congressmen understand the charm of this.

But most worthy humanities projects—for example, historical monographs or translations—involve a more demanding standard of excellence achieved over time. Hence, grants for humanities projects generally must have a larger "critical mass" than grants for "art" as the Arts Endowment can conveniently define it.

Because of the nature of the disciplines it encompasses, NEH is inherently more comparable to the National Science Foundation than to the Arts Endowment. But one should not dwell on this fact, lest it kindle in Pell and Carter anxieties about the Science Foundation's "esoteric" projects and "elitist image."