Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Book Chapter 01

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The Firing of Ed Curran

SOME TIME after Edward A. Curran, the former headmaster of the prestigious Washington Cathedral School, became the director of the government's National Institute of Education, he concluded that his agency was so abysmally wasteful, so unnecessary, so harmful to American education, that it had to be abolished. Yet shortly after he privately communicated these findings to President Reagan, he was fired.

The story of what happened to Ed Curran and the obscure federal agency he headed is an important one — though it was overwhelmingly ignored by the national news media — because it reveals vividly the swift punishment that can befall a public servant who dares to challenge a bureaucracy's very existence. It also shows how an administration elected to eliminate wasteful, ineffective and harmful federal programs can sometimes become the unquestioning defender of such programs; how bureaucratic protocol can become more important than the need to cleanse away a nebulous program that fails every test of performance and effectiveness; and how expenditures, once set in motion, stubbornly defy all efforts to
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eliminate them. It is a story that needs to be told and retold—often.

The story begins with Curran's appointment by President Reagan and subsequent confirmation by the Senate in 1981 to be director of the National Institute of Education (NIE), the $53 million research program within the Department of Education. The slender, mild-mannered educator was a staunch supporter of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and he took his job as seriously as he took what Reagan said about reducing waste within the federal government. "I have been determined to work for the goals which were so resoundingly affirmed in the 1980 election," he later wrote. Thus, it was not long after he settled into his job that he became convinced that there was an excellent example of what Reagan was talking about—an agency whose esoteric, misdirected and marginal research grants were contributing nothing to the improvement of American education.

NIE has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars over the years on numerous studies on such subjects as "early American textbook collections," "sex role attitudes in young women and men," "women facing midcareer changes," "a legal history of American universities," and sexism in school boards, to name a few. While basic achievement test scores had been plummeting for years, and declining educational standards cried out for a return to basics, NIE was squandering its resources on such things as a $276,000 "sex equity in education" project. The grants supported pilot research in more than two hundred classrooms between the fourth and eighth grades in an attempt to eliminate sexism in education. No one, surely, condones sexism in education, but is this what our limited federal tax dollars should be supporting? Wasn't there a school in some inner city that could have better used that money to improve its facilities and educational programs?

NIE's budget has for years been almost routinely approved by Congress, which rarely questions any research expenditures, though most members do not have the foggiest notion how its dollars are really spent. The only significant exception to this occurred when a powerful senator sharply criticized what NIE had been doing with
our tax dollars and called for its elimination. The attack came from Warren Magnuson, then Democratic senator from the state of Washington and the powerful chairman of the Appropriations Committee. Magnuson was one of the all-time big spenders in Congress, particularly concerning anything having to do with education. Yet he and his staff found NIE’s expenditures so “extrinsic to the real needs of our nation’s education system” that he proposed eliminating all funding for it in the fiscal 1975 appropriations bill.

Bear in mind that this is, in and of itself, a highly unusual step for an appropriations panel which rarely, if ever, eliminates any program, let alone one having to do with education. Surprisingly, the Senate accepted Magnuson’s cut, but the House refused to go along, and NIE survived.

Then along came Ronald Reagan, breathing fire about how wasteful the federal government was. Even the panel of experts Reagan assembled during the post-1980 election transition period to study the Education Department suggested that NIE be phased out of existence. But as a respected educator and the former headmaster of a top-notch private school, highly regarded for its educational standards and levels of scholastic achievement, Curran wanted to render his own independent judgment. His study of what NIE was spending its money on soon convinced him that this was an agency that the American taxpayer could well do without. Its only beneficiary was an industry of assorted grantsmanship professionals who made a good living by applying for yearly federal grants to conduct various experimental studies that have had little or no impact on the development of good education.

Convinced of the rightness of his position, Curran submitted the evidence to the Office of Management and Budget and persuaded OMB Director David Stockman to propose in the fiscal 1983 budget recommendations that NIE be phased out by fiscal 1985. Everything seemed to be going well until an eleventh-hour appeal to the White House by Education Secretary Terrel Bell managed to win a reprieve for the agency. Bell’s close ally, Edwin Meese, counsellor to the president, overruled Stockman, and the NIE cut in the budget draft was erased. “We came very close to proposing that it be eliminated,” an NIE official and Curran ally said at the time.
Frustrated but determined, Curran sought advice from colleagues and friends about how he could overcome the obstacles he faced. How could he convince the administration he was heading an agency that was unnecessary, one that even a prominent, liberal Democrat in Congress once wanted abolished? Congress being the toady supplicant to virtually every special interest in the country, Curran knew that there was little chance of closing down this agency, unless the administration itself called for its elimination in its formal budget requests. With Meese in Bell’s corner, only the President himself could make sure that Stockman’s next budget carried a zero on NIE’s expenditure line. But how could he persuade the President, how could he even reach him?

Curran raised his dilemma with a friend, Lyn Nofziger, a long-time Reagan political adviser, and Nofziger had a simple suggestion: Why not write directly to Reagan and lay out your arguments in a carefully drafted letter of particulars? To insure that the letter would get to Reagan’s desk, Nofziger, who had just stepped down from the post of special assistant to the President for political affairs, gave Curran the secret correspondence code available only to top White House and cabinet officials, which would insure that the letter would get through the White House filtering process set up to handle the President’s incoming mail.

Curran wrote his letter, and without telling any departmental officials, sent it off to Reagan, bearing the special secret code. Inexplicably, however, the letter did not go directly to Reagan — few letters do — but instead ended up on the desks of Craig Fuller, White House secretary to the cabinet, and Richard Darman, Reagan’s liberal special assistant who controls the paper flow to the President. “It’s a bit unusual for a letter like this to bear any such code,” Fuller told me at the time, obviously surprised that a relatively middle-level department official would have access to such classified information.

Curran’s letter has never been made public. The White House refused all requests for its release. Curran, who considered the letter a very private communication between himself and Reagan, has never disclosed it, and has never even discussed it with a member of the press. He did, however, give a copy to Bell right after he had
sent it to the President. Bell, a supporter of NIE, was of course furious with Curran's proposal, and even angrier that Curran had gone over his head to the President. To this day, the Department of Education, under strict orders from Bell, has kept its copy under lock and key.

However, I have obtained a draft of Curran's letter, leaked to me by a former departmental official who remains bitter over Curran's mistreatment by the administration. The draft is an almost exact duplicate of Curran's letter, according to this official who read the final version that was sent to the White House. Among the points Curran made to the President were these:

1. NIE is "unnecessary" because educational research would continue without federal funding, particularly among the more than four hundred colleges and universities that have education departments and whose faculties are engaged in research under other grant programs.

2. The agency is also unnecessary because it "is based on the premise that education is a science and that schools are like armies or hospitals in that their progress depends on systematic 'research and development.' . . . this premise is false."

3. "America's schools are in sad shape, not because we don't know how to make them effective, but because we lack the will to apply what we already know. Strong local leadership, orderly classrooms, emphasis on excellence in the basic academic skills, and other ingredients of effective schooling are harder to sustain today than they were before the education programs of President Johnson's 'Great Society.' One reason is that these very programs have modified an army of outside 'experts' with a license to tinker and meddle but with no direct responsibility for actual results.

4. "The agency wastes money," Curran continued. Even Myron Lieberman, an education expert, a former consultant to the U.S. Office of Education, and once a supporter of increased funding for NIE, "became convinced over time that 'NIE's research is largely useless for any purpose except showing that more research is needed.'

"The taxpayer simply does not need a $99,000 survey on the po-
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Carl Cajander 

itical attitudes of college professors, or a study of the 1973 New York City School Board elections," he said.

5. "Obviously," he added, "I intend to use my powers as director to eliminate wasteful projects wherever I can. But at present more than half of my agency's budget lies outside my direct control, in the hands of 17 'labs and centers' scattered across the country.

"Like other well-organized special interests," Curran said, these NIE-funded "labs and centers" lobby Congress "to set aside a protected slice of the budgetary pie for their own well-being. Over the last 10 years this lobbying has succeeded to the point where the House and Senate Appropriations Committees treat these institutions as if they were so many dams and bridges — public works projects which receive favored treatment in Washington as long as they provide employment back home."

6. Moreover, the agency was "overwhelmingly" tilted toward the left in the choice of who gets the research grants and the conclusions those studies reach. Nine months after Reagan's inauguration, NIE "hosted a seminar on tuition tax credits [which Reagan supports] in which the overwhelming majority of the invited lecturers were anti-tax credit."

7. As NIE director, Curran said, he had taken "some of the steps needed to restore balance and objectivity, but I have already been publicly accused of trying to turn the agency into a conservative propaganda mill."

8. "In the long run, the public interest will be better served if the federal government simply drops NIE's mission and concentrates on the mutual collection of factual and statistical data — the mission of the National Center for Education Statistics. The interest groups would lose, but the values of pluralism, democracy and freedom would all gain."

He further noted that since World War II only two nonmilitary federal agencies "have actually been abolished," the Community Services Administration, and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, both eliminated under Reagan. "I would be delighted and honored to help make NIE the third," he told the President.

When Curran showed Bell a copy of his letter on June 1, 1982,
the secretary was livid. "How can you head an agency which you think should not exist?" Bell blurted out, without realizing the irony of his statement. Reagan had appointed Bell precisely because he wanted him to preside over the elimination of the Department of Education, a goal never vigorously pursued by the former Utah educator who was an early supporter of creating a separate cabinet-level department in the first place. Bell strongly hinted that if Curran could no longer support the continuation of NIE’s existence, perhaps he should consider resigning.

Curran had no intention of doing any such thing, though Bell quickly turned the matter into an “either him or me” situation and pressed the White House to dismiss the staunch Reaganite. Over the next several days Curran fought valiantly to win White House support, to allow him to stay in the post for which he had been appointed and confirmed. He had done nothing to merit dismissal, except exercise his free right to correspond about his deeply held views to the President. Unfortunately, Reagan had not seen Curran’s letter and thus subordinates were left to handle the intradepartmental squabble it sparked. That meant that the decision would be up to Ed Meese and implemented by then-White House Personnel Director Helene Von Damm, a longtime Reagan aide.

Initially, the White House hoped a compromise could be worked out between Bell and Curran. To that end the two men held a second meeting on June 8 in the department, at which Bell wanted Curran to recant his views on NIE. But Curran was no Galileo. The future of education did not revolve around NIE, and he was not about to say it did. The next day, after clearing his decision with the White House, Bell called Curran and told him, “I want you to stop functioning as director by the close of business today.”

Thus, in the end, the White House chose to side with Bell, and Curran was thrown out. Leaving with him was his trusted aide, Larry Uzzell, who soon set up a national organization, Learn, Inc., to reform federal education policies and lobby for the elimination of NIE.

When it was over, a presidential aide who sympathized with Curran’s position in the controversy remarked, “It’s a sad day when someone in our administration gets fired merely for suggesting that
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an unnecessary agency of government be eliminated." To this an Education Department official, one who did not support Bell’s action against Curran, said, “One would think that Ronald Reagan’s government would be full of people heading agencies they think should not exist.”

But for the White House high command, the Curran episode did not concern a wasteful, nebulous federal agency as much as it did a breach of protocol. By going over Bell’s head to the President, Curran had “violated good management procedures,” said Meese, who gave the final approval to dismiss Curran. “If you are a company commander, you don’t write to the commander-in-chief with your problems,” he explained to me in an interview. “That’s not the way things are done. If every program chief were allowed to do this, there would be chaos.”

“Then,” I responded, “what you are saying is that if you are a subordinate agency head and you have concluded that your program should be abolished because it is an unnecessary and wasteful bureaucracy, you should never under any circumstances communicate those views to the President?”

“That’s right,” Meese answered.

There was also Bell’s insistence that either Curran leave or he would. “What could we have done?” Meese said. “Keep Ed Curran and let Bell go?” That would not have been a bad idea.

At the end of an interview I had with President Reagan, when my tape recorder had been turned off and we were saying our goodbyes, he made an observation that really goes to the heart of what happened to Ed Curran. Shaking his head, and ruminating about the difficulty of getting federal spending under control, Reagan remarked that no matter how hard he tried to curb wasteful spending, it was frustrating “to know that down there underneath is that permanent structure that is resisting everything you’re doing.”

Edward A. Curran was eventually given another job elsewhere in the administration. Nevertheless, the record shows that when he was down there in that middle-management level bravely trying to eliminate one small corner of a wasteful bureaucracy that Ronald Reagan bemoans, he got fired for it.