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Don't Burn Hackney at the Stake

The National Endowment for the Humanities suffered during the Reagan and Bush years. Prominent academics accused it of putting ideology ahead of scholarship in awarding grants. The council that advises on what scholarship, research and public programs merit Federal money grew less distinguished, with fewer good scholars and too many nonentities appointed for ideological reasons.

Sheldon Hackney, whom President Clinton is considering for the N.E.H. chairmanship, could improve this sorry record. Mr. Hackney is a distinguished historian and a past provost of Princeton. He has been a successful president of Tulane, and now heads the University of Pennsylvania. According to Brown University's president, Vartan Gregorian, Mr. Hackney has "a judicious, moderate temperament." That's what the Endowment needs.

Emboldened by the scuttling of Lani Guinier, right-wing critics now want to sink Mr. Hackney on the grounds that he's too liberal. Moderate members of the Senate ought to be wiser. Mr. Hackney has shortcomings, but none that make him unfit for the National Endowment.

Critics focus on the way he handled recent racial disturbances at Penn. The most publicized event involved a white student who was tried by a disciplinary panel on charges of racial harassment; he had screamed an epithet at raucous black stu-

dents. Mr. Hackney's critics argue that Penn's policy inhibited free speech. Such codes can be dangerous when recklessly applied. But this seems not to have been the case in the Penn incident. The charges were withdrawn and the accused found innocent. Mr. Hackney also announced that disciplinary policies would be reviewed.

Universities are wrestling with a difficult task: how to protect free speech while curbing hateful speech that threatens to turn the campus into a barroom brawl. Mr. Hackney cannot be held liable for the poisonous racial atmosphere that makes some protections necessary.

His critics hit the mark when they say he dealt weakly with blacks at Penn who stole and destroyed thousands of copies of the student newspaper because they disagreed with one of its columnists. As president Mr. Hackney should have denounced the theft, even as he urged black students to fight writing with writing. Instead he issued a statement, saying that "two university values, diversity and openness, seem to be in conflict."

This was a mistake. But it should not outweigh his talents as administrator and scholar. The National Endowment's task is to help the humanities. Those who serve should have outstanding records of scholarship and creativity in the field. Mr. Hackney easily meets that standard.