
Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_71

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_71/58
Cleansing the ‘esoteric’ image of humanities fund

George Will

WASHINGTON — The name of Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) will dominate the history 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 that is sovereign over NEH. Pell’s most notable recent exercise of sovereignty was in blocking more for the Senate, administering the Arts Endowment, 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 “humbling” “groceries” and “shoemakers.” Presumably (Pell is a bit vague on this point) each would do his thing in the humanities field of his choice.

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 U.S. museum visitors. NEH spent just $320,000 to bring CBS’ “War and Peace” to 20 million television viewers. That is .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 the recent 12-month period the Arts Endowment issued $505.50 granting $11.5 million while NEH issued only $245 totaling $11 million.

Perhaps Duffey will be inclined and able to make Pell understand that the aim of NEH under Berman was excellence, whereas under Berman one aim of the Arts Endowment seems to be the satisfaction of a large number of applicants from a large number of congressional districts.

The Arts Endowment can give $500 to a voter in Leadville, Colo., who wants to be subsidized while playing the recorder. The Arts Endowment can rationalize this in terms of a program to provide opportunities for the enrichment of American life, and that, to fulfill its potential, the Humanities Endowment must enlist broader participation in a quality program.

The Humanities Endowment next year will have more than $100 million of the taxpayers dollars, with the congressionally-mandated objective of enriching American life by supporting the study and appreciation of humanistic learning.

There are important questions of policy and philosophy to be debated and decided involving the direction of this program during the coming year.

Regrettably, critics make no real contribution to this debate, but instead confuse the issues by falling out at nearly everyone involved, including President-Carter, Nancy Hanks, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dr. Joseph Duffey, the nominee for chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Congress generally; and myself in particular.

In the process, critics have distorted my own views, and not incidentally, butted their own arguments with erroneous information. But let us focus on the real issue.

I am convinced that the Endowment for the Humanities has not realized its full potential to provide opportunities for the enrichment of American life, and that, to fulfill its potential, the Humanities Endowment must enlist broader participation in a quality program.

In proposing that the Humanities Endowment reach out more vigorously to involve a broader spectrum of the American people, I am not rushing in blindly to destroy the character of scholarship in the United States.

Some appear to have forgotten that the Endowment for the Humanities was established by legislation which I introduced, and which was adopted by the Congress 12 years ago.

Since the establishment of the Endowment, I have had the privilege and responsibility of serving as Chairman of the Endowment, which has grown in part from the program and its funding. I have encouraged and supported the growth of the Humanities Endowment program from an initial funding of $2 million to its current level of $11.5 million for this fiscal year.

I am not about to air the destruction of what I have labored to create and develop. But I do believe that the Endowment has given sufficient emphasis to broadening participation in the enrichment of American life. The Endowment, with its emphasis on increased financial resources, provided by the taxpaying, in fact tending toward favoring an exclusive few or what some would call “elitism.”

Now what does elitist used in this sense mean? To me it means narrow, self-serving, ingrown, and closed off to the majority of our population.

Critics views notwithstanding, I believe that quality humanities studies need not be exclusive; and, indeed, I believe that exclusiveness in the administration of the Endowment program endangers its quality.

The chairmanship of the Humanities Endowment is a sensitive and influential position. I think it essential that leadership of the Endowment reflects the quality and breadth that may be found in every state of the country, in every academic, ethnic, and social community, and that every community benefit from humanistic studies,

The Endowment hampers its own goals if it tends toward concentrating grant awards within a relatively closed circle of scholars and academic associates.

I opposed the reappointment of Dr. Ronald Berman after he had served four years as Chairman of the Endowment. And here a correction is in order. As a member of Congress, I have never considered the Endowment to be a matter of, nor have I considered the Endowment to be a matter of personal interest.

In conclusion, I would be pleased that at least one critic was nominated for at least a temporary appointment because of my opposition to Dr. Berman’s reappointment. I would rather be remembered as a Senator who worked for more than a decade to establish and build the National Endowment for the Humanities than to the Arts Endowment. But one should not dwell on this fact, lest it kindle in Pell and Carter anxiety about the Science Foundation’s “esoteric” projects and “elitist image.”

George Will is a contributor to the National Review.

NEH on target for sound goals

Claiborne Pell

The Humanities Endowment next year will have more than $100 million of the taxpayers dollars, with the congressionally-mandated objective of enriching American life by supporting the study and appreciation of humanistic learning.

There are important questions of policy and philosophy to be debated and decided involving the direction of this program during the coming year.

Regrettably, critics make no real contribution to this debate, but instead confuse the issues by falling out at nearly everyone involved, including President-Carter, Nancy Hanks, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dr. Joseph Duffey, the nominee for chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Congress generally; and myself in particular.

In the process, critics have distorted my own views, and not incidentally, butted their own arguments with erroneous information. But let us focus on the real issue.

I am convinced that the Endowment for the Humanities has not realized its full potential to provide opportunities for the enrichment of American life, and that, to fulfill its potential, the Humanities Endowment must enlist broader participation in a quality program.

In proposing that the Humanities Endowment reach out more vigorously to involve a broader spectrum of the American people, I am not rushing in blindly to destroy the character of scholarship in the United States.

Some appear to have forgotten that the Endowment for the Humanities was established by legislation which I introduced, and which was adopted by the Congress 12 years ago.

Since the establishment of the Endowment, I have had the privilege and responsibility of serving as Chairman of the Endowment, which has grown in part from the program and its funding. I have encouraged and supported the growth of the Humanities Endowment program from an initial funding of $2 million to its current level of $11.5 million for this fiscal year.

I am not about to air the destruction of what I have labored to create and develop. But I do believe that the Endowment has given sufficient emphasis to broadening participation in the enrichment of American life. The Endowment, with its emphasis on increased financial resources, provided by the taxpaying, in fact tending toward favoring an exclusive few or what some would call "elitism.""