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Cleansing the 'esoteric' image of humanities fund

George Will

WASHINGTON -- The name of Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) will not dominate the headlines 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 for more than a year (until after the 1978 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's due, he was offended by the former not the latter. Without being useful to anyone, Pell thinks NEH funds too many "esoteric" scholarly projects that do not "reach out to the breadth of our country." He sometimes seems to think scholarship is "esoteric."A search for 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.

Pell is 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 "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 "ham-"and-grocery" and "shoemakers." Presumably (Pell is a bit vague on this point) each would do his thing in the humanities field of his choice.

Sured, Pell is pleased at least by the fact that NEH spent just $300,000 to bring the Egyptian exhibition of the treasures of King Tut to six million U.S. museum visitors. NEH spent just $2,500,000 to bring "War and Peace" to 20 million television viewers. That is .012% 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 fails easily under the spell of reallocating, and is powerfully affected by the fact that in recent 15-month period the Arts Endowment issued 5,500 grants totaling $115 million while NEH (by Pell's criteria only) issued 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 Hanks 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 writer in Leadville, Colo., who wants to be subsidized when writing the recorder. The Arts Endowment can rationalize this in terms of a per-citizen or per-applicant 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 "cultural mass": than grants for "art" as the Arts Endowment can conveniently define it.

Because of the nature of the disciplines, NEH is inherently more comparable to the National Science Foundation, which supports science-oriented programs.

Pell, and presumably Duffey, shares the opinion that the Arts Endowment has been "a pale shadow" compared with NEH, which Pell controls. Pell has been so effective in blocking the arts (and virtually the only other issue of consequence is the "appropriations bill") that it is reasonable to assume that NEH is more likely to be weakened by his successor than Duffey is to be weakened by Pell.

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

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

Regrettably, Pell's critiques make no real contribution to this debate, but instead focus the issue by failing to see the big picture. Including President Carter, Nancy Hanks, the chair of the National Endowment for the Arts; Dr. Joseph Duffey, the nominee for chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Congress; and I myself.

In the process, critics have distorted my own view, and not incidentally, butted their own arguments with erroneous information.

But let us focus on the real issue.

What does this endowment do? It endows a national project to enrich America's life in the arts.

It gives money to people who want to create and perform, write, or make something. It has always been a national effort to enrich America's life in the arts. It is backed by a consensus in Congress and the American people that America needs a national goal to enrich its arts.

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 "best," or just the best person to please Pell.

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