Bringing the Best to the Most

The search for a new head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which covered seven months and scores of candidates, has ended with the President's selection of Joseph Duffey. Unlike most of those who were considered, Mr. Duffey, a former chairman of Americans for Democratic Action, boasts no impressive scholarly credentials; he owes his new post not to his modest career in Academe but to his efforts in behalf of Jimmy Carter during the 1976 campaign.

The Endowment for the Humanities was set up in 1965, along with the more celebrated Endowment for the Arts, to encourage the advancement of such subjects as literature, linguistics, philosophy, history and archaeology. It is among the very largest of America's foundations; last year it gave out about $84 million. From 1972 through 1976, it was headed by Dr. Ronald Berman, a Shakespearean scholar of conservative political bent. Dr. Berman would still be in charge were it not that his stewardship struck Senator Claiborne Pell, an original sponsor of the Endowment, as "elitist." Senator Pell felt that too much money was going to a few prestigious Western universities and pressed to have 20 percent of the Endowment's funds distributed by the 50 governors. Dr. Berman resisted the active involvement of political officials. A compromise was reached to give money to the states for distribution by independent committees - but Dr. Berman lost his job.

Under Dr. Berman, Endowment grants ranged from the esoteric - production of a dictionary of the Hittite language - to the widely accessible - production of the public television series, "The Adams Chronicles." Many seminars and workshops for teachers were organized around the country. New histories of each of the states were generated. Distinguished scholars received research-guides. Major museum exhibitions, such as the show of artifacts from King Tut's tomb, now touring the country, were subsidized. The New York Public Library and its Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture received generous assistance. Dr. Berman relied on the advice of a large group of specialists in many fields and by large avoided playing politics with grants.

How the Carter Administration proposes to change the Endowment is not yet clear. The President referred last March to the Endowment's "elitist image." Mr. Duffey says he wants the humanities to take the initiative in redefining "national values." Such comments arouse concern that the Endowment will now be steered onto a more "popular" course, which may be more useful politically but less rigorous intellectually.

Unlike the performing arts, the humanities do not lend themselves to widespread popularity. Scholars work in private on subjects that sometimes provide easy targets for mockery. Senator Pell made much of a grant of $35,000 to Harvard for a catalogue of 4,000 Byzantine seals. But it seems to us preferable that a few researchers should be permitted to follow their own, albeit rarefied interests, than that all grants should be weighed on a scale of popularity. Much of the work of the scholar is by nature elitist; it requires knowledge, ability and dedication that cannot be widely shared.

Certainly, the products of such endeavor can often be dispersed to the nation. That is a major duty of the Endowment, one which the leaders of the humanities concede he did not emphasize sufficiently. But it is one thing to stir the nation's interest in ideas, quite another to compromise on quality work for ready acceptance. As Dr. Berman once said to his critics after he refused to fund studies of the lyrics of Bob Dylan and the prose of Charles Reich, "You can be accused of elitism if you confine education to the elite, but you can't be accused of elitism if you bring the best to the most." Mr. Duffey might hold to that precept as he descends from the polite world of politics into the treacherous realms of humanity.