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The New York Times

Founded in 1851

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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 archeology. It is among the very largest of America's foundations; last year it gave out about \$34 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 Eastern 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 the 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 grants. 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 and 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 even admirers of Dr. Berman 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.

Letters

Con Ed: Missi

To the Editor:

The recent blackout of the Con Ed system in New York, and its discussions both for Con Ed and the public have highlighted a weakness that seems to me to be obvious—but apparently has not been addressed by the responsible parties.

The chairman of Con Ed, C. Luce, in his post-blackout press conference, asserted that Con Ed has responsibility both to its shareholders and to its clients. Mr. Luce seems to believe that this statement covers the obligations of a private company. However, there is much more to the public utility's role than keeping its shareholders and clients satisfied: The city has its responsibility to the city, and its life depends on the performance of the policies of the quasi-monopoly energy supplier. If this is recognized and being true, it strikes me as a serious weakness that New York City has not officially represented on the board of Con Ed with voice and vote. How can the city and Con Ed coordinate their respective policies and plans if there is no official link? The dependency

'The Met Should Abolish

To the Editor:

I read in the Times that the Metropolitan Opera may be forced to close its season as of Sept. 9 unless it comes to terms with the unions that are currently negotiating new contracts. Apparently both sides are still very far apart and the musicians' union has demanded, among other things, a five-day workweek with no more than 10 performance a day.

But why stop here? Why not demand a guaranteed 65-week year of retirement after five years and a pension in Greece? The point is that there seems no limit to the greed of the unions or the idiocy of their demands.

I have a modest proposal for dealing with this lunacy. Simply shut down the Fire the orchestra and replace it with non-union musicians. I realize that in a city like New York this sounds like blasphemy, but what, after all,