Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): News Article 01

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Why Humanities Community Is Uneasy Over Proposed Chairman

By WALTER H. CAPPS

Perhaps it was to be anticipated that Senate confirmation hearings on a new chairman for the National Endowment for the Humanities this week would coincide with the 20th anniversary of the agency. Through the years, politics has often overshadowed recognition of the endowment's impressive educational accomplishments.

The Reagan Administration's nominee is Edward A. Curran, 51, deputy director of the Peace Corps. He served briefly as director of the National Institute of Education three years ago, and was forced to resign when he recommended abolishing that agency.

Curran's nomination has been opposed by humanities scholars and professional organizations on two major counts: First, he holds a doctoral degree in any of the humanities disciplines, and has had no direct experience in American higher education. His highest degree is a master's degree in teaching, and his hands-on institutional experience has been in private secondary schools. And his brief experience at the National Institute of Education raises serious questions about his administrative abilities.

These are the stated objections. The deeper worry is that Curran's professional qualifications for the job are only incidental to the need of the Reagan-Bush committee to find an appropriate place for a proven friend, strong ally and dependable supporter.

Through the years the humanities endowment has responded to these threats with a siege mentality. Such a response is understandable. But it would seem that if Taiwan is to present itself as the political alternative to a communist China, then a more productive strategy would be for it to become progressively more liberal and democratic. The conservative strategy is a retrograde one that is undermining Taiwan's image and the support that it has in the United States. The 20 million hard-working inhabitants of Taiwan, including the many talented and truly dedicated government officials, deserve better than that.

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Nearly all these nations now have some form of economic and political restriction on trade with that country. But these measures are more symbolic than damming.

It is true that at least 10 U.S. states have passed legislation prohibiting their pension funds from investing in companies with South African links, and at least 30 cities have done the same.

But two academics at South Africa's Natal University, Michael Sutcliffe and Paul Wellings, argue that relatively few jobs in South Africa are likely to be affected by these measures. They point out that most foreign investments in South Africa are indirect—in the form of loans or shares, which are rarely job-creating.

There is therefore little reason to expect foreign investments to play a crucial role in revising the South African economy, they contend.

As for the much-vaulted effect of divestiture on South Africa's neighboring states, the writers conclude that it is unlikely to be significant, because Pretoria's own economy would not be threatened.

Nevertheless, the politically inspired measures imposed this month by the Reagan Administration and the European countries are causing concern in Pretoria. If they were not, the government would hardly have introduced legislation several months ago making it treasonable to advocate divestiture or sanctions inside the...