

2016

Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 45

Harold C. Schonberg

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Recommended Citation

Schonberg, Harold C., "Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 45" (2016). *Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982)*. Paper 54.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_71/54

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Articulate Humanities Chairman

Joseph Daniel Duffey

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

WASHINGTON

JOSEPH DANIEL DUFFEY, whose nomination as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities was announced yesterday by the White House, makes no bones about the fact that he was reared in West Virginia as "a hillbilly and a Baptist." That has helped put him into a close relationship with another prominent hillbilly and Baptist, one Jimmy Carter. They can identify with each other, and do. This may not cut much ice within the academic community, but it does suggest that between the endowment and the Oval Office there will be a working relationship that previous chairmen have not always enjoyed.

The outgoing chairman, Dr. Ronald S. Berman, was appointed in 1971, and his tenure, especially in recent years, has been stormy, especially in his relations with the powerful Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island. Senator Pell accused Dr. Berman and the endowment of "elitism." Others found him overbearing and arrogant. Dr. Berman, when giving interviews, would carefully spell out words of more than two syllables. "There are very few of us who understand the humanities," he would loftily say. These actions did not make him many friends.

The calm Mr. Duffey (he has a Ph.D. but does not like to be called "Doctor") will not be raising hackles as Dr. Berman did. Urbane, articulate and relaxed, he likes to talk and philosophize, turning over all sides of a problem. He has an unusual past. He came up from poverty, was ordained at 18, had his own parish for three years, then left the pulpit to teach. He got a master's degree from Yale and his doctorate in 1969 from Hartford Seminary, where his dissertation was "Mumford's Philosophy of Technology and Culture." Then he taught at Yale. Primarily he was a sociologist specializing in urban studies. He also has served as chief administrative officer of the American Association of University Professors.

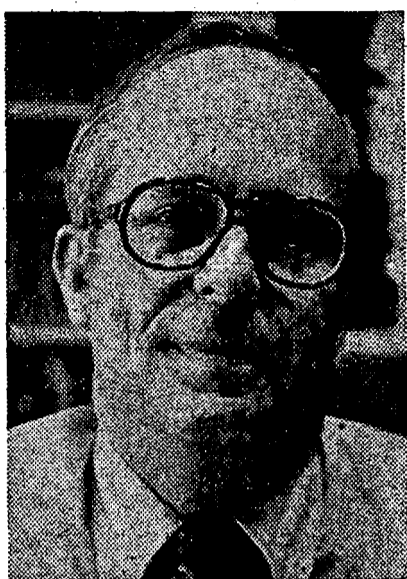
Politically he was a liberal, active in affairs of the Americans for Democratic Action (he was national chairman of A.D.A. in 1969 and 1970). It was in 1970 that he attracted national attention. To everybody's surprise, Mr. Duffey won the Democratic primary for United States Senator in Connecticut, running on a liberal, antiwar platform. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. beat him on Election Day, but only because ex-Senator Thomas Dodd, running as an independent, siphoned off many Democratic votes. Mr. Duffey has only recently finished paying off his campaign debts. He worked as associate director of issues for the Carter campaign, and came to Washington with the new Administration. Last January he was named assistant secretary of state for cultural affairs.

The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were established by act of Congress in 1965. Each year has seen an increase in their appropriations. Last year each agency had about \$75 million to disburse. Nancy Hanks, the imaginative and ebullient chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has put her agency very much in the public eye. The National Endowment for the Humanities never has had equivalent publicity and glamour.

Public Law 209, which established the two endowments, describes the term "humanities" as embracing—among other things—language, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, archaeology, comparative religion, ethics, the history and criticism of the arts, "and those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods."

The mission of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in the bill's own words, is "to promote progress and scholarship in the humanities." It gives research grants, helps various state and local programs, helps support centers of research (including museums and libraries), undertakes educational programs, offers fellowships and stipends, helps sponsor radio and television programs and in general lends a helping hand to the furtherance of knowledge.

Mr. Duffey says that he is not coming to the endowment on a white charger. He did not seek the job, and says that the President asked him to assume it, "after certain constituencies and candidates started eating each other up."



The New York Times/Teresa Zabala

"We'll see what happens as we go along."

Reliable sources describe the fierce academic infighting that took place after Dr. Berman's resignation. Some candidates announced that they had turned down the nomination when in reality they had never been asked. Some made allegations about "mandates," with the implication that certain Presidential strings were attached to the job. Each candidate had his supporters from the academic community, which has as many special interests as there are lobbies in Washington. Academics already are responding to Mr. Duffey's nomination with sour faces. To them, he is less a prominent scholar than a mere politician, and they are spreading the word that he is being installed to carry out certain sinister Presidential populist ideas.

To all this, Mr. Duffey shrugs. "I have never heard that the President wants to popularize the humanities," he said early this week. "The only mandate he and I have is to take over an area that we feel important to American life. We must work toward a society in which we are more tolerant and aware of a plurality of world views."

Mr. Duffey defines the humanities as "those disciplines whose function and purpose are self-discovery and the exploration of the human experience." He sees the role of the National Endowment for the Humanities as "prompter, stimulator and nourisher." But, he says it is a tricky role because of the special interests involved and the passions it arouses.

"People feel intensely about it, and the Government has to play its part with sensitivity. In the learned community there is the ever-present fear of a cultural czar. I know. I had that feeling myself. It is right to worry about the possible politicization of the arts and humanities. It is also right to worry about elitism, though there are those who confuse elitism with snobbery. Snobbery is repulsive anywhere you find it. We have to recognize, too, that there is a certain amount of elitism in many parts of American life. But here we get into definitions of excellence. Of course, excellence must be rewarded. We want a society that rewards and encourages achievement. But we also have to initiate excellence. Fortunately we've accepted the point that it is important to preserve our cultural and intellectual organizations. That battle has been won."

As yet, Mr. Duffey is not prepared to make policy statements. "I have values and convictions, and we'll see what happens as we go along." But of one thing he is certain. "The N.E.H. will be no lace for the exercise of narrow partisan politics."

Mr. Duffey, 45 years old, is about 5 feet 10 inches tall, well-built, and a compulsive worker whose main hobby at the moment is cooking. He was married to Patricia Fortney and was divorced in 1973. That year he married Ann Wexler, who works in Washington as a deputy secretary of commerce. There are two sons from his first marriage. Michael is a journalist for Rolling Stone in New York, and David, still in college, intends to be a sculptor.

"No blueprints," says Mr. Duffey in conclusion. "We grope for what we want to do. Today we are less confident than we were 10 years ago. We are chastened, less arrogant, less sure of our mission. It's a difficult time. But never in my life has there been such awareness that the humanities can reach out to the public."