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Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 30

Jacqueline trescott

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THE WASHINGTON POST
February 13, 1993

The Humanities Anxiety Attack

Fearful Agency Backers
Offer Ideas on New Boss

By Jacqueline Trescott
Washington Post Staff Writer

"The heart" of the National Endowment for the Humanities, said its acting chairman yesterday, "keeps on beating." But anxiously.

Indeed, the principal government agency for America's scholarly community was busy doing what it does to promote culture: reviewing applications, announcing grants, wrestling with problems such as the looting of antiquities, and patting itself on the back for work it has supported that has won awards.

All of that was on the agenda of the National Council on the Humanities, the advisory board to the NEH, which met over the past two days for the first time since President Clinton took office. And while the 90-minute public session was fast-paced and often lighthearted, the agency and its supporters are feeling the transition uncertainty of all government agencies. It now has an acting chairman, Jerry L. Martin, a holdover from the Reagan and Bush administrations, who stoically said yesterday, "We will proceed with the public's business." It has a liaison from the White House, Martha B. Chowning, who has a degree in English literature and has worked as a theater administrator and actor.

Yet still to come are the naming of a new NEH chairman, the expected battle on Capitol Hill over its fiscal 1994 budget, potentially protracted negotiations over reauthorizing the agency and the effect of the White House's order to trim personnel. Although the humanities community knows there are good reasons why the agency has not been on the front burner of the new administration, the constituency is eager for the

To wit, a number of advocacy and membership groups have unabashedly offered their suggestions for chairman to administration officials. The names range from university presidents such as Sheldon Hackney of the University of Pennsylvania; to longtime humanities activists such as Nancy Stevenson, former chairman of the Illinois Humanities Council; and scholars including Gary Nash, a historian at UCLA.

Chowning said the White House personnel office is reviewing a short list, culled from external suggestions as well as its own nominations. "They have completed the search, but I don't know how whittled down it is," she said. "The timetable is hard to be certain of."

The humanities partisans are hoping for someone "prominent, someone who can make the case," as one said, and has credibility as well as credentials. "It has to be a person who can help the Congress and American people understand why the future of the humanities is important to the future of the nation," said Jamil Zainaldin, the presi-

dent of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. He is pushing for a humanities communicator who could explain "how the development of scholarship can be extended to a wider American public and how that can better the quality of life."

In recent years the humanities endowment has not experienced the off-the-charts political skirmishes of its sister agency, the National Endowment for the Arts. But the NEH's last chairman, Lynne Cheney, provoked lively discussions and some controversies in the scholarly community by tackling the trends of political correctness and multiculturalism.

Cheney's critics say she had been deft at putting a conservative slant on grants-making and appointments, though they credit her considerable political skills for advocating a larger budget that grew to \$177 million last year. Cheney did not respond to requests for an interview.

Now the endowment is waiting for its Clinton stamp.

So far, despite the phenomenal embrace of the entertainment community during the inaugural events, the administration has been quiet about its arts policy. The Democratic platform summed up its position on the arts in

one sentence: "We believe in public support for the Arts, including a National Endowment for the Arts that is free from political manipulation and firmly rooted in the First Amendment's freedom of expression guarantee."

The lack of mention of the humanities, said one source, continued in the transition period when at times it wasn't clear if the Clinton representatives understood the difference between the two arts agencies.

Chowning disputed that view and added that the reports on both endowments were "straightforward, definitely not political manipulation."

In the end, the confidential transition report prepared for Clinton has suggested a return to "balance" for both agencies—meaning ideological balance—and strong leadership, according to sources.

If the present configurations are followed, Clinton can fill the chairman's job and immediately only one of 26 council seats, as well as a half-dozen staff jobs.

Reviewing the six years of Cheney leadership, John Hammer, executive director of the National Humanities Alliance, was careful with criticism and praise. "The hallmark for us was devel-

opment of the most important preservation of printed books program in the country. When Lynne Cheney started out it was a program of \$4 million a year, and now it is spending well over \$20 million," said Hammer.

On the other hand, he expressed some misgivings about appointments to the council. "A very large proportion come from the right spectrum of the political field, and that has made it homogenous. In addition a number of council members are highly critical of the trends in scholarship in the last 20 to 30 years. To have that as the sort of overriding view is difficult."

Among the scholars and activists various groups have suggested to the White House are: John D'Arms, dean of the graduate school at the University of Michigan; Wayne Booth, a professor emeritus at the University of Chicago and a past president of the Modern Language Association of America; Roderick French, vice president for academic affairs at George Washington University; and Charles Muscatine, chairman of the Federation of State Humanities Councils and professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Berkeley.

Other names forwarded to Clinton personnel staff include Jill Ker Conway, former president of Smith College and a fellow at MIT; Elizabeth Topham Kennan, president of Mount Holyoke College; Emma Jordan, a professor at

Georgetown University Law Center, president of the Association of American Law Schools and an official with the Clinton transition; William H. Chafe, chairman of the history department at Duke University; Peggy Whittman Prenshaw, a Southern studies specialist at Louisiana State University; Huel Perkins, an educator at LSU; Sondra Myers, cultural adviser to the governor of Pennsylvania; and Robert Vaughan, president of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

Others, whose names surfaced and who declined to be part of the mix, included Vartan Gregorian, the president of Brown; Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of the Afro-American studies department at Harvard University; and Stanley Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies.

Hackney, a historian and a past president of Tulane University, was one of 200 college officials who endorsed Clinton last fall. Hackney's wife, Lucy, is a member of the board of the Children's Defense Fund of which Hillary Clinton is a past president.

A medieval scholar and a longtime activist in the humanities world, Muscatine was a member of the Guggenheim Foundation for 20 years and was its chairman for four. Muscatine finds a number of praiseworthy elements at NEH: "The status is surprisingly good. Even people who would not be sympathetic with the general drift of the past administrations would agree the professional staff is absolutely first-rate."

Muscatine added that some repair to the agency's reputation is needed. "I think the allegations of political bias certainly damaged the image but I don't know of any documented cases."

Vaughan wants a more active role, both to tell people the work of the humanities and to show connections to everyday life.

Speaking cautiously of his interest, French said, "I continue to be very much concerned that the endowment recover the confidence of the humanities community, the general public and the Congress, all of which I believe slipped somewhat over the last dozen years." French, who has been involved with humanities issues for more than 20 years, helped establish the D.C. Community Humanities Council in 1979.

Nash served on the NEH's film and TV panel and is the associate director of the National Center for History in the Schools, which is funded by NEH. In general, Nash said the work of the endowment, especially its outreach to teachers, has been important. "Bringing them up to date on disciplines that they last studied in college, invigorating them and bringing innovations into the classrooms, that is one of the special aspects where the taxpayers get benefits for a relatively small amount of dollars," he said.

Stevenson, who is the head of Voice for Illinois Children, has already seen some steps she likes. "The humanities are the stories grandmothers tell to their grandchildren; they are the connections we make," said Stevenson. She noted that some of the inaugural programming fit that definition. "In the folk festival on the Mall and the children's programs, I saw strong signals of their interest."