Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 39

Steve Goldstein

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Penn president to get NEH job, sources say

Sheldon Hackney will be nominated to lead the National Endowment for the Humanities.

By Steve Goldstein

WASHINGTON — University of Pennsylvania president Sheldon Hackney is about to be named to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, sources said yesterday. "The announcement is imminent," a White House official said. "I understand that everything is a go," said a Capitol Hill source familiar with the selection process, who asked not to be identified. "Everything is moving forward and we expect an announcement soon."

The sources cautioned, however, that the process was not complete. As is standard procedure, background checks are being done on Hackney and, as the source said, "it ain't over till it's over. Just ask Zoe Baird."

The reference was to President Clinton's first choice for attorney general, who withdrew her name from consideration during Judiciary Committee hearings that focused on her hiring of an illegal immigrant as a nanny. Hackney should not have that problem. His three children, Virginia, Fain and Elizabeth, are grown and out of the house.

Penn’s chief executive met in Washington yesterday with administration officials, and his appointment could be announced as early as Monday. His nomination would have to be confirmed by the Senate.

After returning to the campus in the afternoon, Hackney declined to comment.

Hackney, 59, has been Penn president since 1981. Born in Birmingham, Ala., he is an award-winning scholar of Southern history and holds degrees from Vanderbilt and Yale Universities. Hackney previously taught at Princeton and was the president of Tulane University for six years beginning in 1975.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is supposed to be the liaison between the federal government and the academic community.

Hackney would move from a large university with 22,400 students and a budget of $1.52 billion to a relatively small agency (by federal standards) with fewer than 300 employees and a budget of about $177.8 million.

The NEH wields a big stick, however. Last year, the agency made
Penn's president will be named
to lead NEH, sources say

2,199 grants totaling $159.1 million to
the nation's libraries, museums, col­
leges and individual scholars.

The nomination of Hackney, an
outspoken supporter of freedom of
expression, could set off alarms
among conservatives on Capitol
Hill. In 1989, he defended the deci­
sion of Penn's Institute of Contem­
porary Art to exhibit the controver­
sial photographs of the late Robert
Mapplethorpe, which had been la­
beled obscene by Sen. Jesse Helms
(R., N.C.) and some other lawmak­
ers.

Penn's 21st president has been the
front-runner for the NEH job almost
since his name surfaced in February.
He was recommended to President
Clinton's team by Vartan Gregorian,
the former Penn provost who is pres­
ident of Brown University.

Accentuating Hackney's consider­
able credentials is the fact that his
wife, lawyer Lucy Judkins Durr, was
a member of the board of the Chil­
dren's Defense Fund, when Hillary
Rodham Clinton was the fund's pres­
ident.

Sen. Harris Wofford (D., Pa.), a
former Bryn Mawr College presi­
dent, has been quarterbacking the
nomination.

"Harris has been a strong propo­
nent of Sheldon's appointment to the
position," said spokesman David
Stone. "He will be very enthused if
and when it comes about."

The excess caution surrounding
the announcement stems not only
from the Baird-Kimba Wood debacle
at Justice, but also from the adminis­
tration's sensitivity to issues of gen­
der and race in making appoint­
ments.

Originaliy, the NEH appointment
was supposed to come in tandem
with nominations to head the other
two big arts agencies, the National
Endowment for the Arts and the In­
stiute for Museum Services.

But sources said the NEA and IMS
appointments are lagging behind
the pace of the Hackney nomina­
tion.

Hackney would replace Lynne V.
Cheney, the wife of former Defense
Secretary Dick Cheney, who re­
signed at the end of the Bush admin­
nistration.