Humans Endowment in Controversy Over Columbus Anniversary

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1492 be contrasted, and that the consequences of their encounters with each other be assessed.

'Lack of Even-Handedness'
The N.E.H. rejected the proposal in September, telling the applicants that reviewers had concerns about "a lack of even-handedness in the film's approach, with distressing aspects of Aztec culture being minimized, while the excesses of the Spanish are emphasized."
The applicants say that copies of the comments by the peer-review panel tell a different story. Five of the panelists gave the proposal the "highest recommendation," and the other two gave it the next highest rank, "strongly recommended."
The reviews called the treatment of the period "excellent and sorely needed," "a model for how a major proposal should be made," and "superb," according to the evaluations.
The proposal was sent to three outside evaluators after it had been approved by the peer-review panel. One scholar called it "entirely worthy of N.E.H. support," but in the written review, another stated "it would be hard to suggest improvements," and a third praised parts of the program, but objected to one segment for depicting Spanish rule in the Americas as too harsh.

"We had been told by several sources that Cheney had personally reversed approval of the grant, so we decided to appeal to her directly," says Ms. Roelker. At a September meeting, she says, "Mrs. Cheney repeatedly referred to our bashing of Columbus and the European conquerors and said that the Spanish- and Italian-Americans would be up in arms if taxpayer money supported such a project."

Ms. Says Ms. Brandt, the documenter's producer: "There's a double standard being applied. It's O.K. to bashing white Europeans, but not the barbarism of the Europeans. That's a political bias to treat Spain's deci- civilizing as the only civilization worth studying."

"The program is just the usual thing that comes out of historical reflection—a mixed picture," says Natalie Zemon Davis, a professor of history at Princeton University and a member of the advisory board for the series.

Ms. Davis and other historians say the rise of the new social history, with its focus on the lives of non-elite people and non-written records, wrote a new chapter in this long-standing attention to race and ethnicity.

Those developments have pushed research on the 15th and 16th centuries beyond the European explorers to look at the native populations they encountered. The emphasis is now on the exchange of cultures—and on the negative as well as the positive aspects of the encounter.

"Youth," says a professor of history at Princeton University, "is planning its quincentenary."

James M. Lockhart, a professor of Latin American history at the University of California at Los Angeles, is planning the 15th-century's quincentenary. "I don't know what N.E.H. means," he says. "It just seems like a very derivative that is still standard in scholarship it's almost old hat."

Too Hot to Handle

The producers of 1492 also say that while the N.E.H. deemed their series too hot to handle, other agencies seemed to have no such qualms. The project has been endorsed by both the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, the official federal sponsor of the quincentenary program, and by Spain, the Spanish government's equivalent. The National Gallery of Art plans to show the series at its Columbian exhibit next year.

The scholars working on 1492—Clash of Navigations are not the only applicants to question whether the N.E.H. may be uncomfortable with a cross-cultural approach to the quincentenary.

National History Day, an independent corporation established in 1974 to encourage the study of history among secondary-school students, is planning its 1992 program around the theme "Discovery, Encouter, Exchange in History: The Seeds of Change."

Last summer, with N.E.H. support, it sponsored an institute at the Library of Congress to introduce secondary-school teachers and li-
The "Endowment Is 'Drying Up'"

Lynne Cheney: "Because we are a diverse culture, it is all the more important that projects exhibit a balanced approach to all groups."

Some observers say it is public debate that the N.E.H. is nervous about. "I've been at scores of university quincentenary programs that have had N.E.H. support," says U.C.L.A.'s Mr. Lockhart. "But it appears there are different criteria applied when something is safety within the academic world and when you go public."

Says James S. Ackerman, a professor of history at Harvard University and a member of the 1992-Clash of Visions advisory board: "It's just the potential to reach millions through a medium like television that the N.E.H. seems to fear."

Some critics say there is a pattern of the Endowment trying to control reviews with former staff members, peer-review panels, and applicants painting a picture of top agency fear that the N.E.H. "fears the unknown."

"Basically, the people at the top are cowards," says one. "Rather than being in the forefront of thought and discourse in the disciplines, the N.E.H. is going with very conservative approaches."

You Become Cautious"

Another source says: "Sometimes it's hard for even the program officers to know why grants that have had strong peer evaluations were turned down. It doesn't happen all the time, but when you've been turned once or twice, it has a chilling effect. You become very cautious about the whole spectrum of what you recommend."

Many of the overturned grants are said to deal with non-Western cultures or racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. The curator of one non-Western exhibit was twice turned down for N.E.H. support requested copies of the project's peer-review evaluations. He says they were glowing.

"I don't think the N.E.H. has a bias against non-Western subjects as such," he says. "The problem is controversy. It is tied into the real racial overtones, because of the kinds of topics while America first came to be."

Take, for example, the case of a group of scholars who have worked with wampum, the public television documentary project. It proposed to produce a television series on Latin America, to be called Americas. "I think the Endowment has received recommendations from peer-group reviews of any project I'd ever seen," says Alfred Stepan, dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, who worked on the project. "It was turned down by the N.E.H. . . . there seemed to be a feeling that the difficulty was with our interdisciplinary approach, and with our effort to link history with a discussion of present-day problems," he says.

Support Is Drying Up"

Phi Beta Kappa's Mr. Foard points out that the N.E.H. has been under fire from both the cultural- and political-left for its alleged Eurocentric bias -- an issue that has been noted by observers saying it is public controversy that engulfed the National Endowment for the Arts when some charged it with sponsoring pornographic work. Some congressmen have made it clear that the N.E.H. is nervous about the awarding of grants is no more political now than it has ever been.

"The chairman is a political appointee, after all, and that has always been the case," says the representative of an association in the Fine Arts who was asked to be identified. "But the process is not necessarily bad. Making the chairman answerable to politics is a form of public accountability."

Gledey McKin-Smith, Brian May College, Greensboro-Bergdoll, Pa., who works with WGBH, the public broadcasting station from Boston, called the Endowment's actions a "job in New York." Sources say they were glowing.

Mr. Lockhart, a professor of history at Case Western Reserve University, who worked on the program: "There's no way you can deal with Latin America in a U.S.-Latin American relations, and avoid controversy. My fear is that the N.E.H. is nervous about the controversy as something the endowment shouldn't support, and secondly that she is defining what constitutes controversy."

Mr. Womack has refused to serve on N.E.H. peer-review panels because of the controversy. "This is where my opinions will be taken seriously," sources at the N.E.H. say others have taken the same position. Concern for the way the peer review process works at the N.E.H. goes back well before Mrs. Cheney, who worked on the program: "It's not because she is defining what constitutes what makes the chairman nervous."

Says John M'Fadden, a professor of history at Harvard University who worked on the program: "There's no way you can deal with Latin America in a U.S.-Latin American relations, and avoid controversy. My fear is that the N.E.H. is nervous about the controversy as something the endowment shouldn't support, and secondly that she is defining what constitutes controversy."

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The Endowment gives the chairman the final authority to make grants.

Regardless of the specific actions of this chairman, the Endowment has a real baseline in the law: It accords the chairman the final authority for effective public accountability," says Stanley N. Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies.

Last fall, the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, which was then considering legislation to reauthorize the Endowment, included language in its report to "emphasize its long-standing responsibility for the humanities for the Nation's that many of review panelists be readily identified . . . to ensure the accountability of the N.E.H. review panel evaluation process."

Evaluations Overturned"

At a House appropriations subcommittee hearing last month, Mrs. Cheney was asked whether she had ever overturned peer-review evaluations, and if so, why. Mrs. Cheney answered that she had in the past rejected grants, "but I would not say that I have voted to overturn a project that I believe in." On occasion, she said she had changed her mind on a project when she discovered that, for example, an arts group was to be included.

Some congressional sources say Mrs. Cheney was using the panels as a way of marking for keep the N.E.H. out of the sphere of vitriolic public controversy that engulfed the National Endowment for the Arts when some charged it with sponsoring pornographic work. Some congressmen have said it is clear that the N.E.H. is nervous about the awarding of grants is no more political now than it has ever been. The chairman is a political appointee, after all, and that has always been the case," says the representative of an association in the Fine Arts who was asked to be identified. "But the process is not necessarily bad. Making the chairman answerable to politics is a form of public accountability."

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