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Confrontation Politics: An Intellectual Shoot-Out Over Humanities

By Joan M. White

Yesterday morning, at 6 o'clock, Ronald S. Berman jogged his usual 2½ miles along the suburban Virginia countryside.

Berman, Shakespearean scholar as well as jogger, needed to be in good condition.

At 10:30 a.m., lugging a thick notebook of facts and figures, he appeared before a Senate committee for the first hearing on his renomination for a four-year term as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

It was a face-to-face, one-on-one confrontation with Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), who opposes Berman's reappointment and has stalled Senate "advise and consent" for nearly seven months.

Those who expected an intellectual shootout—and the hearing room was packed—were not disappointed. Not if they appreciated the civilized, cultured opponents sparring with felicitous phrase and studied strategy but still going for the jugular.

The Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, and several members indicated pointedly that they would push for the vote soon. Sen. Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.) and Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.) both called for action and Sen. Robert T. Stafford (R-Vt.) said he will vote for Berman's confirmation on the current record.

But in his opening statement, Pell took aim at the record compiled by Berman during his four-year tenure as head of the Humanities Endowment.

In that time, the Rhode Island senator charged, the Humanities had "deteriorated" until it has become a "pale shadow as compared to the Arts Endowments," its sister states. What's more, contended Pell, its programs are cloaked in "elitism," with Berman strengthening central control in Washington and balking at setting up state councils similar to those of the arts programs.

And as for editorial support that Berman's renomination has been given in the national media, Pell labeled it "distorted and shallow" and hinted that it was orchestrated by a "common interest."

Several possible witnesses, Pell claimed, were discouraged by supervisors in their institutions from giving public testimony for fear their institutions might lose grants. He did not elaborate.

Berman—perhaps during his morning jog—had clearly anticipated his critic's attack, and answered with quick jab statistics, including those:

- About 50 per cent of the Humanities Endowment's funds now go for "public" programs outside educational or scholarly circles. This is up from 10 per cent four years ago.
- This year over $8 million is budgeted for TV and radio programming designed to reach 20 million people.
- Berman singled out the Endowment's support of "The Adams Chronicles," the classic theater series, and Japanese film series on television.
- In the last four years, the Endowment has generated $90 million in gifts and matching grants.
- Only 20 states had local public programs when Berman took over in December 1971. Now all 50 states participate, and by next year, the Endowment will be allocating $17.5 million to support locally designed programs.
- Nearly 60 per cent of the Endowment's museum funds go to small operations, and it has supported major exhibitions as the Chinese and current Egyptian shows, seen by millions.

- Of 236 educational grants last year, 240 went to smaller colleges and universities and only eight to Ivy League schools.
- Pell, a graduate of Princeton, was particularly worried about the Ivy League grants. He noted that they got $4.3 million for its National Institute of Humanities, whose returning head had supported Berman's first nomination.

"Neil Harris got an identical grant at the University of Chicago and was not one of my supporters," Berman shot back. At one point, Pell pressed Berman to justify an $8,000 grant to study changes in youth lifestyles on an island in the Hebrides.

Berman responded with a "Glad you asked me that." He claimed the grant came under a youth program, to support locally designed programs.

Sen. Claiborne Pell, left, and Ronald Berman.