1985

Curran, Edward: Confirmation Hearing (1985): News Article 05

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NEH Nominee Under Fire

Senators Question Curran Qualifications

By Mary Battiata
Washington Post Staff Writer

Edward A. Curran, the Reagan administration's controversial nominee for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities, yesterday found his credibility, commitment and qualifications under question in confirmation hearings for a job often described as "the nation's leading humanist."

Curran, a former headmaster of the National Cathedral School for Girls and present deputy director of the Peace Corps, made headlines in 1982 when he wrote to President Reagan suggesting the abolition of the National Institute of Education. Curran was director of the institute at the time, and his letter, which criticized the federal agency as a tool of the political "left," came just months after he had assured the same Senate confirmation panel that he would do his best to promote the institute's work.

It was that seeming inconsistency, as well as his stormy tenure at the Department of Education and the Department of Education and

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NEH Nominee

CURRAN, From D1

the Peace Corps, that prompted a lineup of senators, including Claire Pelle (D-R.I.), Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), Robert Dole (R-Kan.), Lloyd B. Weicker (R-Conn.), Paul Simon (D-Ill.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.), to question Curran and ask him about his plans for the humanities endowment.

"There's a saying that goes 'Once shame on you, twice shame on me,'" Weicker told Curran. "What's at issue . . . is testimony before this very committee that is clearly at odds with subsequent events. And now here we are again, and you are making statements supportive of the National Endowment, but . . . God knows if you won't get in there and find more members of the faculty are preparing to abolish the agency is the way to deal with this.""}

The hearing appeared to rise as many questions as it answered, and is likely to prolong the controversy over a nomination that has been stalled for more than two months. It contributes more than $100 million in federal money each year for scholarly projects, but there has been little in the effort to revise humanities studies in the nation's schools.

Curran, who downs 10 glasses of water before facing the committee hearing, told the members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee that he had been forced to work through channels since sending the Reagan letter, and pledged to "give my utmost assurance that the endowment is a visible leader in support and encouraging the best of America's effort in the humanities." Curran's predecessor as chairman committee Chairman Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), has maintained that Curran has become a visible leader to "give my utmost assurance that the endowment is a visible leader in support and encouraging the best of America's effort in the humanities."

Curran's critics have pointed out that he lacks a Ph.D. Yesterday's objections, however, appeared to have less impact on Congress's relatively few academic credentials (he has an MAT from Duke University) than his limited experience with scholarly research or writing and his record at the Department of Education and the Peace Corps.

Curran was forced to resign his position at the National Institute of Education after he charged with his boss, then-Education Secretary Terrel Bell, of the latter to Reagan. At the Peace Corps, Curran has crossed swords with his boss, Director Loretta Rupp, on numerous occasions. Their dispute has been disclosed in a recent Wall Street Journal article, and reached a nadir last year when Rupp was discovered to have secretly taped and recorded a conversation she had with Curran about the continuing rancor in their relationship. Since then, Rupp reportedly has given Curran a number of assignments and excluded him from most key meetings.

EDWARD A. CURRAN

Curran's response to questions yesterday seemed to do little to escape the senator's critical glare in the audience. "The hearing was disturbing," said O.B. Hardison, chairman of the Board of the Washington-based Humanities Alliance, an association that represents more than 100,000 humanities scholars. "We feel that some grave questions were raised, and our concern is deepening."

Senators Pell and Kennedy said they had received more than 60 letters between them from constituents and humanities groups concerned about Curran's nomination. Pell said it was difficult to recruit academics to testify against Curran's nomination, because they fear loss of NEH money should he be confirmed.

The White House named Curran nine months ago to succeed William Bennett, who left the chancellorship to become secretary of education. Since then Curran's nomination has been opposed by the Senators reportedly stalled by congressional moderates and humanities groups.

Curran, 52, became headmaster at the National Cathedral School in 1968 after working as a teacher at a private boys' school in Houston. Where he got to know Vice President George Bush. In 1980 he worked as a volunteer on the Reagan Bush campaign before becoming associate director of presidential personnel at the White House.

Curran was accompanied yesterday by his wife Nancy Curran and a two-influential, socially accepted, and highly influential...."