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A Ray of Hope for Museums Agency

By Ruth Dean

Until last week, when a House subcommittee cast a sympathetic vote in its way, the future seemed doomed for the Institute of Museum Services, which has done a creditable job in its fledgling role of helping maintain the nation's 3,000 museums.

With the incoming Reagan administration in January came a "termination" notice for theyear-old IMS. Not long after, during the days of Plum Book prising of Carter appointees, the IMS' first and only director, Lee Kimche, got her own "termination" notice.

In the Carter administration, the agency had seemed to lead a charmed life. That was principally because Kimche knew her way in and out of the corridors of Democratic power that created the agency under the aegis of Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., former Rep. John Brademas, D-IN., and former Federal Council on the Arts honorary chairperson John Mandle, who served on the IMS board.

But even before the change of political fortunes that slaxed IMS for extinction under the Republicans, the agency was heading into troubled waters.

The last year of the Carter administration was marked by budgetary cutbacks for all the arts agencies, and the splitting of the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare to make room for the new Department of Education. The museum agency - often called the "third arts agency" - went under Education, but it took a few bureaucratic wrangles for it to establish its autonomy there.

Even before that, in 1978, during hearings before Sen. Pell's Education and Labor subcommittee on the arts and humanities to reauthorize IMS for another five years, Pell trotted out his favorite hobby horse - that IMS belonged with the Smithsonian because it was "the museum of museums - truly the national museum." His theory hasn't found many subscribers, least of all the Smithsonian.

Though the IMS had lost many friends in Congress with the Republican landslide, the charged IMS seemed to have led, even in the midst of Democratic victories, still being held at its board meeting here last December.

It was an up time. Congress had passed legislation extending the life of the agency for another five years, and $12.4 million in funding for 1981.

And, at a time when everyone in government was waiting at what was to come, Assistant Secretary of Education James Rutherford told the IMS board that in his talks with the Reagan education transition team, he'd "heard nothing but confirmatory questions" about IMS, in contrast to the "sharp questioning" about other programs. So he assumed no new cuts were in the offing.

Wrong! Wrong! The truth came with a sudden shock, when the now-famous "black book" of Reagan budget-cut proposals was circulated around Capitol Hill prior to their announcement by the President's Office of Management and Budget.

That's when the arts and humanities endowments learned about their 50 percent cut, and IMS learned it wasn't 'just for this world.

In the terse language of Reaganomics, its officials read: "The administration proposes to terminate the Institute of Museum Services, as part of an overall administration effort to rethink federal support of cultural activities. While museums and other repositories of cultural artifacts are important in our society, they have traditionally been the beneficiaries of private philanthropy, for both construction and operating funds."

When national museum officials appeared at a recent Senate hearing for testimony from outside witnesses regarding the planned cuts for IMS, there were no senators present; indeed none in behalf of the Humanities either - not even for esteemed scholar Buckminster Fuller.

There was only the committee staff in hear Alan Shlesser, director of the Yale University Art Gallery, describe how IMS funds literally helped the museum bail itself out of a sudden flood caused by a street main break. "We have George Washington's furniture," he explained. "We had to move fast to build supports to get it out of the water; IMS money did that."

Earlier on, Sen. James McClure, R-IDaho, chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee on the interior, which considers funding for the arts and museums, was the lone member of his committee present when acting IMS officials testified in behalf of their recinded budget.

The hearing was very low-key. The handwriting was on the wall. Gently, McClure reminded the small group of witnesses about the administration's requested cutbacks. It spelled only one thing - the end of the road for IMS.

Enter on the scene the House appropriations subcommittee on the interior, the committee headed by the influential and longtime arts advocate Rep. Sidney Yates, D-III. In a little-publicized manner this last week, the committee, in an unrecorded voice vote, overturned the Republicans' carefully stacked cut of budget cuts. When the OMB recommendation to rescind the IMS 1981 funds to leave only $300,000 for phase-out operations came up, the committee rejected it.

In effect, the House action restored to the subcommittee level, at least the $12.4-million recission demanded by the Reagan administration. Of course, it still meant weather the storm through full committee, then floor vote, and the whole process all over again in the Senate before its final fate is learned.

Though she has no official connection with IMS now Kimche, when reached for comment by phone, said she was gladdened by the House action, and hoped it would hold the administration to its rescission of funding for the arts and museums, was the least that could be. "It's a step toward eliminating government support of the arts."

George Washington's furniture, incidentally, that knows no party line in either house.

Yates pulled all the stops two weeks ago with a day-long hearing for outside witnesses to place testimony in the record opposing the proposed art cuts.

"It's not going to hold still for elimination of IMS," said an aide. The move was viewed by none as the opening salvo in a spirited effort to save arts funding from the budget ax - a view, incidentally, that knows no party line in either house.

Yates wanted no time in getting to the point. The call for a 50 percent cut, he suspected was "the final step toward eliminating government support of the arts."

Orchestrated by the American Arts Alliance, the hearing drew everybody who was anybody in the arts world for the last 30 years. You name them: Jean Stapleton, Elliot Fless, Robert Rauschenberg, Edward Albee, Billy Taylor, E.L. Doctorow, Alan Lomax, James Earl Jones, Ming Cho Lee, Benia Beilin, and poet laureate Louis Harris, and John Chea, among artists.

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