

# ***Reagan Aides Discuss U.S. Role in Helping Arts and Humanities***

**By HILTON KRAMER**

An important debate on the future course of Government policy on the arts is in progress in the inner councils of President-elect Ronald Reagan's advisers on cultural affairs. The debate is concentrated on the programs and policies of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its outcome is likely to determine how the two Federal agencies will allocate funds and establish priorities for years to come.

At the crux of this debate is a firmly held belief, reported to be virtually unanimous among otherwise divided Reagan advisers, that the activities of both endowments have been profoundly compromised by politicization and an accompanying lowering of standards under the Carter Administration.

## **Divergent Conclusions**

Yet from this belief two widely divergent conclusions are being drawn. One calls for the adoption of narrower programs designed to meet stricter standards of professional accomplishment. This, in effect, would mean a significant withdrawal from programs of popularization and mass appeal, and a renewed emphasis on programs encouraging high art and professional scholarship.

The other conclusion is more extreme.

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# Reagan Advisers Debate Financing of Arts

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It takes the view that the endowments have strayed hopelessly off their intended courses and become mired in social and political causes unsanctioned by the legislation that brought them into being. As a result, there is now no alternative but to abolish them altogether. It would, of course, require an act of Congress to abolish the agencies.

Two committees have been authorized by the President-elect's transition team to look into the activities of the endowments and make recommendations for policy. The committee assigned to evaluate the arts endowment is headed by Robert S. Carter, a Washington publicity agent who organized the Republican National Convention this year and is a former trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. The committee for humanities endowment is headed by Richard J. Bishirjian, a conservative writer and editor who is chairman of the department of political science at the College of New Rochelle in Westchester County.

Both committees have been meeting this week with officials of the endowments. They are scheduled to submit interim reports Dec. 8, and final recommendations Dec. 22.

## Conservative 'Blueprint'

Until the recommendations are submitted to the President-elect, no one associated with the committees or the transition team is speaking out on policy questions for the public record. The substance of the debate now forming the background of the committees' deliberations may be gleaned, however, in a report on the endowments just issued by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank based in Washington, as part of its so-called "blueprint" for a conservative American Government.

The chairman of the team that wrote the harshly critical report on the endowments — Michael Joyce, executive director of the John M. Olin Foundation, which prepared the report for the Heritage Foundation — and several of his colleagues are now members of Dr. Bishirjian's committee on the humanities endowment.

The report states at the outset that recent activities of the endowments "reveal a tendency to emphasize politically inspired social policies at the expense of the independence of the arts and the humanities," and calls for "redirecting the endowments toward the highest purposes for which they were intended."

## Sweeping Criticism

The section on arts endowment — written by Samuel Lipman, a concert pianist and music critic for *Commentary* magazine, assisted by Hugo Weisgall, a composer and professor of music at Queens College — is especially sweeping in its criticism:

"Because the current direction of the N.E.A. is in the hands of those with few esthetic commitments and less discernment, art is increasingly seen as mere entertainment, a diversion whose importance — and the amount of money it receives — is measured by the number of people who can be found to make up its audience."

Deploping what it calls "a flawed conception of art" and the "trifling sums" now allocated for individual composers, writers and visual artists, the report goes on to say that "the N.E.A. spends millions of dollars yearly to fund programs and policies which are unconcerned in any way with enduring artistic accomplishments; the best of these projects do no more than fossilize the popular culture of the past, and the worst are little more than high-flown welfare and employment schemes." It calls for a categorical distinction to be made between "serious art" and what it characterizes as "art for the sake of social service."

## 'Principle of Scholarly Excellence'

This section of the report concludes that "the major problem" now facing the arts endowment is "not financial but rather philosophical" — "the need to redefine its mission as support of art and artists, nothing less, and nothing else."

Under the Carter administration, the National Endowment for the Arts has prided itself on extending its services to more groups and larger areas of the country than were reached by Federal programs in the arts in the past. Its governing philosophy has been to enlarge the constituency for the arts while at the same time attempting to uphold the traditional values of the arts.

As an example of the endowment's recent move to lavish money on expanding the mass audience for art at the expense of standards, critics cite the endowment's Expansion Arts Program. This was described in the endowment's 1979 annual report as "a point of entry for developing groups that are established in and reflect the culture of minority, blue collar, rural and low-income communities." The report goes on to say that the Expansion Arts Pro-

gram "is, in many respects, a mini endowment" within the National Endowment for the Arts.

The section of the Heritage Foundation report on the humanities agency was also highly critical. It was prepared by, among others, Mr. Joyce and Philip Marcus, a former member of the endowment's staff. Dr. William J. Bennett, director of the National Humanities Center in Triangle Park, N.C., was consultant. Acknowledging that the agency "engages in many worthwhile tasks," the report urges that the endowment now "restrict itself in funding the humanities to projects and programs which truly are in the realm of humanities."

"A major issue in redirecting and reorganizing the agency will be to establish the principle of scholarly excellence as the criterion for budgeting and program definition."

## \$200,000 Office-Worker Study

In keeping with its support of what the report calls "the criterion of excellence," it urges that recently established "guidelines for racial or ethnic quotas applied to the grant-review and evaluation processes" be immediately rescinded. This section of the report also deplores "some present programs" that are said "to serve political, or politicized, ends."

A 1980 humanities grant of \$199,953 to a group called Working Women: National Association of Office Workers, for holding classes, film forums and so on on the struggle of office workers for improved conditions has been cited by critics of the endowment as an example of the kind of "political" project that, in their view, does not properly belong "in the realm of humanities."

It has been the policy of the National Endowment for the Humanities under

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Robert S. Carter

the present Administration to take a view of the humanities that embraces popular culture and social-action programs as well as projects of a scholarly nature. This is in keeping with its so-called "populist" attitude toward the humanities.

Although the Heritage Foundation's report on the two endowments urges reforms in the name of "serious art" and "scholarly excellence," there are other voices in the Reagan camp calling for the complete dismantling of Federal programs in art and culture. Speaking this year at Texas A & M University, for example, Milton Friedman — the Nobel laureate in economics whose PBS series, "Free to Choose," did much to popularize his conservative economic theories — said, "There is no

justification that I can see for the National Endowment for the Humanities."

He added that "there is no justification that I can see for the \$160 million a year that is being given to public broadcasting." He acknowledged that he spoke "as a beneficiary, in part," but added, "Fair is fair." Recent articles by Kingsley Amis and Ernest van den Haag in *Policy Review*, the journal of the Heritage Foundation, have likewise urged abolition of Federal programs in the arts.

How much of this debate on the future of the endowments will form the basis of their future policies is not something that anyone participating in the discussion is willing to predict, but the desire for change is felt to be very strong among those in a position to advise the new Administration.

Complicating the prospect of any quick categorical reversals of policy is the fact that the chairmen of the endowments are not expected to leave their posts until next fall. The appointment of Livingston L. Biddle Jr., chairman of the arts endowment, will expire Nov. 4 and that of Joseph D. Duffey, chairman of the humanities agency, Sept. 4.

There are approximately a dozen senior staff positions at both endowments, however, that are regarded as political appointments, and these, of course, could be filled by the new Administration as soon as it takes office in January.

Exactly where President-elect Reagan stands on the endowments remains a little vague. During the campaign, he spoke of the possibility of annual increases in funds for the arts, and generally showed himself to be favorably disposed to Government support for them. Despite his often-repeated talk of cuts in Federal spending, there was no call for cutting back on Government money for the arts. But he has also urged a greater degree of private and corporate support in this area.