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By WALTER H. CAPPS

Perhaps it was to be anticipated that Senate confirmation hearings on a new chairman for the National Endowment for the Humanities this week would coincide with the 20th anniversary of the agency. Through the years, politics has often overshadowed recognition of the endowment's impressive educational accomplishments.

The Reagan Administration's nominee is Edward A. Curran, 51, deputy director of the Peace Corps. He served briefly as director of the National Institute of Education three years ago, and was forced to resign when he recommended abolishing that agency.

Curran's nomination has been opposed by humanities scholars and professional organizations on two major counts: First, he holds no doctoral degree in any of the humanities disciplines, and has had no direct experience in American higher education. His highest degree is a master's degree in teaching, and his hands-on institutional experience has been in private secondary schools. And his brief experience at the National Institute of Education raises serious questions about his administrative abilities.

These are the stated objections. The deeper worry is that Curran's professional qualifications for the job are only incidental to the need of the Reagan-Bush committee to find an appropriate place for a proven friend, strong ally and dependable supporter.

Through the years the humanities endowment has

tended to make news when a program that it has funded touches a raw political nerve. A PBS television documentary on U.S. involvement in Vietnam was criticized, for example, because it appeared scornful of American military performance. Questions were raised about a public forum on contemporary Russian culture because the meeting seemed to give the Marxist-Leninist philosophy an unfair advantage—and at American taxpayers' expense. A film on the effect of 20th-Century technology on the traditional ways of life among Southwestern native American peoples was accused of being motivated to attack the mining industry. Such stories make headlines. They arouse suspicion. They create talk. But they are hardly representative of what NEH stands for, or of the areas in which its greater and more characteristic effect is being felt.

Colleges and universities throughout the country are experiencing fresh institutional life today because the endowment has assisted them in coming to terms with crucial contemporary educational needs. Hundreds of high-school teachers across the land are facing their classes with renewed enthusiasm today because an NEH summer seminar helped restore their intellectual energies and their professional commitments. Thousands of professors and researchers have embarked on individual and collaborative projects that keep their fields and disciplines alive, through NEH support. And, perhaps most impressive

of all, millions of Americans participate every year in programs in their communities—in libraries, parks, union halls, museums, schools—sponsored by the 53 state humanities councils.

NEH does all this with an annual budget of less than \$140 million—roughly half the cost of a single B-1 bomber. Pound for pound and dollar for dollar, it is perhaps the most efficient and effective agency in federal government.

In its 20-year history the endowment has proved to work best when its bipartisan congressional mandate is neither assisted nor impeded by partisan political pursuits. Its most effective chairmen have been those who, though attentive to whatever administration is in charge, have demonstrated a fundamental and inviolable commitment toward preserving, enriching and extending the essential sources of human knowledge and wisdom. On these the enduring intellectual vitality of democracy depends. If Edward Curran is such a person, and is confirmed as such by Congress, he will be welcomed even by the majority of those within the humanities community who today are uneasy about his appointment.

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