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Bush Nominates an Art Historian to Run the Humanities Endowment

By RON SOUTHWICK

Washington

President Bush nominated Bruce Cole last month to serve as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a move that would once again put a conservative scholar at the agency's helm.

If confirmed by the Senate, Mr. Cole, a professor of fine arts at Indiana University at Bloomington, will replace William R. Ferris, who was appointed to the post by President Bill Clinton and has led the endowment since November 1997. Mr. Ferris had hoped to stay on.

Mr. Cole, who declined to comment on his nomination, served on the National Council for the Humanities, which helps set the endowment's policies, from 1992 to 1999. Most humanities lobbyists and former administrators within the humanities endowment praised Mr. Cole's scholarly credentials. A highly regarded art historian who specializes in Renaissance studies, he would bring intellectual heft to the post, supporters say.

Privately, some humanities lobbyists worried that, as chairman, Mr. Cole might cut back support for multiculturalism and women's studies, areas often identified with more-liberal scholars.

Still, most humanities scholars and lobbyists said they were anxious to see whether his strong academic background could help the agency win more funds from Congress.

"He is at the top of his discipline," said Jerry L. Martin, president of the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, a group that supports traditional research. Mr. Martin, who served as the N.E.H.'s assistant chairman when Mr. Cole was on the

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humanities council, called him "arguably the most distinguished scholar who will ever have served as chair."

As a scholar, Mr. Cole has "impeccable credentials," said John H. D'Arms, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, a leading lobbying group for humanities organizations.

One factor that may affect Mr. Cole's nomination is the Democratic takeover of the Senate. Some lobbyists and lawmakers believe that Senate confirmation for Mr. Bush's political appointments may no longer be automatic. However, because Mr. Cole has had such a distinguished scholarly career, most humanities lobbyists predicted that he would be confirmed easily.

With a budget of \$120-million, the N.E.H. represents only a tiny portion of the federal budget, but it is an important source of funds for scholars of history, literature, and ancient languages. Despite its small budget, the agency has been the target of partisan battles in Congress. Republicans threatened to kill the agency and wound up slashing its budget by 36 percent when they took control of Congress in 1995.

Facing lingering hostility toward the N.E.H. following those battles, Mr. Ferris earned plaudits from college lobbyists for improving the agency's image among members of Congress. He built support by providing more funds to smaller, rural states and by spending more on public programs. Mr. Ferris succeeded in getting Congress to increase the agency's budget by \$5-million in each of the past two years -- no small feat considering the low regard some conservative lawmakers had for the agency at the beginning of his tenure.

Some members of Congress -- including some Republicans -- supported retaining Mr. Ferris for another term as chairman, and he indicated that he was willing to serve under President Bush.

"I am especially proud that during my tenure as chairman we have increased access to the humanities for all Americans and have helped our citizens rediscover America's rich history and culture and our relation to our world," Mr. Ferris said in a statement.

A spokeswoman for the endowment said Mr. Ferris would serve out his term, which ends in November.

While praising Mr. Ferris for his rapport with legislators, a number of scholars criticized him for emphasizing public programs over scholarship. Some humanists claimed he was "dumbing down" the N.E.H. by shifting too much money away from important research projects, such as archiving presidential papers and translating ancient languages ([The Chronicle, October 6, 2000](#)).

Some conservative scholars blasted Mr. Ferris in March, after the playwright Arthur Miller attacked President Bush and Ronald Reagan in the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, an annual N. E.H. event. Some critics said the lecture, the government's highest individual honor in the humanities, should not be used as a partisan forum, and they cited the speech to argue that Mr. Ferris should not be retained.

Most lobbyists and researchers predicted that Mr. Cole would be a vigorous proponent for research and preservation. "It might be very positive for traditional scholarship," said John Hammer, director of the National Humanities Alliance.

"I would think that Mr. Cole's nomination would have quite a lot of support, especially from those who think that scholarship was neglected," said Mr. D'Arms. "I'm not saying I think that way, but there are some who do," he said.

Mr. Cole is a prolific author, having written 12 books on Renaissance art for academic and popular audiences. His publishing background suggests that he could succeed in enriching the N.E.H.'s scholarly contributions while still pushing the agency to support projects that appeal to a broader audience, said Catherine Rudder, executive director of the American Political Science Association.

"The thing that is promising is that they have selected someone who is a genuinely fine scholar," Ms. Rudder said.

While academic credentials are important, the N.E.H. chairman must also possess deft political skills, and Mr. Cole is hardly a Washington insider, lobbyists noted. However, those who know Mr. Cole say he has strong interpersonal skills.

Mr. D'Arms said he had "only positive recollections" of working with Mr. Cole when both served on the endowment's advisory council. "He was a very collegial and hardworking member of

the committee."

However, Mr. Cole clashed at times with Sheldon Hackney, the former N.E.H. chairman. He criticized Mr. Hackney for reassigning two conservative scholars on the endowment's staff, saying that the move threatened "the very integrity of the endowment."

During his tenure on the advisory council, Mr. Cole supported one of Mr. Ferris's more controversial ideas: the establishment of regional centers for the humanities at 10 universities. While Mr. Ferris argued that the centers would help foster studies of history and culture, some critics charged that the money should be used for other research, such as archival projects. Still, Mr. Cole supported the concept.

"It will make the N.E.H. less of an abstraction outside Washington, and enable the study of American culture in new ways," Mr. Cole said at the time. The agency is slated to select the sites for the regional centers this year.

Some lobbyists worried that Mr. Cole, as chairman, would use the position to promote a conservative view of academe, much as Lynne V. Cheney did when she was the chairwoman, from 1986 to 1993. Although esteemed by many scholars for being an advocate for excellence in the humanities, she was criticized by some for packing the N.E.H. advisory panel with people who shared her cultural conservatism.

Mr. Cole was appointed to the National Council of the Humanities in 1992 by President George Bush. The professor is a member of the National Association of Scholars, a group that promotes returning to a traditional curriculum.

"I don't think he's going to be regarded as a political chairman," Stephen H. Balch, president of the scholars' association, said of Mr. Cole. "I think he's going to be an academic leader."

Mr. Balch predicted that Mr. Cole "will take the best of traditional and contemporary scholarship and meld them together." He described Mr. Cole as "quietly affable" and said he is someone who will work to get the approval of a variety of people.

"Almost everyone who has their heads on right about what scholarship is supposed to be will see that they have an ally in

Bruce Cole," Mr. Balch said.

Mr. Cole's experience on the National Council on the Humanities may make him motivated to push the administration for better budgets for the agency, researchers and lobbyists agreed.

"Regardless of somebody's politics, if they sit on the council and look at the quality of work they can't support, they have to think, 'I wish I had more money,'" said Mr. Hammer of the National Humanities Alliance.

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