

## **CULTURE AND PUBLIC POLICY IN THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION**

### *A Proposal*

The Obama presidency is in its very essence a transformative phenomenon in American history. Because of President-elect Obama's vision of what our society is and can be, we are obliged as citizens to think beyond the everyday realities of existing institutions, policies and practices and ask how we can come closer to the ideal—the dream of liberty and justice for all-- that defines our nation. Mindful of the enormity of the economic crisis, it is not the moment to think in terms of dramatically increased financial support for the arts and culture; nonetheless, we can, through relatively minor structural changes, vastly increase the recognition of culture as an essential element in the life of a robust democratic society and celebrate the diversity of our cultural expression and the dynamism and creativity of our pluralistic society.

In the interest of shining a brighter light on the significance of the intellect and the imagination in our society, I propose the following:

Creating a senior staff position for culture in the administration that:

- calls attention to the central role that culture plays in defining us as a nation;
- creates an office for culture that indicates that culture is “at home” and has a home in the Obama administration;
- enhances the role of culture in our diplomatic relationships;
- acknowledges the importance of culture for its own sake and also as an economic, diplomatic, educational and social force in our society.

The cultural officer would act as a cultural representative/surrogate/liaison/advisor/ to the president, reporting to a designated cabinet member or senior staff person. The duties would include the following:

Convening role:

The cultural officer, while not tampering with the funding processes of the NEA, NEH, IMLS and other culturally related agencies, would convene their leaders regularly to create an umbrella cultural council that might cosponsor events and discuss ways in which the cultural life of the nation might be given higher priority in the public agenda.

*Note: The Environment as a policy area was in earlier times separated into water, air and trees entities. It is relatively recent that it was recognized that all those areas and others formerly ignored would be best served by acknowledging that the whole—the environment writ large—was greater than the sum of its parts, and important to deal with as a complex interrelated domain.*

The cultural officer would convene symposia and conferences from time to time and feature discussions related to the role of culture in society, the role of culture in foreign affairs, the role of culture in commerce, in education and other areas.

Representing role:

The cultural officer would have senior status in the administration and represent the president at cultural events around the country and abroad that are deemed to be significant enough to warrant such representation.

Advising role:

The cultural officer would call to the attention of the president and/or his staff cultural projects and proposals that would enhance both the quality of life and prestige of the United States, also cultural issues that might be addressed/advocated at the presidential level.

Innovating role:

The cultural officer would create one or more signature programs that reflect the commitment of the president to celebrating, enhancing and promoting the richness of American culture as it reflects the diversity and creativity of a people.

One new program might be The President's Award for Excellence in the Arts, Humanities and Sciences, featuring an annual awards program that would recognize the best and the brightest in the arts, humanities and sciences, a symposium on the interconnectedness of the three domains and a reception for a large audience of cultural leaders from the US and abroad.

A second might be an annual conference on arts education, featuring innovative approaches and scholarly analysis of its role in the education of children.

A third might be establishing relationships with cabinet level departments to find areas/projects that lend themselves to collaboration.

*Note: I do not know the present status of the President's Committee for the Arts and Humanities, but suggest that the proposed cultural position/office might be based on the model of the President's Committee but it would have higher status as an integral part of the administration.*

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