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Stanford Scholar Criticizes Pulitzer Board

Decision not to award prize
in history called 'outrage'

By Bill Workman
Chronicle Peninsula Bureau

The decision of the Pulitzer Prize board not to make an award this year in the history category has been sharply criticized by a Stanford University professor who served on the panel whose book nominations were ignored.

"I was outraged because we made a good-faith recommendation on the books we thought were worthy," said David Kennedy, chairman of Stanford's history department and a 1981 Pulitzer nominee.

Three books were nominated by the three-member history prize jury, including "Crime and Punishment in American History" by Stanford law Professor Lawrence Friedman.

The others were: "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK," by Gerald Posner, and "William Faulkner and Southern History," by Joel Williamson.

Friedman, who is a visiting professor this semester at University of Chicago Law School, joined Kennedy in lashing the Pulitzer board.

The no-award decision, he said, was "an insult not only to the authors but also to the very distinguished historians who constituted the panel."

In announcing the Pulitzer awards last week, officials at Columbia University said that for only the third time in the 77-year history of the coveted prizes, there would be no winner for history.

At the time, Pulitzer board member John L. Dotson told the Los Angeles Times that each of the history finalists was "flawed in certain ways."

However, Kennedy said the board has yet to explain its rationale to the jury. He said he had no idea why the 19-member board, composed mostly of prominent newspaper publishers and editors, concluded that none of the finalists was deserving of the history prize.

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Kennedy did not say which book he would have chosen among the three. But he said he was not only baffled by the board's refusal to award a prize but also by what he said were the awkward rules imposed on the nominating process.

Pulitzer juries, he said, are barred from ranking their nominations. They also are told that they can recommend either three books or none.

"It's very curious. It doesn't allow for anything in between," he said. "The effect is the jury gets to give only some of its opinion, and not the best advice it could."

The other history jury members were Michael Kammen, professor of American history and culture at Cornell University, and Pauline Maier, American history professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Kennedy said he and the other jurors have decided that despite their frustration, they do not intend to make a formal protest.