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SCHOLAR MAY GET HUMANITIES POST

Berman of San Diego Under Consideration by Nixon

By NAN ROBERTSON
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WASHINGTON, Nov. 2—Dr. Ronald S. Berman, a respected but not widely known scholar whose writings range from Shakespeare to the sixties, is the front-runner for President Nixon's nomination as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Dr. Berman, a 41-year-old New Yorker who is professor of English at the University of California, San Diego, received his bachelor's degree at Harvard and his master's and doctoral degrees at Yale, where he studied under Maynard Mack.

The White House confirmed today that "no other name is being so seriously considered" for the post, which has been vacant 16 months.

The first reactions in the humanist community of those familiar with Dr. Berman's work and personality were highly favorable and included an endorsement from the American Council of Learned Societies.

Viewed as Conservative

This contrasted with the angry opposition from the academic community over President Nixon's reported choice of Stephen Hess for the job last June. Mr. Hess was denounced as academically unqualified and too political and the White House never sent his name to the Senate for confirmation.

Mr. Hess, a former aide to Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon and author or co-author of five books, including a biography of Mr. Nixon, was most recently chairman of the White House Conferences on Children and Youth.

Dr. Berman was described in telephone interviews as resilient, both amiable and tough-minded and very much his own man, although "temperamentally conservatively inclined from his interpretation of literature to his political stance."

Only a handful of persons in scholarly circles knew this week that Dr. Berman was under the strongest consideration by the White House. One who did was Gordon Turner, vice president of the Council of Learned Societies, which consists of 35 groups representing about 75,000 educators.

Group 'Well Satisfied'

Mr. Turner called Dr. Berman a "distinguished scholar with a good publication record." He added, "There is no flak on this man at all." He said the council was "well satisfied" with the possibility that Mr. Berman might become head of the single agency in the Federal Government that dispenses largesse to the humanities.

Professor Mack, an authority on Shakespeare and eighteenth century literature who is Sterling Professor of English at Yale, characterized his former student as "temperamentally conservative" but said, "He isn't a captive of any particular group or ideology or ism. He's very much a free agent."

Dr. Berman has produced books on Shakespeare, the seventeenth century poet Henry King, and the intellectual life of America today. Four more books are to be published soon, on subjects ranging from an analysis of American social thought to Restoration drama.

Before going to the University of California in 1955, Dr. Berman taught at Columbia University and Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, where he was also associate editor of the now defunct Kenyon Review.

Writings Are Praised

Russell Fraser, chairman of the English department at the University of Michigan, called Dr. Berman's writings "first class." He characterized his book "America in the Sixties," published three years ago, as "a real work of scholarship" and a fascinating and "very personal view of that crazy decade."

Professor Fraser said he would be "tickled to death" if Dr. Berman became chairman of the Humanities Endowment.

Professor Mack said that Dr. Berman "believes in conserving and preserving" and was "strongly opposed" to campus turmoil. He said, "I honor Ron for that view. He is not an easy man to be swept off his feet with something that happens to be popular at the moment."

Robert Hollander, a professor of European literature at Princeton University who first knew Professor Berman at Columbia, agreed, saying, "He's widely read and widely informed and I think he would tend to make judicious choices for grants rather than flamboyant ones."

Professor Hollander expressed the belief that Dr. Berman would not look favorably on "faddish or temporary projects."

The chairmanship has been vacant since President Nixon dismissed Barnaby C. Keeney, a historian who was the endowment's first head. Mr. Keeney's deputy since 1966, the present acting chairman, is Wallace B. Edgerton, a philosopher.