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From the Art of Politics to the Politics of the Arts



LIVINGSTON L. BIDDLE, JR. PHOTOGRAPH FOR THE CHRONICLE BY ERIC PUGGENPOLL

Livingston Biddle, who has had years of experience on Capitol Hill, takes over the National Endowment for the Arts amid talk about elitism and politicization.

By Ellen K. Coughlin

WASHINGTON

Livingston L. Biddle, Jr., the new head of the National Endowment for the Arts, went to the movies one evening a week or so ago—a Katharine Hepburn double feature.

That same night, the U. S. Senate was frantically trying to tie up loose ends before adjourning for the year. On the agenda, following passage of the crucial Social Security financing bill, was the confirmation of a number of Presidential appointments, including Mr. Biddle's.

As the new endowment chairman tells it, what little suspense the plot of *Sylvia Scarlett* holds was hardly enough to keep him from wondering whether or not the Senate had approved his appointment yet. He ducked out of the theater sometime near midnight, he said, and made a quick call to the Democratic cloakroom. The friend who answered the telephone put the receiver up to the door of the Senate chamber just in time to catch the words:

... of the District of Columbia, to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. There being no objection, it is so confirmed."

No Need for Concern

There was no need for concern; Livingston Biddle has plenty of friends in the Senate.

The new leader of the arts endowment has worked for the Senate on and off since he joined the staff of Sen. Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, in 1963. As an aide to Senator Pell, he helped write the legislation that created the arts endowment, as part of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, in 1965.

Mr. Biddle also had a hand in two re-authorizing bills—in 1973 and 1976—that dramatically increased Congressional appropriations for the arts endowment. In the current fiscal year they amount to \$123.5-million, more than 50 times what they were in fiscal 1966.

In between stints as an assistant to Senator Pell and as staff director for the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities (which is chaired by the Rhode Island Democrat), Mr. Biddle worked at the arts endowment. He served as deputy to the first chairman, Roger L. Stevens, and as a Congressional liaison man for the endowment under its colorful second chairman, Nancy Hanks.

In 1968 he left Washington to head the division of the arts at Fordham University and later to chair the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Ballet Company. He is also a published author with four novels to his credit.

But Mr. Biddle's four-year appointment to the chairmanship of the arts endowment is not without its critics.

His close association with the Senate, and especially with Senator Pell—they were roommates at Princeton University in the late 1930's—has led to charges that the arts in this country are becoming too "politicized."

'Inappropriate' Pressures

Mr. Biddle tackled the question of "inappropriate governmental pressures" on the arts at his confirmation hearing before the arts and humanities subcommittee.

"As the committee knows," he said in a prepared statement, "the law prescribes a catalyst role for the government. The federal role is to encourage, not dominate; to assist without domineering." He pointed out a number of provisions in the legislation governing the arts endowment, as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities, that set limits on the government's involvement in administering cultural grants.

Mr. Biddle said in an interview last week that he was opposed to a frequently heard suggestion that the arts and humanities endowments should become part of a new Department of Education.

The question of their status was settled in the best possible way when the legislation was first written, he said.

There was talk at the time, he said, of establishing the arts and humanities endowments under the aegis of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare—or possibly

as an arm of the Smithsonian Institution. But President Johnson agreed, despite his reluctance to expand the federal bureaucracy any further, that the two cultural agencies should be independent, Mr. Biddle recalled.

Senator Pell, sometimes referred to as "the father of the endowment," supports the idea of a Department of Educational and Cultural Affairs as an umbrella for the education division of H.E.W., the arts and humanities endowments, and other federal offices with jurisdiction in cultural areas. Mr. Biddle disagrees.

Instead of reorganization, he said, what is needed is better "coordination" of the government's educational and cultural efforts.

Interagency Coordination

He suggested that the heads of various federal agencies—himself, Joseph D. Duffey of the humanities endowment, Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer, Patricia A. Graham of the National Institute of Education—should work more closely on policies for allocating their resources among the country's cultural and educational activities.

Mr. Biddle said he would like to see the endowment's support for college and university arts projects expanded during his time in office. He added, however, that the idea of "cultural education" should take on a broader meaning, to include not only traditional college training, but also elementary and secondary education, adult and continuing education, and the entire concept of "lifelong learning."

He admitted that the endowment's support for projects on less "established" campuses—at community colleges, smaller institutions, and traditionally black colleges—had

probably been lacking. He insisted, however, that such support could probably be increased, with a greater cooperative effort among the government's cultural agencies.

In fiscal 1978, the arts endowment will be giving out more than \$114-million in grants, including new "challenge grants" that allot \$1 of federal money to a project for every \$3 it receives from private sources.

A spokeswoman for the endowment said it was "almost impossible," because of the difficulty in classifying grants, to determine how much of that money will go to college and university projects. Some grants are awarded to the institutions themselves, she explained, while others go to individual artists for a term in residence at a college or university.

The endowment has, however, set up a special task force, chaired by the Metropolitan Opera singer Martina Arroyo and the University of Iowa's President Willard L. Boyd, to study the training of professional artists. Part of the group's assignment is to determine how much money educational institutions actually receive from the arts endowment.

'Elitism' Debate

Probably the most frequently heard debate surrounding the federal government's involvement in the arts and humanities is whether or not the endowments should concentrate their support among the older, established cultural institutions—museums, opera companies, symphony orchestras, large universities—or community arts projects generated at the so-called "grassroots level."

Last year, Senator Pell held up the reappointment of Ronald S. Berman to head the humanities endowment, charging that his policies were too "elitist." Mr. Berman never did reassume the post, and President Carter eventually appointed Mr. Duffey to the chairmanship.

Mr. Biddle might be expected to come down on the side of Senator Pell, who strongly supported his appointment, in the "elitist-populist" debate, but he deftly avoided taking a position at his confirmation hearing. "We find words like 'elitism' and 'populism' being used to suggest a polarization of the arts," Mr. Biddle said.

"I am convinced a very different approach is needed, a different means of defining our cultural goals. Why not bridge these two words . . . and simply say that together they can mean 'access to the best'?"