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Endowments Head Decries 'Politics'

By GRACE GLUECK

IN A SWEEPING SERIES of charges, Michael Straight, acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, contends that the arts endowment and its twin agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, have become politicized by vested interests, pressure groups, Congress and the Carter Administration.

"The cancer of political interference has begun to undermine the credibility of the endowments," said Mr. Straight, former editor of *The New Republic* magazine. He was deputy chairman of the arts endowment for eight years until this month, when he became acting chairman after Nancy Hanks left the agency.

Mr. Straight, who will step down from the post in two weeks, because he feels the need for a "change" and because he can "no longer devote full time" to it, said he had not sought the appointment as head of the arts endowment. Livingston Biddle has been named to the post, pending Senate confirmation.

Duffey's Appointment Cited

In Washington, Barry Jagoda, a special assistant to President Carter for cultural affairs, decried Mr. Straight's "unconstructive charges," and said, "We can't take these complaints very seriously now, since we've been working very closely with Michael and consulting him regularly over the last year in his role as deputy to the very capable Nancy Hanks. He has never raised any of these issues."

Mr. Straight's charges come at a time of increasing public and Administration interest in the two endowments. Since they were established in 1965, the agencies have been the recipients of steadily rising Congressional appropriations. Starting out at roughly \$25 million each in 1965, they now operate with budgets of more than \$100 million each for fiscal 1978. The arts endowment makes grants in the visual and performing arts while its less-publicized twin, the humanities endowment, finances endeavors in the fields of education and the humanities.



Fletcher Drake

Michael Straight, acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

interviewed this week in New York. Here he is attending an endowment conference at the Gotham Hotel. Mr. Straight characterized as one example of politicization the recent appointment of Joseph D. Duffey, a former Democratic Senatorial candidate in Connecticut and an adviser on issues during the Carter campaign, to be chairman of the humanities endowment.

"They set up a search committee, came up with very good names, and ended up with Mr. Duffey, whose primary qualifications are political," he said. "He has no credentials in the academic world; his credentials are that when he ran for the Senate in Connecticut, he came out for President Carter."

A major factor in Mr. Duffey's appointment, Mr. Straight asserted, was the dispute between Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, and Dr. Ronald Berman, former head of the humanities endowment. Senator Pell urged a "grass roots" approach to funding state programs in the humanities that Dr. Berman opposed.

A Political Act

"The resultant blocking by Pell of Senate confirmation of Dr. Berman's reappointment by President Ford, from early in 1976 until President Carter's election," Mr. Straight said, "was a highly political act in relation to a nonpolitical agency. Berman would surely have been confirmed had it not been for Pell's opposition, but as a result, the decision on a new humanities head fell to President Carter."

Mr. Duffey was unavailable for comment yesterday. But Mr. Jagoda said: "President Carter is strongly committed to high standards in the arts, and the product made more widely available to our citizens. That view is shared by Dr. Duffey, who is already moving to take partisan politics out of the National Endowment for the Humanities by his appointments and his appointments and his new policy initiatives."

An aide to Senator Pell pointed out that, in writing about the Berman matter recently in *The Providence (R.I.) Journal*, the Senator had said, "To me, the dispute was a matter of principle... The endowment hampers its own goals if it tends toward concen-

trating grant awards within a relatively closed circle of scholars and academic associates. That's why I opposed the reappointment of Dr. Berman."

Pell Aide Replies

The aide also said that Senator Pell had noted that a vote to consider the Berman reappointment was held in the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare before, not after, the Carter election and that "far from overwhelming support, Dr. Berman did not even gain the majority support required for consideration."

Mr. Straight fired another salvo at the White House for its failure to appoint "a strong senior adviser on cultural policy"—a deliberate omission so Joan Mondale, wife of the Vice President, "could have a free hand as spokesman for the arts."

"No one expects President Carter, beleaguered as he is by the SALT talks, the Middle East crisis and everything else to spend more than five minutes a month on the arts," the acting arts chairman went on to say. "But there isn't a qualified senior staff member, such as Leonard Garment in the Nixon Administration, to make decisions in his name. What you have are some 28 year-olds out of their depth." He was referring to the youthful White House group that works on cultural affairs. It is coordinated by Peter Kyros, deputy counsel to the Vice President, who is under 30.

"The reason," Mr. Straight elaborated, "is that the Carter Administration doesn't want senior people interfering with Mrs. Mondale. That's unfortunate, because by the fact of her being the Vice President's wife, she's political. She's a public figure saying all the right things, but she cannot watch over the integrity of the endowments day by day."

Jagoda Says Attention Is Being Paid

To that, Mr. Jagoda responded, "Michael's concern about age seems somewhat irrelevant, but in any event more attention is being paid to cultural affairs by the President, Mrs. Carter, Mrs. Mondale and their staffs than ever before in the White House."

"We all do look to Joan Mondale for her views," he continued, "because of her extensive experience and direct involvement in the arts for many years. We don't need to artificially install one staff member to look after these questions, since this whole area is being given high priority by quite a few people; some working part time, some full time."

Mr. Straight also cited as "political" the appointment of Mr. Bidle—"Senator Pell's old college roommate"—to head the arts endowment. Mr. Bidle, who drafted the legislation that established the endowments and was first deputy chairman of the arts agency, is staff director of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities, of which Senator Pell is chairman.

White House Was Concerned

"If the appointment of the staff director of the Pell oversight committee isn't 'political,' what is?" Mr. Straight asked. "The White House rebuttal is, 'Sure, it's political, but he's the most qualified.' It's true that Liv Bidle helped write the legislation that set up the endowments; he's a good, decent man who'll be a conscientious chairman. But why didn't they look for someone of national stature, who'd be known and respected by both political parties?"

Reached in Washington yesterday, Mr. Bidle said: "I have no sense of being a political person in this regard at all. Over the years, we've worked closely with both Democrats and Republicans, making the endowments increase in scope on the authorization side. Certainly Senator Pell has worked with Senator [Jacob K.] Javits as closely as anyone, and the effort has been a bipartisan one from the very beginning."

And he added, "Besides, I find 'politics' difficult to give a derogatory meaning to because our whole government is based on the political process as translated through our democracy."

A spokesman for Senator Pell relayed a comment from the Senator: "It seems to me that nobody has a quarrel with Mr. Bidle's actual qualifications for the job."

Mr. Straight cited as further examples of "politicization" attempts by "pressure groups" composed of blacks and/or women "to put Government

funding of the arts on a quota basis."

As for "vested interests," Mr. Straight said he had in mind especially performing arts unions that insist their representatives sit on the National Council on the Arts, the Presidentally appointed advisory body to the endowment, and the professional panel that pass on grants awarded by the agency.

He noted that, although two seats on the Council had been reserved for members representative of labor interests since 1965, they had not always been filled. In 1975, Mr. Straight said, the union leaders became concerned over the lack of such appointments by two Republican Presidents, Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford. They succeeded in having the endowment legislation amended to provide that the Presidentially appointed council members also had to undergo Senate confirmation.

"This gave them the political 'in' that they lacked with only Presidential appointment," Mr. Straight charged.

Mr. Straight ended by warning: "The problem now is the reassertion of the nonpolitical, nonpartisan nature of the endowment. It has had unparalleled success with both artists and citizens for two reasons: It was created in response to a need, and it's grown along the right lines, nonpartisan, nonpolitical and completely professional—everything it's done. The difficulty we were once a small, \$7 million operation, and everyone left us alone. Now we're a \$200 million affair, and everyone wants in."

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