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# National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): Article 08

Peter McGrath

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# THE NATIONAL BUREAUCRACY FOR THE ARTS

Is the Federal Government Killing the Arts with Kindness?

By Peter McGrath

The way Michael Mooney tells it, he never knew there was anything wrong with the National Endowment for the Arts until he began talking to artists. The Endowment seemed like a good idea, he says. "But whenever I mentioned it, artists would turn purple with rage. It could ruin a good dinner party. These weren't disappointed grant seekers, either, but major artists like Elaine de Kooning. So I thought, 'What kind of a thing is this?'"

He decided to find out and write about it for *Harper's* magazine. A short article, maybe 2,500 words. Three years and 200,000 words later, that article is emerging as a book called *Ministry of Culture*, to be published later this month by Wyndham Books, a division of Simon and Schuster.

As his Orwellian title suggests, Mooney sees something ominous in the Arts Endowment—and its sister agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities. The marriage between Leviathan and Art has produced a monster, he thinks, bloated, corrupt, and destined finally to crush both the arts and the humanities. According to Michael Mooney, the two Endowments—in an unforeseen and unintended but bureaucratically inevitable violation of their charters—are establishing an official culture and turning artists into minor civil servants.

For the first decade and a half of its existence, the National Endowment for the Arts seemed to lead a charmed life. In an era of increasing distrust of government agencies, NEA kept growing in popularity. Seldom was heard a discouraging word—not on Capitol Hill, not at Republican conventions, and certainly not from the Endowment's headquarters overlooking the Kennedy Center. At NEA, words like "inspiring" and "joyous" flowed from the lips of everyone from the chairman on down.

The Endowment made upbeat sounds because it served an exalted cause. This was no ordinary bureaucracy, no sub-agency of the Commerce Department

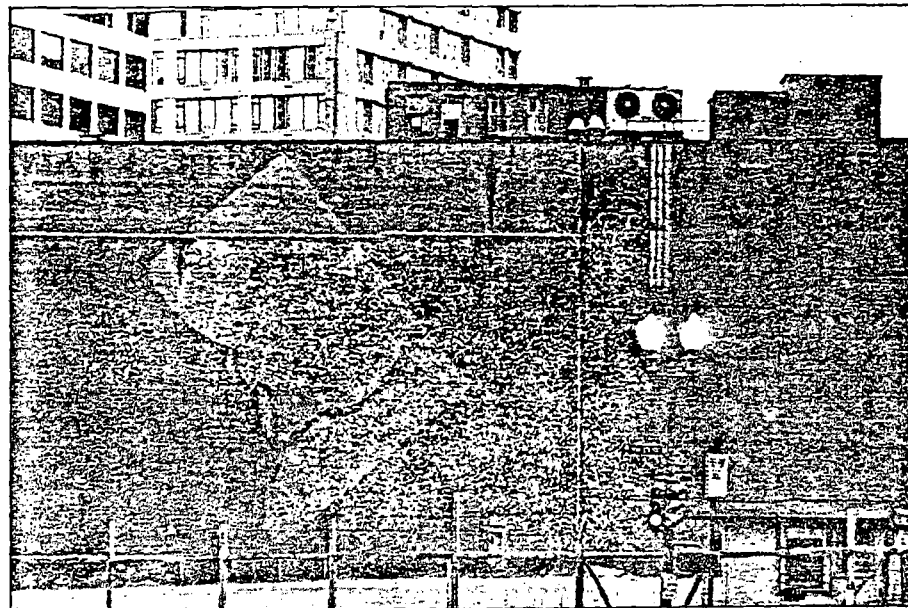
giving grants for research on the marketing of American semiconductors. As NEA Chairman Livingston Biddle liked to say, the arts "give us an enrichment. They give us insights and imagination. They open our eyes and ears and minds. Even in the impoverished sections of our cities, the arts are taking hold as a means of revitalizing the human spirit, and that's never happened before in this country."

But then, never before has this country had an Arts Endowment. The US was the last of the big industrial nations to endorse public funding for the arts. Here the job had always been left to private philanthropy, and if this meant that symphony orchestras and museums prospered because they gave their benefactors social status, while the actual artists lived in damp basement apartments and complained to their friends about American philistinism, this was the natural order of things. Besides, poverty was said to be good for artists' souls.

One by one, however, orchestras and

museums began to fall into financial holes. By the early 1960s, the problem was so serious that it attracted the attention of policymakers in both business and government. A Twentieth Century Fund study by economists William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen concluded that the live performing arts would be losing money at faster and faster rates.

The performing arts are inherently labor-intensive, the economists said, and there's not much scope for substituting machines for people or for otherwise shrinking the size of the work force. An orchestra can't handle the standard symphonic repertoire without a hundred musicians, give or take a few, and it will always take two to dance a pas de deux. The same actor can't play both Claudius and Hamlet. Beyond a point, then, productivity could never be improved to cover rising costs, and the only alternative would be fewer performances at higher ticket prices, leaving high culture even more the province of the rich than



The Arts Endowment gave \$3,000 for Robert Newmann's depiction of the District of Columbia, created by sandblasting on a brick wall near New York Avenue and Fourteenth Street, Northwest. The artist complained that Washingtonians downgraded this already-fading work because it's only temporary. "It baffles them," he said.

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it already was.

At the time of this study, 1966, the Arts Endowment was less than a year old. The Endowment's first full budget was only \$8.5 million, but the Baumol-Bowen thesis made a powerful case for larger subsidies. Both NEA and arts organizations seized it gratefully.

Even more powerful was the argument that the arts had practical value. It wasn't just that they opened our eyes and ears and enriched our minds. They also enriched restaurateurs, hotel owners, and others whose businesses were near popular arts institutions. Congressional attitudes have changed because of this, says Biddle: "In the old days, if you said the arts were of fundamental value to people's lives, you were considered a totally impractical fellow, an eccentric. The very word 'arts' was suspect; you had to talk about 'cultural progress.'"

... Today, chambers of commerce are seeing that if they focus on the arts, they can attract business and increase real estate values."

Even better, the arts have redeeming social value. They make cities more livable—the Endowment funds not only art in public places, like Sam Gilliam's huge outdoor hanging canvas just above Dupont Circle and Robert Newmann's sandblasted profile of the District on a New York Avenue brick wall, but also architecture and historic preservation. Planning grants from NEA proved to be the catalysts in reviving blighted Victorian-era city blocks in places like Galveston and Detroit.

The arts keep kids in school: Biddle is fond of telling about an NEA-funded arts program in a Houston barrio that stimulated student demand for art instruction in a local school. Once art classes made school worthwhile to them, the children began to stick around for reading and arithmetic, too. The truancy rate dropped from 85 to 15 percent, Biddle claims.

Once the arts were shown to be able to heal the sick and doubtless even sometimes raise the dead, the Endowment was out of trouble. There would be occasional criticism of particular grants, like the \$500 that funded a poem consisting solely of the word "LIGHGT," or the fellowship that enabled Erica Jong to write about the famous zipless f--- in *Fear of Flying*, or the \$6,000 that allowed an artist to "sculpt in space" by dropping colored streamers from a high-flying airplane. But generally the Endowment was free to do as it pleased, and with increasing amounts of taxpayers' money.

Richard Nixon doubled NEA's budget his first year in the White House, then doubled it again the next year. By the

time of the last Nixon budget, when the Endowment's authorization reached \$100 million for the first time, its spending had been going up at a rate of more than 50 percent a year. The federal budget as a whole rose only 10 percent annually during that time.

"It's easier to grow from a million dollars to a hundred million than from a hundred to two hundred," says Livingston Biddle when reminded of NEA's

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**During the time Reagan was  
governor, says Biddle,  
California's arts program  
"came close  
to disappearing."**

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phenomenal growth under his predecessor Nancy Hanks, a recruit from the Rockefeller stable of championship-level administrators.

In fact, Biddle's NEA went from \$124.5 million in fiscal 1978—his first year at the Endowment—to \$149.6 million the next year, almost a 25-percent rise, which wasn't bad at all, considering the pressures on Congress to clamp down on domestic spending. The next year, however, was a lean one: The budget for fiscal 1980 increased by hardly more than 3 percent, to \$154.4 million. For the fiscal year just started, the prospects are equally dim. The House of Representatives approved \$160 million, but a Senate subcommittee cut that back to \$156 million. Endowment officials figure they'll do well to split the difference.

This summer brought more bad news for the Endowment. Of its ten or so best friends on Capitol Hill, two lost primary elections (Senator Jacob Javits of New York and Representative John Buchanan of Alabama), and another (Representative Frank Thompson of New Jersey) faced possible expulsion from Congress in connection with the Abscam affair. A fourth, Representative John Brademas of Indiana, who as majority whip of the House is a well-placed NEA friend, was fighting hard for reelection.

Finally, there was the distinct possibility that Ronald Reagan would be the next President. The Republican platform pledged continued support for public financing of the arts, but deplored the politicization of NEA that it said had occurred under Biddle. Even more discouraging, according to Biddle himself, was Reagan's record as governor of California, when the state's arts program "came close to disappearing..."

"It certainly may be true," he says.

"that in a change of administration we'd be in for a period of retrogression."

The press isn't as helpful as it used to be. Florence Lowe, NEA's chief press officer, says that in her ten years on the job, no more than one percent of press comment on the Endowment was unfavorable. Recently, however, a negative tone has been creeping into the coverage.

The criticism began when Biddle was appointed NEA chairman in late 1977. The arts establishment feared that, as a former Senate staff man, Biddle would be entirely too responsive to political pressures, too ready to sacrifice quality—meaning art produced in New York—in favor of quantity—meaning art produced in as many congressional districts as possible. Even worse, Biddle had been crass enough to lobby openly for the job, despite his own impeccable haute-WASP breeding—main-line Philadelphia family, St. George's School, Princeton, Episcopalian.

This was the time of the great populism-versus-elitism debate, pitting proponents of "access" to the arts, like Biddle's former boss, Senator Claiborne Pell, against proponents of "excellence." The excellence side, whose chief spokesman seemed to be Robert Brustein, then dean of the Yale Drama School, held that the access people, the

populists, had a hidden agenda. What they really wanted was to broaden the Endowment's political base and to win over congressional enemies by taking money from Manhattan museums and putting it in every cow-town crafts festival across the country. Biddle himself did nothing to calm these fears when he said things like, "We must support a full flowering of the ethnic arts, of cultural diversity. A full flowering of the design arts, of arts for the elderly and the hand-

### Mooney draws a picture of an interlocking directorate taking control of how we spend money on the arts.

icapped." Most of the early press attacks on the NEA took the excellence side and appeared in magazines like the *New Republic*, *Harper's*, and *Commentary*.

Then disturbing stories about cronyism and conflict of interest at NEA began to appear, often under the byline of Ruth Dean of the *Washington Star*. In the literature program in particular, there was a suspicious-looking pattern in which grants went to friends and favorites of

the panelists that NEA brought in to evaluate applicants.

And now comes Michael Mooney with *Ministry of Culture* and an indictment of NEA far broader than anything else that has appeared in print.

First, however, a few words about Mooney's writing: It's dreadful. Subordinate clauses lurch into each other like drunken marchers at a St. Patrick's Day parade. His use of capital letters to convey irony ("The High White Table of National Culture") is heavy-handed. So are his lapses into dialect ("Baller? Sheet... jes baseball for sissies").

In spite of all that, *Ministry of Culture* is worth the effort. Mooney goes well beyond the elitist-populist debate, which he dismisses as "an argument over the division of spoils between two factions of the same orthodox establishment." The picture he draws instead is of a vast interlocking directorate of the arts, a network of public agencies that, in cooperation with private enterprise, are taking control of how money is spent on the arts in this country.

Mooney's "ministry of culture" isn't confined to NEA's offices in Foggy Bottom. In its narrowest sense, the name of the book refers to the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, a body charged with coordinating all of the fed-

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eral government's activities in the realm of culture. In its broadest sense, however, it refers to the complex created by those activities and includes the agencies that carry them out.

Chief among the agencies are the two Endowments, but others belong, too: the General Services Administration, which oversees not only federal architecture, but also an aggressive art-in-federal-buildings program; the Department of Education, where an Institute of Museum Services helps museums cover their operating expenses; the Smithsonian, with its many museums and publications; the National Park Service, which runs museums, theaters, and historic districts; the National Archives; the Library of Congress; and the International Communications Agency, America's propaganda voice overseas.

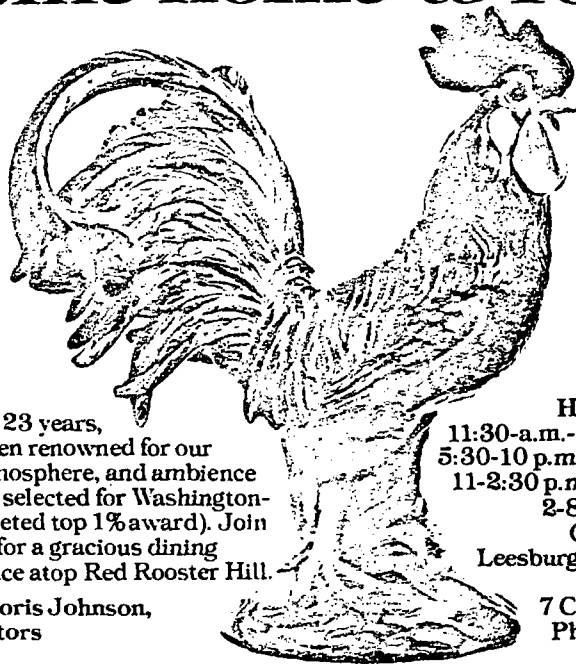
Moreover, this federal complex is only part of a nationwide network that includes state and local arts councils, arts-service organizations like the National Opera Institute, private foundations, and the charitable-contributions departments of big corporations. Mooney says time and again that these institutions all have their hands in each other's pockets, setting up one joint project after another, such as the one that had Coca-Cola and Gillette going in with the Arts Endowment to fund a Boston Symphony trip to China under the auspices of the International Communications Agency.

How much the "ministry" spends is anybody's guess. "Any financial analysis of such a labyrinth of good works failed," writes Mooney. "Every expense was a portion of some other cost." To show how it had stimulated state spending on the arts, NEA officials boasted of the more than \$100 million provided by state arts councils—but it turned out that about 20 percent of that money had been given to the states by . . . NEA. Every grant is a portion of some other appropriation.

This network is largely a creation of the National Endowment for the Arts, Mooney says. Most fund-raising experts trace the rise in corporate support of the arts, now somewhere between \$300 million and \$1 billion a year, to the catalytic role NEA plays. It's widely believed that a government grant, particularly one of the big-bucks challenge grants that require matching private gifts, has become a seal of approval, legitimizing its recipient in the eyes of private donors.

Then there are the state arts councils. NEA is by law required to give 20 percent of its program funds—more than \$19 million in fiscal 1980—to the states in the form of block grants, and in many states it was this money that called the arts councils into existence. As a result,

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the councils tend to be dependent on NEA; it provided almost half of the \$680,000 budget of the DC Arts Commission this year, for example.

Where does the money go? According to economist Dick Netzer in a book called *The Subsidized Muse*, the answer is simple: A lot of it goes to lobbying for more federal money. With federal funds such a large portion of most state arts councils' budgets, he says, lobbying Washington "appears to be the most sensible use of staff time."

Similarly, the service organizations are often creatures of the Endowment. The National Opera Institute, housed at the Kennedy Center, received more than \$400,000 in Endowment funds in fiscal 1979, which accounted for about half its budget. There is even a service organization for the state arts councils, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies; it, too, took home more than \$400,000 in federal money.

In short, a considerable part of NEA's activity seems to consist of establishing institutions that will, directly or indirectly, advocate more money for NEA. Federal agencies themselves are at least technically forbidden to lobby, and besides, in the case of the arts it would be politically unwise to be too open about advancing its own interests. The result is that the Endowment generates more employment for "arts administrators," as they are now called, than it does for artists.

According to Mooney, NEA has a second reason for creating a network of arts institutions: It puts a layer of insulation between the agency and the individual artists, who tend to be unruly, unpredictable, and even uncouth. Sooner or later they will create trouble for the government, like the English painter who placed a nude of the Queen in a government-supported show, forcing the show's cancellation. (What Mooney doesn't say is that artists are also hustlers; one former Endowment official says that NEA program directors and their top assistants "practically have to go in disguise" when they travel, to avoid being besieged by grant-seekers.)

It doesn't take too close a reading of the Endowment's annual reports to verify the claim that institutions are preferred to individuals. In fiscal 1979, only 8 percent of the available funds went for individual grants, and many of these went not to artists but to consultants. The total amount was \$14.5 million.

Meanwhile, arts organizations were receiving almost \$164 million, including challenge grants and private gifts channeled through NEA.

In some programs, such as museums, an institutional emphasis is built in. But

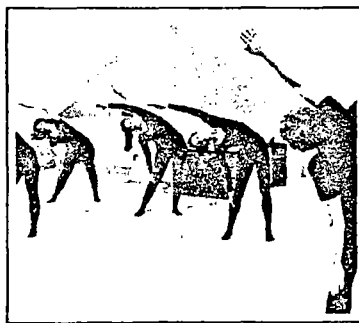
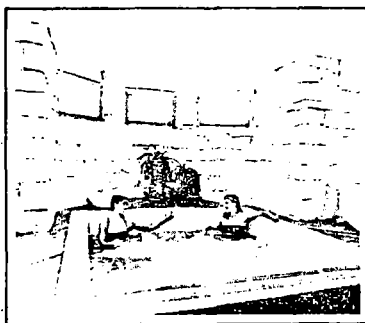
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the pattern is the same for fields in which the individual artists would naturally come to mind first. In the visual arts, for example, even though museums were taken care of by their own program to the tune of \$11 million, less than a third of the \$4.7 million available in fiscal 1979 went directly into artists' hands. The "art in public places" category was typical: In 1979, it gave Gallaudet College \$30,000 for a sculpture by Lloyd Hamrol. Thus, even though NEA knew exactly which artist it wanted to support, it still had to filter the money through an institution.

The same is true of the literature program. Instead of giving its \$3.9 million directly to writers, it supported institutional residencies (\$360,000), little magazines (\$275,000), small presses (\$380,000), distributors and promoters (\$482,000), and even a service organization, the Co-ordinating Council of Literary Magazines (\$420,000), which NEA created to handle some of its grant-making. Writes Mooney: "Perhaps NEA's system of patronage worked to the benefit of artists by trickling down through incorporated institutions, but the 'arts constituencies' NEA talked about were always exclusively arts institutions."

The Endowment's stock explanation for preferring arts institutions to artists is that it isn't capable of making the num-

ber of artistic judgments that an exclusive focus on individual applicants would require. It lacks the staff for extensive traveling, and not even the best-connected panelists can be expected to know what's going on in every corner of the country. It's easier, and fairer to the artists, to let the bulk of individual grants

## The curator of the Corcoran sat on the Endowment panel from which the Corcoran received a \$20,000 grant.

be made at state and local levels, where the judges are more familiar with the work being done.

It's also more prudent politically, though the Endowment doesn't say so aloud. A top official of another agency in the "ministry of culture" complex puts it this way: "Individual grants are always a tricky area because there's always the danger that one will blow up in your face, like *Fear of Flying*. When you make those grants go through the state councils, they take the heat."

Besides, he adds, channeling money through other institutions increases the


number of people who are dependent on NEA—why make only the artist your ward, when you can have him and an administrator, too?

The heart of Mooney's charge, then, is this: The Arts Endowment is "a political establishment with ambitions for the arts that [are] unlimited as to political sovereignties, but silent on questions of aesthetics."

The institutionalization of the arts has inevitably generated the irregularities that occur whenever public and private sectors meet: conflict of interest and the revolving-door syndrome. And apparently no one sees anything wrong with it, because it's all laid out in the annual reports. In 1979, Lloyd Hamrol, the sculptor hired by Gallaudet with \$30,000 of NEA money, sat on the art-in-public-places panel that made the grant. Anthony Gittens was a member of the panel on aid to film and video exhibitions at the same time his Black Film Institute at the University of the District of Columbia was getting \$10,000 from the panel.

A panelist's institutional affiliation can produce an unavoidable conflict. Oleg Lobanov, the former managing director of the National Symphony Orchestra, was on the panel that gave his ensemble \$523,000. Jane Livingston, curator of

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the Corcoran Gallery, sat on the museum purchase-plan panel from which the Corcoran received \$20,000 as part of a large grant package totaling more than \$100,000. The problem enables nearly every major orchestra and museum to get at least some money from NEA; it's impossible, then, to use orchestra and museum officials as panelists without creating potential conflicts of interest. Similarly, on the panel for large theaters, more than half the members' theaters won grants.

The Endowment says that it takes care of conflicts by having panelists leave the room when applications in which they may have an interest are discussed. In

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**"With every grant, we  
create five enemies and an  
ingrate," says  
Livingston Biddle.**

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the case of Lloyd Hamrol's sculpture award, for instance, a substitute panelist sat in. Gallaudet had hired Hamrol only after he was already on the panel, and that, says NEA staff aide Patricia Fuller, "is the kind of thing we can't foresee."

The revolving-door syndrome so familiar to bureaucracy-watchers can also be found in the pages of the annual reports. Former NEA officials often win grants as consultants—people like former expansion-arts director Vantile Whitfield (\$17,500 in 1979) and former theater director Ruth Mayleas (\$100,000). Or they join constituent organizations; the former program director for museums, John Spencer, now heads the American Academy in Rome, which regularly gets \$40,000 from the design-arts program.

While Spencer was revolving out, others were revolving in. Mary MacArthur, the current assistant director of the literature program, began her association with NEA as a grant winner both for *Gallimaufry* magazine, which she edited, and for the Glen Echo Writers' Center here, of which she was a founder. The writers' center continued to get grants for things like typesetting even after MacArthur joined the panel, as did several contributors to *Gallimaufry* as well as the magazine's co-editor, Jonis Agee. Agee, meanwhile, was married to David Wilk, whose Truck Press—itsself a grant recipient—was *Gallimaufry's* distributor. Then, when Wilk succeeded the beleaguered Leonard Randolph as program director, he hired MacArthur, his wife's best friend, as his top aide.

The Endowment usually tries to dis-

miss complaints about such things as a bad-mouthing by disappointed grant-seekers. "With every grant we create five enemies and an ingrate," Biddle likes to say. A more honest answer, however, comes from Congressman Sidney Yates, chairman of the appropriations subcommittee that oversees NEA, and one of the agency's best friends on Capitol Hill: "I don't know how you can make it pure," he says, referring to the conflict-of-interest problem. "In the arts you have panelists who know each other just as in business you have associations in which people get to know each other. The panelists have reputations—that's why they're selected."

"Sure, they all knew each other," says a writer who once served on the literature panel. "But everyone in this context deals in such petty cash. It's not grand larceny. But they're natural crooks in the sense that they actually innocently believe they're entitled to it."

Everything in the government, according to one former Endowment staff member who is applying for a grant of his own this year, works on the buddy system. That, finally, is the point to be remembered about the National Endowment for the Arts. Michael Mooney keeps seeing an "official conspiracy" against art, where in fact there is only bureaucracy. Sociologist Max Weber teaches us that it's in the nature of the beast to pay attention first and foremost to its own survival. When there is a conflict between its internal needs and its stated external goals, the goals will go, as they did when Nancy Hanks canceled funds for George Plimpton's *American Literary Anthology/3* because it contained an obscene story and was coming out at reauthorization time in Congress. When the bureaucracy sees a chance to expand its clientele, it does so, as NEA did by creating its network of constituent institutions. If artistic decisions at NEA are made for reasons of administrative convenience, that should surprise no student of bureaucracy.

Should we then abandon public funding for the arts? Not even Michael Mooney is prepared to dissolve the Endowment; it's needed as a counterweight to the corporations. "It wouldn't do any good to transfer the responsibilities exercised by Liv Biddle to AT&T and Mobil," he says. "We'd just be trading Biddle in for [Mobil's] Herb Schmertz, and Herb Schmertz can't go to his left. It'd be a bad trade.

"It will be interesting, though," he adds, "to see what NEA's friends say when the Reaganites have taken over their Endowment and Jerry Falwell is giving out grants to Christian Baptist University." □