1977

Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 03

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Blend of Arts and Government
Livingston L. Biddle Jr.

By LINDA CHARLTON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 2—When Liv­
ingston L. Biddle Jr. was nominated as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, the appointment—which has its critics—had an unusual sym­metry: Mr. Biddle drafted the legis­lation that set up the endowment 12 years ago. The 73-year-old Mr. Biddle was at that time a special assistant to Senator Claiborne Pell, a Rhode Island Democrat, a college classmate who was called at today’s confirmation hearings on the Biddle appointment, “The father of the arts endowment.”

For the last 14 years, ever since he worked at putting together the first legislation establishing the National Council on the Arts in 1963, Mr. Biddle has worked in the arts field—since 1973 as Congressional liaison director for the endowment, and since last year as the director of the subcommittee on education, arts and humanities of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare.

Called Most Experienced
It was this very subcommittee that met this morning to consider the Biddle nomination, which is expected to be approved by the Senate without difficulty. Senator Pell, as an old friend, patron and colleague of Mr. Biddle, disqualifed himself from the chair­manship, but the atmosphere in the hearing room was one of old home week.

Mr. Biddle is a West Virginia Democrat acting as chairman, told Mr. Biddle, “I think the arts generally will be the beneficiary of his ap­pointment.” Mr. Pell read aloud the letter he had written to President Carter last August, urging Mr. Biddle’s selec­tion. Mr. Biddle, he told the Pres­i­dent, has “more experience in dealing with the relations between the arts and the Federal Government” than anyone else around. There was no doubt about the committee’s sentiments.

Mr. Biddle was also made of the fact that Mr. Biddle is also a novelist, with four books to his credit, two of them best-sellers. That in fact, is why he came to Washington: his four novels have had Philadelphia backgrounds, and he thought it would be interesting to broaden his horizons” by getting to know something about the city that is “the focal point of so much of the nation’s life.”

2 Years as Reporter
The he ran into Senator Pell, an old friend, at a party in Philadelphia and “mentioned my thoughts to him.” The Senator replied, according to Mr. Biddle, “Not looking for a Washington experience, come and work for me.” He was “looking for a generalist who could write,” and Mr. Biddle was that. The novel with a Washington background is still unwritten.

Livingston Ludlow Biddle Jr. was born in Mynn Mawr, Pa., on Philadel­phia’s Main Line, May 26, 1918. He graduated from Princeton University in 1940, spent two years as a newspaper American field service as an ambulance driver in 1942. Until the war’s end, he served in the Middle East, the Medi­terranean, North Africa and Europe and was twice decorated.

He married right after the war and has two children, Cordelia Dietrich, who is studying acting, and Livingston L. Biddle IV, who is finishing architec­tural school, and three grandchildren. His wife died in 1972, and in 1973 he married Catherina Baart, a Dutch-born painter. They live in a three-story gray-painted brick house in Georgetown.

‘Kind of a Dream’
Mr. Biddle took a break from Wash­ington in the late 1960’s, serving for three years as a professor and chairman of the division of arts at Fordham University in New York City. In 1971 and 1972, he was also chairman of the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Ballet Company in Philadelphia, where he had also served as president of Children’s Service Inc.

A slender man, almost self-effacing in manner, with a quiet, somewhat nasal voice, thick glasses and fluffy gray sideburns, Mr. Biddle conceded in an interview yesterday that, “I had a kind of a dream all along that I would someday love to have a hand in guiding the programs I tried to develop.”

Mr. Biddle’s appointment, like that of his counterpart at the National En­dowment for the Humanities, Joseph D. Duffey, has been attacked as inappro­priate and as a portent of “politicization” of the Federal Government’s involvement with the arts and humanities.

“I’m not really annoyed at all,” Mr. Biddle said in reply to a question about his feelings about the criticism. “It is just so disagree with the premise that the arts and the political process, the democratic process—do not mix... if they (the arts) are not there, where else do they belong?”

Controversy Is Cited
In his statement to the Senate sub­committee today, Mr. Biddle ad­dressed the “suggestion” that the arts may be “subject to inappropriate governmental pressures,” and said that “essential safeguards such as the National Council on the Arts, a group of private citizens, who pass on grant applications—were written into the initial legislation.”

He also spoke about the “elitism-populism” controversy that the arts and humanities appointments have stirred, saying that... “...elitism can indeed mean quality... and... populism I would suggest mean ‘access’... why not bridge these two words... and simply say that together they can mean ‘access to the best’.”

Looking back, Mr. Biddle said yester­day, “I feel that we have come from a level of seducie and skepticism to a level of acceptance” of the impor­tance of the arts and the importance of governmental support for the arts...