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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 Livingston L. Biddle Jr. was nominated as 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 59-year-old Mr. Biddle was at that time a special assistant to Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, 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 1975 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, an old friend, patron and colleague of Mr. Biddle, disqualified himself from the chairmanship, but the atmosphere in the hearing room was one of old home week.

Senator Jennings Randolph, 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 had told the President, has "more experience in dealing with relations between the arts and the Federal Government" than anyone else around. There was no doubt about the committee's sentiments.

Mention 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 had all had Philadelphia backgrounds, and he "thought it would be interesting to broaden my 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

Then 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, "If you really are looking for 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 Myrn 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 4th, 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 "politicalization" of the Federal Government's involvement with the arts and humanities.

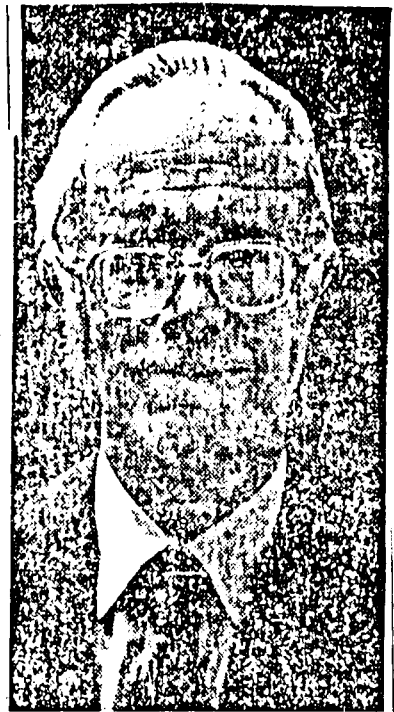
"I'm not really annoyed at all," Mr. Biddle said in reply to a question about his feelings about the criticism. "I just so disagree with the premise that the arts and the political process—the democratic process—do not mix . . . if they (the arts) are not there, where else do they belong?"

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 can 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 ridicule and skepticism to a level of acceptance" of the importance of the arts and the importance of governmental support for the arts



The New York Times/Gewisse Tan

Livingston Biddle

that the arts would have "an ever-larger audience, until many more people than today can benefit from the arts and until more people attach a deeper sense of priority to the arts in their own daily lives."

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