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Elitist-Turned-Liberal Livingston Biddle Seeks A Unity With Populism

By BESS WINAKOR

CHICAGO — Livingston Biddle is a gray-haired, mustached leprechaun of a man with lengthy sideburns and Bing Crosby eyebrows.

He grew up rich. He is a member of the Philadelphia Biddle family, which made its money in banking and acquired even more money when it married into the Philadelphia Drexel family, also in banking.

But along the line, during or after his World War II experiences as an ambulance driver, Biddle became a liberal. He also became a best-selling novelist, writing about the war and Philadelphia. Then, with the help of his lifelong friend and Princeton University classmate, Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., Biddle drifted toward government and politics.

One of the things he did was draft the legislation that set up the National Endowment for the Arts in 1963, and he became the council's first deputy chairman, under Roger Stevens, in its 1966-67 formative years.

Now, he has succeeded Nancy Hanks as chairman and is in the middle of a controversy — "elitism" vs. "populism" — over the direction of the endowment.

Elitism is represented by institutions such as museums, populism by community groups, some of which believe the arts should reach out to more people.

To demonstrate the fury of the controversy, the *New York Times*'s Hilton Kramer, in an article headlined, "The Threat of Politicization of the Federal Arts Program," fears "a new era marked by an aggressive politicization of federal cultural policy is now imminent." He puts Biddle in the anti-elite camp — against "achievement of a high order."

Biddle, the elitist-turned-liberal, is trying to work his way out by saying he'd like to unit elitism with populism. He calls for "a new spirit of unity. Elitism meaning the best, populism meaning access. There's a nice semantic bridge. Together, they mean access to the best."

Meanwhile, Washington-based Biddle was in Chicago recently in his second

week in his new position to speak at an Arts and the Handicapped conference. He was totally relaxed as he talked about his job and his personal interests in the arts.

He had met with the 26-member National Council on the Arts, an advisory group to NEA. And he says, "I would like to involve the council more in the decision-making process." He began by setting up a budget committee and a policy-planning committee.

In addition, Biddle plans to work more closely with the National Endowment for the Humanities (which the *New York Times*' Kramer also worried about

in his article) and is considering having three deputies instead of one. One would deal with programs, a second wit policy planning and a third with intergovernmental affairs, including relationships with state and community arts programs.

Since 1966, when Biddle was deputy chairman, the NEA budget has grown from \$2.5 million to \$116 million. In the same period, state arts-council expenditures have gone from \$4 million to \$60 million. And community arts councils have grown from 150 to 1,800.

Biddle, 59, was introduced to the arts as a child. His father was a poet, his brother an artist, and his mother loved music. While he was attending Princeton, studying English and French literature, he decided he wanted to be a writer. And after serving as an ambulance driver for the American Field Service in the Middle East, Europe and North Africa during World War II — "I couldn't get into the Army. I only have two percent vision (without glasses)" — he became a novelist. His first book, "The Muir Line," a term that usually refers to an elite residential area of Philadelphia, is a "somewhat autobiographical novel about a soldier returning to Philadelphia and finding his values very much changed and the town's not changed." It reached the *New York Times* best-seller list.

"If it hadn't been for the war, I would have continued to be a rather stuffy Philadelphian," Biddle said. "I became more aware, more liberal, more under-

standing, I hope, of other people, more welcoming of other points of view.

"As you write and put yourself in the point of view of other people, you expand your values. I don't mean to criticize Philadelphia, but the horizons there are relatively limited."

His second book, "Debut," about a girl growing up in Philadelphia and going into a war experience, was a "nonseller."

But the third book, "The Village Beyond," about war experiences in Italy, sold 350,000 copies. The fourth, "Sam Bentley's Island," is also about Philadelphia. There's an island by that name in the Caribbean, "where a group of Philadelphians got involved in an oil swindle."

In 1963, he moved to Washington to work as special assistant to Pell. "I asked him if I could develop some legislation with a cultural bent." That led to the drafting of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, which led to the NEA.

"Some people are saying it's fortunate a novelist and not a lawyer wrote it because it's possible to drive a truck several ways through it without hitting the sidewalls, it's so flexible," Biddle quips.