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Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 10

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New arts endowment chairman says quality is key to program

WASHINGTON — (AP) — Livingston Biddle, new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, said Monday he sees no validity to arguments about elitism vs. populism in the nation's cultural affairs.

"Elitist can be defined to mean the best," he said, "Populist can mean access. I would like to join them in a new phrase, meaning access to the best."

Biddle, named by President Carter to succeed Nancy Hanks as chairman of the grant-dispensing agency, was confirmed by the Senate on Friday. He has been a legislative aide to Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I.

Critics of the agency have argued variously that it gives undue amounts of money to major arts organizations, or that it fritters funds away to storefront groups and individuals.

"Quality is the key to our efforts here," Biddle said,

"but I also believe the arts must have the broadest possible base. . . I think we should not worry that more and more people are involved. I think we are an educable people — we always have been."

He quoted Mrs. Walter F. Mondale, wife of the vice-president, as saying the arts are like a pyramid, and that if the peak is to be raised, the base must be broadened.

Biddle said the endowment's basic legislation contains safeguards against politicalization, and that he will strive for unity among various arts disciplines and organizations. "The arts in the United States too often tend to become polarized," he said.

Biddle spoke at a luncheon meeting of the Friends of the Kennedy Center, attended by representatives from around the country who have been meeting there for three days.

The chairman of the volunteer friends, Elizabeth Polk Guest, announced a national membership drive to raise funds to help support programs in the center's new theater complex, being financed principally by a \$3 million gift from Japan in honor of the U.S. Bicentennial.