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THE ARTS Senate happy with new NEA chief

By LINDA CHARLTON
New York Times

WASHINGTON — 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: Biddle drafted the legislation that set up the endowment 12 years ago.

The 59-year-old Biddle was at that time a special assistant to Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., a college classmate who was called, at the recent confirmation hearings on the Biddle appointment, "The father of the (arts) endowment."

For the past 14 years, ever since he worked at putting together the first legislation establishing the National Council on the Arts in 1963, Biddle has worked in the arts field — since 1975 as congressional liaison director for the endowment, and since last year as director of the subcommittee on education, arts and humanities of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare.

IT WAS THIS subcommittee that met to pass on the Biddle nomination; Senator Pell, as an old friend, patron and colleague of Biddle, disqualified himself from the chairmanship, but the atmosphere in the hearing room was that of old home week.

Sen. Jennings Randolph, D-W.Va., acting as chairman, told Biddle, "I think the arts generally will be the

beneficiary" of this appointment. Pell read aloud the letter he had written to President Carter in August urging Biddle's selection. Biddle, Randolph had told the president, has had "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 made of the fact that Biddle is also a novelist, with four novels 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."

THEN, HE CAME across Pell, an old friend, at a party in Philadelphia and "mentioned my thoughts to him." The senator replied, according to Biddle, "If you really are looking for Washington experience, come and work for me." He was "looking for a generalist who could write," and Biddle was that. The novel with a Washington background is still unwritten.

A slender man, almost self-effacing in manner, with a quiet, somewhat nasal voice, thick glasses and fluffy gray sideburns, Biddle admitted in an interview 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."

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," 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?"

He also spoke about the "elitism-populism" controversy that the arts and humanities appointments have stirred, saying that 'elitism' can indeed mean duality . . . 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, Biddle said, "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 government support for the arts. Looking forward, he said he hoped 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."