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New Arts Endowment Head Regarded As Natural For Job

By WILLIAM K. WYANT JR.
A Washington Correspondent
of the Post-Dispatch

WASHINGTON, Nov. 29 — Livingston Ludlow Biddle Jr., a Philadelphia Main Liner and World War II ambulance driver, will be sworn in tomorrow afternoon as the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The oath is to be administered by Vice President Walter F. Mondale.

Biddle, 59, is regarded by many as a natural for the job he'd until recently by Nancy Hanks and, until 1969, by Roger L. Stevens.

For one thing, Biddle has written several successful novels and can claim some personal expertise in the field of creative writing — one of several fields to which the endowment dispenses federal largesse.

For another, he is an old hand on Capitol Hill, where as an assistant to Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., who was his classmate at Princeton, he helped shape the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965.

Perhaps more importantly, Biddle seems to know how to get along with Congress and is unlikely to get hung up, as some do, on the moss-backed issue of

whether federal assistance will "politicize" the arts. He is not afraid of politics or politicians.

In Biddle's view, he said in an interview, the arts endowment budget can and no doubt will be considerably expanded before it reaches the point where it might interfere with private support of the arts. He considers private support very important.

Biddle figures that the present federal level of support — about \$115 million a year — provides about 10 percent of the total budget for the arts in the United States. The federal contribution should not get beyond 20 percent, however, Biddle said.

"More (support) would diminish private participation," he said. The fiscal 1978 congressional allotment of \$115 million for programming compares with \$2,534,308 for fiscal 1966, when the arts endowment began

In a little more than a decade of federal assistance, Biddle suggested, a lot has happened to justify Congress's declaration in 1965 that: "It is necessary and appropriate for the federal govern-

a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent."

Since then, Biddle said, the number of symphony orchestras has risen from 57 to 110, dance companies have increased from ten to 70, theater companies from 12 to more than 60, and opera companies from 27 to more than 50.

When the National Endowment for the Arts announced the first round of grants last July for its new "challenge program," the St. Louis Symphony Society was listed for \$1 million and the Greater St. Louis Arts and Education Council for \$250,000.

In this type of grant, the recipients are required to obtain at least \$3 from other sources for each \$1 of federal money. The principle of matching funds is written into the law, as is the principle that support for the arts is largely a matter for private and local initiative.

Biddle is chairman of the National Council on the Arts, consisting of 26 members appointed by the president. These now include author Eudora Welty, painter James Wyeth, concert pianist Van Cliburn, and others nationally recognized for achievement and civic endeavor.

In addition, there are 14 panels of experts in various fields — dance, literature, music, museums, theater, visual arts, public media, and so on.

David Frank of St. Louis, managing director of the Loretto-Hilton Repertory Theatre, is a member of the theatre advisory panel. Kenneth Billups, supervisor of vocal music for the St. Louis Public Schools, is on the panel for expansion arts.

Despite forebodings in the past that if Congress paid the piper it would try to call the tune, the arts endowment has gotten along well with Capitol Hill, Biddle said.

"I think Congress has become more and more aware that freedom of expression is involved here," he said. Still, there have been a few amusing reactions to art works with which the endowment was involved, or thought to be involved.

An endowment-supported anthology published a one-word poem for which the author received \$250. A congressman said it was the only poem he could memorize. In her book "Fear of Flying,"

Erica Jong expressed thanks to the endowment, but it turned out she had had a grant to write poetry rather than the novel, Biddle recalled.

Biddle is hearty-looking and mild-mannered, with no pretenses about him. He has a moustache and sideburns. His wife, the former Catherine Baart, is a painter born in Holland.

During World War II, Biddle was decorated twice by the British for his work as an ambulance driver in front-line areas in Italy. In France, he was second in command of American Field Service units.

Biddle's office, on the 13th floor of a building near the State Department, offers a view of the Kennedy Center and the Pentagon across the Potomac River. He is obviously happy to be there.

When Biddle first faced the arts council — a formidable group — as chairman, he got a laugh with his paraphrase of what Lord Acton said about power corrupting, and absolute power corrupting absolutely.

"Power corrupts, but absolute power is absolutely delightful," he assured the group.

Just as Biddle does not agonize over the "politicization" of the arts, he does not allow himself to lose too much sleep over alleged inconsistencies between support for high-quality art and support for popular art, folk music or whatever.

Biddle believes the endowment must provide firm support for the classical arts — symphonies, for example — and also provide for outreach.

At his confirmation hearing Nov. 2 before the Senate Committee on Human Resources Biddle said he saw no reason for battle lines to be drawn between

"elitism" and "populism" in the arts.

"Why not bridge these two words?" he asked. "Why not join them in harmony, rather than in discord, and simply say that together they can mean 'access to the best?'"