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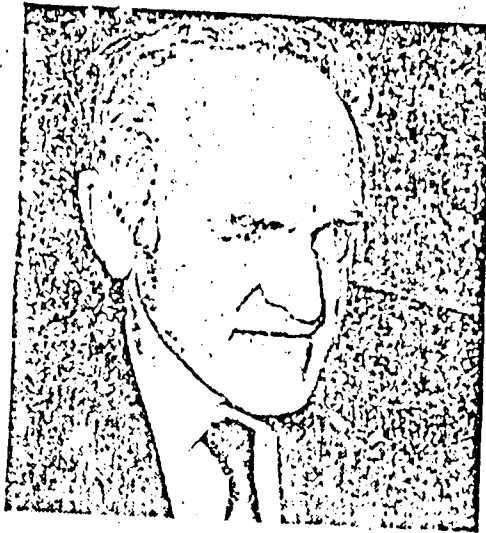
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MICHAEL STRAIGHT
... worried about political influence.

What's Wrong With Federal Arts Policy

BY BARBARA ISENBERG
Times Staff Writer

For several months, deputy chairman Michael Straight felt the National Endowment for the Arts was operating "in the middle of a desert" but did not feel free to say so. Now, however, as an acting chairman who knows he will soon be succeeded out of office, Straight decided to follow poet Dylan Thomas' advice to "not go gentle into that good night." He does not, he said, "propose to go gently out."

So, just a few hours before he was due to address a symposium here on the endowment, Straight delivered a long and "painful" monologue to The Times on just what he feels is wrong and due to get worse in federal arts policy. He is concerned, he said, about "the downgrading of the arts and humanities endowments by the Carter Administration into minor political satrapies for which I hold Car-

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Questioning Federal Arts Policy

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ter himself responsible. They are not treating the arts seriously."

A former editor and publisher of the New Republic, 61-year-old Straight served as the arts endowment's deputy chairman for the eight years of Nancy Hanks' chairmanship. He has been acting chairman since her second term ended Oct. 2—he says he ruled himself out to succeed her as head of the nearly \$115 million agency—and expects to remain in that post until his successor takes office, possibly later this month. And one of the things Straight worried about was that while his apparent successor, Livingston Biddle, "has logged as much time as anyone in the development of public funding for the arts," Biddle's appointment seemed to Straight in part politically inspired.

Straight also expressed his fears that Congress, unions and endowment grantees may begin to apply political pressure to endowment policy and grant making. He further warned that with no one senior official at the White House responsible for the arts, the administration's prominent arts spokesperson, Joan Mondale, wife of Vice President Walter Mondale, "is going to be cut into small pieces over the next four years."

Threat of Politicization

"From the beginning, with any government agency, the threat of politicization is always present," said Straight. "It has to be resisted above anything else in an agency dedicated to an area as subtle and sensitive as the arts." For Straight, one of the "outstanding achievements" of Nancy Hanks' chairmanship was that she made "it plain that political pressures would be resisted."

That was important, he said, particularly since the concept of an arts endowment was initially surrounded by suspicion on all sides. Artists, he said, feared government funding would lead to censorship, control and "the support of mediocrity because government was philistine by nature and in time would corrupt everything that it touched." The majority of Congress, in turn, "believed that in accordance with the old fable of the cricket and the ant, the artist was the cricket who sang all summer while the ant worked and then came around with the first frost for food and shelter."

But despite all those suspicions, the endowment was created by Congress in 1965—Straight's apparent successor, Livingston Biddle, helped draft that legislation as an aide to Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.)—and went on to become what Straight called "one of the very few success stories of the past 10 years in government."

That success, however, worried as well as pleased Straight: "The game wasn't very exciting when there were only \$6 million in chips in it," said Straight, "but there are prospectively more than \$200 million in chips in this game next year (if the White House endorses pending budget proposals). With \$200 million, the game becomes interesting to a lot of power brokers who have no business influencing the professional decisions of the National Endowment for the Arts."