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Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 28

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'My Well Had Run Dry'

The game first became interesting to Straight at a time when he "had written himself out as a writer and novelist. My well had run dry." The son of the New Republic's founders, Dorothy and Willard Straight (and grandson of William C. Whitney, secretary of the navy under President Cleveland); Straight had been a ghostwriter for President Roosevelt before he became first the Washington editor of the New Republic and then, from 1946 to 1956, its editor and publisher. He also has written two novels, a play and nonfiction studies of both the United Nations (1943) and the Army-McCarthy hearings (1953).

Also a musician, artist and art collector and long active in liberal causes, Straight saw the endowment's deputy chairmanship as "a way of combining the two things I cared about—politics and art." (He served earlier as a vice chairman of the National Repertory Theater and chairman of the American Dance Theater.)

Miss Hanks, announcing in August her decision to leave office at the close of her second term, told reporters her decision had been "strengthened by the commitment of President Carter and his Administration to the goals for which so many people have dedicated themselves these past eight years." Barry Jagoda, special assistant to the President, recently was quoted, too, as saying that "cultural affairs are receiving more responsible attention in the Carter White House than at any time since Thomas Jefferson's administration."

Straight disagreed. While saying he applauded Carter's pre-election statement on the arts (which Straight helped draft), Straight worried that the arts now are "a very low priority for him. No one from (the arts and humanities) constituencies would ask that the President of the United States should devote much of his time to these two sectors during the years we've been through," said Straight. "But nobody expected President Nixon or President Ford to spend any time on the arts either."

Unparalleled Expansion

It was, however, during their two administrations that arts endowment appropriations grew from about \$8 million in 1969 to nearly \$115 million in fiscal 1978. "Nixon probably had less of an understanding of the arts than President Carter does," said Straight, "but Nixon assigned a senior White House staff member, Leonard Garment, who was a first-rate musician and passionate advocate of public funding for the arts.

"As long as Leonard Garment was able to speak in the name of President Nixon, it didn't matter whether President Nixon took time out from foreign policy to consider the arts or not. The result was eight years of unparalleled expansion in public funding."

Straight is particularly concerned, he told The Times,

Trump.

Bridge news.

Tenets at 8.00

"GRIPPING, AMUSING, IMPORTANT"—*Scobie, Advocate*
"BURSTS WITH LIFE AND EXCITEMENT"—*Finder, Easy Reader*

that there is no one senior arts adviser in Carter's White House. (Although reportedly appointed by Mrs Hanks on Nixon's recommendation, Straight stressed he was "historically a liberal Democrat" and voted for Carter.) "The explanation given as to why no senior staff person was assigned to the arts was that this would leave Mrs Mondale free to act in that role. The fact is that in the absence of a senior staff official to back her up, Mrs. Mondale is going to be cut into small pieces over the next four years."

Presidential assistant Jagoda sees it differently. Noting the significance of Mrs. Mondale's role in cultural affairs, he said in a telephone interview that Carter values her "advice and counsel." Jagoda added that Mrs. Mondale's full-time assistant, Mary Ann Tighe, is one of several members of what has been called the "White House Cultural Group" or "the arts cluster," Jagoda called the group "collegial," an informal gathering of about a half-dozen White House staff members "who are particularly concerned about cultural affairs" and meet each Tuesday morning.

"President Carter believes in cabinet government," said Jagoda, "and in the area of cultural affairs, the two principal agencies are the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, although considerable amounts of government funds are appropriated for cultural affairs through other agencies. In cultural affairs, as in all aspects of government, the President turns to his appointees such as (the two endowments' chairmen) for leadership in these important areas. At the same time, cultural policy will probably be the subject of Presidential review over the next few months under the coordination of the President's domestic adviser Stuart Eizenstat."

Concern Over Cultural Appointments

Straight also voiced considerable complaints about recent cultural appointments. "The White House began by bungling the search for a new humanities chairman," he charged. "Between the White House and Sen. Pell (chairman of the Senate's subcommittee on education, arts and humanities) who delayed any hearings on the nomination of a new chairman for nine months, the damage done to the humanities endowment was incalculable."

Straight further considered the eventual appointment of Joseph D. Duffey to the humanities endowment chairmanship as "political," calling it the first of "four steps in the politicizing of the arts and humanities." The other three, he said, were two expected appointments to the Museum Services Institute Board and the expected appointment of Livingston Biddle, staff director of Pell's subcommittee, to head the arts endowment. All four appointments were strongly influenced, he charged, by his "good friend" Pell.

Asked to respond to Straight's accusations, a spokesman for Pell said the senator "would obviously have a lot of influence because of his background by virtue of his being the author and original Senate sponsor of the legislation creating (both national endowments) and by virtue of his heading the Senate's subcommittee on arts and humanities (which now also includes education) since its 1964 start."

But Straight seemed most upset by the proposed appointment of Biddle to the chairmanship. In light of the long delay in filling the humanities post, the Carter Administration no doubt felt pressured to move fast on the arts, but Straight indicated he felt the selection was made too quickly. He said it took 10 months to find Miss Hanks and lamented that such potential contenders as Durwood Varner, former chancellor of the University of Nebraska; Vernon Alden, former president of the University of Ohio and chairman of the Massachusetts Arts Council, and jazz musician Billy Taylor were not, in his opinion, given enough serious consideration.

Biddle's Background

Biddle's appointment, however, would appear to be a popular one with arts leaders, both in Washington and in the field. Besides his current post as staff director of the subcommittee that both oversees the endowment and is responsible for its reauthorization legislation, Biddle, 58, served as the endowment's first deputy chairman and more recently as its congressional liaison during 1975. Because of that background, says an endowment executive, Biddle "is in a position to pick up the ball immediately and run with it."

Biddle, in turn, pointed out in a phone interview that as board chairman of the Pennsylvania Ballet between 1970 and 1972, he oversaw receipt of major foundation funding

to eliminate a \$500,000 deficit and that he has an awareness of the creative process through having written four novels. Repeating, too, his history at the endowment, he concluded that "having helped in the Congress with the development of the arts endowment and having also served in the arts endowment itself in the past could be a strength rather than any weakness."

All that, argued Straight, is beside the point. Biddle, he said, "has put in a lot of time at the endowment and knows its legislative background very well. And it's not a personal thing—he's a decent human being, a good friend of mine." But what Straight considers Biddle's "campaign for this position from the Senate . . . in the long run, means to put the endowment in the political shadows."

In announcing her decision to leave office at the close of her second term, Miss Hanks referred to her appreciation for Straight, saying his "wisdom and eloquence have made him one of the most effective spokesmen for the arts in the 12-year history of the endowment." But, added another associate, Straight is also "an idealist. Things are black or white and it's hard for him to deal with the compromises that are often the most effective means to handle a situation."

Straight said he expects Biddle to be in office by month's end—Biddle, who has not even been officially nominated yet, said it's "a possibility"—at which time he will go back to his writing and the possible making of his novel, "A Very Small Remnant," into a film. He said he also would continue writing and speaking on the arts and urging others "to redouble their efforts to aid Mr. Biddle and Mr. Duffey in maintaining the nonpolitical, nonpartisan natures of the endowments we worked so hard for eight years to create."