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Livingston L. Biddle Jr.

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LIVINGSTON L. BIDDLE Jr.

TODAY'S COMMENTS

Endowment: A Seed That Grew

Questions about the appropriate role of the federal government in support of the arts have been raised in recent months, and public debate about such issues is of great value in formulating sound public policy, especially in view of the administration's need to deal with economic problems in an effective way.

However, some misconceptions have entered the discussion of late, as suggested in two recent editorials in *The Washington Star*.

One such notion, in simple form, is that federal assistance has resulted in a reduction in private and non-federal public support for the arts.

The Star, thoughtfully, has cast some doubt on this assumption in recent editorials, but does not appear to have fully comprehended the basic mission of the National Endowment for the Arts established at its creation in 1965. That mission is to serve not as a substitute for other giving, but as a fundamental catalyst for the continuing development of private non-federal support for the arts. That task was given to the endowment precisely because the private and non-federal sector, alone, was not adequate to the challenge.

The mission is totally different in concept and execution from an entitlement program such as *The Star* in part suggests.

Remarkable Success

The endowment now receives more than 25,000 applications for help each year despite stringent eligibility requirements. At present with a budget of \$158.6 million, it is able to fund one quarter of these. Only the very best survive intense competition; and the judgments are made, not by federal bureaucrats, but by private citizens expert in the many art forms involved. That process is key to the mission.

How successful is this mission? To my mind, it has succeeded beyond the most optimistic prophecies. *The Star* has mentioned the 20-fold rise in corporate giving to the arts in 15 years. Here are other examples:

- State appropriations for the arts through state arts agencies totaled \$2.6 million in 1966 for all states. Today, the total is more than \$110 million.

- Community arts agencies now support the arts with an estimated \$70 million annually. At the endowment's birth, few such agencies existed. Now there are more than 2,000.

- During the 10-year period prior to the endowment, contributions from the private sector for the arts and culture rose less than three per cent from an estimated \$199 million to \$205 million, according to figures compiled by the American Association of Fund-Raising Counsel. Its most recent figures (for 1979) show that this private American philanthropy has grown to an annual total of \$2.7 billion!

Can it be that the corresponding growth of the endowment and of private and non-federal support for the arts is sheer coincidence? The evidence leads to the opposite conclusion. Particularly since the

Mr. Biddle is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Why should it mean so much that a game, played by 20-year-olds, come out a particular way?

Fred C. Hobson Jr.,
this page, right.



Federal aid to the arts has succeeded beyond the most optimistic prophecies.

Livingston L. Biddle Jr.,
this page, left.



endowment was established, with the purpose of stimulating private initiative which would continue to be the principal source for support of the arts. Particularly since previous to the endowment's creation, the arts were alive only in limited areas of our nation.

Endowment grants must be matched by private and non-federal monies on a ratio of up to 3 to 1. These ratios have been dramatically exceeded as the agency's catalytic mission has grown in strength, and as the special values of the arts are increasingly perceived — their manifold sources of enrichment for the human spirit, their economic impact in growing numbers of communities.

The arts in America have been growing in size, number, and in excellence for a decade and a half. Almost all arts organizations — large and small — survive and develop within a very thin margin between success and failure, as in the case of the National Symphony Orchestra. It is therefore vital that discussion of the federal role in support of the arts be free of misconceptions that might result in policies contrary to those intended.

The legislation creating the endowment has produced exceptional results, and a commitment which has received the strongest kind of bipartisan support. But we are only in the foothills. Mountains are yet to be scaled — and on this journey erroneous assumptions are not the friends of wise decisions.