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Biddle Indicates He May No Longer Serve as NEA Head.

By Ruth Dean

Washington Star Staff Writer

Livingston L. Biddle Jr., chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, indicated for the first time yesterday he might not be serving another term as NEA chairman. He had, until recently, not expected any change in the chairmanship, believing that the arts enjoy a kind of bipartisan neutrality.

"This may well be my final time before the Senate," Biddle told Sen. James A. McClure, R-Idaho, chairman of a Senate appropriations subcommittee which yesterday heard testimony from arts and humanities endowments officials on their revised 1982 budgets.

McClure, in turn, lost no time acknowledging the statement by the arts endowment chairman. "I've read this may be your last appearance before this committee - at least in your current capacity," he replied.

McClure's answer was hardly surprising, considering the administration's 30 percent slash of the NEA's 1982 budget request and the dramatic shift in attitudes about the arts with which the Republican administration has made its presence known.

Nor was Biddle's final seeing of the light a surprise. Most neutral observers had foreseen the changes to come even during the election campaign when candidate Ronald Reagan took the Carter administration and its appointees to task for "politicizing the arts."

Those who read the political tea leaves correctly knew the slash represented the drawing of ideological battle lines, especially in the face of Reagan's view that the federal government should get out of the arts business. Recent developments - conservative House Democrats' support of the president's budget cuts, and as yet unconfirmed rumors the White House might recommend placing the endowments under an independent agency - have made it increasingly clear that things would not stay the same.

Within the perspective of these larger events this long-awaited confrontation between the arts and humanities endowments and the Republican controlled Senate, represented in this small subcommittee, was almost muted - as if the fighting was all over.

Instead of a contest it became a friendly exchange of fact and wit. After an earnest defense of his budget, Biddle dramatically said he'd "defend it with my life's blood." McClure dryly rejoined: "We haven't quite gotten around to taking that," as laughter rippled through the early morning hearing.

The appearance of Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., the only minority member of the committee present, gave sympathetic encouragement to the beleaguered endowment officials. But only briefly.

More of a political realist, Joseph Duffey, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, appeared in defense of the NEH's \$85 million budget, but made frequent reference to his "leaving in September, so my successor will have to worry about that." His manner was in crisp, businesslike contrast to Biddle's sentimental journey through the NEA's 15 good years of seeing federally funded arts seedlings sprout into a forest of artistic promise.

Getting down to business, McClure reminded Biddle the committee wasn't there "to congratulate you on your success" but to question him on the NEA's \$88 million revised budget submission "in these rather restrained economic times."