1977

Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 29

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The Threat of Politicalization of the Federal Arts Program

By HILTON KRAMER

A specter is haunting the arts and the humanities in the United States today—the specter of a catastrophic shift of government policy in cultural affairs. In museum offices and university conference rooms, in the inner councils of music, dance and theatrical organizations across the country, but especially perhaps in New York, and among the artists and scholars who have been the beneficiaries of Federal policy in the arts and the humanities for nearly a decade now, ever since the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities began dispensing their funds with uncommon intelligence and discrimination, there is a widespread anxiety that we have come to the end of an era.

The Carter Administration, while remaining something of an enigma in this, as in other fields of public policy, has so far done nothing to dispel this anxiety and much to exacerbate it. The warnings about political interference, issued this week by Michael Straight, acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, have crystallized what many others have feared. No one knows exactly what change awaits us, but few knowledgeable people doubt that change on a significant scale is on the way, and many fear that it will be change of the most bellicose sort—that indeed, a new era marked by an aggressive politicalization of Federal cultural policy is now imminent.

The reasons for this feeling are easy enough to identify. Foremost among them is the crisis political manner in which the Carter White House, after floating various shooey lists of prestigious names for the public to study and be impressed by, actually made its appointments to the endowment that matters. The naming of Joseph P. Dallas as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and of Livingston Biddle Jr. as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts are not enough to justify it. The endowment's operations are complex, and even if Mr. Biddle and Mr. Dallas were of the highest caliber, it is hard to see how their presence alone would make any significant difference.

Another reason is the mounting pressure for regulation of the arts. This pressure is not new, but it is growing. There are those who want to impose a tighter rein on the arts, to channel them into the political mainstream, or even to out with them altogether. The arts are being talked of as a political issue, and the talk is growing.

The arts, in contrast, have always been a political issue. They are, after all, a part of the culture, and culture is political. The arts, in the past, have been a part of the political mainstream. They have been a part of the political culture, and they have played a role in shaping it. The arts are not, however, a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that the economy, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that religion, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that education, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that science, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that law, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that medicine, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that industry, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that government, for example, is a part of the political mainstream. The arts are not a part of the political mainstream in the same sense that finance, for example, is a part of the political mainstream.

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The Threat to the Arts

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chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts—the latter appointment still pending—may, of course, prove to be a great benefit to the cultural life of the nation. We all earnestly hope so. But the circumstances of their selection do not—to be blunt about it—inspire much confidence. Both appointments bear the stigma of a cynical political convenience, and both of the new chairmen, therefore, will face an uphill fight in attempting to establish their independence and disinterestedness in the fateful decisions that await them.

Senator Pell has now scored again in effectuating the appointment of Mr. Budde, his former administrative assistant, to the chairmanship of N.E.A. It looks like a clean sweep for the "elitist" forces in both the Senate and the White House—assuming, as I think we can, that Mr. Budde's appointment will be confirmed by Senator Pell's compliant colleagues.

What is the significance of this anti-"elitist" campaign, anywhere, and what is it going to mean for the future of Federal policy in cultural affairs? Are we really prepared to sacrifice quality for numbers in a realm of human endeavor—the arts and the humanities—in which quality is not an incident but the very sum and substance of what is achieved? Are we really prepared to endorse Senator Pell's philistine notions of culture, and President Carter's apparent politicization of it, an official national policy?

The threat to the National Endowment for the Arts is now made public by and large done an outstanding job in upholding the "leadership" of the "best" in both the arts and the humanities. In this sense, and in no other, they have indeed been elitists—and at times, perhaps, not even elitist enough. This is why they have earned our respect and gratitude. They have been a great success, and their loss would have terrible consequences for our culture. This is why so many are now so anxious about the new era we are entering.