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THE ACCUSED

WHEN CAROL IANNONE WAS NOMINATED TO SERVE ON THE NEH, IT WAS HER CRITICS WHO WERE MADE TO STAND TRIAL

Less than a year ago, New York University professor Carol Iannone was known so scarcely throughout academia that even the then president of her own NYU hadn't heard of her. Then Iannone was nominated to serve on the National Endowment for the Humanities council. The position itself is a minor advisory post that doesn't even pay a salary. Yet on July 17, when her hotly debated confirmation failed by one vote in the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, Iannone was left with greater name recognition than many members of Congress.

Continued on page 16
Ego fallout

JOEL BLEIFUS IS WELCOME TO HIS OPINION about Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) crusader Hugh Kaufman ("The First Stone," Nov. 6), but embattled communities across the country who've been fighting radioactive waste dumping tend to have a very different opinion.

At first, our movement welcomed Kaufman, but we found out, after one shocking display after another, that his insufferable ego would never allow him to contribute anything but destruction and dissension. Anyone who questions Kaufman's tactics is immediately subjected to personal abuse and legal threats.

When the Nebraska dump-fighters kicked him out of that state for good in August 1989, the Omaha World-Herald editorialized: "Nebraskans have seen another side of Kaufman. He has brought a mean, confrontational style to the campaign.... At times he has threatened to sue meeting moderators who declined to let him have the floor as long as he wanted it."

In California, where the nuclear industry has selected its leading site for the present generation of reactor wastes, a staffer at one publication told me that his son died "immediately subjected to personal abuse and ridicule. The kindest assumption I can make about that headline is that it is started live as a slugline for internal use at IIT and then was accidentally read by a computer as a headline during production. I can't decide if it's ethnocentric and condescending or just dumb. But, in any case, I didn't write it."

Suzanne Erfurth Chicago
Editor's note: Sorry, it was just dumb

Ethnocentrism

I'D LIKE OUR READERS TO KNOW THAT I HAD NOTHING to do with the bizarre headline "Sandinista seniorita," that appeared over my profile of Magda Enriquez Callejas ("In Person," Nov. 9). The kindest assumption I can make about that headline is that it is started live as a slugline for internal use at IIT and then was accidentally read by a computer as a headline during production. I can't decide if it's ethnocentric and condescending or just dumb. But, in any case, I didn't write it.

Suzanne Erfurth Chicago
Editor's note: Please try to keep letters under 250 words in length. Otherwise we may have to make drastic cuts, which may change what you want to say. Also, if possible, please type and double-space letters—or at least write clearly and with wide margins.
Humanities Council tilting dangerously to the right

By Christopher Lukasik

Eternally next year, the right will have the opportunity to crush any semblance of free debate in the largest source of funding for the humanities in the country. That chance will come in late January, when President Bush begins naming his next nine nominees to the National Council on the Humanities.

Since its inception in 1965, the 26-member council has helped the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) dole out hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grants. In recent years, the council has been quietly packed with Republican cronies and conservative ideologues, despite the fact that the Modern Language Association, an organization of 29,000 scholars, questioned Iannone’s qualifications. Contending that she was a faculty member of “junior standing” and “slim scholarly production,” the MLA pointed out that, by law, council members should have “established records of distinguished service and scholarship.” By these standards, the MLA contended, Iannone was too little too soon.

The MLA was by no means alone in its opposition. Among the other scholarly groups that raised their voices in protest were the 42,000-member Phi Beta Kappa, the 12,000-member College Art Association, the 9,000-member Organization of American Historians, the 4,000-member American Studies Association, the 2,500-member writers’ group PEN and the American Council of Learned Societies, an umbrella group of 46 humanities organizations.

Packing the board: Right-wing press stoked to Iannone’s defense. Their strategy was simple: find the biggest mouth and shut it. In this case, the scapegoat was Iannone. Dubbing the group the “mother lode of political correctness,” nationally syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak accused the MLA of leading a witch hunt against Iannone reminiscent of the McCarthy era. After all, the Wall Street Journal stoked, hadn’t Iannone written critically of the MLA in the past? Neurosurgeon George Will nervously prophesied “social disintegration” if the MLA succeeded and Iannone was rejected. As the carpet bombing continued, the issue of credentials was obliterated. And while the president’s press operatives flixbustered, top Bush administration officials such as Bush’s own NEH grant requests being denied.

Iannone was an archetypal Bush nominee—underqualified, narrowly conservative in her thinking. She has no books and only a handful of essays to her credit.

a legislative mandate to the contrary. If this trend continues, freedom of expression in the council won’t be the only thing to suffer. Diversity of thought in the humanities itself will be seriously threatened.

The cover was almost blown last January with the nomination of Dr. Carol Iannone to the council. Iannone was the archetypal Bush nominee—underqualified, relatively unknown and narrowly conservative in her thinking. A non-tenured adjunct professor of English at New York University’s Gallatin Division, she has no books and only a handful of essays to her credit after more than 20 years of teaching. Her articles have appeared in such conservative redoubts as Commentary magazine, and her only post of prominence is her vice-presidency in the National Association of Scholars, a newly formed group of academics dedicated to battling the dreaded warlords of “political correctness” on campus.

Historically, nominations to the council have breezed through the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources. But the Iannone nomination touched off a media war.

The first salvo was fired in March when left most Americans believing that the left had somehow triumphed.

But a close look at the last two rounds of nominations reveals that the Iannone debacle was a rare setback in an otherwise successful campaign of a radically different ideological bent. A standout among the 1980 appointments was Bruce Benson, an oil company president and head of the Colorado Republic­an Party. An expert on distributing funds, Benson donated $65,000 to Republican causes between 1983 and 1988, according to records provided by the Federal Election Commission. Benson’s wife chipped in another $16,750 during the same time period.

Many of Benson’s 1990 cohorts share his enthusiasm for Republican causes. Donations in 1989 and 1990 by Philadelphia social service consultant Mark R. Duckett to the National Republican Senatorial Committee and Inner Circle Inc., a Republican fund, came to more than $2,500. Helen Crawford, a New Orleans oil and investment consultant, and husband Frank contributed a total of $3,675 between 1983 and 1988. Peter Shaw, a professor of humanities at St. Peter’s College, is a member of the same conservative scholarly group as Iannone.

The list of 1988 appointees reveals more of the same. Michael T. Baas, president of Pensacola, Fla.-based management consulting company, was a Republican alder­man for 12 years. Dr. H. John Henson, a professor of English at Hofstra University, was an advocate of the Bradley Foundation, a Milwaukee-based foundation that heavily funds conservative think tanks.

By law, the council must provide “comprehensive representation of the views of scholars...in the humanities.” But obeying the law isn’t high on the council’s priority list.

After Iannone’s demise, Cheney was quoted as saying, “Her nomination has raised vital First Amendment issues, and this vote will be widely seen as sanctioning limits on free expression.” An ironic statement from a person who seems hellbent on purging the humanities of any non-traditional thought.

Currently, a debate is raging over the direction the humanities should take. One side is seeking to preserve a cultural aesthetic based strictly on the European model, while the other sees in that aesthetic an ideology that silences minority voices. With the decline in private-sector grants in recent years, the NEH has emerged as the primary source of funding for that debate.

Given the political imbalance on the council, Cheney has the power to create a virtual dictatorship of thought in the humanities. Some believe that she already has. In his June 11 Philadelphia Inquirer article, Stephan Salisbury cites critics of Cheney who contend that she “has pronounced several splinter projects solely for political reasons.” One such project was “1492—Clash of Visions,” a proposed mini-series presenting multiple views on the Columbus expedition. The NEH peer panel and a host of eminent historians banded the project, yet Cheney and the council refused to fund it.

Another mini-series, written and narrated by leftist novelist and Mexican diplomat Carlos Fuentes, was reportedly “turned down at the last minute” in the wake of complaints by the NEH peer review panelists. Historian Peggy Liss was quoted as saying in the Inquirer piece. As a result of this growing bias, an increasing number of humanities professors are refusing to sit on NEH peer review panels and many of the university faculty members interviewed for this article refused to be identified for fear of their own NEH grant requests being denied.

Each appointment to the council serves a six-year term, so each wave of appoint­ments has a long-term impact. With the 10 new nominations, the right has the opportu­nity to gain a stranglehold on the council.

Then again, the Senate could finally assert itself and insist upon the comprehensive representation mandated in the NEH’s terms of reference. What’s at stake is close to $300 million in grants annually—and the way in which we perceive ourselves as Americans. “Cheney fails to understand that if we refuse to hear our own dissident voices,” says Dr. Mae Henderson, a professor of English at the University of Illinois in Chicago, “we risk listening only to our own echoes.”

Christopher Lukasik is the assistant editor of Fran Fo, a Chicago-area Italian-American newspaper.

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