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The Accused

Bucking for Iannone was Lynne V. Cheney, forceful chairperson of the NEH, ardent conservative, and wife of another old Washington hand, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. Although Iannone was merely an adjunct associate professor in NYU's Gallatin Division and her record of publication was almost entirely restricted to the pages of Commentary, Cheney and her allies fought for their nominee as if the future of the entire NEH were at stake. Opposing Iannone was the 30,000-member Modern Language Association, as well as several smaller academic groups, which objected to Iannone initially because of her weak résumé, voicing concerns that the candidate simply didn’t have the gravitas required by law for the post.

But the battle didn’t stay in the arena of curriculum vitae for long. In Cheney's hands, the confirmation process soon turned into a referendum on the failings of the “liberal academic elite.” Cheney argued that the MLA and others opposed Iannone because they didn’t like her views on feminism, multiculturalism, and other issues dear to the Left. And as she shepherded Iannone through her interviews with various senators, Cheney warned darkly that a defeat would “be widely seen as sanctioning limits on free expression.”

Iannone’s critics did have some political qualms about the nominee, who, if approved, would join twenty-five other council members in advising Cheney on how to distribute the $170 million annual budget of the NEH, by far the largest single funding source in the humanities. For one thing, they worried about adding another conservative voice to an agency that, under Cheney, had already taken a startlingly rightward tilt; at the time of the Iannone nomination, there had been complaints within the NEH that peer recommendations for grants dealing with non-Western cultures or viewpoints were being overturned by top agency officials. Concern that Iannone would not fairly review grant applications for nontraditional projects only grew when, shortly after her nomination, she published an incendiary article in Commentary arguing that some African-American writers had won literary prizes through a kind of affirmative action.

But Iannone’s critics were loath to voice their questions about her politics, rightly fearing Cheney’s public relations acumen. Although Cheney lost the confirmation battle, she succeeded in convincing large numbers of observers—in the academic world, in the Senate, and most important in the press—that this was the latest battle in the never-ending struggle against the tyranny of political correctness in academia. Cheney merely whispered that her adversaries were puppets and purveyors of “p.c.,” and the columnists and newspaper editorialists did the rest. “The original objections [to Iannone] were solely based on the health and future of the NEH, not on political correctness,” says one Senate source. “Cheney cleverly and successfully reshaped the argument.” In the end, virtually everyone involved wound up slightly wounded having painfully acquired a lesson in the way Washington works—perhaps especially the Modern Language Association, which, though victorious, remains somewhat shell-shocked from a fight it didn’t expect, using tactics with which it had little experience. Says Phyllis Franklin, the

By Viveca Novak

Lingua Franca
MLA's executive director, "We were quite naive."

The battle began last fall when the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee grudgingly approved a group of six nominees to the NEH council. Senator Claiborne Pell, the blue-blooded Rhode Island Democrat considered the father of both the arts and the humanities endowments, was less than pleased with the credentials of the six and sent along a warning to Cheney: Next time you had better send us candidates with better vitae; we fear for the integrity of the NEH. Only a short time later, Cheney picked Iannone for the next vacancy.

Iannone's credentials were not the kind to immediately mollify Pell. Her résumé—later described by the MLA's Franklin as "not without merit ... simply without distinction"—includes adjunct instructorships at Jersey City State College and the College of New Rochelle. For six or seven years in the 1980s she was an adjunct associate professor at Iona College. These positions apparently did not command sufficient salary, since at one point in the mid-1980s she did some secretarial temping. In 1988 she was hired by NYU's Gallatin Division, an individualized-studies program, as an adjunct associate professor and an administrator. Her roster of publications was equally unimpressive: Of the

thirty-four listed, none are books; twenty-one are pieces for Commentary, and three are for the National Review—neither of which can be described as scholarly journals. And since 1981, there have been only eight references to Iannone's work in both the Arts and Humanities and the Social Science Citation Indexes—hardly an illustrious record.

Cheney says she picked Iannone because she admired the professor's writing, but it's difficult not to conclude that Iannone's political credentials had more to do with it. She was a member of Scholars for Reagan-Bush and worked for Herbert I. London, scion of the New York Conservative party, in both his mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns. Iannone's relationship with London cuts several ways: He heads the Gallatin Division at NYU, which employs her; and the conservative group he founded four years ago, the National Association of Scholars, of which Iannone is vice-president, has become a kind of breeding ground for the NEH council in recent years.
It wasn’t long before critics began to raise objections to Iannone’s credentials, citing the endowment’s statutory obligation to appoint members who are “recognized for their broad knowledge of, expertise in, or commitment to the humanities, and have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity.” In early March, the executive council of the MLA voted to oppose Iannone’s nomination—having never opposed a council candidate before. In a March 4 letter to Senate committee members, Phyllis Franklin explained her group’s qualms. She stressed the NEH’s dominant position as funder of humanities projects, praised Cheney as an administrator, and spelled out Iannone’s weak credentials. Franklin attempted to head off charges that the MLA’s objections were ideological by stating that the MLA opposes any nominee with skimpy humanities scholarship—particularly since nine more council slots are slated to become open in January of 1992.

But if Franklin believed she could keep the Iannone debate nonpolitical, she didn’t know Lynne Cheney.

"I don’t mean to minimize the importance [of the MLA], wrote William F. Buckley in a letter to Senate committee members, “any more than I would minimize the importance of an association devoted to the study of Zarathustrian [sic] mysticism.”

Cheney immediately fired back a letter to Franklin saying she was “sad” to see the MLA falling into its “old elitist patterns.” Franklin responded with a four-pager, friendly but firm, defending the MLA and reiterating its reasons for opposing Iannone. But Cheney made the dispute increasingly personal. “I fear that one of the many regrettable aspects of the MLA’s campaign against Iannone will be to damage the MLA’s own reputation,” she warned. (Indeed, a few days after Franklin wrote to Senate committee members, she was asked by the NEH to send them a copy of her own résumé. Franklin believes it was then passed along to Peter Shaw, a member of the NEH council and a colleague of Iannone’s at the NAS, because in the May 1 Chronicle of Higher Education, Shaw seems to have used it to turn the attack on Iannone’s qualifications into an attack on those of Franklin. By the time Franklin was appointed executive director of the MLA, wrote Shaw, “she had published twenty-four items to Iannone’s thirty-one.”)

While Cheney and Franklin exchanged letters, each one chillier than the last, other organizations lined up for and against Iannone. The National Association of Scholars wrote to the Senate committee in April, talking Iannone up and making a case for her as a populist, a teacher in touch with reality. Donald Kagan,
dean of Yale College and an NEH council member, urged others to write and call in support, as did former council member John Agresto, president of St. John's in Santa Fe.

On the other side, the American Council of Learned Societies, the College Art Association, the American Studies Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American division of PEN, the international writers' group, all wrote letters in opposition. Cheney was livid. ACLS President Stanley N. Katz, who says he knew nothing about Iannone's political views when he objected to her, recounts that after Cheney spoke at his group’s annual spring meeting, she pointedly refused to shake his proffered hand.

If the confirmation battle seemed unusually rancorous in the beginning, it was nothing compared to what happened after Iannone published her latest Commentary piece in March. Titled “Literature by Quota,” it declined works by black novelists Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor unworthy of the literary prizes they had garnered. Awards given to Walker’s The Color Purple, wrote Iannone, “seemed less a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation.” While the article wasn’t a radical departure from Iannone’s previous work, in the context of the pending confirmation the piece was a bombshell—and virtually a taunt to those who had wanted to keep the basis for opposing Iannone confined to her résumé. In an April 9 letter to Cheney, Joel Conarroe, president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, expressed his feelings quite plainly, calling the Commentary piece “arrogant, inflammatory nonsense” and comparing its author’s prejudices against African-American writers with those of the late intellectual Paul de Man against Jews. “Surely there are many scholars far better qualified, both by achievement and sensibility, to join the Council,” Conarroe wrote.

Still, the debate was largely confined to academia. But all that changed when George F. Will used his Newsweek column to catapult the issue into full public view. In his April 22 column, Will asserted that the MLA was crawling with “academic Marxists.” His pen dripping acid, he sounded off on feminist literary critics and other “philistines [who] are in the academies shaping tomorrow’s elites.” Cheering Iannone on, he praised Cheney as the “secretary of domestic defense. The foreign adversaries her husband, Dick, must keep at bay are less dangerous, in the long run, than the domestic forces with which she must deal.” Conservative darling William F. Buckley, Jr., cleared his
ACCUSED

throat on the matter as well. In a letter to Senator Pell, the National Review editor explained, “Mrs. Cheney has asked me to comment on the dispute” over Iannone’s qualifications. But his letter is devoted at least as much to skewering the MLA with his verbal rapier and puffing about his own credentials as it is to praising Iannone. “Let me begin by saying that I go months, even years, without perusing the work of the Modern Language Association,” he wrote. “I don’t mean to minimize their importance, any more than I would minimize the importance of an association devoted to the study of Zarathrustian [sic] mysticism.”

Some academic figures did their best to temper the debate. Timothy Light, president of Middlebury College, urged caution. Harvard President Derek Bok, avoiding outright opposition, gingerly suggested that the NEH needed a council of “intellectuals who command wide respect and who have the rare perspective and judgment to stand above the paltry ideological battles that are so evident today.” But the terms of the debate had already been set: Either you were for Iannone or you were a despot of political correctness. Academic sources have said there was a great deal more anti-Iannone feeling on campuses than was publicly voiced, but after the debate had been polarized, few were willing to speak up—or, for that matter, to jeopardize their NEH grants for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the members of the Senate Labor and Human Relations Committee began lining up for and against Iannone in preparation for the vote on her nomination, scheduled for June 5. To some Senate staffers, it seemed at first that Senator Edward Kennedy, chairman of the committee, might go along with Iannone if the candidates put forward for two other council vacancies had outstanding qualifications. He preferred not to cross Cheney; they had served together on the Bicentennial Commission and had developed a mutual respect. But two things happened: Pell, to whom other committee Democrats generally defer on questions of the arts and the humanities, decided to oppose Iannone because of her weak credentials; and Kennedy was lobbied by individuals and groups who opposed the nominee because of her record and her views.

On the afternoon of June 4, Cheney was informed that her nominee would be voted down. She immediately asked for a postponement of the vote to give Iannone time to make courtesy calls. Senate staffers were a little surprised: Meet-and-greet visits with senators rarely take place over such minor advisory posts. As it turned out, though, it was the beginning of an all-out drive by the NEH, the White House, and various well-connected Republicans to get Iannone approved. Lawyer Leonard Garment, who had counseled Nixon during Watergate and Robert McFarlane during the Iran-Contra hearings, began making calls to committee members, as did Morris Abram, former vice-chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. When Senator Pell met with some of Iannone’s opponents, they were interrupted by a knock on the door. Pell answered it and, upon returning, told his guests, “You won’t believe this, but that was a friend I haven’t seen in years who Mrs. Cheney called to talk to me” about Iannone. Cheney even arranged a White House breakfast for Senate committee staffers. John Sununu and Dan Quayle phoned committee members; David Carney, White House political director, sent out packets of editorials from the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. The Post had editorialized that the Senate was being asked “to decide something more than her qualifications, and it should decline.”

Throughout the process, Cheney managed the press with extraordinary skill, convincing reporters and editorialists alike that the Iannone nomination was an extension of the political-
correctness debate raging throughout academia. According to the New York Post the "intellectual life of this country" was at stake. At least thirty-two editorials and op-ed columns ran in various newspapers, including five in the Wall Street Journal and thirteen in the Washington Post (a fact that some attribute in part to the friendship between Cheney and the Post's editorial-page editor, Meg Greenfield). The Journal never ran a news story about the controversy, though its commentary took no prisoners, mocking the MLA's position and even raising the specter of Chappaquiddick. Only a few writers offered an alternative to the political-correctness theme. Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, for one, called Iannone "thinnely credentialed and admired mostly for her ideology and the enemies she's made." But he had little company.

When the committee convened July 17 to take its final measure of Iannone, there was a certain weariness to the proceedings. Orrin Hatch, the Utah Republican, halfheartedly attempted to further Cheney's characterization of the nominee as a sort of populist candidate, calling her academic opponents nutcakes. His fellow Republican Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas said, "I don't know why we fear a little diversity" on the council; Pell sharply replied, "To have diversity means views from the Left, from the Center, and from the Right. As of now, we have the Center and the Right but none from the Left." Iannone went down nine to eight. At the same time two other nominees, Michael Malbin and Harvey Mansfield, whose vitae vastly outshone Iannone's, were approved.

In the aftermath of the vote, the spotlight turned to Lynne Cheney. Why had she fought so hard? On Capitol Hill some speculated that she was trying to prove her political effectiveness and to cement her right-wing credentials with an eye to some future post. In any case, she refused to give up the battle (as she called it) to shape the public's perception of the nomination. On July 30, she called a press breakfast at which she turned up her rhetoric yet again, complaining that Iannone had been ambushed by "liberal McCarthyism." The breakfast was reported in the Washington Post's celebrity column on the same day that the paper's op-ed page carried the latest from Evans and Novak, who accused Senator Kennedy of telling colleagues that he needed their votes against Iannone for a political agenda of his own: to prove his own political clout after the Palm Beach incident. Cheney's finest hour of spin control came when Time magazine Headlined its piece on the controversy "The Bonfire of the Nominee," with the subtitle "Carol Iannone loses a round to political correctness."

As for Iannone, who declined to be interviewed for this article, she broke her silence with an op-ed piece that appeared in the Washington Post on July 25, in which she bemoaned the decline of discourse inside the academy and indirectly compared her treatment to the abuse her Italian immigrant father had received at the hands of Fascists. The theme of Iannone as victim was also sounded by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who saw in Iannone's defeat the "further intellectual decline of the Democratic party." The opposition to Iannone, he said, stemmed not "from the quality of her work, but from her genes, social and otherwise. She is an Italian, Catholic ethnic with a working-class background." Thus did the battle of Iannone come full circle: Here was a candidate supposedly done in by the forces of political correctness, though it had been obvious that but for her politics, she would never have been nominated in the first place. And now her downfall was being attributed to a host of societal ills such as nativism, classism, sexism, and religious intolerance. What could be more correct than that?

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