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MAC NEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR

Friday, June 21, 1991
WNIT, New York, New York
SHOW #4060

ANCHORS: ROBERT MAC NEIL
JAMES LEHRER

NEWS MAKER - S&L'S: WILLIAM SEIDMAN, Chairman, Resolution
Trust Corporation

SERIES - THE BIG CHILL?: CATHERINE STIMPSON, Rutgers University
LYNNE CHENEY, National Endowment of the
Humanities

CORRESPONDENT: ROGER MUDD, FOCUS - GERGEN &
SHIELDS

MARK SHIELDS, Washington Post

TRANSCRIPT BY:
"STRICTLY BUSINESS"
P.O. BOX 12803
OVERLAND PARK, KANSAS 66212
913-640-6381

Funding for this program has been provided by this
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MR. SEIDMAN: No, I don't think it is counterproductive. I think there's a difference between criticism that is designed to help and the kind that we got from Arizona where the banking commissioner there used words like "illegal" and so forth. That kind of thing doesn't help. But I think sound and well reasoned criticism is useful. We look at what people say and we try to improve. But there is no standard here and I think that people have to be careful in what they say or they will destroy the operation and make it much more costly.

MR. LEHRER: There is a great journalist, journalistic cliche that's used a lot, beleaguered, the word "beleaguered." Are you feeling beleaguered after all these months and weeks of this?

MR. SEIDMAN: Well, I'm somewhere between swiss cheese and a punching bag. And I don't really feel that I can't defend what we've done. And as long as I can do that, I think I can handle the rest.

MR. LEHRER: But you're definitely leaving in October, is that right?

MR. SEIDMAN: Well, that's the end of my term and I certainly don't want another term, so I'll be leaving before that, if possible.

MR. LEHRER: Okay. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for joining us.

MR. MAC NEIL: Ahead on the NewsHour, the politically correct debate and Gergen & Shields.

SERIES - THE BIG CHILL?

MR. MAC NEIL: Next, we conclude our week long series on political correctness and the charge that some colleges are stifling free speech in the cause of multiculturalism. Tonight we also examine the charge that political correctness is sabotaging a federal appointment. Carol Iaunion, a professor at New York University, has been named to the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Prof. Ianouli set off a firestorm of criticism this spring by claiming that big literary prizes favored black writers for political reasons. She wrote that when Alice Walker's book "The Color Purple" swept the literary prizes, it seemed less of a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation. Lynne Cheney is the chairperson of the National Endowment. I spoke to her yesterday, along with Catherine Stimpson, former president of the Modern Language Association, now professor of women's studies and literature at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Mrs. Cheney and Ms. Stimpson, thank you very much for joining us.

Ms. Stimpson, before we move on to the Carol Ianouli case, which has caused a lot of flap, how do you see the controversy we've been discussing on this program all this week under the label "political correctness?"

MS. STIMPSON: Political correctness, Robin, is a term with a history and I don't think we can understand the current controversy unless we understand, one, the history of that term, and two, what's actually going on on our campuses. The history of that term briefly is this: Thirty years ago in progressive circles it was used as a term of self-criticism. Then in the late 1980s, it became a term of satire among students. Then conservatives and the right wing picked it up and used it to lump together a whole series of curricular and social movements they distrusted, and then the media, of course, picked it up. And I think the media breakthrough was probably the December 24th Newsweek which had this lurid cover saying, "Thought Police" on it. And since then, the term "PC" has spread through our conversation like a virus and I think one thing we have to do now is what you're trying to do, which is to defuse the term, to look at the reality of our campuses, and to stop speaking and using the term "PC" in an exaggerated and garish fashion.

MR. LEHRER: Mrs. Cheney, how do you see this controversy?

MRS. CHENEY: Political correctness is a very real phenomenon. I disagree strongly with Kate that it's something cooked up by conservative people across the ideological spectrum. People ranging
from Eugene Genovasi, a professor who looks at history from a Marxist perspective. People like James David Barber, who was formerly a president of Amnesty International, hardly a man of the right, along with concerned conservatives have been very troubled by the attempt to impose a single kind of orthodoxy of thinking in our college campuses. Kate does suggest that this is something that is not real. I would strongly urge that if you think it's not real, you talk to some of the victims of it, you talk to people like Steven Thernstrom at Harvard who found himself subjected to accusations of racism because he used the word "Indian" instead of "Native American" in class; Bernard Balen at Harvard, teaching the same course, who found himself subject to accusations of racism because he read from the diary of a plantation owner in class; the charges -- racism is such an awful, awful thing in reality that these charges are very, very damaging when they are made against people. And they're often made in a most irresponsible and anonymous way. This course is no longer being offered at Harvard by Balen and Thernstrom. You've named the series "The Big Chill." Political correctness, the attempt to impose an orthodoxy does, indeed, have a chilling effect.

MR. MAC NEIL: You don't see that or an attempt to impose an orthodoxy of thought on campuses?

MS. STIMPSON: I think bad things happen on our campus. I think there is foolishness and rigidity at every point of the spectrum. And whenever there's a violation of civility, and whenever there is a violation of freedom of speech, and whenever there's a violation of accuracy of thought, it is a responsibility of all of us who care about our democratic culture to name it and to try to speak against it. But the question here is the deeper reality. Now the deeper reality is this. Our campuses are changing demographically and our campuses are expanding in terms of their idea and their curriculum. Some of the questions we're looking at are as old as Plato. What is the nature of knowledge? Some of them are new. How do we correctly incorporate the African-American experience, for example, into our teaching? But there are lots of sufferers. I think --

MRS. CHENEY: Kate, I think you're beating around the bush here.

MS. STIMPSON: No, no --

MRS. CHENEY: Let's talk about political correctness. Let's talk about this phenomenon on our campuses.

MR. MAC NEIL: Just let her --

MRS. CHENEY: It is very very troubling.

MR. MAC NEIL: Let her finish, Mrs. Cheney, and then I'll come back to you.

MS. STIMPSON: For example, how would you feel if you were a black student walking across a campus and you saw the sign "A mind is a terrible thing to waste on a nigger?" So on our campuses we have this whole spectrum of things that are going on that we all wish weren't going on. And I think the debate about political correctness as it's currently going on obscures these deep realities and our job is to look carefully, calmly, reasonably and freely at the deeper realities.

MR. MAC NEIL: Mrs. Cheney.

MRS. CHENEY: Well, it is. In fact, true that there has been a rise in the number of incidents of racism on many of our campuses, but the solution to this is not to put some subjects off limits like questions about race. It is true that sexism exists in this world, but the solution to this is not to put people who object to the more radical brands of feminism that are all too common on our campuses, not to silence those people. Political correctness does that. Kate. And, again, let's talk about specific instances. You've had Stanley Fish from Duke University on this program. A number of scholars at Duke University where Prof. Fish teaches, where he's the chairman of the English Department, a number of scholars organized a branch of the National Association of Scholars on the Duke campus. This is an association that has as its goal to battle the kind of suppression of speech, the attempt
to impose an orthodoxy of thought that political correctness represents. A group of scholars at Duke organized this association of scholars. Prof. Fish questioned whether people who were organizing such a group should any longer have the right to participate in tenure and curriculum decisions, in fact, wrote the provost suggesting strongly that they shouldn't. That is I think a very strong example of this political correctness. You join an organization Prof. Fish doesn't like. Prof. Fish says, hey, no more participation for you in tenure and curriculum decisions. The list goes on and on. And I've been concerned with the effect on faculty. It really does have a chilling effect when a professor at the University of Michigan is called racist because in his class he reads from Malcolm X's diary a section where Malcolm X talks about being a pimp and thief. And the professor quits teaching his course. Steven Thernstrom realized at Harvard in his course that he was teaching that he would record everything he was saying in order to protect himself. And it simply wasn't worth the candle. One point that's extremely important is this charge of racism made in an unfounded and unjustifiable way. It's usually done anonymously and it is enormously damaging to the people it's done to. The worst thing of all perhaps is that it diminishes our thinking about how really abhorrent racism is to cheapen this term by using it in these ways. Political correctness is a deep and severe problem.

MR. MAC NEIL: You just don't see a big chilling effect of attempts to suppress certain forms of speech or limit certain forms of speech which Prof. Fish last night on the campus justified in the name of civility and in the name of the higher purposes of the university.

MS. STIMPSON: I think we have to distinguish here what kind of speech we're talking about. I believe in the university as a place of free inquiry. That's one of its great and beautiful functions. And if people feel they can't discuss all ideas fully, then something bad is going on. But I object -

MR. MAC NEIL: Which, of course, is what people like Mrs. Cheney charge is happening.

MS. STIMPSON: I think it's an exaggeration and Mrs. Cheney gives her story and I could give more stories, story after story after story of how students feel badly treated in class, an African-American student who thinks that white professors are grading them down. We have these stories. We have this documentation. But, again, Robin, what is our job? What ought we be doing with the universities? We ought to be respecting academic freedom and we ought to be preparing the university of the 21st century. And this is a university that will have technology and will be living with a culturally diverse world and with cultural pluralism. And how do we create this university of the 21st century? One thing I'm sorry about, the debate about political correctness is so garish, is that we have to now fight our way through all sorts of distortions in order to get at the reality. For example, after the Newsweek story came out, I was called by more than one representative of the media saying we're doing a story about PC, we want you to represent the Thought Police.

MR. MAC NEIL: And you don't?

MS. STIMPSON: I'm a Rotarian's daughter from Billingham, Washington. I believe in the Bill of Rights.

MR. MAC NEIL: Let's -- we've been discussing this all week and I'm interested in both your contributions to it, but let's move on to the particular dispute between you two at the moment, the case we mentioned in the introduction of Carol Iano, whom Mrs. Cheney and President Bush want on the National Council of Humanities, the advisory group to her organization. Why is Dr. Iano in your view and in the view of the Modern Language Association not qualified for that post?

MS. STIMPSON: I'm glad you asked that question and I want to make one thing clear. It's not just my view. It's not just the Modern Language Association, which represents 32,000 scholars of the languages and literature. It's also the view of the American Council of Learned Societies, which is a coalition of over 50 disciplinary organizations. It is the view of the College Art Association with 12,000 members. It is the view of the American Studies Association. It is the view of the American
Chapter of Pen and questions have also been raised by People for the American Way that has merely 300,000 members. So what I'm about to say is a concern that is not held by a group of little radical faculty. It is a widespread concern among many of us from all points in the political spectrum who believe in the best and most meritorious administration of federal funding for culture and education.

MR. MAC NEIL: That's what is the substance of the objection.

MS. STIMPSON: Two objections. Two objections. One is the argument for merit. The founding legislation of NEH establishing the Council in question said that private citizens had to show a broad commitment and meritorious record in the humanities and academic members to a council had to show excellence, distinction, a fine career. Carol Ianonl has written something, indeed she has, and I have nothing against her personally, but this is not the record that the law mandates. The second objection is this is a political appointment. This is a political appointment that is being made by a group of people who want to impose what I believe to be narrow views on what ought to be a fair minded council of immense distinction. All these organizations want Mrs. Cheney to have better advice.

MR. MAC NEIL: Okay. Mrs. Cheney, why Is she qualified first on the academic --

MRS. CHENEY: Well, I think we'd better straighten out some of the things that Kate talks about. First, in terms of the numbers of people who are objecting to Carol Ianonl, yes, indeed, the Modern Language Association has thousands of members but it's the executive council of the Modern Language Association that is objecting to Carol Ianonl, not the membership. Carol, herself, is a member of the Modern Language Association, so we can't pretend that we have this groundswell here. It's the executive director of the College Art Association that has objected to Carol, not all of the members of the College Art Association. So let's get that point straight first. The legislation calls for people with distinguished records of service and a commitment to the humanities, distinguished records of achievement, and people who bring a diversity of experience in viewpoints to the council. Indeed, Carol Ianonl is superbly qualified to talk about the humanities, to represent the humanities on our council. She has three degrees, including a Ph.D., she's taught for almost two decades. She's been acknowledged as an outstanding teacher. She's published dozens of articles. She's been supported by scholars far more eminent than Kate or I are. She's been supported by people like Jacques Barzon, who may be the most distinguished man of letters in the country today. She's been supported by Gertrude Himmelfarb, this year's Jefferson lecturer, the highest award given in the humanities. She's been supported by Donald Kagan, the dean of Yale College. She has been supported by Joseph Epstein, editor of the American Scholar. I could go on and on. Distinguished, eminent scholars have written about Carol and talked about her qualifications to be on this council. Now I will admit that Carol has not punched all of the tickets that the Modern Language Association would like to see punched. She writes for journals that people actually read. She writes for journals that reach a broad and educated public. She doesn't write for journals that only a few members of the scholarly community read. The question of qualifications, It seems to me, is so clearly a smokescreen for objecting to Carol's ideology, for objecting to the fact that, for example, she has written some very tough-minded essays about the more radical kinds of feminism, the kinds of feminism that would suggest that there need to be separate standards for women, that we must appreciate them in a separate way aesthetically from the way we appreciate the writings of male authors. She has objected to the idea that we should teach according to race and gender, rather than teach according to standards of excellence. She's a fine person. She has been most unfairly dealt with. Kate is basically a kind person and so I, I am very sorry to see her engage -- (Ms. Stimpson laughing) -- I'm very sorry to see her engage in this kind of character assassination.

MR. MAC NEIL: Character assassination?

MRS. CHENEY: That's exactly what has happened.

MR. MAC NEIL: Character assassination. Mrs. Cheney says all your objections are just a smokescreen because Dr. Ianonl doesn't have the right ideology.
Ms. Stimpson: You know, there's a phenomenon called projection, which is accusing people of doing what you're doing yourself. This is a political appointment. And I'm sorry -- let me return Mrs. Cheney's accomplishment -- if I am a kind person, she's also an accurate person. So it's with some dismay that I have to now correct her. I have read Carol Iannoni's resume and again it pains me to do this. I'm not attacking her personally. I am attacking a --

Mrs. Cheney: Kate, this is so elitist I cannot believe that you would --

Ms. Stimpson: I'm attacking --

Mr. Mac Neil: Let her make her point, Mrs. Cheney.

Ms. Stimpson: I am attacking a --

Mrs. Cheney: She takes so long to make it. I need --

Mr. Mac Neil: Well, you had quite a lot of time to make your point, so let her --

Ms. Stimpson: I am attacking a nomination to a council, attacking, regretting a nomination to a council that is responsible for spending $170 million of federal money. The record, the written record, article, I regret to say, is an exaggeration. Most of the publications are book reviews, most of them are for a magazine that has a circulation of 45,000. Now 45,000 is better than nothing, but we can't really think in all fairness call this a broad-based voice.

Mr. Mac Neil: Let me come to what --

Mrs. Cheney: Robin, the points Kate made are so inaccurate that I think they need to be addressed. Very quickly, Carol Iannoni is primarily a literary critic. She writes essays of literary criticism. She does not write book reviews. Carol Iannoni has written for Commentary Magazine. Kate might accurately have portrayed its figures at 45,000. The kinds of articles the MLA would prefer to see her write will probably be written -- read by maybe twenty-four, thirty-six people. This argument is so amazingly elitist, coming from an organization like the MLA that is radically egalitarian that I am astounded by it. Carol Iannoni has brought the humanities to a wider audience than most scholars on your national council. I am appalled that --

Mr. Mac Neil: Let me raise --

Ms. Stimpson: May I make --

Mr. Mac Neil: Could you make your point briefly, because I want to raise another point.

Ms. Stimpson: I work and have worked in the public humanities movement. I chaired something called the New York Health of the Humanities. Its responsibility was to bring the humanities to the public on the record. Carol Iannoni never worked for that organization, never was a part of its programming.

Mrs. Cheney: Kate, this is so completely irrelevant.

Ms. Stimpson: I'm saying this as a symptom that even in terms of this wonderful, wonderful movement called the public humanities I am afraid that I don't see Carol Iannoni having sufficient distinction in there either.

Mr. Mac Neil: Okay. Well, you made that point and Mrs. Cheney disagrees with you.

Mrs. Cheney: There is nothing Carol Iannoni could do to satisfy you, your needs, Kate, because
the charge here is primarily political.

MR. MAC NEIL: Well, Mrs. Cheney, let me turn the discussion to another thing because the point has been raised and supposedly, allegedly is the sort of nitty gritty in this, that the real objection to Mrs. Ianou by you and others at the MLA and outside is that in commentary she wrote a review or an essay which charged that some black writers, notably Alice Walker, the author of "The Color Purple," won a bunch of literary awards not so much for their literary quality but as an act of public, official act of reparation was her phrase, and that the charges made that that disqualifies her because she's also been accused by a former executive director of the MLA for that of being a racist. So would you answer that.

MS. STIMPSON: Robin, the problem is not her moral and political views. There are people on the council who share those moral and political views. The people like Gertrude Himmelfarb, a woman of enormous distinction, a man like Robert Hollander, perhaps the world's leading authority on Dante, certainly in North America, the problem -- and I don't know why this is so hard for people to accept -- the problem is lack of distinction.

MR. MAC NEIL: And it would -- you would say that if she were sufficiently distinguished in your view, you would not oppose her nomination, although she had criticized the award of the Pulitzer and other prizes to Alice Walker?


MR. MAC NEIL: So she is not disqualified because she is politically incorrect in this.

MS. STIMPSON: I think the terms politically correct, politically incorrect are irrelevant here.

MR. MAC NEIL: What is your view of this, Mrs. Cheney?

MRS. CHENEY: Well, Robin, I hate to question the motives of my good friend, Kate, but in this case I feel absolutely compelled. You simply cannot sit down with a well educated adult and say, we have a council here, a National Council on the Humanities, 26 people Presidential appointed who advise the chairman of the Endowment on applications and policy, we have nominated for one position on this council a woman with three degrees, including a Ph.D., a woman who's published dozens of articles, taught for almost two decades, been recognized for outstanding teaching, a woman who has been endorsed by eminent scholars, and I'll go through just some of them again, Jacques Barzon, Donald Kagan, Gertrude Himmelfarb, you cannot sit down across the table from a well educated adult, present that case, and have them come away thinking anything else but his talk about qualification is a smokescreen for another agenda. This is a case of political correctness. It is a case that has profoundly chilling consequences I think. How can a literary critic be expected to deal honestly with the books that come before her if she is going to find herself hauled up on charges of racism by a former executive director of the MLA, because she's chosen to criticize a book by Tony Morrison? I mean, what have we come to on our campuses, in our country, if criticizing Tony Morrison is a racist act?

MR. MAC NEIL: Okay, Ms. Stimpson.

MS. STIMPSON: What we have come to is, I'm afraid, hearing Mrs. Cheney misrepresent an okay but insufficient resume. Now the Washington Post in an editorial that ultimately endorsed the nomination in rather weak terms called Mrs. Ianou a slash and burn critic. But there's a larger issue here which is what has happened to the public discourse about this nomination. Mrs. Cheney is a fair minded woman, but she has permitted her supporters to go beyond the bounds of civilized discourse.

MRS. CHENEY: Kate, it was the Modern Language Association's former --
MS. STIMPSON: What does it mean? I want to ask --

MRS. CHENEY: -- executive director that injected charges of racism --

MR. MAC NEIL: Let her finish her sentence, Mrs. Cheney, and then I'll hear you.

MS. STIMPSON: Where are we when supporters of this nomination go beyond the bounds of rational discourse to refer to the MLA, 32,000 teachers of the language of literature, as the Ku Klux Klan?

MR. MAC NEIL: Mrs. Cheney.

MRS. CHENEY: I have no idea. I am surprised at the kind of resentment that there is on the part of people in the academic community, at media interest in what's going on on campuses, kind of feeling that the media is a tool of the conservative establishment bent on beating up on liberal college and university professors. It seems to me that what has happened instead is that this whole phenomenon of political correctness and the conversation about it has struck such a nerve because it is so true. It not only fits the experience I know dealing with college and university professors. It fits the experience of parents who talk to what's going on in classes on campus. My own daughter called and finally said to me, you know, I'm in this class, I'm a committed feminist -- she, my daughter is, indeed -- but the professor will hear nothing that does not support the feminist viewpoint. And so my daughter said, I'm going to quit talking in class, I'm just going to listen, I'll write what she wants, it's just too much trouble. This kind of dampening of intellectual interchange, this kind of dampening of the debate and discourse about important cultural matters is a source of very great concern and I'm glad to see the media, including MacNeil-Lehrer, pay attention to it.

MR. MAC NEIL: Make a final comment on it, Ms. Stimpson, because we have to go.

MS. STIMPSON: I'd be delighted to. I would like to have any reporter come to my class and see freedom of speech in danger. I'd like to have Mrs. Cheney and her daughter come together to my class. What I also would like is this: I would like those stories called Thought Police to go back and look at the evidence in all its entirety. I would like people to realize that, yes, bad things are happening -- I've said that -- every place, but there is an excitement about ideas now in the humanities that fair minded people can only welcome because we are making our way for the university in the 21st century.

MR. MAC NEIL: Okay. We need to end it there. Ms. Stimpson and Mrs. Cheney, we thank you both for joining us.

MRS. CHENEY: Thank you, Robin.

MS. STIMPSON: Thank you, Robin.

FOCUS - GERGEN & SHIELDS

MR. LEHRER: Some Friday night analysis from Gergen & Shields is next. Roger Mudd has the pleasure tonight.

Roger.

MR. MUDD: The Gergen of Gergen & Shields is David Gergen, an editor at large with U.S. News & World Report, and he's in Boston tonight, and the Shields is Mark Shields, a syndicated columnist with the Washington Post.

Good evening to you both. And since you were last here, there's been another chapter written in the John Sununu book after he was grounded for using an Air Force plane for personal business. The President's Chief of Staff has now been fit to use a limousine to go to New York to attend a rare