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## Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 03

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# Scholars Clash Over Humanities Post

## Conservative Nominee's Credentials Questioned

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By Charles Trueheart  
Washington Post Staff Writer

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The latest skirmish in the nation's culture wars has been provoked by the White House nomination of Carol Iannone, a conservative scholar who has written sharp attacks on African American and feminist literature, to the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The nomination has been opposed formally by the huge Modern Language Association, the American Council of Learned Societies and PEN American Center, a U.S. branch of the international writers' congress, among other professional groups. These groups, many of whose members receive NEH funding, say they question not Iannone's politics or literary opinions but whether she has sufficient distinction as a scholar to serve on the National Council on the Humanities.

But Iannone has drawn much closer scrutiny since the March issue of *Commentary* appeared. In an essay titled "Literature by Quota," she contended that four leading black novelists had been given major literary prizes on the basis of their race rather than the merit of their books. The vitriolic reaction to her essay has angered endowment Chairman Lynne V. Cheney, who has championed Iannone's nomination vigorously. She said this week that the debate had, until recently, been "carried on at a dignified level. Now it's in the gutter."

The Iannone nomination has drawn such prominent supporters as Gertrude Himmelfarb, Donald Kagan, William F. Buckley Jr., and George Will. In his April 22 *Newsweek* column about the affair, Will declared that "In this low-visibility, high-intensity, war, Lynne Cheney is secretary of domestic defense. The foreign adversaries her husband [Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney] must keep at bay are less dangerous, in the long run, than the domestic forces with which she must deal."

Iannone is a 43-year-old PhD with

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# Clash Over NEH Appointment

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an adjunct teaching position at the Gallatin Division of New York University. What brought her to Cheney's attention were her essays and book reviews, most of them published in *Commentary* since the mid-1980s. They represent the bulk of her critical output but, in the blunt view of the MLA, "are not contributions to scholarship."

Because of "interest" by Senate Democrats Edward M. Kennedy, Claiborne Pell and other members of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over endowment appointments, the Iannone nomination has languished on Capitol Hill since last fall, when it was first submitted, even as other appointees to the humanities council have been confirmed.

The 26-member council is composed chiefly of scholars and educational administrators, as well as non-academic figures with experience in humanities organizations and, often, Republican politics. It meets four times a year to advise the chairman of the NEH on 2,200 grants to scholars and humanities groups and on endowment policy in general, but final decisions repose solely with the chairman.

In her *Commentary* essay Iannone wrote that "the amazing honor" accorded to Alice Walker's much-laundered *The Color Purple* "seemed less a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation." Gloria Naylor won two major book awards "for an even less accomplished novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*," Iannone wrote, "and in 1987, a group of black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*."

Iannone was only slightly more approving of Charles Johnson and his *Middle Passage*, which won last year's National Book Award. "Although much in this novel is engaging, and though Johnson's larger ambitions are noble, it is hard to take his prize-winning book seriously as literature," she wrote.

The *Commentary* essay quickened the flow of letters to Cheney and to Kennedy and Pell from scholarly associations and others concerned about the nomination. "Carol Iannone must have stung the mob," said William Bennett, Cheney's predecessor as endowment chairman.

Among the stung was Joel Conarroe, a prominent critic and president of the Guggenheim Foundation. In a personal letter to Cheney, later distributed with his permission to members of the Senate committee, Conarroe declared that "Ms. Iannone's appointment would be an embarrassment to you, to

the NEH, and to all of us who care passionately about the humanities."

Conarroe called Iannone's comments about the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* "arrogant, inflammatory nonsense" and "cheap gossip," and went on to assert that Iannone "clearly views all African American writers the way the late Paul de Man viewed Jewish writers—as easily dismissed second-raters."

Conarroe's invocation of de Man, a literary scholar whose antisemitic writings in the Nazi period came to light after his death, was an implicit charge of racism against Iannone, who has remained silent, according to the protocol of presidential nominations.

Iannone's supporters point out, in response, that she has written approvingly of other black writers and an earlier Morrison novel, *Song of Solomon*. Defending her nominee in an interview this week, Cheney called Conarroe's de Man remark "the most irresponsible statement I have seen written in the last year." She said he had "defamed" Iannone, and that Conarroe's attack was "a classic example of political correctness—to oppose someone's ideological position, and then make inflammatory and irresponsible charges."

Carolynn Reid-Wallace, a CUNY vice chancellor who is vice chairman of the humanities council and an African American, said at last week's spring humanities council meeting that Iannone "is being attacked for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with her intellectual and aesthetic stances. She is being accused of being racist."

Such accusations, Cheney said in the interview, "cheapen the concept of what racism is, and help us to forget how truly reprehensible racism is."

Conarroe's letter goes well beyond the official position taken by the scholars' groups, and Cheney told the council last week that she hoped the "groups will move to dissociate themselves from these accusations." Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Language Association, said yesterday that "Conarroe's letter very carefully stated his concern about the scholarly validity of certain of the assertions in the review. I thought that he raised good questions."

Cheney said that Iannone critics had betrayed "elitism" in complaining that Iannone had, among other deficiencies, published too little in academic journals. The NEH chairman called it a "peculiar standard" to discount "the research that goes into teaching, and writing for journals that people actually read."

Cheney said she was at pains to understand the "basically irrational behavior" that had inspired such passionate opposition to Iannone. "Perhaps it's be-

cause Carol has a very sharp eye for the follies of the cultural left. But I say 'perhaps' because they haven't said that that's the case. . . . What is the real problem here?"

The leaders of the humanities groups arrayed against the nomination insist they have no ulterior agenda. Franklin said yesterday that the imputation of political motives to the MLA is "just plain wrong. We never expected the White House to nominate anyone whose political views are different from those of Carol Iannone."

But People for the American Way, which has recently asked the Senate committee to "carefully review" the nomination, looked beyond Iannone's academic record in referring explicitly to her *Commentary* review; it said "some of the nominee's writings raise questions about her ability to be fair-minded in reviewing NEH applications."

Pell, patron of the arts and humanities endowments for many years and chairman of the pertinent Senate subcommittee, said in a statement yesterday: "Records of distinguished service in the humanities—not political ideology—should be the paramount consideration for appointment to this important advisory council. I have a high regard for many of Ms. Iannone's critics, and intend to study all aspects of the debate carefully before we move any closer to confirmation."

John Hammer, director of the National Humanities Alliance (which is officially neutral on the nomination), described it as "a highly political nomination, a highly ideological nomination." On the other side of the debate, John Agresto, president of St. John's College in Santa Fe and former acting chairman of the NEH, said the attack on Iannone is "fundamentally political." Her critics, he said, "are threatened by an aggressive, engaged woman."

Iannone has not spoken publicly about her embattled nomination and did not respond to an interview request from *The Post*. According to materials submitted with her nomination, before working at NYU's innovative Gallatin Division—where she is dean of freshman studies and "adjunct associate professor of individualized studies"—Iannone held temporary teaching appointments at Iona College, the College of New Rochelle and Jersey City State College. She has served as managing editor of *Academic Questions*, a publication of the conservative National Association of Scholars, of which she has been a vice president since 1987.

In her articles in *Commentary* and elsewhere, Iannone has developed a reputation for harsh critiques of feminist scholarship (the subject of her 1981 PhD dissertation at SUNY-Stony Brook) and other pungent reviews of contemporary fiction. In a confessional memoir she contributed to "Political Passages," a 1988 collection edited by John H. Bunzel, Iannone described her painful conversion from the leftist orthodoxies of the 1960s, especially feminism, as well as her return to God.