

1991

## Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 08

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### Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Laura; Glick, Daniel; and Peyser, Marc, "Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 08" (1991). *Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991)*. Paper 18.  
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# Mudslinging in Academe

First it was the arts, now it's the humanities

**C**arol Iannone may not have enjoyed her 15 minutes of fame, but at least they're over. Praised as a scholar by her supporters and dismissed as a right-wing nobody by her detractors, Iannone, 43, is now stuck with the distinction of being the first nominee to the prestigious advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities ever to be rejected by a Senate committee. But last week's 9-8 vote by the Labor and Human Resources Committee represents more than simply a rejection of Iannone, a nontenured professor at New York University. The vote may also serve as a warning to NEH chairman Lynne Cheney, who lobbied hard for the president's nominee. "Excellence should be the ideal, and this nomination does not measure up," said committee chairman Sen. Edward Kennedy. Cheney had a different explanation. "If you think the fight about Carol wasn't political," she told *NEWSWEEK*, "then I have a bridge I want to sell you."

Overshadowed by its more glamorous sister agency in the arts, the NEH quietly dispenses funds for such projects as a comprehensive catalog of the dirham (a coin used in medieval Islamic Eurasia) or an institute for high-school teachers on African-American literature. Neither Congress nor the public scrutinizes the NEH as carefully as they do the National Endowment for the Arts, in part because NEH applicants tend to keep their clothes on. But the battle over Iannone, which had scholars, columnists and politicians sling mud for months, may herald a new era.

At the center of the controversy is Cheney, whose five years at the NEH have been marked by charges that she is imposing a conservative mandate on the agency. "She's very narrow," says a historian who has served on NEH panels. "She's promoting the primacy of the Christian West, though she'd never call it that. She'd say 'our' civilization, 'our' culture." Critics have complained that even proposals endorsed by peer-review panels have been rejected if they embrace controversial subjects or nontraditional viewpoints. After initially supporting a widely praised



ERNE COX JR.—CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Losing the skirmish but winning the battle: Chairman Cheney

The question of qualifications is a smokescreen for objecting to ideology. She has written tough-minded essays.

LYNNE CHENEY

This was a political appointment made to impose narrow views on what ought to be a fair-minded council of distinction.

CATHARINE STIMPSON

proposal for a television series entitled "1492—Clash of Visions," designed to offer multiple perspectives on Spanish exploration of the Americas, the NEH refused production funds. The rejection letter cited "a lack of evenhandedness in the film's approach, with disturbing aspects of Aztec culture being minimized, while the

excesses of the Spanish are emphasized."

Cheney is not the first leader to give the NEH a political twist. Some scholars say the trend started back in the Carter administration, when an assault on "elitism" resulted in council appointees who reflected political priorities rather than academic distinction. "There's been a steady decline [representing] politically motivated appointments," says Stanley Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, one of many academic organizations that fought Iannone's nomination.

**Controversial commentator:** Iannone wasn't just an academic with minor credentials, she was an academic with minor credentials and highly controversial opinions. In a notorious article in the neoconservative journal *Commentary*, she criticized the awards heaped upon the black writers Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison as an "assault on the ethic of excellence and merit." Iannone's supporters have no doubt that such views doomed her nomination. "I truly can't understand the attack on the nomination on grounds other than politics," says Donald Kagan, a council member and

dean of Yale College.

Iannone's critics insist that their only quarrel was with her qualifications. "Iannone has no record of breadth or depth," says Catharine R. Stimpson, dean of the Graduate School at Rutgers University. "It was a radically inadequate résumé."

If the liberal academics won last week's skirmish, Cheney may have quietly walked away with the battle. While the firestorm raged around Iannone, two other nominees easily won Senate confirmation. Harvey Mansfield Jr., a professor of government at Harvard and a prolific scholar, is known for his ringing 1986 attack on Harvard's proposed women's studies program, which he called "a foolish and almost pitiful surrender to feminism." Michael Malbin, a political-science professor at the State University of New York at Albany, is a former speechwriter for Defense Secretary Dick Cheney—Lynne's husband. "The council used to have genuine humanists; now it has political scientists," says a former NEH program officer. "Where are the humanities? That's what people should be screaming about." Liberals will have ample opportunity to scream next year, when nine members rotate off the council and Cheney introduces the new choices.

LAURA SHAPIRO with DANIEL GLICK  
in Washington and MARC PEYSER  
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