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Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Letter to the Editor 01

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8 July 1991

Editor

The Washington Post

1150 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20071

To the Editor:

Nat Hentoff is wrong in saying Carol Iannone's "qualifications do not really matter" to the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association ("Heresy Hunt," 8 July 1991). The legislation establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities requires that members of the NEH council be

individuals who (1) are selected from among private citizens of the United States who are recognized for their broad knowledge of, expertise in, or commitment to the humanities, and (2) have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity. . . .

Like other citizens, we expect Presidential nominees to hold political views compatible with those of the President, but we also expect that nominees for service on the NEH council will have appropriate credentials. Though not without merit, Carol Iannone's record is hardly distinguished. Her three degrees (AB, MA, PhD) are standard qualifications for college teachers. Distinction comes with the publication of major works of scholarship that other scholars and writers build on and hold in high regard.

Michael J. Malbin and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., the two other nominees currently put forward for the NEH council, have political views, like those of Carol Iannone, that satisfy the President. These nominees, whose credentials are not being questioned, have written numerous books and scholarly articles, and their work is frequently used by others. The Arts and Humanities Citation Index and the Social Sciences Citation Index, which show how widely scholars and writers use one another's published work, indicate that from 1981 to 1990, Dr. Iannone's publications were cited a total of 8 times. During the same period, Dr. Malbin's publications were cited 232 times, and Dr. Mansfield's were cited 164 times. (The difference is not because most of Dr. Iannone's book reviews have appeared in Commentary; Commentary pieces were referred to over 5,000 times between 1981 and 1990.)

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Mr. Hentoff seems to think Dr. Iannone's political views should shield her from questions about her qualifications. We do not. Appointing NEH council members solely for their political views will compromise the credibility and effectiveness of the NEH council and undermine the purposes for which the NEH was established. Qualifications are the issue.

Sincerely yours,

Mario J. Valdés
President