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Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): News Article 02

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Free For All

The Iannone 'Episode'

Carol Iannone has falsely accused me—one of her opponents—of taking part in "an organized letter-writing campaign," of focusing entirely on her politics and of attacking the publications she writes for rather than what she writes ["The Debate—on Me—That Missed the Mark," op-ed, July 25]. This whole "hideous episode" of defeating her nomination is then compared to the brutality of Mussolini's fascist police who crippled her father's fingers in Italy.

This whining, self-pitying, self-aggrandizing, preposterous assessment requires no comment. But I cannot let pass the blanket indictment of all who opposed her.

For the record, then: I am not a member of the Modern Language Association (I resigned, in protest, in 1969). I have never been a member of PEN (though I admire much of its program). I neither conspired nor consulted with anyone before writing to Sen. Kennedy in opposition to the Iannone nomination.

And my letter explicitly rejected a political stance, addressing instead the anti-humanistic nature of her writing.

I stressed two points. First, I urged that those who were charged with the decision read Iannone's work (believing that no one who did so would approve her). Second, I referred specifically to her vicious "Dissent on Grace Paley" in *Commentary* in 1985, in which she attacked a major writer's widely celebrated work on quantitative, political and ad hominem grounds and then condemned Paley's characters for their views, limitations, choices and behaviors—thus giving new meaning to the idea of "character assassination."

By accusing all her opponents of employing her own methods, Iannone exhibits the primitive defense mechanism of projection. In "expressing ideas of reference in which a monstrous conspiracy has broken her heart, thus committing a national disgrace, she enacts a paranoid scenario. I cannot know what motivated all the senators' votes, but I

do know why the idea of Iannone on the NEH advisory panel seemed inappropriate to me. The right decision was made, and her response proves it.

—Neil D. Isaacs

The writer is a professor of English at the University of Maryland and author of "Grace Paley: A Study of the Short Fiction."

So your paper's editors feel the Senate committee vote to reject Carol Iannone for the NEH advisory panel was political [editorial, July 21], and Iannone herself feels heartbroken over her rejection. Come on. The slim credentials that she possesses are based almost entirely on a narrowly conservative stance on literary concerns that places her at odds with many members of her academic community. This political stance was, from the very beginning, the main reason for her nomination. Lynne Cheney, as a leading representa-

tive of the political power structure in Washington, feels unable to control what is taught in the universities and so wants to establish at least some control over the funding of scholarly research.

Iannone was not some innocent, sacrificed to political correctness, but a political appointment who endured scrutiny of both her qualifications and her views on relevant issues. The result has certainly been an increase in the kind of debate over those issues that Iannone claims to favor. It is tempting to think that the hurt she now feels may lead her to feel more sympathy for the subjects of her "critical" assessments. But the mixture of moral righteousness and self-pity she demonstrates in her response leads one to believe her bitterness may be the source rather than the cure for her largely vindictive judgments.

—Peter Baker

The writer is a professor of English at Towson State University.