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WASHINGTON UPDATE

- Senate confirms Alexander as Secretary of Education
- MLA urges rejection of White House nominee to NEH council
- Chances for substantial reform of UBIT laws said to improve
- Lawmakers challenge Bush's plan to freeze student-aid funds
- NSF chief sees balance in aid for basic and applied science
- $28.5-million retrieved in student-loan-debt repayment plan

After a lengthy investigation into his personal finances, the Senate last week confirmed Lamar Alexander as Education Secretary.

The vote was overwhelming in favor of Mr. Alexander (right), the former Governor of Tennessee who has been president of the University of Tennessee system since 1988.

The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, which investigated Mr. Alexander's background, recommended last week that he be confirmed. The vote was 16 to 0, with Sen. Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, abstaining because of concerns about potential conflicts of interest in Mr. Alexander's business deals.

The panel's vote followed a lengthy discussion during which Senators criticized Mr. Alexander for "poor judgment" but said they supported his nomination because of his record of improving education in Tennessee.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat who heads the panel, charged Mr. Alexander with "creating the appearance of a conflict of interest and the appearance of using his high public office for the private financial benefit of himself and his family."

Mr. Kennedy said committee investigators were particularly troubled by several investments that had earned Mr. Alexander hundreds of thousands of dollars in very short periods and helped increase his net worth from $151,000 to $3-million in the 13 years since he was elected Governor.

Senator Kennedy said Mr. Alexander had denied any wrongdoing and had assured the committee that he would give up his seats on private boards that "might pose any conflict with his duties as Secretary and that he will recuse himself from matters that affect business entities with which he has been previously involved."

-THOMAS J. DELOUGHRY

The Modern Language Association of America is urging the Senate to reject President Bush's nomination of Carol A. Iannone to be a member of the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The MLA says Ms. Iannone does not have adequate scholarly credentials or experience in academe to serve on the council.

Ms. Iannone is an administrator and teacher in the Gallatin Division of New York University. She is a vice-president of the National Association of Scholars, a conservative academic group, and has written numerous pieces of literary criticism, most of them published in Commentary magazine. She could not be reached for comment last week.

In a letter to members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over the endowment, the MLA said: "In the 10 years since she earned the Ph.D., she has done some teaching at the college level and written journalistic book reviews in Commentary that are not contributions to scholarship, a book chapter that relates personal experiences that is also not a contribution to scholarship, and three essays that are modest pieces of scholarship. Carol Iannone might in time develop a record that would qualify her for a position on the NEH National Council, but the record is currently too weak to justify such an appointment."

Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the MLA, said politics had not played a role in the association's position. In the letter to the Senate committee, Ms. Franklin wrote: "We welcome the appointment of distinguished scholars across the political spectrum. In our view, Gertrude Himmelfarb, a scholar of distinguished achievement whose 'ideology' is probably similar to that of Carol Iannone, contributed in important ways to the NEH council because Professor Himmelfarb has a profound und-