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Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): News Article 06

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Rally Round the Gibbet

The battle over the effort to block the appointment of conservative scholar and traditionalist Carol Iannone to the National Council on the Humanities grows uglier—and more predictable. Her main antagonist so far has been the Modern Language Association. Carol Iannone's writings criticize the current emphasis in literary analysis on race, gender and in particular "feminist" ideology—all of which are now the lifeblood of the MLA and its various humanities satellites. For what now constitutes their world the stakes are high.

The objections, accusations, "concerned" letters and other testimonials against the candidate now pouring in to the relevant Senate committee offices have a familiar tone—the building roar of an ideological mob. Senator Pell, in his assigned role, has effectively stalled the nomination.

Among other groups in no position to know anything about the candidate's qualifications, the People for the American Way—whose brigades also saw action in the campaign against Robert Bork—has now weighed in against Ms. Iannone, with doubts about "her ability to be fair-minded."

The latest, most vocal recruit to the anti-Iannone campaign is Joel Conarro, president of the Guggenheim Foundation. In charges recently splashed all over the Style section of the Washington Post, Mr. Conarro accused Ms. Iannone of following in the footsteps of the anti-Semitic scholar Paul de Man.

The Guggenheim president argues rather excitedly that Ms. Iannone's appointment would be an embarrassment "to all of us who care passionately about the humanities." He attacks Ms. Iannone for having written that black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved"—a comment Mr. Conarro calls "arrogant, inflammatory nonsense." Carol Ian-

none's adversaries have conveniently neglected to mention the event to which her Pulitzer comment referred—the fact that just such a demand, signed by a group of black writers, actually appeared in the New York Times.

In the effort to paint the candidate as being inveterately hostile to all black writers, opponents of the Iannone nomination also neglect to mention that she has praised Toni Morrison's other works, and that she has been unstinting in her praise of Ralph Ellison and Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. We confess that none of this much surprises us since it is by now clear that in the world of the politically correct a fact is the most irrelevant of commodities.

The executive director of the Modern Language Association, Phyllis Franklin, who has been leading the fight against the nominee on behalf of the MLA's executive council, has all along denied any concern over Ms. Iannone's political views, while assuring all and sundry that the only pertinent issue is the candidate's alleged lack of publishing credentials. Now that the smear campaign has spun into high gear, Ms. Franklin appears to have decided that the accusations of racism now being made against Ms. Iannone "raise good questions."

Carol Iannone has become a target of this sort of slander because she has refused to condescend to black artists with any of the forms of genteel racism practiced today among the literary set. It is an attitude of intellectual honesty that scholars of the humanities would do well to emulate. Senator Kennedy and fellow members of the Labor and Human Resources Committee who will pass on her nomination have an opportunity here. By accepting that nomination they also will be casting a vote against the uninhibited destruction of name and reputation that now passes for political activism in so many quarters.
