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Choice for humanities panel shows political-cultural split

By Stephen Salisbury

The level of vitriol has risen in recent days largely because of an article Iannone published in the March issue of Commentary, a conservative journal.

Titled "Literature by Quota," the piece denigrates the work of a number of prize-winning black novelists, including Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Charles Johnson. Iannone suggests that national prizes won by these authors have not been the result of artistic achievement. Rather, she argues, there is "a tribalism" abroad in the land that has subverted "the ethic of excellence and merit" and has prompted honors for the unworthy.

One very visible instance of this literary affirmative action came in 1988, Iannone says, when "a group of black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison's novel Beloved."

In a recent telephone interview, Joel Conarroe, president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, called this assertion "bizarre."

"It's just mind-boggling that any responsible critic would say such a thing," said Conarroe, who has privately written to Cheney opposing the nomination. "It's cheap gossip and it's not worthy of being published. Plus the fact that Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson are magnificent writers, and so are Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker."

In light of the Commentary article, Conarroe wonders what standards Iannone might bring to endowment projects, particularly those involving minorities.

"Her own critical standards are the sort of thing you wouldn't let a freshman in college get away with," he said. "I have a high regard for Lynne Cheney and I wish her the best, but I don't think she's doing herself any favors by putting somebody on the board who, not to put too fine a point on it, could be described as racist."

Norman Podhoretz, the editor of Commentary, said yesterday that Conarroe's characterization "is morally despicable and intellectually outrageous."

In support of Iannone's remarks, Podhoretz cited stories appearing in 1988 in the New York Times. He said the Times reported that a number of black writers issued a statement (See NOMINEE on B4)
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Nominee, from 1-D

"deploring that Toni Morrison had not won either the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize and, in effect, demanded that she be awarded one."

"It's a fact," Podhoretz continued. "They did demand this. ... (Canar-roe's) charge is totally irresponsible and ignorant."

In January of 1988, the New York Times Book Review published a letter, signed by 48 prominent black writers, that pointed out that Morrison had never won the Pulitzer Prize or the National Book Award. The letter suggested this was the result of "oversight and harmful whimsey."

According to a later Times article, the authors of the letter stated that they were not seeking to influence the Pulitzer jury, only to praise Morrison. After Beloved won the Pulitzer in April, Robert Christopher, secretary of the Pulitzer board, said the prize jury was aware of the black writers' letter, "but, no, it didn't affect their decision." Morrison's prize, he said, was "purely on merit."

Yesterday, Podhoretz acknowledged that, in addition to the black writers, quite a few prominent literary critics praised Beloved when it was published and supported a prize for Morrison based on the quality of her work. Podhoretz agreed that it would be difficult to demonstrate a direct connection between a letter in the Times and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize.

At the same time, he vigorously rejected the charge of racism. "Carol Jannone ... judges novelists, all novelists, whatever color, whatever national origin, by the same high standards," he said. "She has been as tough on white writers as she's been on some black writers. Conversely, she has praised black writers like Ralph Ellison, whom she calls a great novelist, and a Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe. She has even praised one of Toni Morrison's novels, Song of Solomon, while attacking Beloved, which she thinks — and I agree with her — is a bad novel."

Jannone did not return several telephone calls, and Cheney declined to comment, citing the press of business.

The debate over Jannone began in early March when the 18-member executive council of the Modern Language Association (MLA), a professional organization of 20,000 university professors of literature and the Romance languages, voted to oppose the nomination — the first time it had ever taken such an action.

Jannone's 'record is currently too weak to justify such an appointment," wrote Phyllis Franklin, the MLA's executive director, in a March 4 letter to the Senate Labor Committee, which oversees endowment affairs. In particular, Franklin cited her executive council's concern over Jannone's "junior standing and slim scholarly production."

"How sad it makes me to see the Modern Language Association's executive council fall once again into the old elitist patterns," Cheney wrote back on March 15. "Carol Jannone, a teacher of undergraduates, an editor of a periodical that addresses issues in undergraduate education, and a well-published writer on contemporary cultural matters, is well positioned to advise the endowment."

Jannone is being considered for a six-year term on the National Council on the Humanities, a 26-member panel appointed by the President. The NEH makes grants supporting a wide range of projects in literature, history and the humanities.

Cheney told Franklin that the MLA seemed to be seeking the nomination of "only one kind of academic ... someone from a research university who publishes in journals like Publications of the Modern Language Association."

"Such a standard," Franklin wrote back, "we would regard as absurd."

She said the MLA agreed with the legislative requirement that council members have records of distinction and reflect a diversity of views.

On March 27, Cheney again defended the nomination in a letter to Franklin:

"I fear that one of the many regrettable aspects of the MLA's campaign against Jannone will be to damage the MLA's own reputation."

As this exchange of "Dear Lynne" and "Dear Phyllis" letters continued, the American Council of Learned Societies, an umbrella organization for 50 scholarly groups, including the MLA, formally announced its opposition to Jannone. On April 5, the College Art Association, a 12,000-member association of scholars, teachers and museum professionals, also announced opposition.

As these organizations were marshaling their forces, Jannone's supporters began to speak out. Will, the conservative commentator, defended Jannone in his Newsweek column, primarily by attacking the MLA as a "warren for devotees of "watty Marxism." A cultural battle rages," Will wrote on April 22, between the "tenured radicals" of the MLA and the forces seeking to conserve "the common culture that is the nation's social cement."

Buckley, who was asked by Cheney to defend Jannone, did so in an April 5 letter to the Senate Labor Committee. In the letter, Buckley ridiculed the MLA, likening it to "an association devoted to the study of Zarathustrian Mysticism." He suggested that opposition to Jannone was motivated by politics.

Franklin denies that politics is behind the MLA position. She points out that the organization has supported a number of conservative council members in the past and would do so in the future.

The most recent evidence of the controversy contains the current issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, the journal for university professionals. Writing there, Peter Shaw, a professor of humanities at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J., and a member of the humanities council, defends Jannone by comparing her resume with Franklin's.
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