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Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Editorial 01

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Iannone Smoke, N.E.H. Fire

No one expected bitter controversy when President George Bush nominated Carol Iannone to the council that advises the National Endowment for the Humanities on what scholarship, research and public programs deserve Federal money.

Such nominations usually sail through Senate confirmation. But Ms. Iannone's name has been stalled for months amid stormy opposition from some lawmakers and scholarly organizations.

Much of this arises from her views; they may be disconcerting but are not disabling. Yet beyond this particular nomination, there are genuine worries about the condition of the N.E.H.

The endowment is the most important funding source for the humanities, and is becoming more so as foundations cut back their support of scholarships, research and exhibitions. Lynne V. Cheney, chairwoman of the endowment, must hear council recommendations before awarding grants. If the endowment is to remain open to fresh proposals and ideas, the council must be intellectually authoritative, free of ideological bias and strong enough to advance its own opinions.

Scholarly organizations and some in the Senate contend that the council has grown less distinguished in the last decade, with fewer outstanding scholars and far too many nonentities appointed, sometimes for ideological reasons. They cite Ms. Iannone, a teacher of literature at New York University, as a prime example.

Ms. Iannone's literary reviews have become controversial. She is a provocateur who claims, among other things, that feminist scholarship is barbarism and that recent prize-winning books are celebrated only because their authors are black.

These views have aroused anger. But they do not make her unfit for the council.

Senator Claiborne Pell, a founder of the N.E.H., opposes the appointment out of concern "about the lackluster nature of some recent N.E.H. Council nominees." Mr. Pell says Ms. Iannone fails the legislative test for fitness to serve because appointees must have "established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity."

It's a reasonable concern. He points out that Ms. Iannone compares unfavorably with two other pending Bush nominees, Michael J. Malbin of the State University of New York at Albany and Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. of Harvard University. Both have glittering records that include books and scores of journal articles.

Ms. Iannone's record is thin by comparison. She is an adjunct professor, without tenure. She has not published a book. Her résumé lists no articles in the rigorous academic journals in which many applicants to the N.E.H. have made their reputations. Her work is limited to about 30 articles and literary critiques in a few conservative journals.

Ms. Cheney argues that the comparison with prominent scholars is unfair and that the panel needs broadening to include "public intellectuals" who write for broad audiences. Good idea. But Ms. Iannone is scarcely known in the community of intellectuals and she is not known at all to the general reading public.

Ms. Iannone's opinions do not disqualify her. But there is little in her record that qualifies her. It is questionable policy to appoint judges whose knowledge of the humanities is suspect. If the Senate committee grants the President his wish in this case, it is entitled to send along a stern warning to Mr. Bush: this far, but no further.