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Such academic groups as the Modern Language Association and the American Council of Learned Societies opposed Iannone's nomination, focusing on her academic achievements. But many of her defenders argued that she was subjected to a political litmus test. Among those speaking out were historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, Yale College Dean Donald Kagan, and commentators George Will and William Buckley.

Cheney kept the emphasis on politics after the vote. "Carol Iannone is a fine scholar and a fine person, as all the Republicans and one Democrat on the committee realized," she said in a statement. "It is a great disappointment that the rest of the Democrats voted her down. Moreover, her nomination has raised vital First Amendment issues and this vote will be widely seen as sanctioning limits on free expression."

The NEH chairman had pushed hard for Iannone's confirmation, asking for postponement of a vote in early June to give her more time to press her case. Quayle made calls in support of the nomination last week early June to give her more time to prepare her case. Cheney escorted Iannone on visits to committee members.

"The vice president is disappointed," Quayle spokesman David Beckwith said yesterday. "He thinks she is exceptionally well qualified and we deplore this new type of character assassination."

Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), a key Iannone opponent, said yesterday that the nomination was an opportunity to halt a trend of slipping standards for appointments to the NEH panel. "Her record of service in the humanities is not a distinguished one and her qualifications do indeed fall short," he said. "I regret that she has become a symbol in a strident and rhetorical debate that far overshadows what this appointment is really about."

But Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) responded, "If this isn't political correctness, what is the hell is it?" Saying Iannone is "superbly qualified" to serve, Hatch defended her academic record. "She's from a first-generation immigrant working-class family. She's a woman. It's tougher in those first years of academia... And she's only 43 years old," he said.

Kennedy led the opposition to Iannone, comparing her record with that of Harvey Mansfield, a political science professor whose nomination to the NEH panel was approved yesterday. Kennedy said Iannone's work has been cited by other scholars only eight times over the past 10 years, according to the Arts and Humanities Citation Index and the Social Science Citation Index. Mansfield was cited 232 times in the same period, he said. Kennedy said Mansfield, 59, comes out way ahead of Iannone even if his achievements of the past 16 years are eliminated to factor out the age difference.

Iannone's list of scholarly publications, which took up a page and a half on her résumé, consisted mainly of articles in Commentary rather than publications in academic journals, he said. "Compare this... with the 4 1/2 pages of books and articles [listed] by Harvey Mansfield," he said. "The stark contrast is so overpowering."

Hatch responded that Iannone had "written a lot" for her age. "You could list a lot of people who didn't begin writing until after they were 43," he said.

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum (R-Kan.) said she supported Iannone. "She might not fit the criteria but I don't know that any great calamity is going to happen to the National Endowment for the Humanities," she said. "I have a high regard for Lynne Cheney, she feels strongly about this."

Sen. Dan Coats (R-Ind.) concurred: "We are not nominating someone here to a Cabinet position," he said. "These people are not negotiating START treaties."

Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Language Association, said after the vote that her organization is "grateful" that the Senate committee "stood up for standards at the NEH."

The association was unaware at the outset that the fight would be so politicized, she said. "The possibility that Carol's supporters brought to the issue changed the outcome," she said. "The question in my mind has been all along, why did Mrs. Cheney push so hard on this?"

Franklin said various columnists who supported Iannone "have tried to ridicule the association and tried to make it a scapegoat... The message for the humanities community is if you dare question anything, you open yourself up to heavy public attack."