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## Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 33

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# U.S. Humanities Chairman Criticized as Tilting to West

■ **Ideology:** Lynne Cheney is a strong backer of traditional values and a common culture. Her foes say she is unfair to the voices of diversity.

By ALLAN PARACHINI  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—William J. Bennett, the former secretary of education and former director of the White House war on drugs, has a favorite way of characterizing one of Washington's most prominent couples, Dick and Lynne V. Cheney.

Dick Cheney, of course, is secretary of defense. His wife, Lynne, is chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

At least in a tongue-in-cheek sense, Bennett perceives the Cheneys as having a shared mission. "Between her and her husband, they have the entire defense of Western civilization as their responsibility," he says.

It is a zinger of a sort for which Bennett is well known. But, as a characterization of Lynne Cheney, 49; it accurately summarizes a growing controversy over her belief in the primacy of Western culture, a belief that her critics contend may be unfairly influencing her agency.

Cheney and her backers, including Bennett, contend that traditional grounding in Western philosophy and civilization helps the country build a common culture predominating over the diverse histories and traditions of minorities and immigrants. Their critics, including many leading academics, argue that the United States is undergoing a multicultural revolution in which differences should be highlighted and studied without the prism of a Western viewpoint.

Cheney, a former journalist and academic who holds a doctorate in 19th-Century British literature, presides over a \$170-million annual budget from which grants are made to a range of academic and cultural institutions. Since her appointment in 1986, most of the grants have been non-controversial and low profile, although the endowment occasionally makes high visibility grants, including one to last year's acclaimed public television series "The Civil War."

But two recent Cheney decisions have focused attention on the widening dispute over the ideological and intellectual underpinnings of current approaches to the humanities.

Last year, Cheney vetoed a grant for a film intended to depict genocidal side effects among Native Americans from the 1492 voyage of Christopher Columbus. And, this year, she persuaded the Administration to nominate Carol Iannone, 43, a conservative associate professor in New York University's adult extension division, for a seat on the National Council on the Humanities. The council is the endowment's 25-member advisory board.

Iannone is now a lightning rod for the humanities debate, precipitating a fight that has acquired most of the trappings of hotly contested Senate confirmations. The nomination is pending before the Labor and Human Resources Committee, headed by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), and a

subcommittee headed by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), who has announced his opposition to Iannone.

Eight of the nation's largest academic organizations are lobbying against Iannone, charging that her academic credentials are undistinguished. The groups include the 26,000-member Modern Language Assn., representing professors of English and foreign languages; the 425,000-member national Phi Beta Kappa academic honorary society; the 4,000-member American Studies Assn., representing professors of history, literature, art and religion; the

inflammatory nonsense." Iannone, he asserted, displays "the closed mind of a decidedly mediocre critic whose literary taste is at best questionable."

Cheney partisans—most recently the columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak—argue that the dispute over the nomination is an attempt by left-wing intellectuals to require that humanities board members adhere to standards of liberal political correctness.

Bennett, who served as chairman of the board from 1981 to 1985, said that "there is a great cultural gang war [going on] and [Cheney]

viewed for this story, as did Cheney.

The decision on the Columbus film, which was to be produced for release next year during the 500th anniversary celebration of Columbus' arrival, also was criticized as an example of Cheney's cultural tilt.

In a rejection letter to New York filmmaker Yanna Kroyt Brandt, who proposed the Columbus project, an endowment grant officer said that the agency "found much to praise" in the project, but that it broke down over "matters of fact and emphasis." Trying to depict the Columbus party as responsible for the deaths of Indians was clearly outside the bounds of what the agency would support.

An endowment evaluator, the letter said, "objected to the way the term genocide is used," and "cautioned about overstating the excesses of the Spanish."

But the real problem, contended Douglas Foard, executive director of Phi Beta Kappa, is that Cheney adheres to "the great man—or, rather the great white man—theory of history."

John T. Agresto, who served as

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**'A kid who has read Indian fairy tales in Sanskrit, but who has never read the Bible, is a person who is, for this culture, not appropriately educated.'**

JOHN T. AGRESTO  
Former acting chairman of the endowment

12,000-member College Art Assn.; the 2,500-member PEN American Center, representing authors and writers; the 9,000-member Organization of American Historians, and the American Council of Learned Societies, an umbrella group of 46 Establishment humanities organizations.

Critics have seized on a recent article Iannone wrote in the conservative magazine *Commentary*. The piece attacked, as racially motivated and intellectually undeserved, literary honors accorded several African-American women writers, including Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker.

Iannone said that the awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, amounted to "sacrificing the demands of excellence to the 'democratic dictatorship of mediocrity'" and that "we have increasingly become subject to a tribalism of our own."

In early April, Joel Conarroe, president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in New York, wrote to Cheney, calling the Iannone essay "arrogant,

is standing up to the mob, and she is taking flak for it. If you take that job, they [the traditional humanities community] will come after you and try to bust your knees."

Iannone refused to be inter-

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acting chairman of the endowment for 15 months immediately before Cheney took over, acknowledged that the federal agency's grants reflect a Western tilt.

But to Agresto, who said that he shares many of Cheney's values, the bias is entirely appropriate. "I would hope there is some significant emphasis given to the study of this civilization as it has developed from its Greek and Hebraic roots," he said in a telephone interview from Santa Fe, N.M., where he now heads St. John's College. Western primacy, Agresto said, is "appropriately before [Cheney's] eyes."

"I cannot imagine people functioning intelligently in this civilization without knowing about the Greeks, the Romans, the Bible, the heritage of English liberty, the American Revolution and the Civil War, no matter what race or ethnic heritage they are," Agresto said. "A kid who has read Indian fairy tales in Sanskrit, but who has never read the Bible, is a person who is, for this culture, not appropriately educated."

Early in her tenure, Cheney publicly rebuked Stanford University for allegedly weakening its curriculum requirements for Western civilization study. In 1989, in "50 Hours," a highly publicized and controversial report written by Cheney calling for reforms in the core humanities curricula at the nation's colleges, she argued for greatly increased attention to Western thought, "so that students can better understand the context of their lives and the foundations of their society."

"Some have argued in recent years that the Western tradition is not sufficiently inclusive. It speaks only with a white, male voice, critics say. But studying the way in which Western tradition has evolved in this country . . . increases the diversity of voices," she wrote.

Early last year, in an article in the endowment's quarterly magazine, Cheney observed that "students need to comprehend, in a coherent and substantive way, traditions outside the West. But even more crucial, they need opportunities to explore the Western tradition."

But Foard, who taught college-level Western civilization courses

for 20 years, counters that, "in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent, it is inadequate to insist on [treating] Western civilization as if it were the . . . supreme concept. If [American young people] don't know about Kuwait or something as improbable as Oman, they're likely to end up dying there."

"Cheney is a very ideological person," said John Hammer, executive director of the National Humanities Alliance and one of Cheney's most persistent critics. For months last year and earlier this year, Cheney and Hammer locked horns over a contention by Hammer that the proportion of legitimate scholars on the endowment's advisory National Council on the Humanities had declined during Cheney's regime, leading to a lessening of influence of intellec-

tuals and academics. Iannone, Hammer charged, is one more example of this trend.

To UC Berkeley English professor Charles Muscatine, the controversy may be a signal that Cheney and the Bush Administration believe that the nation's academic community is ripe for defeat. Muscatine is an influential member of the board of both the California Humanities Council and the Washington-based Federation of State Humanities Councils.

"Maybe she's attacking them [the various organizations of the humanities Establishment], not them attacking her," Muscatine said. "The humanist academic Establishment has never been weaker in the sense that it is so open to attack from common-sensical and populist points of view. If you want to reform academia, it's a wonderful time to move in."

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