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

Allan Parachini

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36/56

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu.
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

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

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

Iannone said that the awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the 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, 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 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 burst your knees."

Iannone refused to be interviewed 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 Krosy Brands, who proposed the Columbus project, an endowment grant officer said that the agency "found much to praise" in the project, but that it was broken 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 Spaniards."

But the real problem, contended Douglas Paard, 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 chairman of 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 28,000-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

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. AGRESCO

Former acting chairman of the endowment

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

Critics have seet on a recent article Iannone wrote in the conservative magazine Commentary. The piece attacked, as racially motivated and intellectually underserved, 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 the 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, 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 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 burst your knees."

Iannone refused to be interviewed 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 Krosy Brands, who proposed the Columbus project, an endowment grant officer said that the agency "found much to praise" in the project, but that it was broken 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 Spaniards."

But the real problem, contended Douglas Paard, 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 chairman of 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 28,000-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
Continued from A22

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 have,” 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 intellectuals and academics. Hammer charged, is one more example of this trend.

To UC Berkeley English professor Charles Muscantine, the controversy may be a signal that Cheney and the Bush Administration believe the nation’s academic community is ripe for defeat. Muscantine 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,” Muscantine 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.”