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Heresy Hunt

The character assassination of Carol Iannone.

Having learned a lot about politically correct posses during the McCarthy years, I remain particularly interested in attempts—from the right or the left—to punish heresy by character assassination. One of the most repellant such attacks I've seen for a long time is being directed against Carol Iannone, who has been nominated for a six-year term on the advisory council for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee decides these matters, and the vote, scheduled for July 17, is too close to call. Some of the senators are troubled by the charges against her of racism and anti-feminism. Among those opposed to her are such gatekeepers of the new literary orthodoxy in the academy as the executive council of the Modern Language Association and the American Council of Learned Societies.

As if this weren't enough, Garry Wills, in his syndicated column, has called Iannone "a bigot" on the basis of a single article by her. Also, Joel Conarroe, president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, says in the Philadelphia Inquirer, that she "could be described as a racist." (He cites the same one article).

Conarroe later told me that what he had actually said was: "She has put herself in a position of being called a racist." The first quote was a little less slippery.

There is also the accusation that Carol Iannone's academic qualifications are much too slight for so august a council. It's as if her three college degrees—including a PhD in English Literature from the State University at New York in Stony Brook—had come to her from some mail order outfit.

Not mentioned by the opposition is that at the Gallatin Division of New York University, where she is head of freshman studies, Iannone teaches non-traditional students: older people going back to school after a long time and students with families who also work while going to college. This dread "conservative"—labeled as such with the same mean spirit that liberals used to be labeled fellow travelers—is a working populist.

But her qualifications do not really matter to her accusers. Iannone is under siege because her opponents do not like her views. Her "racist" article, for instance, was "Literature by Quota" in Commentary (yes, Commentary). What she actually wrote was that some of the black writers who have been winning some of the biggest literary prizes are being honored "less than [as] a recognition of literary achievement than [as] some official act of reparation."

The formidable black literary and music critic, Stanley Crouch, an Oxford University Press author, has said much the same thing. Does that make him a self-hating "Negro"? In the same Commentary article, Iannone is even less enthusiastic about a novel by Joyce Carol Oates. Does that make Iannone anti-white?

William Raspberry has made the point that when the word "racist" is used loosely and irresponsibly, it loses its moral force. Joel Conarroe and Garry Wills, in attacking Iannone as a "racist," have indeed helped strip the word of its value.

As for Iannone being anti-feminist, a good many feminists agree with her that when feminist scholarship is manipulated for political ends, the scholarship becomes corrupted. Iannone quotes a 1986 resolution passed by the Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession and the Conference Group in Women's History:

"We believe as feminist scholars we have a responsibility not to allow our scholarship to be used against the interests of women struggling for equity in our society."

No wonder the politically correct mandarins in the academy are working so hard to discredit this woman who does not belong to any of the usual herds of independent minds.

The most surprising member of the opposition is the writers' organization, PEN, which helps politically incorrect writers in trouble all over the world. Now PEN is among those hunting down Iannone because of her disrespect for orthodoxy.

If Carol Iannone had been a regular contributor to the Nation or the Village Voice, with a couple of degrees from an obscure and undistinguished school, her present critics would have been silent. But if the real Iannone is sent down because of her views, this Senate action will have told other independent professors down the line to censor themselves henceforth if they aspire to official recognition.

I hope the senators in charge of Iannone's fate, particularly the liberals among them, will read some of her essays before becoming mechanical parts of this posse.