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Lynne Cheney

Bridging Academe and American Life

As Richard Cohen points out ["Iannone: a Political Choice," op-ed, July 9], the nomination of Carol Iannone to the National Council on the Humanities has called forth an astonishing amount of ink and vituperation. The passions being expended are out of scale for a position on a part-time advisory council. The partisan divisiveness of the debate is also out-of-date, given that one of the most notable aspects of cultural life today is growing agreement among thoughtful people across the political spectrum on matters central to American intellectual life.

Take the question of what constitutes a proper academic career. Carol Iannone's opponents argue that her résumé is insufficiently distinguished to merit her confirmation to the NEH Council, and they specifically point to her having written for publications like *Commentary* that appeal to a general readership rather than for academic journals that are aimed at small, highly specialized audiences. Ten years ago, or even five, such a charge might have drawn sage nods throughout the academic world, but no longer. Today some of the country's most eminent scholars are endorsing Iannone's nomination: Columbia University's Jacques Barzun, the University of Chicago's Edward Shils, classics scholar and Yale dean Donald

Kagan, and Northwestern University's Joseph Epstein. These academics and the many others who support Iannone praise the lucid, well-argued essays she writes for journals that are widely read.

In recent years there has been a growing realization of how isolated the academic world has become from the rest of society and how both are poorer as a result: The academy loses its grounding in the larger culture, and society as a whole loses the rich understandings that can come from the knowledge of scholars. To overcome the split between the two cultures, scholars are needed who do what Carol Iannone does: write clearly and thoughtfully about intellectual issues for nonacademic audiences.

In his newest work, "Scholarship Reconsidered," Ernest Boyer argues at length for an expanded notion of scholarly life—one that includes writing for the public—and this idea has been embraced across the political spectrum. Russell Jacoby, a critic from the left, makes the point eloquently in his 1987 work, "The Last Intellectuals." Distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, a conservative, applies it specifically to Carol Iannone, writing to the Senate that "She would bring to the [NEH] council precisely what is now most urgent-

ly needed: the ability to bridge the gap between the academy and the literate public."

Another aspect of the Iannone nomination that should allow people to overcome partisanship has to do with her freedom to express her opinions. Her ideas are very traditional. She thinks that scholarship ought to try to rise above politics, for example. Often her views run against the grain of fashionable thinking on our campuses, but as *The Post* has noted [editorial, May 20], "They are well within the zone of what is or ought to be permissible discourse." Nevertheless, just as there have been efforts on our campuses to limit free expression in the name of harmony, so too there have been suggestions that the opinions of NEH council members ought to fall within a certain range—one that would exclude Carol Iannone.

Fortunately, the idea that the academic world should become party to narrowing the range of permitted expression in our society is being challenged both by conservative critics like Dinesh D'Souza and by scholars such as James David Barber, a former president of Amnesty International, and Eugene Genovese, an historian who writes from a Marxist perspective. Free speech is a cause that is uniting people from across the politi-

cal spectrum, and almost daily there is a new and vigorous defense of it. Yale President Benno Schmidt warns that "on many campuses, freedom of thought is in danger." Harvard's David Riesman denounced a "closed-mindedness" in which "everybody is supposed to go along with the so-called virtuous position." Historian C. Vann Woodward calls upon scholars to "rally to the defense of free speech." Columnist and ACLU veteran Nat Hentoff writes specifically of Carol Iannone and warns of the chilling effect on free speech if she should be rejected by the Senate for her independent views.

Indeed, the single most important movement in the cultural world today may well be the growing alliance of thoughtful people from the left and right. They are coming together to urge an expansive vision of the scholarly life and to defend the right of scholars like Carol Iannone to express themselves freely. It is earnestly to be hoped that members of the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee can similarly unite—and confirm Dr. Iannone to the National Council on the Humanities.

The writer is chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.