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Christopher Myers

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After Bitter Debate, Senate Panel Rejects Nominee to NEH

Was issue scholarly qualifications or 'political correctness'?

By CHRISTOPHER MYERS

WASHINGTON

After months of bitter wrangling among academics, lawmakers, and officials of the Bush Administration, a Senate committee last week rejected a controversial nominee to the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

On a vote of 9 to 8, the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee killed the nomination of Carol Iannone, a teacher and administrator in the Gallatin Division of New York University. Only one committee member—Democrat Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, who voted in favor of the nomination—crossed party lines in the voting.

N.E.H. Chairman Lynne V. Cheney and Republican members of the Senate panel decried the outcome, saying Ms. Iannone had been rejected because of the conservative political views she had expressed in numerous magazine articles. In a short written statement last week, Mrs. Cheney said that the controversy over the nomination had "raised vital First Amendment issues," and that the committee vote against Ms. Iannone would "be widely seen as sanctioning limits on free expression."

Opponents of the nomination said the

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vote reaffirmed the notion that members of the agency's advisory panel must have distinguished records of service and scholarship. They denied that the nomination had been rejected for political reasons, noting that two other politically conservative nominees—Michael J. Malbin of the State University of New York at Albany and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., of Harvard University—had been approved by the committee without controversy.

The nomination of Ms. Iannone to the National Council on the Humanities drew opposition from several major scholarly organizations, including the Modern Language Association and the American Council of Learned Societies. The academic groups said they opposed the nomination because Ms. Iannone did not have a sufficiently distinguished record as a scholar.

Mrs. Cheney called Ms. Iannone's opponents "elitist" and accused them of submitting the nomination to a test of "political correctness."

Doctorate in English

Ms. Iannone, who has a doctorate in English literature from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, has not published any books but has written many magazine articles, most of them in *Commentary,* on literary and cultural issues.

During the controversy over her nomination, Ms. Iannone was criticized for the ideas she had presented in some of her magazine articles. Some critics pointed to a March article in *Commentary* in which she said that several contemporary black novelists had won literary awards not because of the quality of their books but because of "tribalism."

Both sides intensely lobbied the Senate-committee members. Mrs. Cheney, Vice-President Dan Quayle, and John Sununu, the White House chief of staff, weighed in on behalf of Ms. Iannone.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts and chairman of the panel, reportedly was working as late as the eve of the vote to keep the Democratic members of the committee in line. At the panel's last week, Mr. Kennedy said that the council members "must have outstanding records of service and scholarship, and Ms. Iannone's background does not meet that test."

He added: "Ideology is not the issue, and p.c. is not the issue."

Both Mr. Kennedy and Sen. Claiborne Pell said they had been concerned about what they called the declining quality of recent nominees to the N.E.H. council. Mr. Kennedy said "it was time to draw the line."

"Superbly Qualified"

Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, the panel's ranking Republican, offered a long and spirited defense of Ms. Iannone. He said she was "superbly qualified" to serve on the council because of her work as both a scholar and a teacher.

Senator Kennedy said Ms. Iannone's scholarly output compared unfavorably with that of Mr. Malbin and Mr. Mansfield, the other nominees to the council. Senator Hatch responded that Ms. Iannone had "written a lot for someone of 43 years of age" and that she had overcome several obstacles to a successful academic career.

He said: "She's from a first-generation immigrant family, and she's a woman, and it's tougher for a woman in those early years of an academic career."

A vote to reject Ms. Iannone. Senator Hatch said, represented "the ultimate in political correctness."

Other supporters of Ms. Iannone's nomination were less emphatic. Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum, Republican of Kansas, said of Ms. Iannone: "She might not meet the criteria, but I don't know that any great calamity is going to happen to the National Endowment for the Humanities."

After the committee vote, Ms. Iannone said her reaction was "one of surprise" that Senator Kennedy and other Democrats on the committee had opposed her nomination. Ms. Iannone said that in her visits with Democratic senators in June, several lawmakers had said they had no problems with her credentials but were "uneasy" about her views on political and social issues. She said she could conclude only that the lawmakers had opposed her because of those views.

Ms. Iannone declined to answer questions about other aspects of the controversy.

Things 'Just Escalated'

Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Language Association, said she was "very grateful" to Senators Kennedy and Pell "and other members of the committee who took our concerns seriously."

Ms. Franklin ignited the controversy in March when she wrote to Senator Kennedy to register the opposition of the association's executive council to Ms. Iannone's nomination. Mrs. Cheney of the endangerment wrote a sharp response to the M.L.A.'s letter and, as Senator Pell said last week, things "just escalated."

"A Weak Nomination"

Ms. Franklin said Ms. Iannone's supporters had "attempted to take a questioning of qualifications and turn it into a political correctness issue, maybe because they thought that was a good way to enforce the political correctness issue or to distract attention from what in our view was a weak nomination."

Ms. Franklin and other opponents of the nomination denied accusations that they had opposed Ms. Iannone because of her views. Stanley N. Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, said he was "immensely pleased" by the Senate committee's action. He said that with nine positions on the N.E.H. council opening up next year, it was crucial that the Bush Administration and Congress closely examine the qualifications of nominees.

"While some people persist in saying that we're not concerned about qualifications, that's the only thing we're concerned about," he said. "We hope this sends the message that we're going to look very carefully at every nomination for the vacancies next year, and we are going to insist that appropriate qualifications exist in each case."

Mr. Katz and other opponents of Ms. Iannone's nomination said they were unsure why her nomination had stirred such controversy. Said Mr. Katz: "I can only assume it's because for whatever reason Mrs. Cheney decided to make a big deal out of this. All we did and all the M.L.A. did was write a letter."