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Carol Iannone

The Debate—on Me—that Missed the Mark

When I was asked many months ago if I would be willing to be nominated to the National Council on the Humanities, I thought that serving on this 26-member part-time advisory board would be an agreeably low-profile way for me to contribute to the public sector. The fact that my name wound up in headlines is to me a sign that the disastrous corruption of discourse inside the academy has now pervaded our national life as well.

While a number of my supporters have taken note of my working-class background, the real significance of that to me is that I of all people know that a traditional, liberal arts education is the opposite of elitist, because I know that it opened up to me the large and expansive life of the mind. I know and cherish the irreplaceable and imperishable value of the humanities that are under siege in today's academy, and often by the very groups that opposed me.

The opposition to my nomination constantly shifted ground, with the real issues hidden from sight. A consortium of scholarly groups led by the Modern Language Association claimed to be offended solely by what they saw in my record as insufficient academic distinction, in particular, that I write literary criticism for more broadly based intellectual journals rather than scholarly publications.

But since the National Endowment on the Humanities is precisely charged with the task of bringing the humanities to the larger public, the idea of a "public intellectual" being nominated to the council began to exert a certain irrefutable appeal in the debate, so that it then became necessary to challenge my entitlement to such a designation. This was done by nothing so honest and honorable as analysis and criticism of my writing, or disagreement with the eminent scholars who had endorsed me, but by discrediting or dismissing the magazines I write for, particularly the prestigious *Commentary*, as conservative, right-wing, ideological—by clear implication ei-

ther outside the stream of respectable dialogue or simply beneath notice.

In other words, the criticism switched from qualifications to politics, and my nomination was being condemned as a political choice. The irony of people who have claimed that everything is political fretting over a political choice can only be noted here, but what is clear is that they no longer know the difference between politics in the best sense—conflict between honestly held differences of opinion—and politics in the invidious sense that they practice it.

My opponents fear to engage with my ideas in a free and open fashion, as I do theirs, and so seek to label, package and dispose of me instead. The fact that one of their defenses was to point out how many "conservatives" they have quietly allowed to ascend to the panel is only proof of the point—they do not engage ideas, they count heads.

My credentials were scarcely even an issue with most of the senators and aides I visited. Instead I was questioned, with an admittedly unavoidable superficiality, about my literary and intellectual standards, about my views of feminism, minority writing, multiculturalism and even of mental illness. The problem for Sen. Simon was apparently that my standards are too "traditional"; the problem for Sen. Adams was that I have any at all. It was suggested that I write for a more "middle of the road" journal. Sen. Kennedy explicitly discounted credentials as a factor. It seemed that I had satisfied enough of the senators fairly well, but then the ground shifted again to . . . qualifications, which Kennedy turned around and made the entire issue at the time of the vote.

But clearly the senators had been alarmed by what they had heard of my articles from various muffled and not-so-muffled sources. One aide finally told me that an organized letter-writing campaign had by no means

stuck to qualifications. At one point, a major feminist leader was lobbying the senators against me, presumably stressing the importance of citations in the Arts and Humanities and Social Science indices. The president of the Guggenheim Foundation and former Modern Language Association official Joel Conarroe asserted that my remarks about the role of race in literary prizes made me a racist, and he compared me to Nazi sympathizer Paul de Man. He floated these disgusting charges to the press.

The MLA, suddenly lapsing from its pristine concern with my qualifications, declared that Conarroe had raised "good questions," thus availing itself of the smear without having to make it. Likewise, PEN's official word about my remarks was that they were "opinions" that I was entitled to, but "anonymous" PEN sources worried about "racism." Soon, uncredited charges of racism were being made even by senators and their aides and appearing in the press.

Never did any of my opponents deal with the real questions. I've written critically of the MLA, of PEN, of feminism, of the politicization of literature and the corruption of academic and cultural life on their watch.

Thus the real issue in the uproar over my nomination is the disappearance of principled discourse from our cultural and intellectual life. Intellectual intimidation and campaigns of vilification and character assassination have replaced rational discussion of opposing views. Crusades of delegitimization against certain opinions and individuals have replaced the honest face-to-face confrontation in the marketplace of ideas that is the foundation of a free society. This has happened because my opponents are advancing an agenda of radical ideas that cannot stand up to scrutiny; thus, in order to carry out their program, they must avoid or suppress free debate.

My father, who had had his fingers broken, twisted and permanently crippled by the Fascist police in Mussolini's Italy, thought that one of the great achievements of his life was to have become an American. When he took us on our periodic jaunts to the Statue of Liberty, he always reminded us of what it meant to live in a land where you could speak your mind openly and fearlessly, where all kinds of ideas could be discussed with rigor and honesty. Frankly, I'm glad that he was not alive to witness this hideous episode; it would have broken his heart in more ways than one, as it has mine.

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