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Thinking Small on the Iannone Vote

The truth probably is somewhat more complicated than Iannone would have us believe. To attribute the corruption of national discourse to poison within the academy is to credit the professoriat's left wing with more influence than even its most wishful apologists could imagine; further, we must grant at least the possibility that character assassination and innuendo in politics—remember Willie Horton?—have found imitators in academia. But in essence Iannone is right. Dirty business is being done, so whether the nation mirrors the campus or the campus mirrors the nation is ultimately beside the point; what matters is the business itself.

As an example of it Iannone cited the comments on her nomination by Joel Connaroe, who has been an officer of the Modern Language Association and is now president of the Guggenheim Foundation. Connaroe was vehement in his opposition to Iannone, citing as just cause an article she published in Commentary under the title "Literature by Quota," wherein she argued that questions of race and politics have become—most unfortunately, in her view—central to the giving of literary awards. That point should be perfectly obvious to anyone who has followed the recent history of the country's major (and minor) prizes, but no matter: For having the effrontery to make the all-switcheroo is a question of almost ludicrously small importance to those given or denied them, but the awarding of humanities grants for $5,000 or even $500,000 may be a matter of immense moment to those given or denied them, but their numbers are miniscule and too small. The awarding of humanities grants for $5,000 or even $500,000 may be a matter of immense moment to those given or denied them, but their numbers are minuscule and too small. The awarding of humanities grants for $5,000 or even $500,000 may be a matter of immense moment to those given or denied them, but their numbers are miniscule and too small.

But in another sense the quarrel over Iannone is no laughing matter, and no trivial one either. Licking her wounds in public last week, in a commentary on the NEH, will have the opportunity to fill nine of the 56 seats on the advisory council; surely they know that this time around members of the public and fellow senators will be alert to the issue of "qualifications." surely they know that it therefore will be almost impossible for them to pull off another job such as the one they did on Iannone, and that as a result Cheney will end up with just about exactly the kind of council she wants.

This, assuming it comes to pass, will be justice both poetic and political. Although John Aloysius Farrell in the Boston Globe and Nat Hentoff in The Washington Post have advanced the interesting notion that the Democratic vote against Iannone had less to do with the NEH than with Kennedy's perceived need to remind Massachusetts voters of his continuing "march" in Washington, it remains that the campaign against Iannone was at heart a battle between the spent, irrelevant old left and the academicians amusing. In NEH, will have the opportunity to fill nine of the 56 seats on the advisory council; surely they know that this time around members of the public and fellow senators will be alert to the issue of "qualifications." surely they know that it therefore will be almost impossible for them to pull off another job such as the one they did on Iannone, and that as a result Cheney will end up with just about exactly the kind of council she wants.

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The hope, and no doubt in today's climate it is a slender one, is that episodes such as the Iannone hearings will bring this state of affairs to greater public attention than it has thus far received. Perhaps—no, probably—the mentality of the television age has so inured us to oversimplification and casual vilification that nothing can jolt us into an awareness of what has happened to us, but surely the recent spectacle of Carol Iannone running out of Washington on a rail should provide such education.

It's true: The "real issue" isn't Iannone herself but the large and troubling questions raised by the sham "debate" over her nomination. Whether she is on the NEH council or off is of absolutely no moment to anyone save herself and a handful of others. Whether we are capable of talking intelligently to each other about difficult and ambiguous questions is another matter altogether, and nothing in the brief flap she caused can give us any reason for optimism.

Jonathan Yardley