

1991

Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 59

Carol Iannone

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36

Recommended Citation

Iannone, Carol, "Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 59" (1991). *Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991)*. Paper 71.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36/71

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

NEW YORK FORUM

ABOUT CULTURE — II

Blackballed By
The P.C. Crowd

By Carol Iannone

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 to contribute to the public sector. That my name wound up in headlines and my nomination was rejected by the Senate Labor and Human Relations Committee is to me a sign that the disastrous corruption of discourse inside the academy now pervades our national life as well.

While a number of my supporters have taken note of my working-class background (I grew up in the Bronx, and my father was a steelworker), the real significance of that to me is that I of all people know that a traditional, liberal arts education is anything but "elitist" — as the academic radicals now protest. I know because it opened up to me the large and expansive life of the mind. I know and cherish the 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, while the real issues were hidden from sight. A consortium of scholarly groups led by the Modern Language Association claimed to be offended that I write literary criticism for broadly based intellectual journals rather than scholarly publications. Then the criticism switched from qualifications to politics, and my nomination was condemned as a political choice.

My foes fear to engage with my ideas in a free and open fashion, as I do with theirs, and so they seek to label, package and dispose of me instead.

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 mental illness.

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

means stuck to my qualifications. At one point, I learned, a major feminist leader lobbied the senators against me, presumably stressing the importance of citations in the Arts and Humanities and Social Science indices. The head of the Guggenheim Foundation and former Modern Language Association official, Joel Conarroe, asserted that my remarks about the role race has played in the awarding of literary prizes made me a racist, and he compared me to Nazi sympathizer Paul de Man. He floated these disgusting charges in 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 response to my remarks was that they were "opinions" 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 have raised. 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.

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 face-to-face confrontation in the marketplace of ideas that is the foundation of a free society. My opponents are advancing an agenda of radical, "politically correct" ideas that cannot stand up to scrutiny; 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 one of the great achievements of his life was to have become an American. When he took us on periodic jaunts to the Statue of Liberty, he always reminded us 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.

Carol Iannone teaches writing and literature at New York University's Gallatin Division. This article ran in slightly different form in The Washington Post.