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Sent to Boston Globe 31 July 1991

Standards at the NEH

On 17 July the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, chaired by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, rejected the nomination of Carol Iannone for a seat on the NEH National Council on the Humanities on the grounds of qualifications. On 18 July an article in the Boston Globe seriously misrepresented the legitimacy and importance of the committee's action, which aimed at maintaining high standards at the NEH.

The Globe erroneously reported that the editorial board of the New York Times--along with George F. Will and Nat Hentoff--regarded "the issue of qualifications" as a "ruse." Iannone, the Globe continued, "was being unfairly hounded for her conservative attacks on feminist scholarship and some black literature." On the contrary, the New York Times editors thought Senator Claiborne Pell expressed "a reasonable concern" about Iannone's failure to meet "the legislative test for fitness to serve" on the council. Furthermore, the Times editors described Iannone's record as "thin" and saw "little" in it "that qualifies her." They concluded, "It is questionable policy to appoint judges whose knowledge of the humanities is suspect" (14 July 1991).

The Modern Language Association was one of five scholarly organizations that opposed the nomination, and I know that for us the issue of qualifications was not a ruse. Thus far, the MLA has not opposed nominees to the NEH council for their opinions. The nomination of Peter Shaw, an English professor whose views are conservative but whose scholarly record met the legislative requirement, was not questioned. Nor were the nominations of Michael J. Malbin and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., although both are politically conservative and Mansfield--like Iannone--is

known for his opposition to women's studies.

On 17 July the Senate Committee confirmed both Malbin and Mansfield--and rightly so. Each has written numerous books and scholarly articles, and their work is frequently used by others. The Arts and Humanities Citation Index and the Social Sciences Citation Index, which show how widely scholars and writers use one another's published work, indicate that from 1981 to 1990, Iannone's publications were cited a total of 8 times. During the same period, Shaw's publications were cited 72 times, Malbin's 232 times, and Mansfield's 164 times. The difference here is not because most of Iannone's reviews appeared in Commentary magazine, since Commentary pieces were cited over 5,000 times between 1981 and 1990.

Iannone's opinions about literature by African Americans are said to have caused the MLA to oppose her nomination. For better or worse, when the MLA council voted on 21 February 1991 to question the nomination, Iannone's controversial article on this topic was not listed in her resume and was not available for review.

Iannone's supporters have gone to extraordinary lengths to draw attention away from valid questions about her qualifications. They label all opponents "political correctness" advocates and reject the only argument that counts: Iannone's slim scholarly record.

Beyond the apprentice work of her dissertation, Iannone has not published a substantial study of literature. It would be unthinkable that a person with a PhD in science who had never designed or conducted a major experiment and never brought this research forward for publication after peer review would be eligible for a comparable position on the National Science Foundation board.

Questions about the credentials of NEH council members did not begin with Iannone's nomination. In his 17 July statement, Senator Pell indicates that he spoke to the Senate Committee last fall "about the mediocrity of some recent NEH Council appointments" and "conveyed these thoughts to the Chairman of the Humanities Endowment at that time . . . in the hope of achieving a higher standard for nominees to this important and prestigious Council."

In rejecting the Iannone nomination, some members of the Senate Committee apparently decided that a line needed to be drawn, because the terms of nine NEH council members will conclude in 1992. Had Iannone been confirmed, her weak record would have set a precedent.

The Globe's readers should be proud of Edward Kennedy's leadership in defending high standards at the NEH. The Senator made clear on 17 July what the issue was. In my view, he is right to insist:

No one is imposing political correctness on the Council. Numerous distinguished nominees with conservative backgrounds have been confirmed to the Council in the past, as they will continue to be confirmed in the future. But no amount of strident rhetoric over ideology can make up for the nominee's lack of qualifications.

Phyllis Franklin
Executive Director
Modern Language Association
10 Astor Place
New York, NY 10003