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Leftists and conservatives are fighting for control of the government's grants to the humanities. The latest scrap is over the nomination of politically incorrect Carol Iannone to the board of the

NEH



RICHARD ZODAK / INSIGHT

By Helle Bering-Jensen

Just when it looked as if the National Endowment for the Arts had established a monopoly on controversy — nude males performing unspeakable acts, bodies covered with chocolates, provocative minglings of the sacred with the endocrine — its quiet sister agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, has become embroiled in a nasty political scrap of its own.

Specifically at issue is an attack by the academic establishment on the nomination of one Carol Iannone to be a member of the grant-making NEH council. Up to now, Iannone — an adjunct associate professor and director of freshman studies at the Gallatin Division of New York University — has been little-known outside the small world of New York literary intellectuals. But her sharp criticism of the radical follies of contemporary culture, published frequently in conservative magazines like *Commentary*, has come back to haunt her, making her Washington debut reminiscent of Robert Bork's.

As in the Bork brouhaha, there are broader issues at stake in the Iannone affair: Who sets the NEH's cultural agenda? Who gets its bucks? Can the

tide of "politically correct" groupthink in the humanities be reversed?

The humanities endowment is an important source of funding for a wide range of academic and research programs, including teacher training in the public schools, curriculum development, museum exhibits, scholarly books and journals, and television and film productions. Because of the intense competition for private donations among cultural institutions, the 25-year-old taxpayer-funded endowment has become more than ever a pacesetter in the field.

The 26-member council meets four times a year to advise the NEH chairman on grant proposals. It is composed, as the federal statute puts it, of private citizens who have "records of distinguished service and scholarship" and who are "recognized for their broad knowledge of ... the humanities."

Since 1986, the NEH has been directed by Lynne Cheney, a former professor of English literature and author of three books (as well as wife of Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney). She followed in the footsteps of William Bennett, who, to the chagrin of leftist academics, shifted the NEH away from grants for the pet projects of university professors and toward the



Cheney and MLA members are at odds.

education of primary and secondary school teachers.

Bennett insisted that the NEH not fund politics posing as scholarship. Cheney has gone a step further, openly advocating the study of Western culture and history in the nation's schools. "We run the danger of unwittingly proscribing our own heritage," she wrote in the endowment's 1987 report on the quality of American education. One of the high-visibility projects funded by the NEH was the popular recent PBS series "The Civil War."

While the National Endowment for the Arts has been fighting on Capitol Hill for more money with fewer strings attached, Cheney astounded politicians at a 1989 budget hearing, declaring that her endowment did not need more money. The \$160 million budget proposed by the president was just fine with her (as opposed to \$170 million for the NEA).

Cheney got more money anyway. For 1991, Bush requested a big increase for the NEH, \$8.1 million as opposed to only \$3.7 million for the arts endowment. He cited Cheney's efforts at "preserving America's heritage."

While NEA Director John Frohnmayer screamed bloody murder when Congress two years ago imposed grant restrictions on both endowments after the Mapplethorpe-Serrano debacle, Cheney endorsed stricter supervision

of grant recipients and subgrants given by institutions to individuals. Academics grumbled about the endowments' new watchdog role.

Compared to the NEA, of course, the NEH has enjoyed a low profile in recent years, though a few flaps have made it into the papers. In 1986, Cheney sharply criticized the PBS series "Africa," which she called an "anti-Western diatribe," and she demanded that the producers, who had received a grant from the NEH before she became chairman, remove the endowment's name from the credits.

Critics, in turn, have charged that Cheney is the one playing politics. One spurned grant applicant, David Thelen, editor of the *Journal of American History*, was outraged when the NEH, as part of its celebration of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, refused to fund a project on "contemporary rights" in the Constitution. Thelen insisted that "right-wing political passions" had informed the decision.

More recently, the endowment has been promoting projects on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. It rejected a slew of programs and events that promised a "non-Western" perspective on Columbus. Among them was the television series "1492: A Clash of Visions" — the colonizers vs. the colonized — which accused Columbus of "genocide." "Columbus was guilty of many sins, but he was not Hitler," Cheney noted.

That rejection sparked a modern clash of visions. "There is no way you can deal with Latin America, or particularly with U.S.-Latin American relations, and avoid controversy," says John Womack, a professor of history at Harvard University.

"My fear," Womack adds, "is first that Mrs. Cheney is defining controversy as something the endowment should not support, and secondly, she is defining what is controversial." Womack had endorsed the "Clash of Visions" project but has now decided — as have many other Cheney critics — no longer to write letters of evaluation or sit on peer review panels for the NEH.

Amid these protests, the terms of nine of the 26 members of the council are near expiration. Thus the Iannone affair. The NYU professor would fill a vacancy that came open last fall, and her nomination is a bellwether for the battles to come. And who governs the NEH is "a matter of considerable importance," noted Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Lan-



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guage Association, in a recent letter to Congress. Council nominations are approved or rejected by the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee, chaired by Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts.

The MLA is perhaps the most influential academic organization in the country, with 30,000 members in language and literature departments. It is also the home base for Marxist, feminist and deconstructionist literary critics.

Along with the National Humanities Alliance, a lobby group for NEH grant seekers, it is arguing that in the Bennett-Cheney years the NEH council has been composed of fewer faculty and administrators in the humanities and fewer representatives of large research universities. "As a result, the council may provide less effective leadership and advice to the NEH on scholarly and curriculum issues than it might otherwise provide," claimed a recent National Humanities Alliance study written by Director John Hammer.

Cheney responds: "It is not the first time Mr. Hammer has not gotten his facts right. It is a distortion of the truth.

"I can't answer what his motives were," she says. "I finally listed for him the people who were on the council. And the objections are so stupid. What difference does it make if they are in political philosophy instead of English?"

The squabble over numbers and categories comes down to this: The Modern Language Association and its allies want to keep a hefty chunk of the NEH pie by putting more of their kind of people on the council — established humanities academics at big-name schools.

In the case of Iannone, the professional organizations opposing her have gone all out to stall the nomination. Back in September, Bush nominated her, but Congress didn't act. She was renominated in January.

Iannone was skewered by the MLA and the American Council of Learned Societies after the two had been alerted to her nomination by Hammer. "It seems to us that if Dr. Iannone is confirmed," Stanley Katz, head of the ACLS, wrote to Kennedy's committee, "it will set a disturbing precedent and may lead to a diminution of the council's prestige and influence, especially within the academic community."

In an interview, Katz was more to the point. "I am tired of never getting my suggestions even considered. Iannone's nomination is the last straw. We have not protested anyone before in this way, but when you see someone who is so obviously not qualified, you have to take action."



D. FENEMAN / INSIGHT

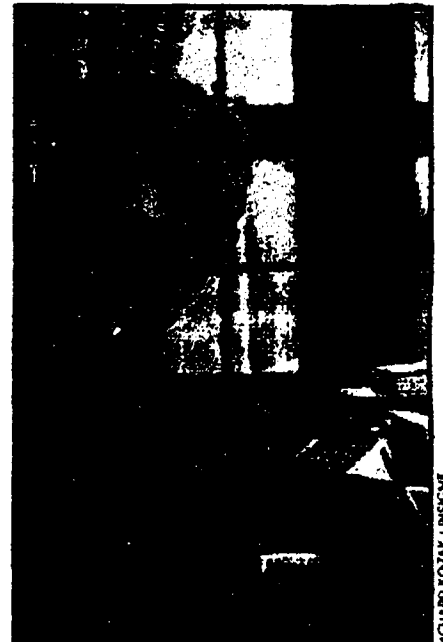
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Franklin of the MLA charges that Iannone's academic standing is too low and her publications too few over the 10 years of her postdoctoral academic life. "We do not believe that a person of such junior standing and slim scholarly production as Carol Iannone's record indicates would even be considered for comparable councils in the arts and in science," she says. In a letter to Cheney, Franklin wrote: "Dr. Iannone's record is not without merit; it is simply without distinction."

In fact, Iannone's problem may not be qualifications. She can point to a Ph.D. in American and British literature, the managing editorship of the journal *Academic Questions*, more than 30 published articles and service with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

But rather than spending her career writing footnotes about footnotes in academic journals, she has written for the public, mostly in conservative publications. She is also vice president of the National Association of Scholars, which promotes traditional academic standards, and has spoken forcefully against the politicization of the schools.

In short, Iannone is nothing if not politically incorrect. In articles like "The Political-Literary Complex" and "From 'Lolita' to 'Piss Christ,'" she has attacked the injection of radical ideologies into every facet of American cultural life. What is more, in articles like "Feminist Literary Criticism: At War with Itself," she has exposed femi-



IONA WARBOLD / INSIGHT

RICHARD KOZAK / INSIGHT

nist criticism as an intellectual fraud (hardly likely to endear her to feminist critics like Phyllis Franklin and former MLA President Catharine Stimpson).

The MLA's executive council voted with just one abstention to oppose her nomination.

Reached at New York University, Iannone was too spooked to speak. "I would really rather not answer any questions. White House nominees are not supposed to talk about their nominations, and I would rather do as they say."

There are plenty of people willing to speak on her behalf, however. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has praised her "ability to bridge the gap between the academy and the literate

public." Donald Kagan, dean of Yale College, has testified to "her knowledge, her scholarly depth, her devotion to teaching and to her students."

"The opposition to her is totally political. It has nothing to do with her qualifications as a teacher," says Roger Kimball, author of *Tenured Radicals*. "She doesn't toe the line and so she is unacceptable. Because she has made the mistake of publishing in magazines like *Commentary* and the *New Criterion*, it has tarred her beyond redemption in the eyes of the officers of the MLA. The fact that she has done a great deal of important in-

tellectual work and cultural reportage doesn't matter to them so much as a declaration of political bona-fidism."

National Review's William F. Buckley has weighed in with: "Miss Iannone, in her regular contributions to *Commentary* alone, can be said to have contributed more to the general understanding of important academic, cultural and philosophical questions than a dozen issues of the *PMLA* alone." (That is, the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*.) About that organization, he noted in passing: "I don't mean to minimize their importance any more than I would minimize the importance of an organization devoted to the study of Zarathustrian Mysticism."

Peter Shaw, a member of the National Council for the Humanities and professor of the humanities at St. Peter's College, also questions the attack on Iannone's credentials. He notes that Phyllis Franklin herself, in a 1978 article in the *American Quarterly*, wrote that scholarship should be pitched to a broad audience. "The broad audience of art," Franklin then called it.

A member of the council since last year, Shaw says that it is not just Iannone who has been an outspoken critic of feminist studies and the politically correct orthodoxies currently prevailing on the nation's campuses. Other members of the council, Kagan of Yale, Robert Hollander of Princeton and himself, hold well-known views on these subjects — and they do not coincide with the views of the MLA by any means.

But "Don Kagan and I have not dealt with contemporary writers. We might be arguing about Shakespeare and Homer, and there would be a sharp difference with the MLA people who might treat them as dead white males," he says. "But that is a very different matter from writing about living women and black and Hispanic writers and books and discussing the shortcomings of their books."

Among the writers Iannone has subjected to withering scrutiny have been Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor of *The Women of Brewster Place* fame, as well as the rainbow coalition of nominees for last year's National Book Award. "Carol may be almost alone in writing that kind of criticism," says Shaw. "These writers have pretty much gotten a free ride and they get all the literary prizes. The only other person I can think of is Stanley Crouch, and he is black, and so he is able to do it without risking what Carol is risking." ●



DON HAMBRAN

Conservatives Kagan (clockwise from left), Buckley and Himmelfarb support Iannone, while liberals Franklin and Hammer question the professor's qualifications.



SAM RITNER