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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 19, 1991 A19

Rowland Evans

And Robert Novak

'PC' Virus

In the Senate?

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy has another opportunity to make a bit of history, this time good history, by taking a stand within the next two weeks to prevent the PC ("politically correct") virus from infecting the U.S. Senate.

As chairman of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, Kennedy holds the key to whether President Bush's appointment of Professor Carol Iannone to the Advisory Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities will be confirmed. Her problem is writing material that is politically incorrect, that dares to criticize black writers. Unless Kennedy surprises insiders and defies the PC standard, Iannone will never get out of his committee.

His decision transcends the fate of a single person on the 26-member council that advises NEH Chairman Lynne V. Cheney on 2,200 federal grants each year. The Iannone case is being carefully monitored throughout academia. At stake is a 1990s version of McCarthyism: whether an unfounded accusation of racism is disqualification for public service. If so, there will be more of the same affecting higher offices.

Advisory Council nominations are routinely confirmed by the Senate without scrutiny. Iannone's résumé, showing 20 years of teaching and writing culminating in a New York University literature professorship, would seem more than adequate compared to other council members. So it was extraordinary that the Modern Language Association launched a campaign against Iannone because she lacks "distinction" and regularly contributes "journalistic" book reviews to *Commentary* magazine.

The Modern Language Association insists its opposition has nothing to do with Iannone's views, and it appears to have convinced the main source of her trouble: the Labor Committee's most senior member, Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.). He tells colleagues she is not distinguished enough, and they think he means it. ("Claiborne is really an elitist, you know," says a fellow committee member.) Were it not for Pell, it is hard to imagine Kennedy getting involved. Now only Chairman Kennedy can undo what Pell has wrought.

To understand what's happening, it is necessary to appreciate the Modern Language Association as the mother lode of political correctness. In consecutive annual meetings, it voted not to convene in any state with a sodomy law on its books, recommended acceptance of American Indian dialects to satisfy college language requirements and opposed aid to El Salvador. Its most recent session dealt with "Sodomy in the New World," "Lesbianism, Heterosexuality and Feminist Theory" and "Women's Responses to Shakespeare Today: Gender, Race, Colonialism."

Carol Iannone scoffs at such nonsense. Thus, the Modern Language Association "and other academic organizations," writes Joseph Epstein, editor of the *American Scholar*, "have come to oppose Professor Iannone because she believes in holding intellectual work of the kind done in the National Endowment and elsewhere up to the standard of intellectual seriousness that, until recent years, has given the humanities such distinction as they possess."

Joel Conarroe, president of the Guggenheim Foundation and a former Modern Language Association executive director, was indiscreet enough to tip off the real case against Iannone. He took issue with her April *Commentary* article ("Literature by Quota"), in which she suggested that some black writers got awards because of their skin color. The "amazing" hat trick of three 1983 book awards for Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," Iannone writes, "seemed less a recognition of literary achievement than one official act of reparation." For that, Conarroe first compared Iannone with the pro-Nazi, antisemite Paul de Man and then called her "somebody . . . who, not to put too fine a point on it, could be described as racist."

For all the talk about "distinction," this is what's bothering Labor Committee Democrats. Sen. Paul Simon is candid: "I am concerned that there seems to be a strong ideological tilt"—specifically, the *Commentary* article. "It made me feel uneasy," Simon told us. "I like to feel more comfortable with a nominee."

At last month's NEH Advisory Council meeting, Cheney noted that Iannone has commended black writing, praising Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon" and the work of Chinua Achebe, and has called Ralph Ellison a great novelist. A council member who is black, City University of New York administrator Carolyn Reid-Wallace, intervened: "I think this endowment must not capitulate to those kinds of criticisms. Because if it does, then it means I lose my freedom to criticize you, Henry James or any other person who happens not to be my color."

Lynne Cheney has been battling the corrosive effects of PC on the college campus, only to encounter its baleful presence at the NEH, with implications resounding through the halls of government. The only force that can stop it now is a vote by Teddy Kennedy.