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ON THE SCENE

Borking the Humanities

WILLIAM MCGURN

WASHINGTON, D.C.
YOU HAVE TO wonder about the fates. Only a short time ago Carol Iannone was going about her business as a professor at New York University. She was not widely known outside the readership of *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, and, of course, *NATIONAL REVIEW*, where she published sharp articles devoted to literature and contemporary culture. These essays are best described by Professor Donald Kagan, dean of Yale College, who says they are characterized by "clear and lively prose, free of jargon and cant."

That's not always the ticket to advancement in academe. But Miss Iannone's demonstrated good judgment must have attracted some attention, because in September she was nominated to serve on the grant-making council for the National Endowment for the Humanities. That nomination transformed her into a *casus belli* for America's academic mandarins.

First a word about the NEH. The academic twin to the National Endowment for the Arts, the NEH has never been as controversial, if only because its subject matter tends to be less of a minefield than the areas with which the NEA must deal (e.g., contemporary art, dance, and music). Where the NEA is probably best known these days for *Piss Christ*, the NEH can boast of funding the PBS documentary *The Civil War*.

The National Council for the Humanities is the NEH advisory group. Council member Aram Bakshian Jr. describes it as "something of a cross between a board of directors and the House of Lords," i.e., capable of giving important recommendations but with-

Mr. McGurn is NR's Washington bureau chief.



Joseph Hurzeler

out much direct power. When it was set up under the Johnson Administration, it was explicitly not limited to professors, and so among the "public" (non-academic) appointees all Presidents have slipped in friendly contributors. Starting small, the NEH budget ballooned under Nixon in a vain effort to appease the intellectual community, which of course rewarded him with nothing but contempt.

In the NEH's almost three decades of existence no one can recall a real catfight over a nominee, though there have been the understandable grumbles. What makes Carol Iannone different is that she has become the focus of a concerted attack by a few powerful academic interest groups, led by the thirty-thousand-member Modern Language Association, the American Council of Learned Societies, and PEN. Ostensibly these groups are concerned about Miss Iannone's lack of academic credentials (her career is "not without merit," says MLA Executive Director Phyllis Franklin, but "it is without distinction"). But it's hard to believe that a liberal would have

aroused the same opposition. Right now Miss Iannone's nomination rests with the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, chaired by Teddy Kennedy. Although in substance and procedure, her nomination process differs tremendously from that of Robert Bork for the Supreme Court, the smallness and dishonesty of those making the charges against her are a rerun.

"In some ways the attacks are Kafkaesque," says NEH chairman Lynne Cheney. "There is all this talk about 'qualifications.' But what's really going on is a classic case of political correctness. Carol has written an essay about the MLA, and Carol has written an essay about PEN. The question is whether PC is going to extend to the United States Senate."

The main charge against Miss Iannone is that she hasn't written enough for purely academic journals such as publications of the Modern Language Association. Surely this is the first time *The New Criterion* has ever been dismissed as a popular magazine. That aside, the charge is ludicrous on several counts. For one thing, Miss Iannone would be replacing a non-academic member, and in any case the mission of the NEH is precisely to sponsor projects that make the humanities more accessible to the public. For another, some of the MLA's own preferred topics—as gleaned from a *New York Times Magazine* piece on the MLA's recent convention in Chicago—speak for themselves. Among the scholarly papers delivered: "Victorian Underwear and Representations of the Female Body," "Assume the Position: Pluralist Ideology and Gynocriticism," "The Lesbian Phallus," and . . . well, you get the point.

When the competency charge didn't seem to be working out, the opposition was quick to play the racism card. In an April 9 letter to Mrs. Cheney, the president of the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Joel Conarroe, stated that Miss Iannone "clearly views all African-American writers the way the late Paul de Man viewed Jewish writers—as easily dismissed second-raters." Mrs. Cheney decided to ignore this patently foolish letter, as something sent in haste that the author would regret he had sent. But the letter soon surfaced in the newspapers, and the charge, utterly without foundation, is out there to be cited by those

who don't even know whence it came. Mrs. Cheney says she is "appalled" by the accusation, and her correspondence makes clear that she has no intention of backing down.

Indeed, all this attention may have backfired on the MLA and its companions. The goal for these groups is to intimidate the Administration into withdrawing the nomination before going through the process, which effectively would give them a new veto power, like the one the Black Caucus has on civil-rights appointees. But Mrs. Cheney has stuck to her guns, she has the backing of President Bush, and although committee members Paul Wellstone (D., Minn.) and Bar-

bara Mikulski (D., Md.) are just wacky enough to make this a crusade, even Ted Kennedy (with preoccupations of his own these days) has to realize that attacking a perfectly qualified woman for not having enough footnotes does not hold much demagogic potential.

In short, in the unlikely event that Miss Iannone's nomination does become the subject of a public hearing, it's not likely to show the MLA and Co. to advantage. "She's stung the mob," says former NEH chairman William Bennett. "They're losing, they know they're getting beat, and they want to bust things up. They're testing the waters, but it's more a sign of weakness than of strength." □

its body, which was lying on the floor. After Samuel Doe was captured by Field Marshal Brigadier General Prince Y. Johnson and the men of his Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (a video exists of Doe's interrogation, in the course of which his ears are cut off and he is made to eat one of them), the Liberian army, which by then was composed almost entirely of Doe's Krahn tribe, acted on the slogan "No Doe, No Monrovia"—and for once in Africa, a political slogan meant precisely what it said.

The John F. Kennedy Hospital, for example, is now an empty shell. It was built to the highest standards with American aid, but it ceased functioning properly long before the civil war administered the *coup de grâce* (so bad did its reputation become that JFK was said to stand for Just For Killing). It is an eerie experience to wander through a giant institution, with corridors a quarter of a mile long, that is entirely deserted; to wander into a professor's office and find it abandoned like the *Marie Celeste*; to find wards with twisted bed frames but no other equipment, and operating rooms with smashed lamps and damaged operating tables, open to the air because rocket fire has blasted holes in the walls. The maternity ward, refurbished only a few years ago by the Japanese, is now of archaeological interest only.

Had I not been to Monrovia, I should not have believed there were so many ways to destroy vehicles; their abandoned shells litter the streets like an exhibition of avant-garde sculpture. Appalled, fascinated, I followed trails of dried blood on the sidewalk to their sources in dark cellars. In St. Peter's Lutheran Church, where, nine months before, six hundred people had taken refuge, I saw the outlines of bodies in the dried blood on the floor: all six hundred had been killed by the army (Doe is said personally to have taken part in the massacre, arriving in a fabled white car).

As everyone knows, Liberia was founded as a colony for freed American slaves. Independence was achieved in 1847. Descendants of the freed slaves, known as Americo-Liberians, dominated the country for the next 133 years, the True Whig Party ruling for the last 104 of those years. Never more than a few thousands, and always a small minority of the total

Heart of Darkness

ANTHONY DANIELS



Janet Hamlin

I TOOK a slow tugboat, the *Steel Trader*, from the Ivory Coast to Monrovia. Captain Monty Jones, an old West Africa hand, was commanding, and we had on board a Vietnam veteran known as Rambo, who spent his spare time in his cabin polishing his guns in preparation for the pirate attacks he hoped would happen. They didn't, and we steamed peacefully enough into Monrovia harbor.

At the height of the Liberian civil war, the *Steel Trader* was the only vessel that would brave the artillery duels across the harbor to bring food to the starving city. Someone once asked why the Liberians fired so many rounds into the sea. "It's the only thing they can hit," was the answer.

Dr. Daniels's next book, Utopias Elsewhere, is due out in November from Crown.

Now peace has returned to Monrovia, but the city has been comprehensively destroyed. The only electricity is supplied by a few private generators; there is no running water, no functioning bank, no post office, no telephone, no garbage collection. Every public institution has been looted, and I met no one who knew where all his or her relatives were.

The destruction was not the result of military action alone: often, the vandals were the so-called freedom-fighters, in the wake of whom civilian looters picked over the ruins. Nor was it casual: it displayed not merely a disregard for property, but a hatred of it, and of civilization itself. In the Centennial Hall, the auditorium in which Liberian presidents are inaugurated, I found a Steinway piano—probably the only such instrument in the country—with its legs cut off and strewn around