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Nat Hentoff

Senatorial Obsession

Carol Iannone went to Washington, but, alas, Frank Capra wasn't there. And neither was Jimmy Stewart.

So, Dr. Iannone, the first member of her working-class family to earn a college degree, has gone home, her presidential nomination to an advisory council for the National Endowment for the Humanities rejected by the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

Despite whatever damage has been done to her status on the grim playing fields of higher education, Iannone did leave town with a certain amount of comfort, however cold.

Notwithstanding all the alarms sounded by the inimitable Modern Language Association and in the public statements of certain scholar-senators, her alleged lack of qualifications was not what did her in. She knows that because her leading opponents on the committee told her so in meetings she had with them before the fateful vote.

For instance, Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), chairman of the committee, told her that her lack of tenure was of little consequence because academic politics are "the nastiest kind of politics" and sometimes have no connection with merit. Why, a friend of his at Harvard with five books did not get tenure.

As it happens, Carol Iannone does not have tenure at the Gallatin Division at New York University because no one there has tenure. That's the way it's structured.

Iannone's most prestigious critic among senatorial authorities on the humanities was Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), a founder of the endowment. "Her qualifications," he has said, "do indeed fall short of what the NEH enabling legislation expects of such nominees."

Yet, in a conversation with Iannone before he voted to defenestrate her, Pell told her that maybe, if she would withdraw her nomination and return to these august precincts in a year or so—after having written for "a middle of the road journal"—she might find a more favorable reception.

In terms of her "qualifications," what difference could a year make—unless, as Pell more than implied, her appearance in a "middle of the road" journal would make up for her politically incorrect credits in conservative publications?

Iannone's views certainly did have a lot to do with the sustained campaign against her by the guardians of academic orthodoxy. She had the effrontery to write that certain black novelists were getting prizes more because they were black than because their work was all that remarkable. She also offended certain feminists by putting a harsh light on the kind of feminist scholarship that is trimmed for political ends.

Finally, however, it was a different kind of politics—having little to do with her views—that sent her packing.

It looked for a time as if at least two Democratic senators—aside from Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), who did vote for her—were going to

At the caucus, Kennedy, invoking his privilege as chairman, asked for the votes of his fellow Democrats against Iannone. Kennedy told them that this battle had become personal and certain backers of Iannone were after him. He considered his reputation to be at stake.

Why, actually, did Kennedy become so obsessed with this nomination? Despite whatever headlines he has made over the years that are not connected with his work in the Senate, Kennedy is valued in Massachusetts because he is seen as a powerful figure in the Senate. But he is becoming anxious that this power not be seen as vulnerable.

What would Massachusetts' sardonic political writers, for instance, have made of his failure to get the support of his own party's senators in the matter of Iannone?

Accordingly, John Aloysius Farrell of the Boston Globe had the right lead on his story about the fall of Iannone: "In an eleventh-hour display of political muscle, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy yesterday secured just enough Democratic votes to defeat the nomination of a conservative scholar, Carol Iannone."

The vote was 9-8. Only Sen. Bingaman, among the Democrats, declined to sacrifice the conservative scholar to the chairman's anxieties.

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support Iannone. One of them said, "I don't understand it. She's qualified. Why all this fuss?"

But the day before the vote on July 17, Kennedy called a caucus of his party's senators on the committee. (Sen. Bingaman tells me he didn't know about the caucus and he wasn't there. In any case, "I was for her," he said. "We have a pretty broad mainstream in this country, and she's part of it.")