

# Over Here

By Tom Engelhardt

Washington, a town ever in search of linkages, missed a crucial one at the remarkably brief hearings that confirmed Rep. Richard Cheney as the new secretary of defense. It was much noted that with Cheney at the hearing was his wife Lynne (as well as his two daughters), towering evidence of his non-womanizing nature. No one, however, noted the real linkages involved in her presence. Lynne V. Cheney heads the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). What this may mean, according to Washington insiders, is that for the first time in American history, scholars, writers, poets and artists may get a genuine break.

"You've heard of the art of war," one middle-level Pentagon official told me privately. "Well, soon you're going to hear about the war of art. Let's face it, there's hardly an area of American life that hasn't gotten a helping hand from the Pentagon. Only the other day we announced a \$30-million program to finance American electronics makers to create a new generation of high-definition television technologies.

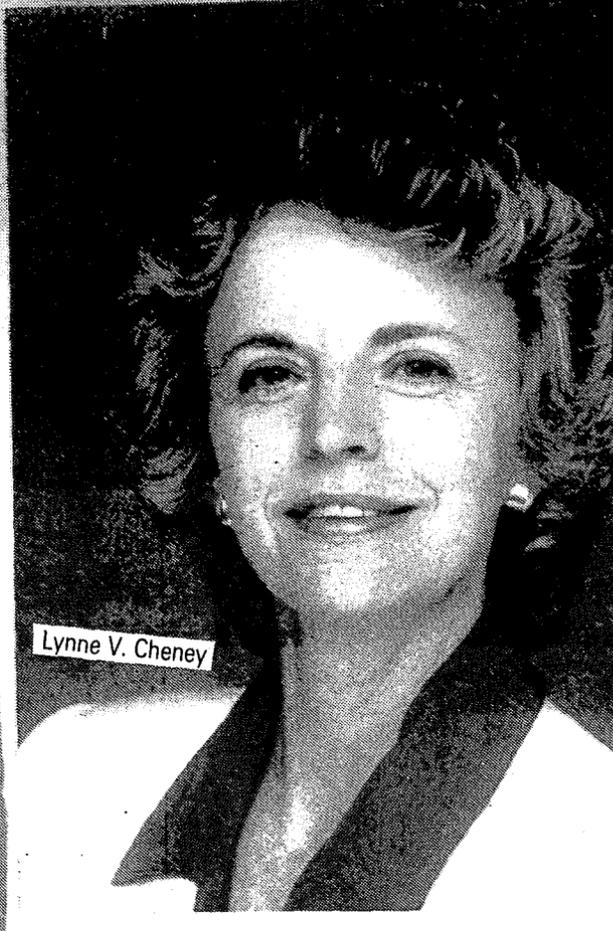
"That makes it clear that we're not about to let our technomilitary future fall into foreign hands. The same should go for art. As the Rushdie affair indicates, unless similar moves are made to shore up the arts, 21st-century America will be a pitiful helpless giant in the face of the terrorist onslaught."

**Dirty dancing:** To make any such moves Cheney and Cheney first have a clever conglomeration two-step to accomplish, though one that administration insiders believe to be well within the realm of possibility. Not only must the Pentagon fuse with the NEH, but the NEH, whose purview at present is only scholarship, must in turn absorb the still headless National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

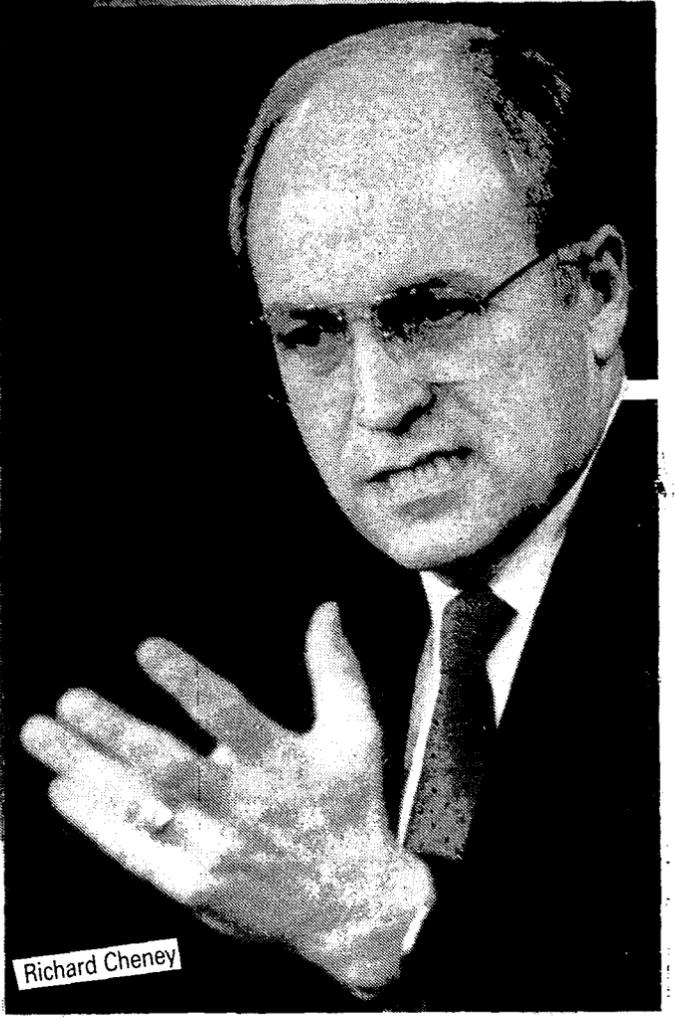
"Conglomeration is the name of the game out there in the corporate-cultural world," says the previously quoted Pentagon official. "Seven media empires control the arts and communications, and about 10 university complexes basically control higher education. If the Pentagon's going to be an effective player in American cultural life, we'd better damn well get everything we can under one big five-pointed roof."

In the privacy of their own home the Cheneys are evidently already giving the concept of conglomeration a new meaning. Each has pledged to move swiftly (Richard Cheney as soon as he has filled the 40-odd empty posts in the Pentagon) to bring the military to bear on art and scholarship, and art and scholarship to bear on the military. Evidently, Cheney avoided the subject at his hearings for fear that the notorious congressional distaste for the arts might slow the confirmation process.

This being the Cheney's pet project, initial planning is already advancing swiftly in the Pentagon and in the NEH bureaucracy. "Look," says a Cheney aide, "once Congress and the American public get the full picture, they're going to love the idea. When the Pentagon funds a science project, immediately you're into the multibillions—the next thing you know you've got Star Wars. And with the arts you simply get more bang for your buck. Publishers get whole books for no more than a few thousand dollars each. You see, the Pentagon can fund an area like artificial intelligence up the wazoo to get itself a jet with a talking cockpit, but the point is, what's the damn thing going to say? That's where—let's face it—the arts have something to contribute. If, for instance, Shakespearean scholars or deconstructionist literary critics focus their wasted argumentative energy under military discipline, think what sort of combative plane America could field!"



Lynne V. Cheney



Richard Cheney

## Merging the art of war and the war of art

**Might makes write:** The Pentagon, for its part, is already preparing a pilot project in which the Iowa Writers Workshop would be moved to Fort Benning, Ga., and renamed the Fort Benning School of Military Aesthetics. "If this catches on and becomes a national program, can you imagine the benefits?" adds a Pentagon procurement officer with growing enthusiasm. "Just for starters, you'd never have to read a novel set on campus again. And as for the writers, no more scrounging for freelance work that doesn't pay. No more rejections. Free food and lodging. Free computers at the motor pool. It would be paradise.

"And this is without even considering the very real benefits to the military," continued the official. "Not just superficial things like giving the army stylish urban camouflage uniforms that would blend into post-punk low-intensity warfare environments. But think of the sophistication the modern army will gain by living in the same barracks with authors, artists and scholars. With a program like this in place, we're assured that a Rushdie affair can never happen to an American author. Not with the military sensitized to literature, and writers off campuses and out of their urban hot-house environment. If they start writing not just on military bases but *about* military bases, they're sure as hell not going to insult a bunch of Moslems, are they? It's the perfect answer—just militarize the freedom of art!"

The official indicated that the Pentagon was also looking

into funding a program in which modernist literary scholars, fiction writers and performance artists would offer carefully chosen military teams a crash course entitled "Advanced Trends in World Literature." These military "SWART" teams, linked through Pentagon computer technology to global literary trends, could then spot and excise literary trouble spots around the world before terrorists even had the opportunity to take advantage of any literary endeavor—or before some possibly pernicious Third World literary trend could endanger the First World cultural canon.

"After all," adds the Pentagon official, "if there's one thing we know something about it's canons. Anyway, let's face it, it's about time somebody put a little muscle into the arts. It's not just a matter of handing a cruise missile to Norman Mailer and seeing what happens. The real question is: why should writers and artists always have to stand out there and take the flak alone?"

"It's not enough for the administration to offer a few pious words about the sacred nature of the freedom of the writer to write—not if it wants to go down in the history books as an administration that was strong on the arts. We're on a planet where the smart writer had better walk softly but carry a laser-armed pen, and I know for a fact that Dick and Lynn Cheney agree with me on that." □

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