

A Conversation with DONALD KAGAN

Professor Emeritus of Classics and History at Yale University, Donald Kagan is a preeminent historian of both the ancient and modern worlds. In this conversation, Kagan and Kristol discuss what humanity's greatest wars—from the Peloponnesian War to World War II—can teach us about the nature of war and the sources of human conflict. Kagan also discusses his education in history at Brooklyn College, his groundbreaking work on Thucydides, and his distinguished teaching career at Yale. Finally, Kristol and Kagan discuss the state of the study of history and the liberal arts more generally in America today.

On American power and global order, Kagan says: The policy we had during [the] successful phase of [the post-World War II era] was: don't even think of using force to bring about your desires. And it worked because people believed [it]. They knew we had the force and they believed we'd use it. Both of those elements are critical to preserving the peace.

On why people go to war, Kagan says: Thucydides has this great insight. He has one of his speakers at the beginning of the war say: "Why do people go to war? Fear, honor and interest." Well, everybody knows interest. That's right. Fear is very credible. But nobody takes honor seriously. The thing that was the biggest surprise to me was how potent honor was—and is—in the conduct of foreign affairs. And it can often lead to war.

On American pacifism and World War II, Kagan says: [Pacifists pretended] that these things that were so troubling in Europe were not their problem. The thing to do if you want to avoid war [said the pacifists] is to not become involved with anything outside the Western hemisphere. Of course the world simply didn't work that way anymore. The United States had become a world power. The U.S. economy, its security, were all tied up in Europe. It would make a very considerable difference to the U.S. if Europe went in the wrong direction. But [many] Americans just didn't want to know about that.

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