

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Donald Kagan, Yale University

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I: The Origins of War (0:15 – 23:20)

KRISTOL: Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to have with me today Donald Kagan, distinguished longtime professor – I guess now, Professor Emeritus – at Yale University. Thanks for being here.

KAGAN: Pleasure to be here.

KRISTOL: It's great to have you. So I told someone in Washington I was coming up to New Haven to do a conversation with you, Donald Kagan, and he said, "Oh, I love Don Kagan; he's the war guy."

So you're a great professor, distinguished ancient historian, and yet in Washington, you're known as "the war guy." I think that's mostly because of your book, terrific book, *The Origins of War*, but talk about the book and about war.

KAGAN: Well, the book is called *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*.

KRISTOL: Yeah, people drop the second part.

KAGAN: They do tend to drop the second part but I think the connection is very crucial and too infrequently attended to, and the other rest of the title, a little bit of it is owed to Clausewitz who wrote his famous essay, *On War*.

Well, I'm concerned particularly with the origins, how wars come about, not how you fight them. But the other thing is, I think, there's an inherently important linkage between thinking about how wars come and then since most of us find it unfortunate when wars come most of the time, how in fact wars don't come about.

And how in one sense how wars can be prevented, that sounds like a bit of a more active and hopeful way of looking at things, or how you can avoid going to war, which is a different thing but has the same outcome.

KRISTOL: So talk about the *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. Why'd you write it, what prompted you to do it?

KAGAN: I have always been interested in the general subject, and my own life's work about Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War naturally leads me to think about war in general, and, of course, Thucydides

certainly was the first person ever to make a very serious, careful analysis of why a war came about, with a kind of a modern degree of sophistication, beyond a modern degree of sophistication, I think, which made it both historically serious, and worthy of your attention. With philosophical implications having to do with its place in human events in general so that the question of why the war came about always sees me and I taught about it many times and, of course, before I undertook the book *On the Origins of War* I had written a four-volume history of the Peloponnesian War so you can see why those thoughts would come together.

But the rest of the story is that I didn't begin my interest in history in the ancient world. I didn't really know there was an ancient world in any serious way until I was a sophomore in college. It really came quite late to me. But I had always been interested in modern European history, and modern European history, of course, is full of war.

And it's always an incredibly dramatic thing but it also appeals to my feeling that history is most interesting when you try to figure out what any sensible person gets interested in when he studies history, which is, why do things happen as they do?

And did they have to happen that way? And very few things are as helpful for that kind of thinking as the outbreak of a war or on rare occasions the avoidance of a war that seemed to be highly likely. So I was very interested already, I had a hobby almost in reading about the First World War and particularly the origins. And of course, that's a good one because no war has ever been argued about as much as that one.

And it is one of the more interesting and difficult and complicated questions compared to many other wars. Anybody who has trouble understanding why the Second World War came about needs a little help. But the First World War, it's really worth all the argument that there's been about it. So, that had interested me quite a lot. But then again having lived through the Second World War, I was enormously interested in that.

And as I read about the ancient world and continued to read about the modern world, I was constantly struck with my dissatisfaction about the way these were treated typically by other historians and my feeling that, although each was different, there were important similarities but even the differences were very instructive. And so I thought about the idea of making a comparative study. Another thing that attracted me was that people have done some kinds of that sort of stuff before but they usually have a social science deformation.

KRISTOL: Spoken like a historian.

KAGAN: Which produces whatever it produces but not what I was looking for.

KRISTOL: What does it produce though, because it seems to be that's one of the distinctive things for me as a political scientist, sort of trained as a political science?

KAGAN: Well, you've been trained in anti-political science.

KRISTOL: Well, that's true, anti-political-science political science, that's the best kind. But I'm very struck by your historical, explain that –

KAGAN: Yeah, I mean. Maybe this will help. I think in the introduction to that book I speak about what I think I'm doing. I describe it as comparative narrative history.

And I think my own opinion is the best way to grasp the past – at least for a very long time before we reach a high degree of sophistication – is by telling the story.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: The discipline that comes from having to tell a story and essentially defend your understanding of what really happened, I think, is necessarily prior to any attempt to explain why anything. So I thought I would write a number of narratives whose purpose would be, first of all, to establish what I think happened and then to go at the question of why did they happen, did they need to happen, if they didn't whose fault was it that they did? – all the questions that your average person who has a general interest in these questions is interested in.

KRISTOL: From a political science point of view, I would say what struck me reading the book is the – you don't dot this "i" or cross this "t" or hit the reader over the head with it – but the contingency when you look at it in this narrative way without a presumption or prejudice ahead of time as to "this must be the cause" or that must be the way that wars happen because some social scientist decided it. It's the contingency of events, it seems to me, that leaps out from your pages.

KAGAN: It's absolutely true. Even Thucydides who was the first and was really very sophisticated in his attempt to grasp how these things are connected and who tends much more than I do to think that there are broad general rules of human behavior, which help explain or maybe thoroughly explain why people do what they do.

Even he – and what made him so great was he understood perfectly well – but these are not hard and fast scientific rules. And the events and the individuals involved in the events can be critical in what happens. So –

KRISTOL: So you did what five or six wars or not-wars, I guess?

KAGAN: I did five. I should say, this idea came to me before I ever thought about writing the book. I taught a course for, I don't know, a couple of decades called "Historical Studies in the Origins of War," and I studied the five cases that ultimately –

KRISTOL: Your colleagues let you teach outside of your own little part of the department there? They let you teach modern history even though you're an ancient historian, that was broadminded of them. Or maybe you just had so much clout, you just –

KAGAN: None of those things. Because I started doing that in the second semester that I was at Yale.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

KAGAN: None of that. No, Yale's History Department, at least, is absolutely splendid, if to a fault. I mean, as most history departments are in a way, what I mean by that is that they essentially let you teach what you want if you don't have a crazy –

KRISTOL: That's good and bad, I guess. Yeah, right? Good in your case, though.

KAGAN: The bad thing is that too often people teach what they know.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: Which turns out to be the material of a very recondite – what do you call the little classes that we teach?

KRISTOL: Seminars.

KAGAN: Seminars. But rarely leads to anything broader than that, but nonetheless. So that accounts why nobody cared.

They wouldn't have cared much if very few people showed up, but it turned out if you order a course that says historical origins or who started the war the whole universe turns out. I might just say a word about

that, how you can be wrong about these things. It was 1970, Vietnam War, everybody knows war is evil. Everybody knows you mustn't pay any attention to it; you must just stop it. And anytime anybody ever gave a course on war or military history in all my time at Yale, filled with students who wanted to know about it.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

KAGAN: You could be a sure thing, anybody.

KRISTOL: Well, it's important history, you know.

KAGAN: I think so.

KRISTOL: The outcome does matter. Yeah. So you did World War I, World War II, as I recall.

KAGAN: And then I did the Second Punic War because I thought it was again a very interesting example, but I had a couple of pairs in my mind. It seemed to me, that the Second Punic war had some interesting elements in common with World War II. And I had always been struck by what seemed to me to be enormously great similarities between events of the Peloponnesian War and World War I.

And then of course, I was enormously interested in a war that didn't happen. There's not too many of these things where you can say there was gonna be a war but it didn't happen, but I had lived through it and so I was much taken with it and that was the Cuban missile crisis. And that was attractive because also it was a live subject; documents were still being turned out. Or made available, I should say. That weren't available so that rarely happens to a guy that does ancient history so I thought that was attractive but it turned out that that also was very illuminating and so I did them for different reasons but they turned out to be the five I would have chosen if I had to choose.

KRISTOL: What about the similarities between the Peloponnesian War and World War I, on the one hand, and the Punic War and World War II, on the other?

KAGAN: Well, in the case of the Peloponnesian War, you have a situation in which there is a great power which is has been the dominant power about, and that is Sparta.

And then you have a newly emergent power, which is, in fact, practically passing the first one and is a great threat to its standing, in its position in the Peloponnesian War. In the First World War, you have a great power that has been the force for peace and order in the world, in the case of Great Britain, and then you have this newly emerging, bumptious power threatening those kinds of things so that, on a very large level, seemed to me to be an interesting similarity and the other thing about it was that it seemed to me that in the case of the Peloponnesian War it was a war that came about without either side wanting it to come about.

And my feeling was so was World War I. That nobody really wanted that war when the whole gang got rolling but that various kinds of errors of judgement and conflicts of values produced the war, and I felt like that was a nice match for them.

In the case of the Romans and the Carthaginians in the Second Punic War, you have – what struck me there was, okay, one side beats the other side and beats them quite nicely in the First Punic War. And then they are sufficiently comfortable and sufficiently distracted that they really don't pay attention any longer adequately to what's happening to their former opponent, Carthage, in Africa. And they tend to think, "Oh, we can handle those guys, and they're not so stupid as to tackle us again, and that's that."

That reminded me of the stretch leading up to World War II where the victors did everything they could to make believe there was no problem, and the defeated country came on with a tremendously potent political figure as their leader and tremendous ambitions and so on, and again that seemed to me to be in a fairly gross way but in a way that I thought was helpful. How does the war come about in those

circumstances where somebody surely wasn't averse to war at all, which was Hannibal who was certainly nothing would have pleased him more than, "by the way, what we ought to do is invade Europe, Italy, and destroy those Romans." Nothing was more appealing than that on every ground. And the Romans were not keen to have it, and they were unduly confident too. I think they just felt they're not going to be so crazy as to come at us again, and we all learned something about how crazy people can be.

KRISTOL: Any individuals you came away admiring especially or more than when you started or surprises on the upside or downside in terms of statesmen, especially, I guess, in the modern cases

KAGAN: Yes, I didn't get much of a change in the ancient thing, there's not enough. But I came away with a greater appreciation of the positive sides of Bismarck. Plenty of negatives with Bismarck but he did have a really good capacity to evaluate what were the pros and cons from a practical point of view in international relations and war and so on and so forth.

And so this really did work to prevent war and in my opinion with extraordinary success. It's very interesting he knew that the trouble, if it arose, was going to happen in the Balkans, and he knew that it was going to be a war between Austria and Russia, and it would be very hard for Germany to stay out one way or another if that happened.

And so he conducted a very complicated foreign policy that few people understood and really could grasp what he was up to in which his determination was to see that those two states did not come into conflict and one of the ways he did that was by throwing Germany's weight around but not in order to increase Germany's power or whatever but to see to it that nobody got to be too ambitious in that territory.

And he succeeded until he was fired in 1890, and Germany was the force not formally allied to Britain but informally working with Britain because the British wanted the same thing.

KRISTOL: Was it mistakes that didn't continue that policy or was it somehow just couldn't have been continued once Bismarck left?

KAGAN: I'm among a minority who think the war was not inevitable when the trouble started. The trouble starts when he gets fired. Maybe another way to put it is the trouble starts when William the Second gets rid of the guy who been restraining him and really starts running German policy and it becomes really hard to defend policy from any rational perspective because he wasn't rational about what he wanted and Thucydides would have understood that better than most.

You know, Thucydides has this great insight I wish I could get people to pay attention – he has one of his speakers at the beginning of the war say, "Why do people go to war? Out of fear, honor, and interest." Well, everybody knows interest, and fear is very credible. Nobody takes honor seriously.

And one of the things, the thing I suppose that was the biggest surprise to me in writing that book was how potent honor was and is in the conduct of foreign affairs, which often leads to war. That, and if people say, "Who cares about honor?" that's something that's – translate honor in ways that we would understand it today, use a word like *prestige*.

Use a word like *shame*. It's the negative that's most important in the honor issue. It's not so much that you want to acquire honor by victory. It's that you want to avoid the disgrace and the shame that comes if you feel like you lost and you can lose in negotiating and you can lose in war. And so people and – I quote the passages that demonstrate this, right down to the last minute, people are infinitely more concerned in what they're talking about inside their private circles with the disgrace, with the honor, with the besmirching of honor for their country. Nobody is talking about economics.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

KAGAN: It's and – they don't even talk about power. More than anything you would imagine they are concerned with this other thing.

KRISTOL: I guess national pride is one way we try to capture it a little bit but –d

KAGAN: Sure. But it doesn't quite get it.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: It doesn't quite get it, that sounds like you who needs that kind of pride but shame, disgrace, "they will think we are weak, they will think we are cowardly," and not only is that inherently bad but all the people we rule will think they can push us around and that, so they always are thinking about practical consequences of these impressions that are made.

KRISTOL: So that's good about Bismarck, and World War I, I do think the majority – I don't follow this closely – but my sense is majority of historians, probably influenced by social science perhaps or by, I don't know, certain trends in historiography, do want to say that that was a war in which individual decisions didn't somehow make much of a difference. It was, once Germany was rising and Britain was there and –

KAGAN: Totally the evidence is totally against it. As I say, Bismarck decided no, and he was successful in preventing it. William, on the other hand, was as concerned with those kinds of things as anything in the world. All he cared about was prestige. All he cared about. And he particularly felt shamed and disgraced personally by Britain's role in the world because they were all related, the kings were all related.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: The British with Germans, and the Germans had British – William's mother was British, she was a princess, a British princess. So he was personally irked, to put it very mildly, by the way the British treated him. They did not treat him with the respect he thought he personally should have, and he certainly identified himself with Germany and Germany with himself, and certainly, he felt did not treat Germany with the respect that it deserved, and it focused very interestingly, why could the British do that? There were so few compared to the Germans and the Austrians, and the German Army was infinitely more potent they thought than the British Army.

It was the fleet. It was the British fleet, and indeed at that moment in history when the western European countries were spreading all over the world, and most particularly Great Britain, and their power was naval. And their prestige was naval, and so William decided Germany had to have the fleet, at the very least, able to challenge the British and he hoped one that would be even greater than Britain and that was the single activity that I would argue of the many that drove the British into the position where they became the people not cooperating with Germany as they had done so much in the past and with Bismarck but rather the number-one stumbling block of the Germans.

II: Lessons of World War II (23:20 – 38:50)

KRISTOL: That's interesting. And World War II, do you have any revisionist views about that?

KAGAN: My views there are very conventional, but those conventional views are everyday becoming less popular to people who count, and I must say, as I observe American behavior now in facing the problems it does face in the world, I cannot believe that the people who are involved in those decisions ever took a decent history course.

Because we know so much about how you go wrong in these kinds of circumstances, the story seems to me to be as clear as it can be, and by the way, most historians who've ever written about this idea and they've gone against it. What I'm getting at is this, and this is a characteristic problem of modern liberal

societies, starting with the British in their biggest days and then, of course, the United States coming in later to be the major successor to that, and that is the notion that because you are protected by water from the same dangers that confront most other nations – namely an army is going to come marching in so you've got to be alert to that – they imagine that they have a degree of security, which is simply an imaginary situation.

You can really wonder about the British or how few miles is it across the channel? Practically, people do swim it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

KAGAN: So, there's that. But they acted as though the fact that they had that water and they had a fleet that was the best fleet and that ought to be successful in a war, that that would take care of all their problems. And of course, after the First World War, the United States, with this great ocean, had always not ever considered the possibility since the British went away, of a European power coming here so that, and they didn't even think they needed a big navy much at the time, they were so confident about the situation.

So what they did was to make-believe that these things that were so troubling in Europe were not their problem, and they didn't need to worry about it, and they made up a story which had been made up originally by British pacifists that in fact there was no need to fight the First World War. And that was simply a wicked action taken by people with wicked motives and that –

KRISTOL: Munitions makers and –

KAGAN: Munitions makers and all that stuff. So the thing to do if you want to avoid war is do not become involved with anything outside the Western hemisphere. They usually didn't worry about Asia; it didn't seem to occur to them that the Japanese would be a problem, so it was all about that.

Well, and of course, the world simply didn't work that way anymore. The United States had become a world power. The United States economy, its security, were all tied up, chiefly in the European area, so it would make a very considerable difference to the United States if Europe went into the wrong direction, but Americans just didn't want to know about that.

KRISTOL: Was it they didn't want to know, or how much of it was that and then the wishful thinking, kind of just utopianism about world peace and modern commercial nations wouldn't go to war? Is that just a rationalization for the – ?

KAGAN: I think that different people different stories. For some people, it was ignorance and foolishness.

Never underestimate the enormous power and extent of ignorance and foolishness. And most people didn't know how the First World War came about, and they were immediately fed a thoroughly false picture of it, which, whose message was, "It came about by people not minding their own business." And so the average man who didn't know better thought, "Fine, then we don't need an Army, and we don't need to pay for it. and we really don't need as much of a Navy as we thought so let's reduce it," and I think, so we shouldn't fail to appreciate the mental and cultural elements that shapes what's going on and I don't think our national leaders are necessarily free from those things.

They're usually not as ignorant as the average man but they're not so terribly far away in many cases, and I think that the educational system, insofar as it plays any role in anything – I really have never had a clear idea of how people are affected in their ideas about the world in which they live by what they learn in school courses. I really don't know how important it is. I think it's become more important because we are more schooled than we used to be. We are schooled longer than we used to be, and never has there been so much agreement on absurd grounds about history, insofar as history is taught at all in our schools, but there is a very common widespread message sent out which, I believe there was also a pretty widespread common point of view after the First World War, which was the antiwar view.

The view that wars come about by evil or by mistake and you shouldn't get involved in them, whereas a careful study at the start of the First World War might well have been a warning signal about what was happening in Europe.

KRISTOL: Two short final questions on this. I like to quote Churchill because I admire Churchill. I think it's somewhat analogous to the 30s now, but, of course, friends of mine on the left say, "There you go quoting Churchill again, it's not the 30s, the more relevant lesson is Vietnam," or maybe the Iraq War, if you want to be really contemporary and there we overreached, we got involved in something we didn't have to get involved in. The problem is American overambition, not American withdrawal or wistfulness about not having to get involved in the war.

KAGAN: You do hear people saying that all the time and every day they sound more and more foolish, because it seems like all you have to do is say, the Iraq War and that means, well, you don't go to war because it was a failure and a mistake, and the only thing wrong with it was that we got involved in it. Well, the fact of the matter is we succeeded in the Iraq War. The people, the guy who was, the dictator running the place, was gone, there was a government that was popularly elected, nobody was getting shot, and nobody was getting killed, and the hard part of the fighting was over.

We are in the spot we're in now – I say this with no hesitation at all – as a consequence of the President of the United States subsequently saying, "We're not going to have anything more to do with it." After you win the war, you decide to lose it in that way.

So I mean, I think there's no excuse. I really think this is just special pleading by people who have a particular picture of the world and are not interested in the facts, which are very simple and obvious to see. And Afghanistan is more complicated and so on, but they're not talking about Afghanistan yet. So much it's clear enough we lost some troops so it's a terrible thing. But the fact of the matter is that that area, which was threatening to become very dangerous, as it is again now becoming, was cooled down by the American intervention.

KRISTOL: And the 21st century is not going to be, I take it, based on your reading of history a century of perpetual peace where we leave behind these 20th century – Secretary Kerry likes this formulation – this isn't appropriate or tolerable in the 21st century, as if these terrible things happened in the past centuries but the world is going to change in the 21st century.

KAGAN: Every day, he looks even more foolish than he was when he made that statement because we had war all over the place, real hard-fighting wars in places that matter enormously to us, even the people who run our policy repeatedly talk about the importance of these areas and then act as if there not important.

KRISTOL: In general, I think you're a disbeliever in Kant's perpetual peace or in any kind of –

KAGAN: Kant was a disbeliever in perpetual peace.

KRISTOL: Well, that's an interesting. That's a deep point, actually. One forgets that.

KAGAN: But of course, anybody who has examined the history of the world – but let's pay our attention chiefly to the world of the modern world – knows that war is perpetual so far. And that war, right now, is more prominent an element in our lives in this world than it has been since World War II, I think.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's amazing

KAGAN: And so only if you're determined to ignore the evidence can you come to that conclusion. There is war right now; there's every reason to think it will spread. Everything I see, but also any study of the past, suggests that it will not stop being that way until something big happens to stop it. These things

don't just go away when they are this prominent and not just a mere local skirmish, then something serious has to be done to stop the forces that require war.

KRISTOL: But the book also shows that peace can be preserved or achieved.

KAGAN: Yeah, and that's the other thing that is so discouraging to me. We've just had such a fascinating course in this subject – you should begin the course, in my opinion, in, let's say 1890, when the Kaiser comes to his own power in Germany and then Germany becomes the stormy petrel that stirs up all this blatant stuff.

That's World War I. Next, everybody goes to sleep again into our 19th century mull, and the consequence of that is Hitler and the Japanese empire and World War II – the worst war the world has ever seen. Certainly, the two of them – I can't think of any match for them in terms of loss of life in all of history.

We know, some of us have lived through part of it, so that is what's before, but and most particularly and this is hardest to get across because there's so much propaganda flying around about it, but start in 1945. And go down 70 years and you have an extraordinary stretch of time in which there are not really any great wars at all, there is an enormous outburst of prosperity in the world as a whole. There is a – oh yes.

If you think this is a good thing and I do, a tremendous growth in popular government, such as the world has never seen, and not only this time in the West so that I would have to regard it as the most positive, fruitful period of international relations and internal positive development that I can think of in the history of the human race.

Now, was that just luck, dumb luck? If you ask me what are the characteristics of the world in which that arose and was permitted to grow, and the answer was it was the victory in the Second World War, first of all, of the antifascist and anti-imperialist forces – who were themselves a big chunk of them were the Soviet Union, and you have to face the fact they were critical in that victory.

But, they were not the state that after the war especially had the greatest impact on what was happening in the world, they had a very serious impact but it was largely negative. Its tenancy was very old-fashioned territorial imperialism, and it would not have ever sort of calmly gone away. Either they would have made their empire firm, and we would have old-fashioned despotism that the world is used to, or they would have what did happen, which is the world fall apart and then for a brief period of time then popular government would be the force that was coming on.

Well, that came about because the United States, chiefly, and its allies undertook handling the world a different way. They judged that all of the things that matter to us were necessarily connected to what happened to the rest of the world and that if we wanted those things to move in a positive direction rather than negative one we had to be engaged and that one form of our engagement has to be overwhelming military strength.

I always like to use this because I think my foreign policy formula, you guys have all been in places where you see a sign that says, "Don't even think about parking here." I think the policy we had during this successful phase of it was "don't even think of using force to bring about your desires," and it worked because people believed, they knew we had the force and they believed we'd use it, and both of those elements are critical in my view to preserving the peace that exists.

III: Studying and Teaching History (38:50 – 1:04:14)

KRISTOL: So why'd you become an ancient historian, why the classics, why Thucydides?

KAGAN: Well it's a purely biographical story with no deep philosophical context. I had always liked history and when I was a kid I just read history for fun. But I knew nothing about the ancient world, we were never taught it in school.

And so I just never had anything to do with it. Most of my historical interests strangely though, or not, not so much in America, I was very interested in modern European history, which has always stayed with me but that was what I read, that's the fun I had.

And so now I, next moment in my life was then in high school – I want to give a plug to Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, New York, where I had the good fortune to have a wonderful history teacher, the only wonderful history teacher I ever had up until college.

KRISTOL: Is that right? Where is Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn?

KAGAN: East New York. Maybe the worst neighborhood in Brooklyn now.

KRISTOL: Still, you know every other neighborhood in Brooklyn has been gentrified. East New York is still hanging in there?

KAGAN: Oh yes, it's bad. But it was actually, I actually grew up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, which was below East New York in those days but East New York is pretty sad now.

However, it was a very nice local high school, and he was a remarkably good teacher, and what was remarkable was that he was the first real, sort of spoke like a historian, the first one that I ever met. He didn't just tell you stories and ask you to remember what was in the classes and stuff like that, he asked questions and he undertook to answer them or have you participate in the answering of them and that really sharpened up my sense that what I wanted to be was a history teacher. It had never occurred to me to be a professor because I didn't even know what that was, nobody in my family had ever been to college and so it just wasn't a world that existed for me. But when I graduated and went to Brooklyn College, it was with the intention of becoming a History major.

In those days, there were required courses – would you believe? Most of the first year was spent with required courses of one kind or another; a couple of them were history courses but they were pretty routine, and now for the first time, I had to choose courses for myself in the sophomore year. What do you call them?

KRISTOL: Electives.

KAGAN: Electives. And I thought, to be a school teacher, high school history teacher in New York in those days, they had this very quaint idea that you ought to know a lot of history and so they had a set of courses that you needed to take to qualify for a license if you ever got there and so the first one was Ancient History.

And then, but you didn't have to take them in sequence, but being unimaginative about it I thought, "Why not start at the beginning?" And so I asked my savvy senior friends and said, "Is that alright?" And he says, "Oh yeah, Ancient History is fine but wait until you are a senior because she will have retired by then." And they were referring to the only Ancient History teacher there was at Brooklyn College in those days, Meta Elizabeth Schultz, a maiden lady from the state of Maine, and I never saw anything like her and she totally changed my life. Would you like to hear a little bit about that?

KRISTOL: Yeah absolutely, sure, sure. So when are we, when is this?

KAGAN: This is 1951, so it wasn't a lecture and it was not a seminar. I guess what you would have called it was a recitation There might have been anywhere from, depending on how many kids turned up, ten to 25 students sitting in their chairs in rows, and the professor sitting at her desk, and she would give

us an assignment for the day to read and then she would come in and she would ask questions but she never asked questions, generally of the class.

She would say, "Mr. Kristol," and then she would ask you a question. And you, fairly nervous, would give her an answer. Now, she would correct any factual error you made; she would correct any error of pronunciation or any conceivable shortcoming of perfection whatsoever and not in a particularly pleasant way.

So I thought. Jesus, what is this? Well, as it turns out she went through the class for, I think, about almost two weeks, and she never got to me but every day, I was angrier and angrier at what she is doing, and I said, "She is not going to get me," and I prepared for that course like for no other course in my life.

And finally she got around to me and she said, "Mr. Kagan," and she asked me a question – I don't remember what the question was. But I know I spat out the answer in the shortest possible manner possible, the fewest words conceivable, and I was as certain as I could be that it simply had no flaws and she said, Yes," and she moved onto the next guy.

KRISTOL: Oh wow.

KAGAN: And then it all sort of dawned on me that all she wanted was to get it right. But she insisted that we do, and of course, what was behind it all was something I believe was really very nice. You know, Brooklyn College in those days was very much a poor man's college, probably still is, and it was a New York City College.

The tuition fee was exactly the amount I could afford – nothing. And we had to pay a \$10 semester library fee – that was the totality but that's what most of us could afford. The other thing about it was that most of us were working-class children or petty bourgeoisie but nothing much about that.

And for us – it was very hard to get in. I don't know if this is totally true but they were telling us this story in those days, it was more difficult to be admitted on terms of academic qualifications to Brooklyn College than to Harvard. I do believe it. Those were the days of the gentleman's C at Yale and Harvard and places like that, it was nothing like that at Brooklyn College.

So, here are all these kids – many of them by the way either foreign-born or their parents are foreign-born so that English wasn't necessarily the language that was spoken at home – but they were all really quite bright and tremendously motivated. This was the biggest thing in their world, but more than that from the time their talents were discovered, which would have been when they were very young, in their families, they were lionized.

We all thought whether we said so or not, that we were pretty nifty because everybody had always told us how nifty we were. And she knew how we were in that respect but she also knew all the ways in which we fell short, all the imperfections of our language, our habits, our interests, and so she was determined to make us aware of all of them and to see to it that we ceased to be inadequate in those ways. So I made such a story of it because I thought it was educationally one of the most amazing experiences I ever had and I often wondered what if she had been an expert in African history, would I be an African historian today? I don't know.

KRISTOL: But you also presumably decided the subject matter was pretty fascinating.

KAGAN: Well, that's the rest of it. I was just as interested in the Romans as I was in the Greeks in those days but over a pretty short time the Greeks began to fascinate me a lot and so now I think it was not just accidental, I think what I saw in the story of the ancient Greeks really appealed to me.

KRISTOL: And you then studied obviously Greek at some point. So you didn't have the languages at this point when you were going to college?

KAGAN: The only language I had was that I had the two-year French medal in high school – that was it.

KRISTOL: So then you took Greek and Latin?

KAGAN: There's a story that goes with that too, because I'm so pleased to have a chance to pass on the amazing place that Brooklyn College, and I'm sure City College and the others, were like in those days.

Here, I was in the middle of my sophomore year, never took Latin, never took Greek. But if you wanted to be admitted to graduate school in ancient history, you needed to have Latin and Greek, and I only had four and a half semesters to go – what to do? Well, the Classics Department at Brooklyn College in those days was very friendly to any students interested in them so I went to see a professor who had taught me a course in my freshman year – she didn't know who I was, she wasn't particularly a great teacher, she was the only one I knew in Classics.

She must've been in her 60s, and she was not very well physically, but I went and I asked her, "Can you tell me how can I make the greatest progress as quickly as I can in these ways?" and after a little while she said – she had an apartment right next to Brooklyn College. And she said to me, "If you will come to my apartment at 8am every weekday, I will teach you Latin."

And there was a course that they had for beginning Latin one year, and then you would be presumably ready to go into Latin texts of the literary kind and so on, and we completed that one year and the remaining months of that year – thanks to, she didn't get a nickel.

KRISTOL: She didn't get paid for this?

KAGAN: Nothing, she just did it out of the commitment.

KRISTOL: That's an amazing story.

KAGAN: That is an amazing story, and then the next semester I began Greek and Latin courses, and the rest is history.

KRISTOL: And you went to grad school?

KAGAN: I went to grad school at Brown for a Master's degree. I would have liked to stay but they didn't have a Ph.D. in Ancient History so from there I went to Ohio State, and that was stupid because I didn't know anything about Ohio State, didn't know anything about the teachers or anything, but in those days nobody told you.

KRISTOL: Right, they offered you a scholarship or something?

KAGAN: Well sure, but other folks offered me scholarships too, but anyway, it's so much better to be lucky than smart, and it turned out there was a wonderful teacher of ancient history there, magnificent, and there were some very very good teachers in other fields of history, and I really feel very indebted to my education at Ohio State, which I really think was better than I deserved.

KRISTOL: And Thucydides became your great object of study and the subject of your four-volume work. Did you always love him, do you remember how you, was he a late interest?

KAGAN: You start reading Thucydides, even in the freshman year, you read chunks of him in the Classical Civilization course that was required – didn't mean much to me.

And then I had a course in Greek history with Professor Schultz and we certainly read some Thucydides there and I developed a pretty good appreciation of him but I was still pretty raw and pretty ignorant and there was no great thing and then I went to Ohio State.

I must've done some Thucydides in Greek at Brown, but I was mostly reading Greek, is what I was really doing. So when I go to Ohio State, and Professor McDonnell was my man at Ohio State – wonderful teacher, a person of great education and learning, and a warm human being – we were required to read the whole of Thucydides and we talked about him some and then I became really quite interested in him.

But not committed in any way, and then so now I'm in graduate school and I have to write a dissertation and I was hunting around for a topic but it wouldn't have occurred to me to write on one that was Thucydidesian, because I figured like everyone figured, "It's all been done, it's all been said." You got to go look into something a little bit more recondite.

Okay so I finally ended up – What I thought I would do in my simple-minded way is I would start where Thucydides quits, and then the next narrative history available after Thucydides runs out is Xenophon, a very unexciting Athenian military historian, and other things, and see if anything turns up. So I read through Xenophon and finally I came to a story that interested and puzzled me.

In the town of Corinth in 395 – the war started in 395 – something called the Corinthian War and it was all around Corinth. I think in the year 392, there was a civil war that broke out in Corinth, and it involved oligarchs on one side, democrats on the other, which was characteristic of the time, but there was some other bunch of folks running around that it was, I couldn't identify and so I read all of the secondary sources I could and they all had it different.

Some people had democrats here and oligarchs there, and some people had, but there were always only two oligarchs and democrats – you had to decide who was who. And it still left something not working and so one day it just hit me – I don't know how I realized – "Oh, the problem is there aren't two, there were three."

And so finally I ended up arguing there was indeed a democratic faction, and there was indeed an old oligarch faction, but there was also something that had sprung up in more recent times that was something between the two, and they had a different angle, and so on.

So I thought, "Great, I think I'm going to write a history of Corinthian politics from the first time we can do that, which is 421 BC down to where it runs out" so that was my dissertation. But 421, that's Thucydides territory. And so I began to now have to wrestle with Thucydides with the intention of understanding what happened and what does Thucydides say about what happened.

And I suppose the peculiar thing – or I wouldn't say peculiar – but characteristic thing about my dealings with Thucydides that made me slightly different from most people who dealt with him is that I have the greatest admiration for him and can't possibly say enough things that suggest how a wonderful historian he was. But he was a human being. And what people have not sufficiently noticed was that not only was he a contemporary, and the war was taking place in and around his city but he was an important player. He was a general.

And he played a very significant role, he got one particular assignment, he writes about that and it was determined, he failed to do what he was supposed to do. His job was to protect – he was the naval commander up there – he was to protect the Athenian ally who was up the river from where he was, and when the Spartans sent the invading force in there, he wasn't there. And the Athenian people found him guilty and they exiled him from the city. Thank God, because he could not have written the history he wrote.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's amazing.

KAGAN: If he were in Athens, because he went off and was able to talk to people on both sides and all of that was true. But, my point was people were treating Thucydides as though he were God's truth.

You find out what Thucydides and now you start concerning yourself with other things. And I realized, wait a minute, it's as though, all we have as a history of the First World War were Winston Churchill's account of that war.

Now, Winston Churchill is a great, great man and fundamentally truthful, but he was deep into everything and there's plenty of argument about whether Churchill was right about this, that, and the other thing and what his angle was. And I said, it's got to be the same with Thucydides. And so that's when my deep interest in coming to understand Thucydides and the war he wrote about.

KRISTOL: And did you conceive your four-volume work at a early age?

KAGAN: No, no. I graduated and went off and lucky enough, went off and won a Fulbright, which was tremendously valuable because I could spend a year in Greece and see the place for the first time.

KRISTOL: So you had never been to –

KAGAN: I had never been to Greece. And then I got very lucky and I got a job and I began teaching at Penn State for a year and then before I was there for a few months I was offered a job at Cornell and spent the next nine years there.

And, I don't remember, I guess I started in 1966 when I had been at Cornell for five or six years, and I thought it was time for me to try to tackle a new kind of book and I decided I wanted to get at the question – this takes us back to the beginning of our conversation – on the origins of the Peloponnesian War.

And by this time, I had really begun to suspect that there was a great deal to be learned by comparative thinking about the origins of World War I and the Peloponnesian War. And I just remembered this, there was a summer program at Cornell; in those days it was called the Telluride.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I know many people who went through it.

KAGAN: And each summer they get a couple of faculty guys to teach a seminar to these extremely bright juniors from people around the country. So they ask me and a colleague to do it and I thought, "Here's the chance, I can try out this stuff" so that seminar was on the origins of wars, and meanwhile I was writing my history on the origins of the Peloponnesian War.

So I did that, that was published in '69, and I realized when I had finished that that I want going to be satisfied until I had done the same thing for the rest of the war.

KRISTOL: And I remember four volumes came out, and then there was this one-volume abridgment that you did which was hugely surprising – maybe I shouldn't say it was surprising – but I thought it was surprising.

KAGAN: I was surprised!

KRISTOL: Bestseller, right? That was amazing.

KAGAN: It sold very, very well, yeah. It was a wonderful day. Amazing day, the *Washington Post* and some other papers run sort of, ranks bestselling books each week. I think I've got the numbers right – one day the Peloponnesian War book was number seven, and my son Bob's book was number five.

KRISTOL: And you were okay with that?

KAGAN: I was better than okay with that.

KRISTOL: That's good, that's pretty generous of you as a father.

KAGAN: But I mean, I never would have imagined in a million years that anything I wrote would be on that kind of thing.

KRISTOL: That's fantastic. It's a tribute to the American public, I guess, that enough of them care about the Peloponnesian War, right?

KAGAN: It turns out that it's amazing how many people around the world are interested in that subject.

I know that some of it was a reaction to the books, but more strikingly at Yale, I taught this course that was televised, my Greek survey course, and it's unbelievable the amount of mail I get from all parts of the world and very often they talk about Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War even within that context.

KRISTOL: Yeah, there's something about, I mean, the war issue is interesting, maybe there's something about the Greeks, people sense the kind of amazing character of Greek civilization and greatness of Greece and can't help but appeal to people, you know, to people, once they see something of it maybe?

KAGAN: No, I think that's true but I also think that to focus on Thucydides, I think, he has some kind of a special appeal that people get – the ones who are – get very taken with him and they see the relevance of it.

I mean, it's worth noting, because when I first learned this I was surprised, Thucydides is studied as a required part of the study at all the military academies, West Point, Annapolis, several others. And you're constantly, I wouldn't say constantly, repeatedly hearing important figures who deal with war and politics asserting the central importance of Thucydides.

General Marshall has a very famous quotation – I can't repeat because I can't remember it – in which he says, you got to know Thucydides.

KRISTOL: Is that George C. Marshall? Yeah, that's great.

KAGAN: And he's not the only one of that level who has said that, and I've had occasions to lecture sometimes at the military academies, West Point and Annapolis especially, and there's never a shortage of real interest and response from the cadets, they study it in their work and it livens them up, they really become purists about it.

KRISTOL: No, that's great.

IV: Higher Education Today (1:04:14 – 1:20:24)

KRISTOL: You were a professor at Yale for 45 years, I think, and a hugely popular and successful one. Give us your judgment on the fate of the higher education of universities over that period. How has it changed, has it changed for better has it changed for worse?

KAGAN: Well, I think it's a hard, complicated story to tell. Because it hasn't gone the way of disaster, which is the way I see so much of America's higher education having gone.

It has not sort of evidently and on the surface abandoned its old ways and so forth, and also I suppose the reality also is a slower change. But if I look at what the situation seemed to me to be like when I arrived and what happens now, it really does seem very different, even, strangely enough, as it remains the same.

The differences are, the ones that I think are common across the country, the subjects that are studied, the subjects that are popular the way subjects in the humanities and in the social sciences are taught have gone much more sharply in a direction they were already going in those days.

Some of the difference is very clear numerically, and it tells you a story. When I arrived at Yale, the number-one major in Yale College was History, the number two was English. And I think that tells you a lot about what kind of place it really is because it means that a very large percentage of the student body you can count on to have read many of the same books, to have considered some of the same experience and so on, so there was a considerable piece of common culture, and it was not despicable common culture.

These were serious books that had been studied for centuries in many cases, and the approach to them was still, I would have said, differential and respectful to the great writers, to the great subjects, and to the body of knowledge that had been thought to be the starting point for educated people. That hadn't really changed an enormous amount.

KRISTOL: Traditional liberal education.

KAGAN: Traditional liberal education and a very good one because the faculty, in my opinion and everybody's opinion in those days, was really quite extraordinary, and everybody seemed, must have been exceptions, everybody seemed to be committed to the value of what they were up to the notion that what they were doing was very inherently worthwhile, and the morale of everybody was that.

And I mean one of the things I'm struck by is nobody seems to be worried about convincing anybody that they should be studying this subject whereas people seem to me constantly aware of what do we have to do, not just in these fields by the way, in all fields, what do we have to do to interest students in this kind of stuff? And it reflects a fact that in a way the university doesn't really know what it's doing anymore.

KRISTOL: I assume history and English are no longer the two largest majors.

KAGAN: They are not. Some of the social sciences, I think probably – I don't know that I'm dead right on this, but I would have expected the trio of economics, psychology, and political science. Because a lot of Yalies know that they're going to go to law school so political science is part of it.

They – I would guess, I can't be sure, I would guess – would be the top three. In any case, they're the ones who seem to be the most upfront. Now, part of that has to do with a lot of things that have nothing to do with the educational thinking of the university, but I think some of it does.

It seems to me that the trouble that the humanities are in is a largely self-created illness. For the longest time, the faculties have pursued the interests they learned about in graduate school, and these are not the interests by and large shared by innocents who come to us from the best high schools in America. They just don't care about most of those things. And to the degree, you know, now obviously, I reflect an older way in looking at things, and maybe that's the whole story.

But the issues, even in courses like History, which have been turned into forms of social science in cases but also in a kind of advocacy mode, the notion that somehow the study of politics and society, it's we all know what the answers are, the only question is to ask what's the most effective way to move society to its where we enlightened ones know.

Now, in my day it could be that all the faculty agreed about all these things, but they didn't talk about that. They talked about the books they read and the subjects they studied and the different points of view that were held by different people and how one makes judgements among them and we are all human and we all have our preferences, no doubt we said why the way I look at the world is particularly attractive but we didn't feel like it was proper to convince them to do it and we didn't think it was in any way proper not to give the contrarian, other points of view but to indicate what were the strengths and weaknesses of them.

Mostly, I learn this from students who tell me about it, because I don't hear my colleagues very much and that's just not the way it's done. As I said, the thing that stuns me the most is everybody knows what the answers are and you just have to work your way towards that.

KRISTOL: And that your colleagues, yeah. And the students, do you think they're fairly similar?

KAGAN: This is the amazing thing. I think I have lived in a personal bubble. I find the students I teach today I can't tell the difference between them and the students I taught 45 years ago and I think there a reason for it. When you're around that long, people get to know what the common story is about you.

Some part of that is factual, they tell you what the work is like, what the requirements are like, what the demands are like, and of course, they know from the syllabus what the subject is going to be about and on top of that, the students give you if they're telling somebody about the course their own personal view of it.

But the first thing that happens is that nobody is going to take a course in Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War taught by me and be surprised by what he runs into. So, I have the feeling I'm getting the same students because I'm attracting the same kinds of students.

KRISTOL: Self-selection, I suppose. Yeah

KAGAN: And so I really don't know the difference.

KRISTOL: But you were you the Master of a College?

KAGAN: I was the Master of a College.

KRISTOL: So you did deal with the range of students?

KAGAN: Oh, I know what the rest of the universe is like, but in my class, when the class selects itself then I can't tell the difference.

KRISTOL: But as Master of a College and you were also senior administrator – Dean or Provost, and Dean of the College – did you have the sense – some people complain, for example, that students know much less when they come to college and they're 17 than they did 30 years ago. And part of me thinks, I don't know they never really knew much when they're 17 and if there's been a change, it's the faculty that's changed and the way they teach, not the students in their preparation, but it could be either. I don't know.

KAGAN: I have no reason to believe, it could be true but I don't know that it's true, that the students are any more ignorant than they were before or particularly different in any significant way, the students I teach. Now, when I ran into students in my other capacities, I really wouldn't know because the kinds of issues that come up have nothing to do with that.

So, that's what I said, I've been living in a bubble. I've been living in the bubble of Yale 1969, all these years.

KRISTOL: Well, you created the bubble by having an excellent class and attracting great students – liberal education is supposed to be a bubble in a way, separated from the rest of society and cushioned from those forces.

KAGAN: Yeah, but as you know the students are asked to write evaluations of their courses and teachers each semester and most of them do, and I read them avidly, and what I find that's very interesting is when they want to say something nice, the personal stuff is not important, it's what they say about how the course works, what it does, how it's structured, what is required of them, and so on and I so often get to think, "I never had a course like this," which is wonderful, but "I never had a course that had this structure, that had this set of expectations that was conducted in the way that this one is," and that tells me that one of the things that, well, let me just say a word about that so you get an idea of what I'm talking about.

KRISTOL: Yeah, give us an example.

KAGAN: So this is a seminar we're talking about, a lecture's a lecture, I just give a lecture. But, in the seminar they'll be something, between 15 and 20 students in the seminar, the entire class has a very specific reading assignment that it has to do for that day and it includes many original sources and secondary sources to get at the arguments and so on and so forth.

On any particular day, there might be as many as four students who have been chosen that day to have written a paper on a particular topic, about five typewritten pages, which they distribute a week in advance so that the class has read their papers as well. Then, when we start I begin to question the people who have delivered the papers and ask them to answer the, I pull a Schultz on them, and have them answer the questions.

And we then allow the conversation to take its course because then I'll recognize people who want to comment on them and soon if things go well, you've got yourself a conversation, sometimes a debate, and that kind of a thing, and in the course of that exercise, if we do it right, there is no way the students can fail to know the range of opinions, interpretations that are available and what arguments might be deduced for them.

But better yet, they get attached to them by chance and now they have to defend themselves so, I might say, one of the things that is good about that method of all the things I was surprised by in meeting these very bright students I've had the chance to teach at Yale, I was surprised to discover, everybody complains about students writing, most of the students can write very well, you can help them but they can mostly get there without being able to write well.

But what I've found was they don't talk well, I mean, they are not skilled at a serious conversation, on how to get the most of it. They've had no practice at it, and so this is practice. And because I'm engaged it's never going to go off on the moon, and it's never going to be anything but what I want it to be. And that means they have to talk on the level I want them to talk at. So if it has to be elevated it is, by virtue of that experience. So it's that kind of thing that I don't know how widespread that ever was but the students like that kind of thing.

KRISTOL: Sounds like a great seminar, to share a bit on that seminar.

KRISTOL: And your lectures, to close – they're online and they're fantastically popular, you're a popular lecturer – any advice to people watching who might be thinking of being professors? How do you give a good lecture?

KAGAN: Well, the first thing is talk about something that interests you.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that is good advice, it's very hard to disguise the lack of interest.

KAGAN: And secondly, I think, you should be aware that it is debate, controversy, arguments that catch the attention of most intelligent people when they are at a subject that is new to them so don't ever just lay down the law and tell them this is how it was. You need to help them see how you get at two things.

One is deciding what's worth talking about. And secondly, how you can go about trying to make up your mind about what's important about that, and somehow in your lectures you want to be constantly indicating to them these are things that people argue about and here's why they do and here's what some say and here's what others say and here's why maybe you should think about this point of view.

But the point is, I think, it's got to be the way things really are when you're interested in something you need to know what there is to be concerned about and you need to know what the possibilities are and you need to have some idea of the virtues of this and the virtues of that. If you're doing that, it's hard to defeat education entirely.

KRISTOL: Well, that's great. It's a good note to end on, and I think in this conversation, people might have gotten a sense of why you were one of the great teachers of the American academy of the last half century and so, Don, thanks so much for taking the time today, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

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