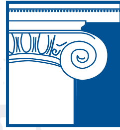

ACTA

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

"Always Be Freshmen"

By Professor Donald Kagan

Remarks accepting

The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

with

Introduction and Tribute
By The Honorable José A. Cabranes

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New York, NY

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability. Launched in 1995, ACTA has a network of alumni and trustees from over 700 colleges and universities.

Introduction and Tribute

by The Honorable José A. Cabranes*

This tribute to Donald Kagan, Sterling Professor of History and Classics at Yale, was delivered on the occasion of the presentation to Prof. Kagan of the 2008 Philip Merrill Award.

To be able to pay tribute to a friend of many years who also happens to be one of the great historians of our time is both an honor and a challenge: *an honor* because it affords an opportunity to express directly sentiments of respect, admiration and affection difficult and awkward to express in everyday life; *a challenge* because of the difficulty of capturing in a brief statement the full measure of the man.

In the three decades that I have spent in and around Yale University, Donald Kagan has represented for me and for many others—like no one else in this extraordinary community of extraordinary people—Yale's highest ideals and aspirations of scholarship, teaching, and service. As the leading University proponent and defender of programs in the study of Western Civilization, he has inspired those of us in New Haven and around the country who believe there is something to be said for the serious and sustained study of our own history and tradition.

Though in many ways a dissident within the academy, Donald Kagan has been deeply involved in the administration of Yale. He has been one of the barons of the faculty—a voice in all matters of academic consequence, a member of innumerable committees, the Master of Timothy Dwight College, the Acting Director of Athletics, the Chairman of the Department of Classics and Dean of Yale College. In each of these roles he has been loved by students and respected by faculty

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colleagues, and he has never stopped dedicating himself to scholarship and teaching.

This combination of scholarship and service is difficult to achieve in the modern university, and Donald Kagan is a model for students and for young academics alike. While deeply committed to ensuring that Yale faculty uphold the highest standards of scholarship, he is also committed to teaching undergraduates.

He demonstrated his commitment to scholarship and teaching most clearly when, at a time of financial hardship, he saved from extinction the Directed Studies program—Yale's select Western Civilization program for freshmen. To do this, he proposed that academic departments share their junior faculty members with Directed Studies, and he thereby ensured that the departments would continue to support a Western Civilization program and that young faculty members would have a chance to teach Western Civilization.

As one observer has said, "this idea reveals a man who can stand apart from the school politically and pedagogically and still make the school function like a true insider. Whether you call him the outside insider or the inside outsider, he has kept Yale on its toes for years."

Professor Kagan's teaching style could only be practiced by someone who has wrestled with the great issues of higher education in the past century. He loves history, and he loves the methods historians use to study the past, fully revealed by the enthusiasm and erudition that he brings to every lecture. Students leave his classes with an understanding not merely of the importance of the Greeks, but with a vast amount of knowledge—a distinctly old-fashioned idea. No matter the subject, the recitation of platitudes does not masquerade as education in a Kagan course.

Few scholars have had the satisfaction of seeing their work so widely celebrated as important and even inspirational as Donald Kagan. One especially memorable appreciation of Donald Kagan's work was offered

in 1991 by the critic George Steiner, who wrote as follows in *The New Yorker*: "The temptation to acclaim Kagan's four volume [history of the Peloponnesian War] as the foremost work of history produced in North America in [the Twentieth Century] is vivid . . . . [T]here is here an achievement that not only honors the criteria of dispassion and of unstinting scruple which mark the best of modern historicism but honors its readers. To read Kagan's 'History of the Peloponnesian War' at the present hour is to be almost unbearably tested."[1]

Donald Kagan's work teaches us many lessons and, most importantly, teaches us to ask many questions—questions that are always relevant.

Of the surrender of the Athenian empire in 421 B.C., he notes that "the Athenians abandoned the war just when circumstances were about to give them great advantages and opportunities . . . . The advocates of peace in 421 allowed their eagerness to achieve it to stand in the way of objective assessments of reality and sound policy."[2]

In the poignant final passages of his monumental history of the Peloponnesian Wars, he writes that "the Athenian experience . . . [s]uggests that in warfare democracies, where everything must be debated in the open and relatively uninformed majorities persuaded, may find it harder to adjust to the necessities of war than other, less open societies. Perhaps that is what Thucydides had in mind when he connected the Athenian defeat with the death of Pericles, who alone among Athenian politicians could persuade the people to fight in a way contrary to their prejudices and experiences."[3]

Such reflections explain why George Steiner observed, that to read Kagan "at the present hour is to be almost unbearably tested."

But if the fall of Athens is a source of melancholy reflection for Kagan, and for us (his students), it is also a reminder of the value and promise of the democratic idea. In his 1991 biography of Pericles of Athens, Kagan reverts to his characteristically affirmative (if not always entirely optimistic) reflections on the fate of democratic government:

> The new and emerging democracies of our time are very fragile, and they all face serious challenges. . . . If the newly free nations see democracy chiefly as a quick route to material well-being and equal distribution of wealth, they will be badly disappointed, and democracy will fail. To succeed, they need a vision of the future that is powerful enough to sustain them through bad times as well as good and to inspire the many difficult sacrifices that will be required of them. They must see that democracy alone of all regimes respects the dignity and autonomy of every individual, and understand that its survival requires that each individual sees his own well-being as inextricably connected to that of the whole community. . . .
>
> They need leaders who understand that individual freedom, self-government, and equality before the law are of the highest value in themselves. And they especially need leaders with the talents to persuade their impatient citizens that these political institutions are the necessary first foundation for a decent regime and a good life for all. [4]

It is a special source of satisfaction to those of us who admire Donald Kagan that his legacy to his country includes two remarkable sons who have chosen to go into "the family business"—the study of war and peace: Robert Kagan, today our leading student of the history of the foreign relations of the United States; and Frederick Kagan, a student of military history at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, among whose many achievements is the coinvention of the idea of the "surge" in Iraq (along with General John Keane), a notable service to his country and to civilization.

Incredibly enough, each of the Kagan *daughters-in-law* is, in her own right, an equally distinguished practitioner of diplomacy and its history: Victoria Nuland (Bob's wife), a career Foreign Service officer and until recently the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, and Dr. Kimberly Kagan (Fred's wife), an historian of Rome and a leading chronicler of the Iraq war. And as Senator Joseph Lieberman reminded me when I expressed awe that this one family should include so many exceptional students of history and diplomacy, Don's wife Myrna has been an inspiring teacher of history to generations of New Haven schoolchildren.

Like no one else, Donald Kagan understands the history of democracy and liberty in the West. He emigrated at the age of two from Lithuania and he grew up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Donald Kagan cannot be fully appreciated, I think, without knowing this about him. For it was in Brooklyn that Don experienced at first hand the joys and the perils of free speech and the necessity of fighting to defend freedom. It was in the Brooklyn of the 1940s and 1950s that Don first embraced a love of democratic empire; it was in Brooklyn that he dared to embrace the empire that is the New York Yankees.

The love and defense of free expression learned in Brooklyn Donald Kagan brought to academic life. For quite apart from his justly-celebrated scholarship, Donald Kagan's contributions to the life of the American academy include a fearless, outspoken and eloquent defense of academic freedom.

While at Cornell in 1969 he observed with appropriate alarm the seizure of university buildings by students carrying guns and rifles. The shameful capitulation of the Cornell administration was a "disillusioning experience" that led to his departure from Ithaca.

Don told the *Yale Alumni Magazine* some years ago that "[w]atching [Cornell] administrators demonstrate all the courage of Neville Chamberlain had a great impact on me, and I became much more conservative."[5] He decamped for Yale, where in times of crisis and hysteria he

has been Yale's indispensable man—the outstanding faculty member who courageously confronts every effort to impose explicit or implicit codes of speech; who resists institutional movements toward Group-Think; and who, when everyone else on campus is either silent, passive, or hostile, unabashedly defends the role of the United States in world affairs.

It is no exaggeration for me to admit that whenever I hear there is a campus convocation on a major world issue where America will surely be denounced and pilloried my response—as at least one Yale president can attest—is to ask, "Will Kagan be there?"

Well, tonight I can answer that question. Kagan is indeed here.

End Notes

1. George Steiner, "Mars," *The New Yorker*, March 11, 1991, at 88, 92.
2. Donald Kagan, *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* 422 (1987).
3. *Id.* at 426.
4. Donald Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and The Birth of Democracy*, 273-274 (1991).
5. Quoted in Bruce Fellman, "Lion in Winter," *Yale Alumni Magazine* (April 2002).

"Always be Freshmen"

by Professor Donald Kagan

I am deeply grateful for this great honor that ACTA has bestowed upon me. I am moved by the merits of the donor, by the high goals and purposes and remarkable achievements of the sponsoring organization and I am honored not least by the chance to follow in the footsteps of the outstanding people who have received this award before me.

I have read the fine talks given by Robert George, Harvey Mansfield and Gertrude Himmelfarb and admired and learned a great deal from each of them. They addressed important philosophical questions and brought much light to them. Tonight I should like to try something a bit different. Yale, like many colleges and universities, provides several opportunities for its educational leaders to address its students. My favorite as Dean of Yale College was to speak to the freshman class at their first assembly of the academic year. My favorite one of these, though not my most notorious, was my first in which I suggested to them some of what they ought to learn in their college years and how they should try to receive these things. I would like you to imagine you are the innocent freshmen in such a class while I address you in a version of the advice I gave to them.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 2012, parents, and friends, I offer you my greeting and my welcome to Yale. To the Class I also offer congratulations for attaining the status of Freshmen. To be a freshman

is a rich, various, and wonderful thing. Freshmen are students in a first-year class, beginners; their essence is that they are fresh. Consider what it means to be fresh: new, not encountered before; novel, different, original; recently made, produced, harvested, not stale, spoiled or withered; not yet used or soiled; clean; bright and clear, not dull or faded; having the glowing, unspoiled appearance of youth; charged with energy, frisky; revivifying, invigorating; fairly strong, brisk. Of course, it also means untried and inexperienced and, in some cases, bold, saucy and impudent but, overall, to be a freshman is a wonderful thing.

Even better is to be a freshman at Yale. I have had the pleasure of seeing both my sons enjoy that experience and can report at first hand the joy and excitement they shared with their classmates. They come with a sense of pride in the achievements that earned them admission and with the fear that their brilliant peers will quickly discover their unworthiness. All Yale freshmen are haunted by a lurking conviction that they are surrounded by outstanding people whose standard they can never match. In almost every case this works as a spur to effort and achievement by which means they can earn their place in that company. Soon their awe diminishes a bit, and they can revel in their new friendships with fellow-students of a caliber they have rarely known. They feel free to reveal their intellectual bent, to exchange ideas with a new openness and depth. They are thrilled by the opportunity to talk freely, seriously and long with so many others who share their interests and abilities. For some months their feet never touch the ground.

They carry these same qualities and the same excitement into the classroom. Those of us who have the good fortune to teach freshmen know the wonders of that experience. Some one once defined matriculation at a university as a confession of ignorance and of a determination to repair that condition. So it is with most Yale freshmen. They are

honest about what they don't know and eager to learn and to discover how to learn. They bring a freshness and openness of mind that make each class an adventure and an education for the teacher.

Unfortunately, after a year, most of them become sophomores. The dictionaries announce that the origin of that word is obscure, but to a Hellenist, and even more to an experienced college teacher, it plainly derives from the Greek words *sophos*, wise, and *moros*, foolish; a sophomore is a wise fool. To be sophomoric, my dictionary and my experience say, is to be immature and overconfident. How do those wonderful youths who come to us as unspoiled freshmen decline to this lower estate? The transformation appears to be a feature of most human natures. A little learning, it has been said, is a dangerous thing. In our eagerness to shake the minds of our students free of their prejudices, to demolish accepted and unexamined opinions, to teach them to question everything, we teachers often forget to remind them that not all opinions are equally foolish, that not all values are equally groundless, that wisdom does not mean the ability to destroy any argument. We teach them the techniques of intellectual demolition, but we don't always warn them of the dangers of playing with explosives, and we don't always indicate the purpose to which those skills should be put. The result often is the union of intelligence with skepticism and the techniques of analysis and argument. Together they produce not wisdom but the essentially sophomoric quality called cleverness.

The first such training of which we know was provided in the fifth century B.C. to rich and noble young men in Athens by teachers called Sophists. Perhaps their most famous pupil was Alcibiades, the ward of the great democratic leader Pericles. Alcibiades was intelligent, good-looking, ambitious, and arrogant, a typical Yalie. He had put in the equivalent of a freshman year among the Sophists and was still in his

teens when he felt ready to challenge his guardian. Here is an abbreviated version of the conversation:

"Tell me Pericles, can you teach me what a law is?..."

"Well Alcibiades there is no difficulty about what you are eager to learn: what is a law? Laws are those things considered and voted by the majority gathered in assembly saying what should be done and what should not."

"Do they think it is right to do good or evil?"

"Good, of course, my boy, not evil."

"But if it is not the majority, but rather, as happens in oligarchies, a minority that meets to write laws saying what should be done, what is that?"

"Whatever the sovereign power in a state enacts governing what should be done is called a law."

"And if a tyrant is the ruler of the state and enacts what the citizens must do, is that a law too?"

"Even what a tyrant enacts as ruler, that also is a law."

"But what are force and lawlessness? Aren't they at work when the stronger compels the weaker to do as he wishes, not by persuasion but by force?"

"Yes. I agree with that."

"So whatever a tyrant compels the citizens to do by enactment, not by persuasion but by force, is lawlessness?"

"I believe so, and I retract my statement that whatever a tyrant enacts without persuasion is a law."

"And whenever a minority passes acts, not by persuading the majority but by using its power to compel them, shall we call that force, or not?"

"Everything, it seems to me, that does not persuade but compels

people to do something, whether it is an enactment or not, is force, not law."

"Well, then. Everything that the ruling majority enacts over those who have property, without persuading them, would be force, not law?"

"Alcibiades, at your age we were also clever at this sort of thing. For the puzzles we spent time over and split hairs about were just the same as the ones you seem to think about now."

"Oh Pericles, how I wish I had known you then when you were at the peak of your form in these matters." (Xenophon, Memorabilia 1.2.40-46)

Pericles, of course, had once known the answers, but for years he had been engaged in the serious business of the world, and his eristic skills were too rusty to cope immediately with the sharply-honed abilities of a bright young man fresh from Sophistic training. Given time, he would have conceded the point that all law and every constitution rests ultimately on force, for it is the granting of the monopoly of the use of force to a single authority that makes possible civilized and orderly life, any kind of decent life beyond the primitive world of tooth and claw, where the strongest and most savage rule and destroy the others. He would have gone on to say that not every constitution is equally legitimate and deserves to exercise the monopoly of force, but only those that rest on the freely expressed consent of the citizens, for there is no acceptable evidence that one category of human beings is inherently more capable to govern than any other.

He might have pointed to the argument his friend Protagoras had made in the form of a myth: when the gods created living creatures they gave each species its special quality of speed, strength, or camouflage to protect it against the others and the elements. Human beings alone had no such protection, so for them Prometheus stole fire and technical

skills to permit their survival, but with these alone they could not fight off the beasts, so they came together for mutual defense. Soon, however, lacking the art of politics, they quarreled and could not live together. To prevent their destruction Zeus sent his messenger Hermes to bring them *aidôs* (reverence) and *dikê* (right), the components of political virtue, to make communal life possible. The crafts and skills had been distributed among men in the same way as the powers among the animals, different crafts to different people, but Hermes asked Zeus: "Shall this be the way I should distribute right and reverence, or shall I give them to all?" "To all," said Zeus; "Let all have a share; for cities cannot exist if only a few share in the virtues as in the arts. And also make a law, by my authority, that a man who is not capable of reverence and right shall be killed as a plague to the city." (Plato, Protagoras 322 C-D) The message is that all normal human beings have the qualities needed for political life; from that it follows that all citizens of the community should share in its government, and the opinion of the majority of them should be decisive. Only a government that meets that test, therefore, is legitimate; its monopoly of force is justified, and its laws are morally binding on its citizens.

Further thought and study could have taken the young Alcibiades beyond the sophomoric nihilism of his dialogue with Pericles. In fact, he continued his education beyond the Sophists when he attached himself to the philosopher Socrates. Socrates was not an admirer of the Athenian democracy, and his relentless questioning of its basic beliefs and institutions embarrassed and angered its citizens. They were convinced he was corrupting the young men who followed him about and undermining the beliefs and commitments needed for the survival of the democracy, so they brought him to trial and condemned him to death. While he was in jail awaiting execution his friends offered him the opportunity to escape, but he refused. Among his reasons was

a conception of the law totally at odds with the relativism and nihilism implicit in the questions of the young Alcibiades. He imagined a conversation with the laws of Athens if he should try to escape: "Tell us, Socrates," they say, "what are you doing? Aren't you going to destroy us, the laws, and the whole state, in so far as you can? Do you think that a state can survive and not be overthrown, where the laws have no power but are set aside and trampled by individuals?" Socrates points out the force of this rebuke but then asks, "Shall we reply, 'Yes; but the state has injured us and given an unjust sentence'?" To this he suggests the laws' response:

"Consider, Socrates, ...that you are not doing right in trying to escape. For we have brought you into the world, nurtured and educated you, and given you and every other citizen a share in all the good things we have to give, we also proclaim to any Athenian by the liberty we allow him, that if he does not like us when he has come of age and sees what goes on in the city and us, its laws, he can go where he likes, taking his possessions with him....But we say that whoever has seen how we do justice and govern the state, and still remains, has agreed to do what we command. And whoever disobeys us does wrong in three ways: because he does not obey us who gave him birth, who educated him, and because he has made an agreement that he would obey us; yet he neither obeys us nor convinces us that what we are doing is wrong...."(Plato, Crito 50-52)

Socrates finds the laws' arguments convincing, as we all should, for if a state meets the criteria explicit and implicit in the dialogue, that is, if its citizens are free to question the law, to try to change it by legal means, to convince a court that their actions are justified, and finally, to leave the country freely and without penalty, as they were in Athens and are in our own country, then its citizens have a tacit but clear moral obligation to obey the law, however little they may like it or its

consequences. That was the wisdom Alcibiades might have achieved had he carried his education beyond the acquisition of technique and cleverness toward knowledge and wisdom, toward what may properly be called a liberal education, that is, an education necessary and proper for free people.

Class of 2012, you must do better. You will learn the techniques of analysis and will develop cleverness. You will win praise for your efforts, and you will revel in your newly found powers. From upper classmen, from the world at large, sometimes even from your teachers, you will hear that technique and cleverness are the paths to power and that power is all, that there is nothing beyond it but fraud and self-serving deception. Do not accept that advice to be satisfied with the first step in learning, the capacity to question all that is traditional and see through it. Understand that intelligence and cleverness are not knowledge and that knowledge is not wisdom. But wisdom is the proper end of liberal learning, and the road to it is long and arduous. You must learn the skills that allow you to analyze, that is, to take apart and destroy, what is false or ill-founded, but not to leave all in shambles. Intellectual inquiry is for the purpose of clearing the path to wisdom, but wisdom is the goal. Destruction should be in the service of constructing a truer and sounder edifice. A year from now, alas, you will be sophomores. That is inevitable, but don't spend a long time as sophomores. Pass through that phase as soon as you can, and proceed on your search for wisdom. Along the way refresh yourselves; I mean recover those wonderful qualities you had as freshmen, for the search for wisdom never ends, and it needs those revivifying essences you brought to Yale. Be sophomores briefly, if you must, but never stop being freshmen.

Professor Donald Kagan

An eminent historian of ancient Greek and military history, Dr. Donald Kagan has won dozens of awards, including the 2003 National Humanities Medal, Fulbright scholarship, the National Association of Scholars' Sidney Hook Memorial Award, and several National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships. He was also the 2005 National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecturer. He has written widely on scholarly matters and issues facing higher education and is an outspoken proponent of liberal education, core curricula, and the teaching of Western civilization.

Professor Kagan studied History at Brooklyn College and received his M.A. from Brown University and his Ph.D. from the Ohio State University, both in Classics. Since coming to Yale in 1969, Kagan has been Dean of the College and held several endowed professorships, including the Bass Professorship of History and Classics and Western Civilization, and the Sterling Professorship, a position reserved for Yale's very best scholars. As Master of Timothy Dwight College, he lived in a residential college with undergraduates and, famously, participated in their intramural football game (defensive tackle). He briefly served as Yale University's Director of Athletics, and his expertise on the Yale Bulldogs is largely unpublished.

Some of Professor Kagan's well-known books include: *The Peloponnesian War* (2003), *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (1991) and *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (1995).

The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

ACTA is most pleased to be presenting the fourth annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. The awarding of this prize, made on the recommendation of a distinguished selection committee, advances ACTA's long-term initiative to promote and encourage a strong liberal arts education.

The Merrill Award offers a unique tribute to those dedicated to the transmission of the great ideas and central values of our civilization and is presented to inspire others and provide public acknowledgment of the value of their endeavors. Past recipients of the award are Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and founder and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University (2005); Harvey C. Mansfield, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University (2006); and Gertrude Himmelfarb, professor emeritus of history at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (2007).

The prize is named in honor of Philip Merrill, who served as a trustee of Cornell University, the University of Maryland Foundation, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, the Aspen Institute and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Mr. Merrill was also a founding member of ACTA's National Council.

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