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Activist Dean at Yale Brings Controversy to His Post With Strong Views on Study of Western Civilization

Ally of traditionalist scholars gains national prominence and provokes disagreements on his campus

By CAROLYN J. MOONEY

Donald Kagan is hurrying across the campus of Yale University. Mr. Kagan, the dean of Yale College, is on his way to an appointment, but he stops just long enough to draw a visitor's attention to the contrasting architecture—beaux-arts, neo-gothic, classical, late modernistic. He nods at a small white building (classical) that houses the president's office. "That's very Yale," he says. "The administration building is very small, very insignificant."

The same could hardly be said about Mr. Kagan, whose outspoken views in favor of political correctness have made him one of the more controversial scholars to serve as dean of Yale's undergraduate college.

On a campus where civility is as much a part of the tradition as the elegant residential colleges (neo-gothic) with their quiet courtyards, Mr. Kagan has eschewed the historical role of dean as consensus builder. Although the athletic-looking, silver-haired dean is by many accounts personable, straightforward, and even charming, consensus is not his goal. He'd rather be a provocateur. An activist dean.

"My role is to raise important educational questions," Mr. Kagan says. "I don't think it's appropriate for a dean to be forced to be some kind of silent bureaucrat. My idea of what a dean is has to include the capacity to speak the truth about issues that are controversial, and will inevitably lead to disagreements with the faculty."

Fighting Left-Wing Orthodoxy

To say there are disagreements would be an understatement.

Mr. Kagan, who is also a professor of history and classics and the author of a highly acclaimed four-volume work on the Peloponnesian Wars, has held the job two years now. (He's planning on three more.)

Some professors and critics have complained that Mr. Kagan's views, which he described as controversial and outspoken when he was appointed, have led to disagreements with the faculty.

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But only recently has he emerged as a national figure, an ally of traditionalist scholars who contend that higher education has become dominated by a left-wing orthodoxy.

In the academic year just ending, he gave a much-publicized speech to the freshman class about the need to study Western civilization; published an article that sharply criticized the humanities at Yale; appeared on national television to condemn what he described as a hostile climate for dissenting opinion in academe; defended what critics decried as an ideological nomination to the National Endowment for the Humanities advisory board; and basked in the announcement that Yale had received a 200-million-dollar gift to support a special Western-culture curriculum and endowed 11 faculty chairs (including one for Mr. Kagan, who has a reputation for being an excellent teacher).

All the activity has catapulted the dean to a level of national prominence that he says he never sought, and that some Yale scholars aren't at all happy about. Yale hasn't experienced the nasty battles over how the 200-million-dollar gift from Lee M. Bass, a Yale alumnus and heir to a Texas oil fortune, would be used.

At a recent faculty meeting, several humanities professors—still smarting over the article Mr. Kagan wrote in the winter issue of Academic Questions, a journal published by the National Association of Scholars—asked Mr. Kagan to address faculty concerns about the article. It was based on comments that Mr. Kagan (who is not a member of the N.A.S.) made at the association's meeting last year.

Professors Too Narrowly Educated

In the article, called "Yale University: Testing the Limits," he described the opposition to his appointment from students and scholars who thought he would be hostile to their concerns. He lamented the lack of a common curriculum at Yale, but said he had no intention of trying to introduce one. Not only would the faculty not approve it, he wrote, "it would be far more terrible if the faculty did approve it. Consider what a core constructed by the current faculty would look like, and the consequences that would ensue if they also had the responsibility of teaching it." He added that most were too narrowly educated to do so.

Mr. Kagan, who sits on key faculty-apportionment committees, also wrote that Yale was looking carefully at departmental...
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searches to make sure there was civility. Mr. Kagan was a history enfant early on, but attributes his interests to a deep interest in undergraduate education. He had also served a year-long stint as acting athletics director (he is a deconstructionist and mentor). Without this, he says, "The reason we have this system is that we are more than the sum of our parts."

As for other critics, he says he welcomes the debate. "There's always going to be someone who's dissatisfied," he says. If not to students, to some professors, the most pressing issue may be preserving civility on a campus not accustomed to having the world view its soil as laughable. "This is a matter that, if publicly debated, could really harm the institution," says Vincent Scully, an art historian who is about to retire. While he found parts of Mr. Kagan's article "appalling," he says, "it's important that we not attack each other. We live by collegiality."

In his 22 years at Yale, Mr. Kagan hasn't exactly been unopinions. He criticized Yale's climate for freshmen after William Shockey—a Stanford physicist who argued that blacks were inferior to whites because of genetic differences—was prevented from speaking on the campus in 1974. He later argued that students who had erected anti-Spaniard shanties should be punished.

The 'Loyal Opposition'

That Mr. Kagan was actually chosen for the post is ironic, for his candidacy didn't. He had been chairman of the classics department twice, served on numerous university committees and chaired a deep interest in undergraduate education. He had also served a year-long stint as acting athletics director (he is a deconstructionist and mentor). Without this, he says, "The reason we have this system is that we are more than the sum of our parts."

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