Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 23

Carolyn J. Mooney

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36/1

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu.
Activist Dean at Yale Brings Controversy to His Post With Strong Views on Study of Western Civilization

All 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—brass-arts, neo-gothic, classic, 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 the study of Western civilization and against all that falls under the label 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 some kind of silent bureaucrat. My idea of a dean is 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.)

"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."

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;

Yale's Donald Kagan: "My role is to raise important educational questions. I don't think it's appropriate for a dean to be forced to some kind of silent bureaucrat."

and basked in the announcement that Yale had received a $20-million gift to support a special Western-culture curriculum and endow 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 $20-million 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-appointment committees, also wrote that Yale was looking carefully at departmental

Continued on Following Page
Activist Dean at Yale Brings Controversy to His Post and Campus

Continued From Preceding Page

searches to make sure there was no discrimination against conserva-
tive scholars. Describing Yale as "top-heavy in the humanities," he
advised like-minded academics to form an alliance with scientists,
who, he said, believed in truth and reason. "On the other hand," he
wrote, "the woods are full of hu-
manists who doubt these things.

Not unexpectedly, humanists at
Yale were fuming, and have been
coming out of the woods to defend
themselves ever since. (One might
have assumed that copies of such an
article would have been circu-
lating in faculty mailboxes within
days of its publication, but the aca-
demic pace being what it is, it took
several months.)

"Now there are some very angry
people around here," says Michael
Holquist, a comparative-literature
professor who directs the Soviet
and East European Studies Center.    "Everybody who's read that
article is angry."  "Angry enough to
take up the cause and hold it up as
evidence of what a bad school we
have here," he adds.

Kagan later apologized for
some statements that, he said, had been seen as more far-reaching
than he had intended.

Unappreciated Critics

But some critics weren't ap-
preciated. They say they are es-
pecially concerned that Mr. Kagan's
seeming lack of interest in history
scholarship may spill over to de-
cisions about the university's aca-
demic priorities. Yale, like other
private universities, is anticipating a
future budget crunch, is currently
assessing its academic programs to
determine its future priorities. It
may decide to consolidate or even
eliminate some programs.

Says Margaret Homans, an En-
glish professor active in the wom-
EN's-studies program: "I used
to think that toughness and benign
decision making, but I view him as
someone who is opposed to most of
my academic aims."

Some critics also suggest that
ideology may have played a role in
several recent tenure or appoint-
ment decisions—particularly one
involving a film-studies professor
who was unanimously recom-

Kagan told The New York Times last
week that he would consider a run for
decades—"failure to serve the
artistic purposes of the theater"
nobody was expected to
time. When he took the job, he
argued that students
against apartheid shanties
ought to be burned.

The 'Loyal Opposition'

That Mr. Kagan was actually
chosen for the job is something
some people found surprising.
Mr. Kagan is part of a com-
mittee on which Mr. Kagan sits.

Kagan said he charges are totally
unfounded, and adds: "The
reason we have this system is that
school academic aims."