

## THE JEFFERSON LECTURE

On May 12, 2005, classicist Donald Kagan delivered the thirty-fourth annual Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Washington Convention Center in the District of Columbia. In his lecture, “In Defense of History,” Kagan argued that the ancient Greeks and their search for human truth are at the foundation of the humanities and our culture. He said, “they are at the root of modern civilization, so like us in so many ways and so different in others; they offer a perspective removed from the prejudices of time and place that threaten to distort our understanding and yet are continually relevant and illuminating.”

Kagan contended that history, rather than poetry or philosophy, is especially adept to further the goals of the humanities. Beginning with Herodotus and Thucydides, he defined “the missions for the historian: to examine important events of the past with painstaking care and the greatest possible objectivity, to seek reasoned explanation for them...to use them to establish such uniformities as may exist in human events, and then to apply the resulting understanding to improve the judgment and wisdom of people who must deal with similar problems in the future.”

Thucydides, for Kagan, “stood at a position on the road from literature to philosophy. Like the poet he was free to select his topic, to define its boundaries...however, the historian may not invent characters or events or chronology but must report with the greatest possible accuracy.” Kagan urged historians to look at different angles of a situation to be as accurate as possible.

Admitting his personal bias toward the subject, Kagan called on historians to resist the modern and post-modern influences of politics and prejudice. “History, it seems to me, is the most useful key we have to open the mysteries of the human predicament,” said Kagan. “Is it too much to hope that one day we may see Clío ascend her throne again and resume her noble business?”

It was during his undergraduate years at Brooklyn College that Kagan discovered the Greeks. He earned his master’s degree from Brown University and his doctorate in history from Ohio State University. Kagan taught at Pennsylvania State University and Cornell University before moving to Yale University in 1969. For the last thirty-seven years Kagan has taught classics at Yale and

also served as dean of Yale College, as acting director of athletics, and as “little short of a one-man university.” From 1988 to 1993, Kagan was a member on the National Humanities Council, and in 2002, President George W. Bush awarded him the National Humanities Medal.

In almost forty years, Kagan has published more than fifty books and articles on a multitude of subjects—political theory, education, war, terrorism, baseball, and ancient history. However, it is his four-volume history of the Peloponnesian War for which he is best known. Published between 1969 and 1987, *The Peloponnesian War* became the definitive work on the subject. Kagan drew mostly from Thucydides’ original history, but disagreed with him on several points—most importantly, the inevitability of the war. He writes, “The Peloponnesian War was not caused by impersonal forces...It was caused by men who made bad decisions in difficult circumstances.” He has also written *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (1991), *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (1995), *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* (2000, with Frederick W. Kagan), and articles for the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Public Interest*.

Kagan lives with his wife Myrna in Hamden, Connecticut. The Jefferson Lecture is the highest honor the federal government bestows for achievement in the humanities. It was established in 1972 and carries a \$10,000 stipend.