

Kagan, Donald. *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

James Mellon

Volume 16, numéro 1, spring 1996

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs16_01br09

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Mellon, J. (1996). Compte rendu de [Kagan, Donald. *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 16(1), 183–185.

Kagan, Donald. *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

In his impressive work, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, Donald Kagan adopts an historian's approach to issues that have long plagued humankind how do wars come about, and how can they be prevented. Rather than looking at competing theories of war and peace, he chooses to examine specific actual cases in which war either broke out or was prevented. The cases selected are the Peloponnesian War, the Second Punic War, the First and Second World Wars, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kagan elaborates on the notion of the causes of war outlined by Thucydides, and later used by Thomas Hobbes. This notion is crucial to Kagan's discussion. Conventionally writers on war, Kagan observes, focus on decisions to resort to war as following from some calculation of material self-interest; the limitations, from an explanatory viewpoint, are obvious increasingly war seems irrational but wars continue to take place. Thucydides, Kagan notes, saw war as emerging from not only the pursuit of interest but from considerations of honor and out of fear and insecurity. Kagan also departs from convention by approaching the question not so much as "what happened to disrupt some natural tendency toward peace?" but as "how can the conditions necessary for the preservation of peace be constructed as an objective of foreign and defence policy?."

Kagan is, in some sense, very Hobbesian. He harbors few illusions about either human nature or alleged natural tendencies in international politics toward peace. Many will find his account dark and pessimistic. In terms familiar to theorists of international politics, his account is unremittingly realist. States facing threats must, if war is to be averted, Kagan warns, be prepared either to deter with a credible and adequate show of force, or to resolve differences and ameliorate grievances through making concessions from a position of strength. What must be avoided, he insists, is either attempts to deter with inadequate or purely nominal force, or attempts to resolve differences through making concessions from a position of weakness; either will, he cautions, be likely to be counterproductive, encouraging, rather than deterring, potential aggression.

Kagan expresses concern that liberal democratic states with capitalist economies may neglect military preparedness as a consequence of an inclination in such societies toward support for the pursuit of peaceful relations, and of a recognition of the economic benefits of trade. Liberal democratic societies must, Kagan warns, resist temptations toward the appeasement of aggressors. He challenges revisionist accounts of the origin of World War I that raised doubts about the responsibility of decision makers in the German government for the outbreak of war, and, in his view, laid the groundwork for a sympathy for German grievances in the 1920s and 1930s that led to the misguided effort to appease the Hitler regime. He is strongly critical of Neville Chamberlain for, in Kagan's view, first denying sufficient resources to the maintenance of military preparedness on the grounds that he saw no imminent threat, and then pursuing appeasement when a threat arose on the grounds that Britain was militarily unprepared to challenge potential aggressors. He also expresses reservations about the high marks conventionally given President Kennedy for his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, suggesting that Kennedy's concern with avoiding the possibility of conflict through Soviet miscalculation

based on a misreading of American intentions led him to adopt a softer position than Kagan sees as having been appropriate. Kagan's reading of events leads him to speculate that the Kennedy Administration was prepared to remove missiles from Turkey in return for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, provided that it could be made to appear like the Soviets were simply withdrawing the missiles in return for an American commitment not to invade Cuba. Given the actual strategic balance at the time, Kennedy could and should, Kagan suggests, have taken a tougher stand. Kagan argues that Kennedy's first approving the Bay of Pigs action and then not reinforcing it or making sure it succeeded, and subsequently his performance at the Vienna Summit gave the Soviets a dangerous impression of weakness and irresolution that, in part, precipitated the Soviet decision to position missiles on Cuba. Not all, of course, will accept Kagan's interpretations of these events.

Whether or not one shares his interpretations of historical events, one cannot but be impressed by the breadth of the erudition. He makes a strong case for the need to maintain an adequate level of military preparedness. In practical terms, two questions remain what level of resources is genuinely required for defence, and how can this be balanced against other pressing priorities within society. For any civilized society, peace is always the objective. Kagan believes that military preparedness is the most effective way to maintain peace. In fact, he sees it as essential if any effort at conciliation is to inspire peace, rather than to encourage aggression. There is something to be said for this view. How far, however, it can be taken without either breeding fear and insecurity in other states, or jeopardizing other needs in society remains an urgent issue for dialogue and debate. Kagan's book is recommended reading, and is certain to provoke considerable thought and discussion.

James Mellon

Halifax, N.S.