

George McT. Kahin

January 25, 1918 — January 29, 2000

George McTurnan Kahin, Aaron L. Binenkorb Professor of International Studies, Emeritus, died at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester on January 29, 2000, a few days after his 82nd birthday. More than any single other scholar, he helped create the new “field” of Southeast Asian Studies, and built Cornell University’s Southeast Asia Program into the preeminent institution of its kind, not merely in the United States, but in the international arena. He was also the most consistent, outspoken, and scholarly critic of American policy in Asia over the whole period of the Cold War.

George was born in Baltimore on January 25, 1918, but grew up in Seattle. He graduated from Harvard University in 1940 with a major in history. When, in the wake of Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans on the West Coast were interned in an atmosphere of racist hysteria, many unscrupulous “Caucasian” Americans took the opportunity to refuse to repay their debts to these innocent fellow-citizens. Characteristically, George joined the American Friends in the thankless task of collecting these debts for the internees. Then, and later, he did not want to be ashamed of his country, which he hoped would live up to its highest ideals. From 1942-45, he served with the U.S. Army, and was trained to be parachuted behind enemy lines in the Japanese-occupied Netherlands Indies. He was sent to Europe instead, but his engagement with Asia had begun.

After obtaining an M.A. degree at Stanford University in 1946, he moved to The Johns Hopkins University to prepare himself for Doctoral fieldwork on the nationalist revolution in Indonesia against returning Dutch colonial rule. He arrived in mid-1948, and quickly aroused the hostility of the Dutch by his candid sympathy for the independence movement, and his warm relations with the movement’s leaders. On his return to America, he worked hard with important members of the Congress to shift Washington’s support from its NATO ally, The Netherlands, to anti-colonial Indonesia. In 1951, he completed his dissertation, which was immediately published as *Nationalism and Revolution*, and remains a classic half a century later. In 1951, he joined Cornell’s Department of Government where he taught for 37 years until his retirement in 1988.

George’s strong advocacy of Indonesia, and of a general change in American Asian policy in a more progressive direction won him powerful enemies in McCarthy’s Washington, and for some years he was deprived of his passport. But he found a principled supporter in Cornell President Deane Malott, and enlightened backers at the

Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, for building, together with the late Professor Lauriston Sharp, an historically new Southeast Asia Program. Their success was such that students came from all over the world to study in the Program, and many of these went back home eventually to play important roles as scholars, civil servants, administrators, and public intellectuals. The “Cornell model” was soon widely imitated at other universities in the United States and overseas. In 1954, George also founded the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project which he directed for thirty-four years, and which published foundational work on contemporary Indonesia by both Indonesian and non-Indonesian scholars.

George’s abiding concern was to make Americans more aware of and more sympathetic to the newly independent peoples of Asia. Accordingly, working with colleagues and his own advanced students, he produced sophisticated textbooks on the governments and politics of the region, which became the standard works for undergraduate and graduate students all over the country.

Long a critic of Cold War policies backing, openly and clandestinely, rightwing military dictatorships in Asia, he was among the first leading American scholars to oppose the Vietnam War. At the famous national teach-in of May 1965, he, along with Professor Mary Wright of Yale University, and Professor Hans Morgenthau of the University of Chicago, represented the opposition to the war with great effectiveness. In 1967, he published, in collaboration with John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, the first scholarly critique of American policy. Almost twenty years later, he published the magisterial, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*, which was based on thousands of declassified documents as well as countless interviews with participants in the War from every political group. His teaching paralleled his scholarship. Generations of Cornellians remember fondly his great course on America in Asia. Among them must be Richard Rusk, son of Lyndon Johnson’s Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, whom George treated with the greatest courtesy even as he criticized the father’s policies. For this course above all, George was eventually honored with a coveted Clark Teaching Award. Yet, unlike many scholars with strong political convictions, George never imposed his views on his graduate students, who included 1960s radicals, as well as junior government officials from the State Department and the Department of Defense. Provided they worked hard, and maintained strict scholarly standards of research, they were encouraged to write as they wished. During the Cornell crisis of 1969, he spoke out strongly for academic freedom, especially for those whose pro-war views he detested. He was endlessly supportive of his students, especially of their initiatives. The internationally respected journal, *Indonesia*, now in its 34th year of publication, though initiated by graduate students, would never have gotten off the ground without George’s disinterested support.

Eventually, many honors came George's way. He was elected president of the Association of Asian Studies (1973-74), was made an Honorary Fellow of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. But he wore these honors with characteristic modesty. There was nothing he disliked more than arrogance, and it was natural that one of his heroes was Senator William Fulbright, author of the compelling book, *The Arrogance of Power*.

It was a matter of abiding sadness to him that after 1965 the Indonesia he loved fell into the hands of a brutal military dictatorship, which lasted until 1998. For some years, he was blacklisted by this regime and barred from entry to the country. Yet the abiding affection Indonesians felt for him as their champion during the struggle for independence forced even this regime to award him a medal for his historic role in building ties between Americans and Indonesians. George was initially reluctant to accept the medal, but in the interests of his students from both countries, and with hopes for the longer term, he eventually changed his mind. George's countless admirers and friends are all happy that he lived long enough to see the dictator fall, and democracy returned to the country where his concern with Asia had begun.

In 1992, four years after his retirement, Cornell University inaugurated the George McT. Kahin Center for Advanced Research on Southeast Asia, situated at 640 Stewart Avenue, in what was once the mansion of Ithaca's prominent Treman family. George's wry words on the occasion will be fondly remembered by all that attended the event. He noted that according to Parkinson's Law, the grander the building, the less serious the work done inside it. He urged all the students to make sure that in this instance at least Parkinson be proven wrong. Retirement did not slow George down too much. At the age of 77, in collaboration with Audrey Kahin, his wife of (then) 28 years, he published *Subversion as Foreign Policy*, a trenchant analysis of the CIA's clandestine role in the 1958-61 rebellion against the central government in Indonesia.

That George lived so long and so productively, in spite of illnesses that would have crippled most of us, must be attributed not only to his own spiritual vigor, but to the devoted care and intellectual companionship of Audrey, a leading historian of Indonesia in her own right. To her above all, as well as to Brian and Sharon, his children from his first marriage, all of us here at Cornell who were among George's countless friends and students, express our deepest sympathy. They have lost a husband and a father who was a gentleman in the true sense, but who was also in the wider world a great man. We shall not see his like again.

Benedict Anderson, Walter LaFeber, Peter Katzenstein