

# A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

Revisiting America's Greatest 20th Century Diplomat in the 21st Century

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# INTRODUCTION: READING KENNAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**G**eorge F. Kennan has achieved enduring distinction as an American diplomat, interpreter of international affairs, and occasional prophet. Inside government, he enjoyed remarkable influence, though his policy proposals had consequences he sometimes did not intend, and which he even opposed. Outside of government, Kennan earned the stature of an accomplished scholar, educating and persuading wide audiences through his books and his lectures. More than half a century since the peak period of his government service, and more than a decade since his passing in 2005, Kennan's legacy continues to resonate.

Kennan was a point of reference in the debates about Russia that began in 2014, when some diagnosed the return of a Cold War and when many wondered openly about how best to engage Moscow, looking back to the elaborate diplomatic maneuvers that defined the Cold War as much as outright confrontation ever had. Never purely a hawk or a dove, Kennan spoke to the imperatives of confrontation and engagement. His was the art of combination, even of contradiction. He could loathe the Soviet government while loving the Russian people, and he served the U.S. government while harboring serious reservations about democracy and the American people.<sup>1</sup>

A young diplomat in the 1930s, Kennan eschewed appeasement. A careful student of the First World War, he disdained brinkmanship and the severing of military from diplomatic action. The author of

containment, he was famously a critic of the Vietnam War. Kennan matters today not for any doctrine or static body of ideas but for the variety, depth, and the complexity of his formidable legacy.

## THE LONG CAREER

Born in 1904, Kennan's working life ran from the 1920s into the 21st century. He joined the State Department as a Foreign Service officer, which led him to study Russia and the Soviet Union. For this purpose, he was sent to Germany, where his first direct Russian contacts were with White émigrés, and where he imbibed language, literature, and history in the University of Berlin's Oriental Institute. In 1931, he joined the U.S. legation in Riga, Latvia, then an outpost for regional diplomacy and for watching the Soviet Union. When diplomatic relations were reestablished, he helped set up the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, and was the author in the mid-1940s of two seminal texts, "The Long Telegram" and the X article.

At the State Department, Secretary George Marshall tasked him with creating the Office of Policy Planning, which Kennan did in 1947. Only he could have been its first director. At the Office of Policy Planning, Kennan helped to conceptualize the Marshall Plan and to articulate an American strategy for the Cold War. Kennan would periodically return to the diplomatic life, serving as the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union (1951–52) and to Yugoslavia (1961–63); but from 1950 on, his intellect belonged to the public sphere, which Kennan sought to educate.

He remained a bold, prolific voice for as long as he was alive, offering up his critiques of NATO enlargement and of German unification in the 1990s and of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the early 21st century. Posthumously published diaries revealed something of the private Kennan. In all of his writings a distinctive voice is audible: historically informed, erudite, literary, wistful, critical, pessimistic, analytical, lyrical, acerbic, constructive, and challenging, simultane-



ously committed to American stewardship in international affairs and skeptical that the United States had the wherewithal, the patience, and the virtue to be a good steward. Kennan did not think or argue in straight lines.

Kennan's best-known contributions to American foreign policy are in the government work he did from 1946 to 1950. He was perfectly prepared to guide the early Cold War policy debate. His command of the Russian language, of Russian culture and history, coupled with an understanding of Soviet high politics gained from living in Moscow, were precious commodities in pre-1946 Washington. After 1946, these skills made Kennan invaluable. He became a celebrity of sorts when the poorly hidden secret of his being Mr. X was revealed.

He had a gift for projecting ideas out from Washington and into the bloodstream of national debate and discussion. In the late 1940s, Kennan's temperament contributed to his prowess. He loved defying conventional wisdom. He had intellectual élan and excelled at the grand sweep of a big idea, the novelty of which he could temper with historical example and analogy. His tone was serious and worried when seriousness and worry were prized, in the anxious years between the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War. Kennan was also quick-witted and self-aware, a superb public speaker, and a superlative writer: he shrewdly anticipated his reading audience and took it by the hand to unexpected conclusions. A dramatist rather than a simplifier, Kennan's writing was neither bureaucratic nor journalistic. Instead, it was analytical and prescriptive. He interpreted the world while proposing ways of changing it.

Kennan did not exactly make policy or even plan policy, despite the mark he left on the Office of Policy Planning. His ideas tended to crystallize into archetypes, which then had lives of their own. The most obvious example is containment, a word that will forever be attached to Kennan's name. Kennan understood containment as the opposite of passivity, as an active set of policies that would hem in

the Soviet Union, build up the democratic reserves of the United States and Western Europe, and hasten or at least capitalize on the Soviet Union's eventual decline. Kennan pegged containment to the inherent (long-term) weakness of totalitarian governance. He thought the Soviets were exploiting an ideology unpalatable to many Russians and out of sync with Russian culture. In Kennan's view, containment devolved into a global strategy of confronting communism by military and covert means.

Kennan's response was to differ with a strategic posture that many took to be his signature creation and to differ vigorously. Kennan also pursued the origins of the misunderstanding in his historical research, decrying a legalistic-moralistic impulse in American foreign policy, of which Woodrow Wilson was the patron saint.<sup>2</sup> Time and again, Kennan asked whether the democratic energies of American politics were an obstacle to careful foreign-policy formation. A democratic polity could understand and get behind a crusade, and it gladly turned the Cold War into one—in the name of containment. Thus was containment corrupted, to the detriment of the American national interest and of U.S.-Soviet relations. The policy's corruption had historical pedigree, and so a policy problem was transformed, in Kennan's hands, into a scholar's conundrum.



*George F. Kennan and members of the Policy Planning Staff, June 1948*

The regretful architect of containment, and the misunderstood philosopher of American diplomacy, left no school and no disciples. From the beginning, he felt himself to be an outsider, as a Midwesterner from a family of relatively modest means, arriving at Princeton to begin his higher education. That pedigree and his diplomatic career launched him to insider status for a while, but there was something about government work and something about elite circles in Washington that did not suit Kennan. Or perhaps it was he who was not suited to government work and to the proverbial Georgetown dinner party.

Whether an insider or an outsider, his writing quickly resonated in government. “The trouble with George,” Dean Acheson once said, “is that he writes so beautifully, he can convince you of anything.”<sup>3</sup> Yet persuasive as he was on the page, Kennan was not an easy colleague. He was too tortured, too intimidating, too much the natural dissenter—and never one beguiled by creating bureaucratic consensus behind a cherished idea. To Kennan’s credit, he did not skew his public writings to mythologize his own government career, to rewrite the record, or to avoid responsibility for mishaps. In fact, he focused in on the mishaps, speculating about how often he and his country fell short of the mark.<sup>4</sup> His melancholy was both stylized and sincere, his ambition and even his success seemingly a burden to him.

He had to take his ambition away from the capital city, to the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies and to his house in the Pennsylvania countryside. Kennan hardly knew many of the illustrious foreign-policy personages who came to Washington after he had removed himself to Princeton. He was not a mentor to Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski or Richard Holbrooke.<sup>5</sup> When the Cold War ended, it was the misapplication of containment that continued to preoccupy Kennan, the stubborn crusading impulse, and not some effort to gather his suggestions from the 1940s into a lasting foundation for a post-Cold War American foreign policy.



Kennan's later-in-life isolation from Washington mirrored his lifelong alienation from modern America. In his autobiography *Vixi*, the historian and Sovietologist Richard Pipes offers a memorable, if unflattering, portrait of Kennan. This is Kennan the reactionary, someone who "fancied himself an eighteenth-century aristocrat... [and who] believed that the eighteenth century was the apex of Western civilization, a civilization that collapsed under the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution... He felt disgusted with the United States as it was and resented the influence on it of immigrants."<sup>6</sup>

A paradox shadows Kennan's diplomatic and scholarly career. There was his razor-sharp assessment of the Soviet system, Kennan's intuitive feel for the antipathy many Russians had for Soviet-style modernization and his belief that Soviet rule would give way to something more culturally traditional. Then there was his incomprehension of the country into which he himself had been born, his pining for the lost pre-industrial Protestant village.

By disposition, Kennan was the least American of modern American diplomats. The many 20th century revolutions in technology, in the United States and elsewhere, may have disgusted Kennan, but they did not much interest him, and yet he was an authority on international affairs precisely because he had a knack for peering into the future. In this Kennan resembled the historian Henry Adams, grandson of John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of John Adams, whose elitist rejection of the modern world and of modern America did not stop him from making interesting and at times accurate predictions about the future. Like Kennan, Adams got much wrong. A few big things, such as the destructive potential of modern warfare, Adams got all too right (well before World War I). Both Adams and Kennan gladly wore the mantle of the anti-modern prophet.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it was Kennan's reservations about modern times that prevented him from celebrating the end of the Cold War. He did not see the collapse of the Soviet Union as a resolution to Europe's age-old

security dilemmas. Nor did he see the arrival of a unified Germany in NATO as a spectacular breakthrough for American foreign policy, as did much of the American foreign-policy establishment in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Kennan emphasized two problems with the international scene after the Cold War. One was that Germany might come to dominate Europe—not militarily but economically and politically. Kennan even proposed developing the once divided city of Berlin into a European capital on European rather than German soil. A salutary consequence of doing so, when Kennan floated this idea in 1998, was that it would prevent Germany from fully unifying and therefore from upsetting the balance of power within Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Kennan's other worry concerned Russia and the security architecture that the Clinton administration had devised for Europe, namely the enlargement of NATO to include former Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe. Kennan's strongest statements about NATO enlargement appeared in a 1998 *New York Times* column, written by Thomas Friedman. "I think it is the beginning of a new cold war," Kennan declared. "'I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves. We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way.'"<sup>10</sup>

Referring to the Senate debate on NATO enlargement, Kennan declared that he "was particularly bothered by the references to Russia as a country dying to attack Western Europe. Don't people understand? Our differences in the cold war were with the Soviet Communist regime. And now we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime." To this Kennan added that the enlargement of NATO "shows so little understanding of Russian history and Soviet

history. Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [advocates of NATO enlargement] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are—but this is just wrong.”<sup>11</sup>

The father of containment unhappily likened NATO enlargement to the restoration of containment—that is, to containment misconstrued. He deemed American policy toward post-communist Russia a catalogue of errors. In a 1999 interview, he admonished Washington for heedlessly leaving Crimea attached to Ukraine: “in the case of Ukraine, in particular, there was the thoughtless tossing into that country, upon the collapse of Russian communism, of the totally un-Ukrainian Crimean peninsula, together with one of the three greatest Russian bases [Sevastopol]. For that we, too, must accept a share of the blame.”<sup>12</sup>

Worst of all, Kennan worried, the State Department and White House had signed on to the cause of promoting democracy within Russia. Private citizens might justifiably choose to do this. Non-governmental organizations might boldly wave the banner of democracy in Moscow, but the form of government in Russia was for Russians to determine. “I would urge far greater detachment, on our government’s part, from their [Russians’] domestic affairs. I would like to see our government gradually withdraw from its public advocacy of democratic and human rights.”<sup>13</sup>

Kennan applied the same reasoning to U.S.-China relations that he did to U.S.-Russian relations. Democracy promotion from abroad could not be done and attempting it would poison the healthy course of diplomatic interaction. With consistency and impressive vigor for a nonagenarian, he decried the legalistic-moralistic strain, the crusading Wilsonian impulse driving 21st-century American foreign policy and inverting the national interest. By Kennan’s lights, a cautiously plotted foreign policy grounded in self-awareness and self-criticism was as elusive as ever, even or especially after the end of the Cold War.

Kennan lived long enough to see the September 11 attacks. From his perspective, the Iraq War demonstrated how little he had taught the makers of American foreign policy and how thin his influence on the general public had ultimately proven to be. For Kennan, this was a far-away war activated by the crusading impulse, the resurrected dream of making the world safe for democracy, confused in the arguments Washington made to the American public and even more confused about the cultures and civilizations into which American soldiers were being sent.<sup>14</sup>

History, Kennan believed, was the necessary guide, the natural companion in the calculation of policy, the roadmap to the territory. History could not guarantee outcomes, but it could serve as a measurement of what was likely to happen. If there was a historical paradigm into which the Iraq War fit, it was the dismal precedent of the colonial war. Powerful as the American military would undoubtedly prove, Washington's capacity to establish new and viable political structures was, nonetheless, miniscule at best. In the Middle East, Americans would be perceived as invaders and occupiers, as had been the case in Vietnam. Predictably, Kennan was not shy about assaulting the conventional wisdom in Washington circa 2002. This would be the last of the great American ventures he found it his duty to oppose.

## LEGACY

Kennan's legacy cannot be separated from his expertise on Russia and his lifelong engagement in U.S.-Russian relations. Nor should it be. But immersed as Kennan was in Russian questions, his legacy also contributes to our understanding of three much broader avenues of government work and of national life: the craft of diplomacy; the relationship between domestic and foreign affairs; and the formulation of effective foreign policy.

For Kennan at mid-century, Russia was patently Soviet, previously non-Soviet, and potentially post-Soviet. The Soviet Union inherited

imperial Russia's foreign policy in all the ways that history, geography, ethnography, and culture dictate. It was an immense Northern territory with uncertain, difficult to defend borders. Kennan did not consider either imperial Russia or the Soviet Union to be the West, and this distinction was a key to Soviet foreign policy, which Stalin based on fear, paranoia, and antipathy toward the West. Marxism-Leninism was merely the vocabulary of his paranoia and antipathy. Yet Russia's non-Western civilization was extraordinary, in Kennan's view, and not to be faulted for being non-Western. Even the despotic Soviet Union could not erase the treasures of Russian language, literature, and art, artifacts of a spiritual intensity and creativity that Kennan considered both beautiful and indigenously Russian.<sup>15</sup>

The West's challenge, in dealing with Russia, was to contend with Soviet hostility, to acknowledge the sources of this hostility—the sources of Soviet conduct, as it were—and to know them without illusion and naiveté. The Soviet threat had to be faced squarely, but an intelligent threat assessment would not confuse the government's malice with the popular will, and it would be alive to Russia's distinctive, complicated, and beguiling history and culture. Russia *and* the West, these were Kennan's preferred categories, and he often paired them in his writing. The goal was a relationship that worked rather than a civilizational and strategic convergence that would never happen.<sup>16</sup>

Kennan's strategic thinking flowed from his image of Russia within the Soviet Union and from the fact that Marxism-Leninism "does not represent the natural outlook of Russian people," as he put it in "The Long Telegram." Because Stalin was a monstrous tyrant and because his rule relied on violence and deceit, conventional diplomacy was impossible. No treaty could be signed that would resolve the differences between the United States and Stalin's or Khrushchev's Soviet Union. Containment was therefore the system of pressure that Soviet motives and conduct demanded. Ideally, the pressure would hinder the Soviet Union from taking the initiative in Europe

and elsewhere. It would command a chastened Moscow's respect, and the ensuing stalemate would be the cause of the Soviet Union's internal stagnation.

Because the Soviet government under Stalin and later Soviet leaders was illegitimate, because it had been coercively imposed and perpetuated, because it rested on an ideology that was fanatically embraced as well as cynically betrayed by the Soviet leadership, because the Soviet ideology militated against Russian culture at so many points, containment could be shorthand for patience and in this sense the opposite of waging war. A militant West, reminiscent of Napoleon's France or Hitler's Germany, would only serve the interests of the existing Soviet leadership. If containment could be a tool of moderation and restraint, it would subtly underscore the tension between the Russian people and the Soviet government. Containment could discipline the regime-strengthening contest between the Soviet Union and the West. In his own mind, Kennan's containment was as much a pro-Russian as it was an anti-Soviet strategy.

The Soviet-Russian differences Kennan embedded in containment were the differences only a certain kind of diplomat could see. Since diplomacy entails relations among states, a preoccupation with governments is the diplomat's occupational hazard; but the aspiring diplomat needs to go beyond states and governments. To do this, a diplomat should cultivate extensive area expertise, which begins with an excellent command of foreign languages. Foreign languages open access to literature and to historical debate and discussions. The more business that is conducted in translation the more that will be missed or falsely interpreted.

In a lecture reviewing American diplomacy of the 1890s, Kennan lamented "the overestimation of economics, of trade, as factors in human events and the corresponding underestimation of psychological and political reactions—of such things as fear, ambition, insecurity, jealousy, and perhaps even boredom—as prime movers



of events.”<sup>17</sup> To get at these psychological and political reactions takes time and hard work; it demands a literary imagination. The work must be done by a cadre of highly-trained diplomats impervious to the fads and slogans of democratic politics, which is to say sheltered from public opinion and even from democratically elected politicians who lack the patience and the wisdom to absorb what the imaginative, erudite, and cosmopolitan diplomat knows. Real area expertise takes decades to acquire, and communicating its insights, once acquired, is an uphill battle, whether because of democratic whim or bureaucratic inertia. Democracy is not the natural ally of well-wrought diplomacy, though Kennan’s concern was less about democracy per se than about the complacency and smugness of 20th-century American democracy.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Kennan was proudly unsentimental about democracy. He tended to regard it as a form of government or as an empty form that had to be filled in by leadership, by governance, and by culture. Democracy mirrors the relative strengths and weaknesses of the society in which it is found. Here Kennan’s attitudes traced a chronological arc that was not the arc of progress. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the United States was ascendant. It withstood the cataclysms of the 1930s, emerging in the 1940s and 1950s a stronger, better country. Franklin Roosevelt embodied much that was best in the American spirit—at home and abroad.<sup>19</sup> Wartime sacrifices helped Roosevelt to win the war. In the postwar years, as the country changed around him, Kennan’s revulsion mounted. The country had lost its way in the Vietnam War, he thought, letting its culture dissipate into hedonism, arid secularism, and commercial vulgarity. In a 1999 interview Kennan characterized the United States as “the world’s intellectual and spiritual dunce,” a phrase evocative of the anti-modern mood that was second nature to Kennan.<sup>20</sup> Democracy was not the reason for this moral and intellectual decline, but American democracy was only as worthwhile as the country behind it. Kennan was not cheered by what he saw.

More than cultural pessimism was at stake in Kennan's gloomy assessment of postwar American politics and culture. Kennan was arguing *for* the rigorous incorporation of domestic politics in foreign policy. This had been a premise of the Marshall Plan, which he had had a hand in developing. By minimizing the domestic turmoil and despair that was rampant after the war, financial, food, and industrial aid harmonized with the stationing of American troops in Western Europe. The Marshall Plan was more than an anti-communist tactic. It was a nuanced strategy of encouraging political decency in countries tempted by their own worst instincts.

The same equation—between decent domestic politics and foreign-policy promise—obtained in the United States. Far from the Iron Curtain and the Fulda Gap, the outcome of the Cold War would turn on the image that foreigners had of American politics. In the grand finale of the X article, Kennan appealed to an internal American excellence, contending that foreign-policy success rests on “the degree to which the United States can create among the people of the world generally the impression of a country which know what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.” Propaganda, Olympic medals, symphony orchestras, and high-profile chess games were peripheral. Problem solving and vision were the decisive Cold War assets.

## **A GEORGE KENNAN FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Since Kennan's death some 15 years ago, a balance has emerged between his legacy, which withstands the test of time, and the changes that distance our world from Kennan's. The changes are many and encompass the emergence of Putin's Russia, the rise of China, the expansion of the global economy, the acceleration of communications and other technology, and the division of the United States into rival camps, with little in the way of a shared political culture. Kennan

chafed against Cold War consensus and post-Cold War triumphalism, but he took an American foreign-policy establishment for granted; its virtues and vices were built into the political scene. Many of the givens of Kennan's political era are no longer given, both within and outside the United States.

The international landscape has diversified since Kennan's heyday. By serving in Moscow and then in Berlin in the 1930s, Kennan believed himself to be at the center of the world. Moscow, Berlin, and Washington were the inevitable focal points for international affairs: if this was not really true, it could at least appear to be true in the 1930s and 1940s. In the past 40 years, the loci of the international system have shifted away from Europe, and it is no longer acceptable for a diplomat or scholar of international affairs to have as European a gaze as Kennan so obviously did.

Likewise, Kennan's Luddite tendencies would be more of a burden today than they were in the 1940s. For good or ill, the technology for disseminating information has reconstituted international relations, introducing new modes of warfare, new styles of leadership, and new forms of political consent and dissent, especially in the Western democracies. Technology must be factored in; it cannot be placed to the side of events. Evolutions in communications technology, in particular, can themselves be events on par with the signing of a treaty or the erasure of a pre-existing border. No doubt Kennan would not have gone on Twitter and would have looked askance at those who do. But any latter-day Kennan would not have the option of spending weekends on the farm reading Chekhov, either. The times have changed, and the changes are unforgiving to those who would prefer to ignore them.

Together, technological change and the diversification of the international landscape qualify the strategy of containing Russia. So too does the vanishing of the Soviet Union. The post-Soviet Kremlin is not smoothly representative of the Russian people. President Putin

does not rule without coercion, and his government harnesses state-run media to impose ideological positions on the culture, positions that do not emerge organically from public opinion; but the list of salient departures from the Soviet past is long and crucial to the formation of U.S. policy.

The distinction Kennan drew, in the 1940s, between the Soviet government and the Russian people needs to be reformulated in the 21st century. One change is inherent to a post-Soviet Russia. The Soviet borders are no more, and today's Russia is incomparably more Russian than the Soviet Union ever was. Suppressed in Soviet times, the Russian Orthodox Church has been brought back as a pillar of nationhood. Putin has found his way to a usable past, mixing together elements of imperial Russia, elements of the Soviet Union, and elements of post-Soviet Russia. Whether weak or strong, Putin's government cannot be as starkly separated from Russia as the Soviet state could be. Containment as Kennan charted it in the 1940s will not have the same final chapter, or the same spectacular denouement.

Another change is external to Russia in the present moment. Unlike the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia, if it is to be contained at all, will need to be contained in a highly porous information space and contained against the will of an ascendant China (as well as a host of other countries). Kennan's idea of containment emerged from a bi-polar world and from an information space in which there could be such a thing as an iron curtain, as indeed there was between the East and West of Europe and between the American-led and Soviet-led Cold War coalitions in the 1940s and 1950s.

Yet Kennan's containment holds still within it the building blocks of a 21st century U.S. policy toward Russia. There are three such building blocks in 2019. The first is an avoidance of extremes, of fearful passivity on the one hand and a maximalist military posture on the other. The second is a focus on the domestic strengths that follow from

well-practiced self-government, a focus that includes the capacity to be self-critical and open to reform; and the third is an educated ability to penetrate beyond centuries-old clichés about Russian politics and foreign policy especially where the relationships among Russian state, society and culture are concerned. From these building blocks, an U.S. policy that is proactive, restrained, self-confident and well-informed can be fashioned.

All diplomatic concepts, even the most durable, apply to a world in flux. Most of them fade away quickly. Containment as Kennan construed it has retained a peculiar salience. More remarkable than an evolving international landscape is the continuing fascination with Kennan and with his reasoning behind containment. Of course, fascination is understandable in considering the person John Lewis Gaddis brought to life in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning biography, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, which was published in 2011. Gaddis's prosaic title was also revealing. Kennan's was an American life and an American story, after all: the modest Midwestern beginnings, the lonely years at F. Scott Fitzgerald's Princeton, the bold, globe-trotting journey forward, the success and the problems of success—and then the recreation of things left behind at Kennan's farm in East Berlin, Pennsylvania.

Kennan was a self-made diplomat and, to borrow a phrase from Emerson, he was an American scholar. Instead of a doctoral degree he had an autodidact's curiosity about many subjects. He had John Winthrop's conviction that America could be like a city upon a hill; he had Thoreau's or Jefferson's skepticism of cities and manufacturing; he had John Quincy Adams's contempt for the fantasy of slaying foreign-policy monsters. And there was more than a touch of the Puritan about Kennan, the rigorous intellectuality and the fear that righteousness was rapidly slipping away, for sin and evil were so close at hand. Kennan had the Puritans' austerity of vision. Kennan himself described the X article as 20th-century variation upon the theme of a 17th-century Protestant sermon. The X article even concludes with

an exhortation to be good and with mention of the responsibilities history (read: Providence) “plainly intended” America’s political leaders to bear.<sup>21</sup>

To posterity Kennan demonstrated that it is possible to know other cultures and that, through this knowledge, productive, helpful ideas can be generated. Though he believed in an Occident and an Orient, in a Western and an Asiatic mind, in fundamental differences between the West and the “Russian-Asiatic world,” as Kennan termed it in the X article, he was the opposite of the stereotypical Orientalist. He was eager not to superimpose an American or a Western frame onto the Russian picture and vigilant about identifying the particularities of a genuinely—and at times obstreperously—foreign culture. True diplomacy starts with an awareness of these particularities, and true diplomacy involves the management rather than the eradication of incompatible particularities.<sup>22</sup>

When Kennan was a rookie diplomat, the United States did not recognize the Soviet Union, so abhorrent were the Soviet particularities to the American government. When Kennan was a seasoned diplomat, the United States was enmeshed in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, with the constant risk of contained hostility turning to open hostility. The enmity between Washington and Moscow was longstanding, quite possibly intractable. Yet Kennan found countless ways of eluding this enmity, of which the best was to discover qualities in the foreign culture that were worthy of love. Language and literature were his tools. They lifted the mind out of its innate parochialism and chauvinism. Kennan impressed none other than Joseph Stalin with his fluency in Russian, and in December 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev approached Kennan at a reception, telling him “‘Mr. Kennan... we in our country believe that a man may be a friend of another country and remain, at the same time, a loyal and devoted citizen of his own; and that is the way we view you.’”<sup>23</sup> Kennan was gratified. It was a gracious compliment, and it confirmed the inner logic of his containment strategy, the weakening of enmity through friendship.



Kennan's accomplishment with "The Long Telegram," the X article, and the founding of the Office of Policy Planning may not have been accomplishment enough for him. Or it may have been the wrong kind of accomplishment, but the "misinterpretation" of containment was to be expected. No government elegantly executes an idea: ideas collide with the inelegant machinery of government, and no idea ever survives the collision intact. Kennan the historian knew this very well.

Kennan's accomplishment in his writing and in the office he created was to raise the conversation within government to the level of ideas. Normally, diplomats and secretaries of state are too busy, too beholden to the play of events and personalities, too encumbered by the tyranny of procedure to sustain prolonged, nuanced conversations. The mind-numbing chore of diplomacy is wonderfully captured by the phrase "clearing paper," and for much of the day paper must be cleared. Kennan put words to paper and the effect was enlightening. He advanced the conversation, he informed the conversation, and in doing so he clarified the choices that President Truman and Secretary Marshall had before them. This was a great and lasting accomplishment.

Kennan then doubled this accomplishment by doing in the public sphere what he had done behind closed doors at the State Department. He advanced and informed the conversation. So cogent and probing were his lectures, essays, and books, that they are informing and advancing the conversation still.





*Joan Kennan, George F. Kennan, Grace Kennan  
and Annelise Kennan, September 1938.*

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# REMARKS AT THE KENNAN LEGACY CONFERENCE

**Grace Kennan Warnecke**

**W**hen George Kennan died in 2005, my siblings and I all grieved at our personal loss but also at the thought that our father's ideas and influence would be waning as well. It has been a complete surprise that not a week goes by without our reading or hearing some reference to Kennan and his policies. Most, of course, refer to the containment policy, but for us it keeps our father alive.

The question is whether George Kennan is still relevant today, more than a century after his birth. In some ways, he is definitely not. He certainly never understood or learned to use the new technology which has transformed our world. He was definitely European focused, but some of that was because his diplomatic posts were all in Europe and he married a Norwegian. He had peculiar prejudices—no interest in South America—and a strong prejudice, for example, against the state of California. But he was interested in China and the Far East and played an active role in the State Department's stands on Korea at the beginning of the Korean War.

My father was definitely an elitist in the better sense of the word. Kennan felt very strongly about the importance of knowledge. He considered that the more you know about a country the more sensitive you can be towards it. He was a strong supporter of the impor-

tance of professional diplomats, with foreign language skills and in-depth country erudition. In term of what is happening to the State Department today—staff cuts, the resignation of senior officials, and empty ambassadorial posts—he would be appalled. I can hear him fulminating at the breakfast table.

George Kennan was committed to competence and dedicated to professionalism. While he never understood the Internet, he kept up an enormous card file which took up half a wall of his office and was almost a precursor of the computer. He tracked Russian military and politically important figures by reading the Russian press. That knowledge often led him to learning of twists in Soviet foreign policy before anyone else. When he was ambassador to Moscow, many of the foreign ambassadors would come to the American embassy to learn what was going on and report back to their governments. Father thought that Stalin's irritation with his extensive knowledge was one of the reasons for his being declared persona non grata in 1952.

In 1974, when I went to the Soviet Union as Senator Ted Kennedy's aide and interpreter, we had a meeting with General Secretary Brezhnev in his Kremlin office. At the beginning of the meeting, Brezhnev's top aide pulled me aside and told me privately how much they admired George Kennan. This was 20-plus years after he was kicked out of the Soviet Union.

My father's emphasis on professionalism was also reflected in his deep involvement in the Kennan Institute. He was always very proud to have played a role in creating this institution dedicated to supporting advanced Russian studies. And he would be thrilled to know about the conference held on his life and legacy at the Kennan Institute on February 2018.

Today, when relations with Russia are again strained, the question that comes up is whether to go back to a containment policy. My father's view of containment was always political more than military. But I think the main reason that he formulated this policy was be-

cause of his horror of nuclear war. He had traveled around Europe at the end of World War II and never got over the loss of human life and physical destruction caused by that conflict. He later co-sponsored the so-called "gang of four" declaration, along with McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, and Gerard Smith, that called on Washington to renounce first use of nuclear weapons.

His containment policy was also predicated on his gut feeling that the Soviet Union was in some way unnatural and thus temporary. Ambassador John Beyrle has related the anecdote that when asked why the Kennan Institute was named the Institute for Advanced Russian Studies he answered, "because the Soviet Union will not last, but Russia will."

The best aspect of what we will retain from George Kennan's thinking is that we have the luxury of choosing the best of his ideas. It is amazing how many of those policies are even more applicable today than when they were first formulated. He was a prescient man.





*George Kennan getting sworn in as U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia (1961)*

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# A COMPLEX MAN WITH A SIMPLE IDEA

**James Goldgeier**

**W**hen George F. Kennan provided the intellectual underpinnings for the Cold War strategy of containment in 1946–47, he set a standard that others have striven for but failed to match: the articulation of a simple American grand strategy that can guide policymakers and the public but that reflects a deep understanding of geopolitical dynamics. The effort to combine conceptual simplicity with deep global understanding was as valued by the generation that emerged after the end of the Cold War as it was for Kennan’s contemporaries in the decades that preceded it. There is no conversation about American grand strategy that does not use Kennan as its reference point.

## **A TALENT FOR THE BIG PICTURE**

Kennan had a knack for getting the big thing right. He recognized in 1946 that the United States needed to protect its core interests in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Middle East by containing Soviet expansionism, particularly through non-military means, and he argued that there was a strong possibility that the Stalinist system “bears within it the seeds of its own decay” that would result “in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.”<sup>24</sup> The most spectacular American post-World War II success while Kennan

was still serving in government was the Marshall Plan for Western Europe. He did so much to help bring it about, and it enabled those countries to regain their economic strength and avoid succumbing to communist propaganda.

When Soviet foreign policy did mellow under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, ultimately leading to the breakup of the entire edifice of the Soviet bloc and the USSR itself, Kennan appeared to be a genius for what he wrote in 1946–47. After all, he got the big thing right for the right reasons. He was a well-trained Foreign Service officer who knew Russia, its culture, and its language. In fact, he knew Russia better than he knew the United States, whose society and culture were a much bigger challenge for him to comprehend.

Kennan also got the big thing right despite his shortcomings. He was an elitist who joined the Foreign Service in part because it was a meritocracy and believed foreign policy was best left to Ivy-League trained, Northern European, white diplomats. He also believed that the Soviet Union, because of its closed nature, had a superior foreign policy making process. Kennan remarked that if the Founding Fathers were hostile to participatory democracy “for a population predominantly white, Protestant and British, faced with relatively simple problems, would they not turn over in their graves at the mere thought of the democratic principle being applied to a population containing over ten million Negroes, and many more millions of southern Europeans, to whom the democratic principle is completely strange and incomprehensible?”<sup>25</sup>

Despite his views that the Soviet system could not last, Kennan was not an optimist about the United States in the manner of a Ronald Reagan. Along with Cold War policymakers such as Henry Kissinger and Paul Nitze, Kennan studied the works of German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler closely, leading him to believe that the West was in decline. (There is undoubtedly more to be written on the ways in which Spengler’s reading of history shaped leading

American diplomats of the Cold War.) Unlike Nitze, who believed the United States could reverse that decline, Kennan, like Kissinger, was focused on managing it.<sup>26</sup>

Kennan's ability to get the big thing right meant that it also would have been good for policymakers to pay attention to him on other things, most notably the Vietnam War, which he understood as an unnecessary, undesirable, and faulty application of the strategy of containment and a foreign-policy and human fiasco. As he wrote in the *Washington Post* in December 1965: "I would not know what 'victory' means....If we can find nothing better to do than embark upon a further open-ended increase in the level of our commitment simply because the alternatives seem humiliating and frustrating, one will have to ask whether we have not become enslaved to the dynamics of a single unmanageable situation—to the point where we have lost much of the power of initiative and control over our own policy, not just locally, but on a world scale."<sup>27</sup> Sadly, these words echo today in the continued U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

Kennan was not always right. He himself said that his greatest mistake was support for CIA covert operations, which he originally viewed positively as a non-military means of implementing containment.

More complicated is Kennan's opposition to NATO enlargement in the 1990s. Critics of the decision, who believe proponents of expanding the Alliance into Central and Eastern Europe foolishly ignored the predictable Russian reaction against it, often cite Kennan's opposition to bolster their argument. But Kennan's opposition has to be put in the context of his own attitudes toward NATO; after all, he had major concerns about the Alliance when it was being created. A 1948 paper written by the State Department Policy Planning Staff under his direction raised concerns that a defense pact going beyond the strict North Atlantic area would harden the line of conflict between the West and the Soviet Union in Europe: "It may not be pos-

sible for us to prevent a progressive congealment of the present line of division. But our present policy is still directed (and in the opinion of the Staff, rightfully so) toward the eventual peaceful withdrawal of both the United States and the USSR from the heart of Europe, and accordingly toward encouragement of the growth of a third force which can absorb and take over the territory between the two.”<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, proponents of NATO enlargement in the Clinton administration believed they were operating off of containment’s success. They were promoting a new policy that maintained a core feature of Kennan’s strategy: containment was an easy-to-understand concept. The deliberations among the National Security Council staff on a post-Cold War strategy were internally dubbed the “Kennan Sweepstakes.” The goal was to come up with a simple single-word replacement for containment that would make its author or authors as famous as George Kennan. National Security Adviser Anthony Lake asked his aide Jeremy Rosner to draft a speech that could produce a new foreign policy idea “understandable enough you could put it on a bumper sticker.”<sup>29</sup>

Rosner came up with “democratic enlargement.” Juxtaposed against the Cold War objective to protect Western Europe by containing Soviet expansionism, the new American policy in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, espoused by Lake in his speech at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in September 1993, was to enlarge the community of democracies to include the former communist bloc. Democratic enlargement became the theme for the Clinton administration’s 1994 National Security Strategy, and over the years the prospect of membership in NATO was meant to encourage political and economic reform in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Ironically, the NATO enlargement policy resulting from the Kennan Sweepstakes was shot down by Kennan himself. He argued that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy

in the entire post-cold-war era. Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations; and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”<sup>30</sup>

Newly released records of the conversations between President Bill Clinton and President Boris Yeltsin throughout their years in office demonstrate just how bitter a pill NATO enlargement was for the Russians to swallow even as Clinton tried various ways to lessen the pain.<sup>31</sup> Any assessment of the policy, however, has to account for the fact that for its proponents, it largely accomplished its objectives. Central and Eastern European nations carried out the political and economic reform necessary to join NATO and the European Union, and they are more secure and prosperous as a result. Unfortunately, while the prospect of gaining membership induced reform, once in the Alliance, countries are more free to abandon democracy. The recent rise of authoritarianism in Poland and Hungary certainly casts doubt on the future of the European project and the support for liberalism in countries of the former Warsaw Pact. On balance, however, the effect of NATO enlargement on Central and Eastern Europe, and especially on the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which would otherwise be insecure in the face of Russian aggression, has been profoundly positive for the region, even as it worsened relations between NATO and Russia.

Kennan’s argument highlights his strengths and weaknesses. As a student of Russia, he knew that Moscow would react badly to NATO’s expansion. Proponents of enlargement in the Clinton administration believed that the United States could expand the Alliance and still maintain good relations with Russia. Kennan knew that was unlikely since Russia would see the expansion of the West into the East as undermining its geostrategic position in Europe and threatening its role as a great power.

But the argument that NATO should not enlarge because of the Russian reaction also reflects his weaknesses. Why should Russia get to determine the fate of Central and Eastern Europeans? Why should the West accept a Russian privileged sphere of influence in its neighborhood? And what was the alternative to not enlarging NATO? A Europe in which a line drawn by Josef Stalin in 1945 continued after the revolutions of 1989 would not have been a stable continent. It is easy to imagine that the Baltic nations and perhaps others in the region would today face the same problems that Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova face: namely, violations of their sovereignty with Russian troops on their territory.

Kennan's opposition to NATO enlargement can be viewed not only as a direct outgrowth of his views when the military alliance was created, but also his concerns with how containment was applied. He sought a non-military approach to containing the Soviet Union because he thought its challenge was largely political and economic, but those who implemented his policy found his understanding of containment to be too limiting. Similarly, he opposed using a military alliance to extend democratic norms, which would not have been a major concern of his anyway, and as his earlier quote on Southern Europeans indicates, his views of what constituted "the West" were quite narrow.

When NATO enlargement was underway, he, like many opponents of the policy, did not propose an alternative approach to the vast territory between NATO and Russia. (Inside the government, the primary alternative, developed at the Pentagon in 1993, was the Partnership for Peace, open to all former Warsaw Pact and former Soviet nations, which was a military-to-military endeavor.) Opponents of enlargement such as Kennan also have to grapple with the question as to whether the West's relations with Russia would have been more positive in the absence of enlargement. The political scientist Kimberly Marten has argued they would not have been, because the central problem could not be solved: the impact of Russia's loss of



status as the other superpower after the Cold War on its attitudes toward the United States and Europe.<sup>32</sup>

## DEFINING THE NATIONAL INTEREST

At the core of Kennan's arguments was a foreign-policy realism, focusing on narrow American interests, leading him to oppose more expansionist, interventionist foreign policies. On this, he was consistent, from his horror at the Cold War strategy document NSC-68, which led to a dramatic defense build-up in the 1950s, to his opposition to NATO enlargement in the 1990s.

There is no more important foreign policy issue for us to debate in the United States than the proper scope of our national interest. Wherever we come down, we have to grapple with Kennan. He was very circumscribed, with what in today's academic foreign policy conversation would be seen as a position of "restraint." Restrainers argue that the United States has overextended itself since the end of the Cold War, to the detriment of American national interests.

U.S. policy in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War was a strategy of primacy. The leaked 1992 Defense Planning Guidance argued that the United States needed not only to prevent the rise of a peer competitor on par with the Soviet Union but that it needed to prevent regional hegemony from arising, whether adversaries like Iraq or allies such as Germany and Japan. At the end of the Bush administration, the United States initiated the effort to feed the starving in Somalia, a mission that increased in the Clinton administration until the Black Hawk Down incident in Mogadishu in October 1993. In the Clinton years, the United States ended the war in Bosnia in 1995 and launched the Kosovo war in 1999. Despite the George W. Bush team arguing for a return to realism in the 2000 campaign, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States went to war not only in Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda had planned the attacks, but then in Iraq. And while Barack Obama



came into office pledging to get the United States out of two wars and not into new ones, not only was the United States still at war in Afghanistan and Iraq when he left office, but he also supported the NATO-led and United Nations-authorized attack on Libya in 2011.

The restrainers have been appalled by the global American military footprint and the extensive use of force since 1993, particularly the 1999 Kosovo War, the 2003 Iraq War, and the 2011 Libya War launched by presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Each of those wars has demonstrated, however, that American leaders have an easier time selling war at home when they appeal not just to narrow U.S. self-interest but to broader democratic values and/or humanitarian concerns inherent in upholding international order. A great illustration was the 1991 Persian Gulf War, seen as one of the most significant foreign-policy highlights of George H. W. Bush's presidency, a presidency most analysts associate with a greater realism and restraint than those of his successors. The selling of the war to the American public was based on the need to uphold the post-World War II international norm enshrined in the United Nations, the idea that powerful countries should not be allowed to occupy the territory of their weaker neighbors, as they had prior to 1945. This was the argument used by American officials in building a broad international coalition to support the goals of the United States. Secretary of State James A. Baker III got very little traction at home in the debate over how to respond to Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait when, trying to shore up support for the confrontation with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, he argued, "the economic lifeline of the industrial world runs from the gulf and we cannot permit a dictator such as this to sit astride that economic lifeline. To bring it down to the level of the average American citizen, let me say that means jobs. If you want to sum it up in one word, it's jobs."<sup>33</sup> In the end, the main message used to justify the first Gulf War was the need to uphold the post-World War II international norm against aggression by strong states against their weaker neighbors and by

comparing Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler to underscore why the international community could not afford a policy of appeasement. Similar appeals to American values helped Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama make their case when arguing for the need to go to war in 1999, 2003, and 2011.

## **KENNAN: IT WAS THE IDEAS, NOT HIS POLICY-MAKING PROWESS**

Although Kennan's first career was in the Foreign Service, he was not an inside policy adviser for very long. For most of the Cold War and after, he was on the outside of government looking in, as he began a second career as a historian at Princeton, while his Foreign Service colleagues Charles "Chip" Bohlen and Llewellyn "Tommy" Thompson became the main presidential advisers on Russia. Thompson himself had his own biting assessment of his more famous colleague. Kennan was, in his words:

a "charming, lovable man, sentimental yet ruthless." He was also "aloof," a "one-man show." He had a great sense of history and a broad perspective. He was often wrong in the short term, but right in the long run. He was a poor administrator yet refused to delegate authority. Kennan was brilliant at tossing out ideas, but not capable of choosing among them. He had a good intuition and was "exceedingly perceptive," but he was not the sort of person who should have the responsibility for carrying out policy. Working with Bohlen helped Kennan, since Bohlen was "practical and knocked many extreme ideas out of Kennan's head."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fact that he was not in government for most of the Cold War, as a strategist he was important, and his architecture of containment remained the gold standard for American policymakers. In 1994, State Department officials asked a 90-year old George Kennan

for his advice in a private dinner discussion. After Lake's inability to gain much notice for the policy of "enlargement" he articulated the previous year, they were hoping Kennan could help them create a single foreign policy rationale for what they were doing in the post-Cold War world. But Kennan would have none of it. He argued that it was a mistake to try to boil the world's complexities down to one word and advised them to compose "a thoughtful paragraph or more."<sup>35</sup>

Even that thoughtful paragraph has proven elusive. For America during the Cold War, everything was viewed in the context of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, and so every issue could be understood in the context of containment. There is simply no way to create a simple framework in a world of threats posed by a range of actors and issues, including hostile authoritarian states like China, Russia, and Iran; dangerous non-state actors; complex globalization; climate change; and artificial intelligence. The Clinton team's "democratic enlargement" came and went. So did George W. Bush's "war on terror." Barack Obama resisted being pinned down on the notion of a doctrine and was widely cited as saying the U.S. goal should be, "don't do stupid stuff." Donald Trump's "America First" is a rejection of the approach of his predecessors to uphold the post-World War II liberal international order, casting doubt on America's commitments to free trade and alliances.

Long before Trump's election, Bill Clinton looked back at the end of his presidency and admitted to an audience in Nebraska that he had not succeeded in conveying the rationale for American engagement in world affairs: "People say I'm a pretty good talker," Clinton declared, "but I still don't think I've persuaded the American people by big majorities that you really ought to care a lot about foreign policy, about our relationship to the rest of the world, about what we're doing."<sup>36</sup>

That, too, is a large part of the Kennan legacy: the challenge of explaining foreign policy to the American public. Kennan would have greatly preferred a foreign policy carried out in the absence of public debate, by well-trained elites such as himself applying their deep knowledge to solving problems and to promoting the national interest. He did not view democracy in a positive light, at least with respect to the making of foreign policy. Even during the Cold War, the public may have understood the basic need for containment, but significant internal debates occurred over implementation. In the case of the Vietnam War, debates over the implementation of containment boiled over, as well they should have, given that more than 50,000 American troops died in that conflict.

Today we struggle to agree on first principles. Given the growing complexity of global affairs and the increased domestic political polarization in the United States, the failure to create a new grand strategy will likely persist. But while we will continue to hear wistful calls for the next George Kennan, we are unlikely to find one.



*Dennis Ross*

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# INTERVIEW WITH DENNIS ROSS

**May 17, 2018**

**Editors:** We want to start with your coming in as director of Policy Planning at a moment that one might describe as the culmination of George Kennan's vision and strategy for managing the Cold War, the vision he laid out in "The Long Telegram."

Between 1989 and 1992, the Soviet Union collapsed from its own internal contradictions, while the United States offered better solutions to the sorts of problems that Soviet citizens cared about. Eventually, we came in and tried to help Russians and Ukrainians and others through those problems.

In many ways, that was exactly the vision that Kennan had articulated. Did that have the feeling of a culmination of long-term policy strategy planning?

**Dennis Ross:** The way I would describe it is that during the transition I was asked by Secretary of State James Baker to formulate what our approach to the Soviet Union should be and to brief him and the team he was assembling. One of the things I said is, "we are clearly at a point of transition. It's too soon to know exactly how this is going to play out but the potential for change is quite real."

I think I said that I don't know if we're at the point yet where the kind of contradictions that Kennan identified as eventually changing the Soviet Union [were evident], but it's clear that we're at a point where something big is happening. At a minimum, the potential to see the Cold War end is high. Whether that itself will then have implications within the Soviet Union remains to be seen.

Our task was to see if we could move things along—at least in terms of bringing the Cold War to an end, in terms of recognizing that what we saw happening within the Soviet Union was being driven by a recognition that they need to change internally.

Our interest was in supporting that change, not making it harder for them to carry out that change. But we had to calibrate what we did in terms of understanding their impulses. We had to recognize what Gorbachev had already done without supporting competition or conflicts in the third world. That was a good impulse. That was a good instinct, and we certainly wanted to do that.

We also wanted to see what we could do on arms control. These were all things that might allow us to help foster some of the more favorable trends we were then seeing emerge.

I didn't say more than that about Kennan, but I was acknowledging at the time—at least in my own mind—that if you go back and take a look at “The Long Telegram” and you look at the logic of what containment was supposed to do, it did seem that the inner contradictions were beginning to reflect themselves.

I'll add one other point. I had done a doctoral dissertation earlier in which I didn't really have the complete confidence of my own convictions. But I had laid out that the character of Soviet decision-making in what might be called the coalition maintenance model. Coalition maintenance tends to work by giving all of the members of the coalition incrementally “more.”

It looked to me as if that coalition maintenance would be harder and harder to do. Therefore, something had to give. From a conceptual or theoretical standpoint this was a way of taking account of the Kennan argument: that there were these inner contradictions and sooner or later they would manifest themselves.

**E:** One of the implications of Kennan's early analysis and of your observation at the end of the period was that the Soviet threat to the United States relied on the nature of the Soviet system, on the strength and durability of its political model.

If the Soviet threat and the political model were closely linked, did that make long-term strategic planning inherently more difficult? Kennan himself once wrote that one of his biggest regrets was his decision in favor of lending covert support to Baltic dissidents in 1946 or 1947.

In other words, if you really can't control domestic developments in another major power, it's unwise to try. The unpredictable linkage between domestic politics and geopolitical activity makes it very hard to plan your geopolitical engagement.

**DR:** There's one other factor I would add to what you're raising. Policymaking doesn't occur in a vacuum. It has to take account of what the Soviets were doing at that time, the changes that *perestroika* represented, that *glasnost* represented. But we also had to take account of a certain degree of bureaucratic inertia here in the United States.

Within the national security apparatus, there were different points of view. Some were convinced that Gorbachev was a more clever competitor than his predecessors had been. Much of what he was doing had less to do with changing the Soviet Union on the inside and more to do with making himself attractive to the Europeans so



that he could compete more effectively with us and create a breach between the Europeans and us.

So here you are trying to make policy. It is not just that there are these elements over there that we couldn't control, but also there is a certain competition in terms of policy formulation. Those who find it difficult to acknowledge that something is changing are still an important part of the policy-formulation process. And that too was the case at this time.

**E:** We would like to ask about another aspect of "The Long Telegram" in light of your policy-planning experience from 1989 and into the post-Soviet period. Kennan argued that for the Russian people, the Soviet Union was an unnatural political construct and that at some point the Russian people would push against Soviet power. I'm curious how much this argument factored into your analysis at the time, whether the Russian nationalism of Boris Yeltsin or nationalism in the Baltics. How did you approach the issue of nationalism at this moment of Soviet transition?

**Dennis Ross:** It became an issue on which we focused much more, and on which I in particular focused much more, not during the transition but beginning in 1989 when I would join Secretary Baker in meeting with Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. I still recall very vividly when we flew to Wyoming for our ministerial [meeting] in September of '89. On the flight, it was just Baker, Shevardnadze, Tarasenko, and I. We got into a discussion of the nationalities raised not by us but by Shevardnadze, and he was explaining to us why Gorbachev and he were so committed to transforming the Soviet Union from within.

Shevardnadze started by saying, "we can't produce a hypodermic needle but we can produce, you know, rockets." He said, "I'm a Georgian, and I feel that I know that others feel that, and we're not going to survive unless we can do much more to recognize these separate identities. We can survive as a Soviet Union, but not if we

don't reform our approach, not just to the economy but also to each of the republics. We're going to be torn apart if we don't do that." This was quite striking to me.

We recall Baker and I sort of looking at each other as if this were something more profound than we had realized. Here's the Soviet foreign minister acknowledging this point. I have to tell you, it did one other thing. It helped to create this profound bond of trust because of how much he was confiding in us. He could easily have felt that his saying these things would be perceived as a weakness that we could exploit. But he wasn't acting as if that was the case. He was acting as if he already felt he had a relationship with us and therefore he could say these things. Obviously, he was trying to get us to be responsive, but it had quite a profound effect on both of us at the time.

In answer to your question, I have to say that initially I was not as sensitive to the issue of the nationalities and of what might be going on among the peoples of the different republics until we had that conversation in September of '89.

**E:** I have one other version of this question, which is not about the Soviet Union or the post-Soviet space but about Germany. In the 1990s, Kennan voiced skepticism about the unification of Germany. There was a divergence of opinion among the Western European leaders at the time about German unification. Was this a problem that your office tackled?

**DR:** Yes, I had a major role in it. I'll discuss it from two standpoints. Members of my staff went to Germany not long after Secretary Baker and I went to Germany; that was in May [1989?]. They went not long after that, and they came back convinced that the potential for unification was much more real than anybody within the administration seemed to accept. In fact, their judgment was explicitly rejected by the Bureau of European Affairs.

This didn't really become an issue with the Allies until after the wall came down. And after the wall came down, Thatcher and Mitterrand were overwhelmingly against any rapid movement. I still recall Thatcher saying the Germans will achieve in peacetime what they couldn't achieve in wartime. And in our inner councils we had a discussion on how to manage. From my staff, Francis Fukuyama, Roger George, and Jim Holmes had gone on this trip, and they came back and said that we should begin to plan for this.

Francis Fukuyama was the one who drafted principles designed to guide us in the event that something like this happened. Built into these principles was a sense that somehow you had to find a way not to look like you're imposing German reunification on the Soviets and on the Europeans as well. My role quickly became focused on how to manage the Soviets in response to this. There was a quick consensus, forged at the apex of the administration by the president, the secretary of state, the national security advisor, and their most immediate aides.

The quick consensus was that you had to learn the lessons of Versailles and that you couldn't single out the Germans. Singling the Germans out would be the surest way to put us at odds with the Germans and to have them leave the Alliance, to have those within Germany feel that they should end up being more neutral between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. There was a consensus that we had to stay close to the Germans. They had to have a sense that we weren't trying to block their aspirations.

But we also had to manage how this was done. My role was to focus on how we could create a sense that this is not being imposed on the Soviet Union, we were not against their interests. Gorbachev ran the risk of being challenged, as if he'd lost the Cold War and was surrendering too much. I was focused very heavily on this. It was my responsibility. How could we create a package for Gorbachev that

would show that we were addressing their needs and at the same time not build up their sense that they could block this?

We had to create a duality. The train was leaving the station, but there were also things that could be done to manage this from a Soviet perspective. The whole two-plus-four mechanism that we faced opposition to internally was designed to create a process where Gorbachev and the Soviets could say, "we're the ones, we're part of this process, we're managing this." Later on, our focus on changing NATO doctrine was once again designed to address Soviet needs.

We sought to work with the Germans to ensure that there would be significant economic assistance going to the Soviets; that too was a part of this. We fashioned a package, which included a statement by Secretary Baker that NATO forces would not move eastward. When he said that he was referring explicitly to Germany, but it's fair to say that the Soviets heard not just Germany. All of this was designed to help Gorbachev manage this process, to make it a process in which the Soviet Union had its own input.

We had discussions with them at one other point. We went to Moscow in February 1990. A Central Committee plenum was taking place at the time. Shevardnadze arrived for our initial meeting. He arrived late because of the plenum and described how difficult it had been.

We spent time with him and then with Gorbachev, talking through the issue of why Germany could not be put in a position where if it wasn't in the NATO alliance it would feel the need to acquire an independent nuclear capability. That was not in the Soviet interest or our interest. This was a conditioning process that we were going through. We understood that German reunification had to be accompanied by a package that Gorbachev could sell.

**E:** You spoke earlier about the real clarity and connection—maybe trust is the right word—that came from Shevardnadze’s opening up about the domestic Soviet nationalities challenges, his own Georgian identity, and so on. Over the past three decades, one of the criticisms of U.S. policy toward Russia has been the degree to which it has been driven by domestic politics, diaspora politics, defense-industry interests, and intra-Alliance politics. There are the commitments that we make to our European allies and the leverage that they exert in turn, little of which is reflected honestly in high-level dialogue between U.S. and Russian leaders. To what extent did you seek to reciprocate Shevardnadze’s openness about the constraints you were under?

**DR:** I think that we were also pretty honest as a result. Secretary Baker was the kind of guy who always held his cards very close to his chest. But he opened up much more with Shevardnadze after that. I think he felt like that Shevardnadze was revealing himself, and it made Baker much more open with him than he would have been otherwise.

Something else contributed to this. We were seeing Shevardnadze every other week. He had a lot of things happening internationally. We went to see him and then Gorbachev for the first time in March 1989, but things—when we offered an arms-control initiative by late May—things began to accelerate. There were international conferences. There was Namibia and the Namibian independence; so we went there.

Everywhere there was an international setting or there was a reason to be seeing him either in Moscow or in Washington or internationally. There was such an intensity of meetings. Baker was pretty open about taking on those within the administration who saw things historically and found it hard to break old habits of thinking about the Soviet Union.

And that had the virtue of being true. It also didn't hurt with the Soviets that he could suggest that he was doing battle with his own government. Another way you build a kind of bond is by putting yourself in a position where the other side can see that you're doing things that are hard for you and that matters to them. I do think it was part of the discussion over time, and after the plane ride it was a more prominent part of the discussion.

**E:** One of the famous guiding principles for policy planning is George Marshall's injunction to Kennan to avoid trivia.

**DR:** Yes.

**E:** You clearly had one cluster of challenges around the end of the Cold War. What about all the rest? How did you engage with the wider problem set, be it the regional or functional issues that were clamoring for your attention? How did you ensure that the United States as the principal superpower was giving adequate attention to global challenges without wasting time on trivia?

**DR:** It was not a simple thing to balance. I wouldn't say trivia. I would say operational details. It was not a simple thing to balance because Baker viewed me and Robert Zoellick as his main assistants on all matters of substance. He looked to the two of us. We would meet every 90 days and go over our established set of priorities. What were the most important things we should be doing? What were the opportunities we were acting on? What were the things that surprised us? Did we need to rejigger or redefine what was important to us?

We each had this broader responsibility, plus I was responsible at least for Arab-Israeli peace issues at the same time. Baker was determined not to be visibly involved with that at that point. He put a premium on my doing it. What that led to was one other thing that

Baker wanted. Initially, Baker wanted both Zoellick and me on every trip with him. We both came to the conclusion that it was just impossible to manage. So we began to split the trips based on substantive responsibilities.

That also meant that there was this broad array of issues that we had to work on. In a sense, when Bob and I weren't together on trips, one of us was helping to manage all the issues coming to his attention and working with the executive secretary on what he should and what he shouldn't see, on the issues he had to be aware of. Did he have to call the president? Were there issues that required his dealing with a counterpart? All this was being done on the road.

I had to manage the staff on a broad array of issues. I created a kind of bifurcation. On the one hand, I was being used operationally in a way that would have made it very difficult for me to ensure that the staff was still planning. I was on the road a lot with the secretary. On the other, I felt this larger responsibility to ensure the essence of good policy planning, which is making sure that you are moving toward and not away from the objectives that you identified as important from the beginning.

That's how I tried to contend with the imperatives of policy planning.

**E:** You came to the Office of Policy Planning approximately 42 years after the office was created. You have said that in some ways your mission was very much George Kennan's mission in the late 1940s, but clearly there had to have been changes and evolutions in the office itself. Could you comment on the changes in the office and in the State Department around it?

**DR:** I did a study of the office before I took the position. There had always been a tension between Policy Planning and the rest of the building. The way Policy Planning is and its impact is heavily influenced by the relationship the director has with the secretary. I

understood that I was going to be in a position where I had leverage because I was going to be part of the inner circle, and I also had operational responsibilities.

The operational responsibilities and the proximity to the secretary were useful at one end because it meant that the functional and regional bureaus couldn't do things without Policy Planning. They couldn't go around Policy Planning. They couldn't ignore Policy Planning. Ultimately, it was in their interest to be inclusive because they had a better chance to influence policy if they were.

When I inherited Policy Planning from Dick Solomon, he had a good relationship with Secretary of State George Shultz, but Shultz tended to give much greater weight to the regional and functional bureaus and particularly a bureau like EUR [European bureau]. His teams didn't pay attention to policy planning at all. That changed with Baker and obviously with the role I had with Baker.

To be fair to them, under Rozanne Ridgway, there was a sense they could continue doing business the way they did before Secretary Baker changed this. The key to Policy Planning is not having a tense relationship with the rest of the building. The secretary of state must demonstrate that Policy Planning matters so that others have an incentive to work and to get along with it.

**E:** What forms of communication did you find to be most effective at Policy Planning? You've mentioned personal conversations with the secretary, and we're sure that there was a lot of memo writing. Email played no role at that time.

**DR:** Yes.

**E:** What were the best ways of getting your and the office's ideas across?



**DR:** Baker had a daily lunch with Zoellick, me, [Lawrence] Eagleburger, Margaret Tutwiler, Janet Mullins. That lunch was a place where we would go over what we needed to go over. If there was an issue I wanted to let him know about, or a memo I wanted him to be aware of, that was a way to flag it for him. Sometimes, I would just bring it down to him.

He was fine with memos through the system, but if he felt there was something sensitive he would say to me, “I want you just to do this and just give it to me, just hand it to me.” That was more unusual. That was much less the norm, but it did happen. It was less the daily staff meeting. There was a daily staff meeting, but that’s not where we would go over things. It was more perfunctory, where he would go around the room and people would report something, but that was more general. In terms of the real daily business it was the daily lunches that mattered most.

When I was traveling on the trips, the level of intense engagement with him was even higher. It was in that kind of a setting. Then, if there was follow up on an issue, he would just ask me to come down and talk to him about it. I would see him when we were in Washington. I would see him five, six times a day—at least five, six times a day. There was a lot of very direct communication verbally.

He was a reader too. If he read something and wanted to talk about it, that would be one of the reasons to come over to him. Or if he’d just returned from the White House, he might want to brief me on what happened and ask for some follow-up work to be done on it. Then I’d get a call. They moved my office into the inner corridor so that I would be more immediately available to him. He was sending a very clear signal about the role of Policy Planning. In a lot of ways, Policy Planning became kind of a mini-NSC [National Security Council] in the State Department, and that sent its own signal not only, by the way, within the building but in the inter-agency process as well.

**E:** We wanted to pivot and ask you to contrast your time recently in the Obama NSC. In a much smaller government, 70 years ago versus today, you could have whole-of-government strategic thinking reside within one cabinet agency; and the Office of Policy Planning could really think on behalf of the government as a whole. When you served at the NSC it was almost an agency unto itself.

**DR:** Absolutely. The growth of the NSC and the changed character of its role would have made it impossible for Policy Planning to function as it did when I was its director. The NSC was so small after it was formed, and it had almost no operational role; it couldn't, given its size. When Kennan created Policy Planning, he already had a genuine stature. He had a real relationship with George Marshall.

The nature of the challenges created an interesting confluence of circumstances that lent itself to a kind of Policy Planning that would be unthinkable today.

**E:** When you were director, we imagine that the Office of Policy Planning had an open door to scholars, thinkers, researchers on the outside to get ideas of merit into the policy process. Did you see it that way? How useful was that type of interaction to you? If you were to compare it honestly with what the intelligence community would bring to you? Is the interchange between policymakers and experts waxing or waning in the longer-term trend of the 21st century?

**DR:** Today that role actually is probably played more by the intelligence community than it is by the Office of Policy Planning or other places within the national security apparatus. Guidance comes more typically from the intelligence community than from academics or those in think tanks.

When I was at the Office of Policy Planning, there wasn't a lot of time for conversation with academics and outside experts given the travel schedule. But I had a number of academics that I brought

onto the staff. They represented more openness to creative thinking, more awareness of emerging concepts in academia. And from time to time we brought people in.

There was a recognition of the importance of outside expertise. We were going through a time of unmistakable transition, and it was logical to bring people in who were keen observers of this. Whether that's always the case or not, it was certainly a logical thing to do in my time.

**E:** Kennan was very often frustrated as a diplomat. As a member of the government, he often felt that his best ideas weren't heeded or they were misinterpreted, including containment itself. Were there ideas that you put forward that fell to the wayside or ideas that got misinterpreted?

**DR:** Yes, it's impossible for that not to be the case. You don't get your way on every issue. Certainly when I was there, I was on the winning side of most things because I would be presenting them to Secretary Baker. Most of the time Baker carried the day, but not all the time. I was pushing for us to be taking initiatives very early on and because I felt the scope of change, I saw something new in Gorbachev. There was great resistance to that, and even Baker couldn't deliver it early on. The president had made a decision that we were going to do these bureaucratic reviews of every issue.

At a time when there were rapid changes, the people being asked to do the reviews were from across the interagency. This meant the people writing the reviews were for the most part people who had held their positions in the Reagan administration. They had a kind of intellectual stake in the positions that they held. For the first couple months of the new administration, I was pushing hard to change things and found a fair amount of frustration early on because there was resistance to it. That tended to change over time.

One of the virtues of working for Baker was Baker was unquestionably the strongest actor in the administration. One area where I wanted to do much more and did not succeed was where Bush wasn't prepared to overrule Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady over Baker. Brady was loath to provide much assistance to the Soviets, and I was among those who found this frustrating given all the things I thought we might gain. We had a hard time breaking through on that.

Similarly, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, which followed immediately on the heels of a unified Germany's entry into NATO, a non-stop policy initiative from November of 1989 until March of 1991, I pushed an initiative on funding Soviet scientists who might have been working the nuclear area. Eventually Nunn-Lugar did this but at about one-third of what I was pushing for, and it took a long time before it was done. I felt we needed to be investing in this. It was just very hard to break through at that time.

For me the picture was crystal clear. It was just too hard to break through. There was a level of fatigue. You began to see signs of Bush feeling that he had to focus more on domestic issues. Those were the two areas where I felt that I could see clearly what needed to be done and where it was hard to get attention. Same on Yugoslavia.

**E:** When you came on the job it was Washington-Moscow as the dominant axis of Cold War diplomacy. That already begins to become more complicated by 1989, 1990, 1991. we're curious to get your take on the new complexity. Was it felt purely as an opportunity at the time, or was it something you had to worry about as well?

**DR:** We focused very heavily on how we were going to deal with nuclear weapons in these emerging new states. We also focused very heavily on creating a set of principles on civil-military relations among other things, on building relationships with the new states

and moving them in a direction of being democratic and market-based economies.

That was very much part of what we were doing. I ended up being sent a couple times to Ukraine to help manage what was going on there. So the short answer is: yes, there was new complexity. It opened up new challenges. We negotiated the process of centralizing the nukes. This was a big deal. I think I viewed it as a really interesting challenge. The landscape was changing and already Larry Eagleburger was saying we might want to have nostalgia for the Cold War because at least then everything was bilateral. Now we're going to face all these additional challenges as well. But, yes, I was caught up in it.

**E:** Do you have nostalgia for what it was to be Policy Planning director in 1948?

**DR:** I think I have some appreciation for it. I think Kennan was having to shape what we were going to do in what was a new world and in a context that was different than the one that I faced. He was having to do it in a context where you were trying to build an instinct for American engagement at a time when there was a desire to be focused domestically. He was trying to focus on how you could build a case for us to play a role that Walter Russell Mead claims we have always been playing—that of an active foreign policy. But that was not the self-image when Kennan was the director of Policy Planning.

When I was the director, the idea of the U.S. in a leadership role was given. By comparison, Kennan's task was much more demanding than the one that I faced because of the profound difference in domestic circumstances.





*George F. Kennan is awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George H.W. Bush, July 6, 1989*

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# GEORGE KENNAN: AMERICAN MACHIAVELLI

Jeremi Suri

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*When man is given (as he can be given only for relatively brief periods and in exceptional circumstances) freedom both from political restraint and from want, the effect is to render him childlike in many respects: fun-loving, quick to laughter and enthusiasm, unanalytical, unintellectual, outwardly expansive, preoccupied with physical beauty and prowess, given to sudden and unthinking seizures of aggressiveness, driven constantly to protect his status in the group by an eager conformism—yet not unhappy.*

—George Kennan, 1951<sup>37</sup>

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**G**eorge Kennan witnessed the triumph of democracy over fascism, and he predicted it would outlast communism too. Yet, he feared democracy would defeat itself. The tendencies toward materialism, moral sanctimony, and militarism frightened him in the earliest days of the Cold War, when the United States simultaneously invested in consumerism and exhibited cruel intolerance. The expansive promises of education and homeownership through the G. I. Bill went hand-



in-hand with the repressive witch-hunts of McCarthyism. Mid-century America was going in too many contradictory directions at the same time. It was both over-exuberant and paranoid.<sup>38</sup>

This was the context for Kennan's famous advice to American policy-makers about containment: "The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation."<sup>39</sup> Americans had to confront aggression firmly abroad as they also curbed their excesses at home. Tradition and preservation were the key words—along with containment—for a conservative-minded man like Kennan. The United States had to defend democracy without becoming too democratic.

Democracy was a problem because it discouraged what Kennan believed were the essential qualities of effective diplomacy: patience, restraint, compromise, and consistency. Citizens wanted immediate results, especially after long decades of economic depression and world war. They treasured boldness and tenacity in pursuit of their goals. They rejected cooperation with adversaries, and they switched policies with each election, and often in between.

Kennan believed these damaging behavioral tendencies were inevitable with public participation in policymaking. "A good deal of our trouble seems to have stemmed from the extent to which the executive has felt itself beholden to short-term trends of public opinion in the country and from what we might call the erratic and subjective nature of public reaction to foreign policy questions," he said. "What passes for our public opinion in the thinking of official Washington," he continued, "can be easily led astray into areas of emotionalism and subjectivity which make it a poor and inadequate guide for national action."<sup>40</sup>

The emotionalism and subjectivity of populist policymaking induced stupidity, according to Kennan. He wrote one of his most memorable

and controversial descriptions just five years after American victory in the Second World War:

I sometimes wonder whether in this respect a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin: he lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.<sup>41</sup>

This is hardly the language one expects from the man who authored the framework—“containment”—for American foreign policy in the Cold War. This is not the attitude one frequently encounters from American diplomats. And this is decidedly not the optimism about American power and righteousness that constitutes the vernacular of mission and purpose for most successful American politicians.

How, then, did the grumpy Kennan come to matter for so much, and for so long? Why do scholars, pundits, and policymakers remain obsessed with him? What is his enduring legacy?

These are difficult questions to answer because Kennan does not fit any standard category. In fact, he disdained them all. He found classical realists too power hungry and ignorant of foreign cultures. He viewed liberals as too idealistic and ignorant of diplomacy. And he criticized institutionalists for overstating the force of law and understating the enduring pull of the nation-state. In Kennan’s estimation, the United Nations was never the correct place to conduct great power diplomacy.

His views were an unstable and messy mix. When criticized for his inconsistency, Kennan wrote an eloquent little book that included

complaints about automobiles, televisions, and big cities—not a coherent philosophy.<sup>42</sup> His most thorough biographer finds many endearing impulses—patriotism, restraint, balance, and a belief in inherited wisdom—at the center of Kennan’s thinking. Yet, a policy temperament and a diplomatic style emerge from a full rendering of his life, not an enduring philosophy: “Kennan disliked theory,” John Lewis Gaddis writes, “and never regarded himself as practicing that dark art.”<sup>43</sup>

There might have been a Kennan doctrine of containment, but there was no Kennan school of thought as there was for some of his peers, Henry Kissinger especially.<sup>44</sup> Although many policymakers were influenced by Kennan, few credit him as a mentor or a guide or even a close friend. He was more of an island—“an outsider in his own time,” according to John Lewis Gaddis—than an institution. Loneliness was his frequent and self-pitying condition.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps that is the source of Kennan’s endurance. He exposed and challenged core American assumptions about the world, as he also supported American purposes in trying to protect stability, prosperity, and national independence. Kennan did not believe in making the world look like the United States in its politics, economy, or culture. In fact, he thought that would be a horrible idea. He was neither a universalist nor a cultural relativist but instead a particularist.

Drawing on the conventional wisdom of the nineteenth century, Kennan perceived that different cultures and traditions emerged over time, and that they remained distinctive. Influenced by social Darwinists, Kennan believed in a world of hierarchal civilizations that manifest themselves in nations and empires that the United States could neither eradicate nor reform. Instead, America had to encourage favorable behavior from the civilizations that had the most to contribute (Europe and Japan), while ignoring those that did not (Africa and Latin America), and containing those that threatened destruction (especially Russia under communism). Kennan noticeably

favored northern light-skinned societies, and he frequently disdained tropical climates, cultures, and communities. His worldview was racialized and Orientalist, as one would expect from a man educated in his early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Euro-American milieu.<sup>46</sup>

For all its limits, that canonical education produced valuable insights, especially for one of the oldest international professions: diplomacy. Kennan entered the newly created U.S. Foreign Service because it offered an opportunity to travel and interact in cosmopolitan, elite circles.<sup>47</sup> The Foreign Service did not exist to change the world but to make sense of it for policymakers, businesspeople, and ordinary citizens. Kennan never thought of himself as a “change-agent” (a term popularized in the late 20th century.) He was an interpreter of a large, complex world to a distant and ignorant American public.

Diplomacy for Kennan, therefore, meant managing and influencing a diverse, historical cocktail of world civilizations from the margins. Kennan had a keen eye for foreign societies and a good ear for foreign languages. He traveled extensively in Europe and eventually made his way to Russia, reading intensely about the history of these societies as he interacted with their leaders and ordinary citizens. Kennan was not bringing America to them; he was bringing them to America in his frequent telegrams and reports to Washington DC, as well as his prolific letters and diary entries. Kennan’s goal was to penetrate the mysteries of these civilizations, explain them to Americans, and help improve mutual relations. This was diplomacy as anthropology and not as imperialism or intervention.

Kennan did not think the United States could act as an empire, or a hegemon, or even a world policeman, even if it wanted to. It was a big, self-serving, distant island nation that interacted with others, while remaining far removed from their cultures and traditions. (Hence, his infamous comparison of the United States to a prehistoric monster “with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin.”) Even after World War II, Kennan suspected that American

complaints about automobiles, televisions, and big cities—not a coherent philosophy.<sup>184</sup> His most thorough biographer finds many endearing impulses—patriotism, restraint, balance, and a belief in inherited wisdom—at the center of Kennan’s thinking. Yet, a policy temperament and a diplomatic style emerge from a full rendering of his life, not an enduring philosophy: “Kennan disliked theory,” John Lewis Gaddis writes, “and never regarded himself as practicing that dark art.”<sup>185</sup>

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power was not all that it was cracked up to be. The United States had proven that it could fight in a coalition to defeat fascist states, but it did not have the will, knowledge, experience, or resolve to govern abroad.

The history of the Cold War would confirm Kennan's astute, but often unpopular, judgment of American limits. Kennan was an early critic of the Vietnam War and a consistent detractor from most American military interventions outside Western Europe and East Asia. And even in Europe, he opposed the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which he feared would divide Europe permanently and antagonize neighbors. Kennan favored opening relations with Communist China long before President Richard Nixon's overdue visit in 1972. Kennan's loudest critics were generally more idealistic and militaristic, and history has not judged many of them well. That verdict explains Kennan's continuing influence. It helps that numerous American misadventures seem to have confirmed his predictions.<sup>48</sup>

Kennan's most influential policy documents—his "Long Telegram" from Moscow on February 22, 1946 and his X article published in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947—brilliantly reconciled the limits on American power with the need to combat Soviet aggressiveness. Kennan described how the Soviet system under Josef Stalin was "committed fanatically" to conflict with the capitalist world, but also "highly sensitive to [the] logic of force."<sup>49</sup> That meant Stalin was not like Hitler; the United States did not have to fight a war to stop his aggression. There were other strategic alternatives: "the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," he wrote.<sup>50</sup>

Kennan called on the United States to "create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a World Power, and which

has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time." Kennan did not want the imposition of American ideas abroad; instead, he favored aid for other societies to find their way free of communism, in partnership with the United States. He wrote, "to the extent that such an impression can be created and maintained, the aims of Russian Communism must appear sterile and quixotic, the hopes and enthusiasm of Moscow's supporters must wane, and added strain must be imposed on the Kremlin's foreign policies."<sup>51</sup>

Careful defensive military power, according to Kennan, served a vital role as an accompaniment to the political pressure he advocated. Kennan never argued that the United States could defeat the Soviet Union by force of arms. Military power would enforce limits on Moscow, just as it reflected America's own limits. Military power would give American political actions time and space to encourage positive internal dynamics within societies (including Russia), reflecting their own unique histories. Communism was an alien intruder, and the United States would stand on the side of independence and self-government, not an alternative imposition. That comparison would give the United States and its partners "reasonable confidence" in "a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world."<sup>52</sup>

Containment, as articulated by Kennan, was not a military or an ideological policy. It was a political strategy to nurture developments within societies, on their own terms, that would benefit American interests. That was all.

The first, and perhaps most important, step in containment was to stop Soviet advances and allow European and Japanese citizens to rebuild their societies based on the particularities of their own respective histories. Recipients of American aid, Kennan explained,

“should themselves take the initiative in drawing up a program and should assume central responsibility for its terms.”<sup>53</sup> The Marshall Plan in Europe and the Reverse Course in Japan were anti-communist and pro-capitalist, but they left a lot of openness for local institutions and traditions to set the contours for political-economic development. Despite the horrors of fascism, Kennan looked for continuity in supporting new regimes that resurrected enduring pre-fascist traditions. West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Japanese Emperor Hirohito—neither of whom were American-style leaders—embodied the historically grounded anti-communists that containment privileged. The local and national traditions defined the nature of postwar democracy for Kennan, not American models, which Kennan always found ill-suited and undesirable.<sup>54</sup>

Early success in containing communism and helping national leaders build alternatives encouraged Kennan’s counterparts, including figures like Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles, to increase American ambitions. After the shock of the North Korean invasion of South Korea, with Soviet and Chinese communist collaboration, American policymakers undertook a breathtaking set of global investments in nation-building throughout East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and soon Africa. Fears of communist penetration in the Western Hemisphere, and a long-standing tradition of American intervention in the region, had already driven this dynamic close to U.S. borders in the early 1950s. In the compelling analysis of one historian, the defensive posture of communist containment slipped into an aggressive pursuit of preponderant power around the globe.<sup>55</sup>

The lingering trauma of the Second World War made it hard for American leaders to maintain perspective on foreign threats. Communist aggression on the Korean peninsula and elsewhere evoked memories of Nazi and Japanese war making, which triggered panic and an overwhelming response. American leaders also believed that they now commanded military and economic power that was absent



a decade earlier. They intended to use their newfound power, often flagrantly, to bolster morale at home.<sup>56</sup>

Threat inflation and an overestimation of American power characterized NSC-68, an influential document written by Kennan's successor on the Policy Planning staff at the State Department, Paul Nitze. Containment now became a clarion call for American intervention around the globe to attack communist sympathizers and support preferred American leaders. There was no time to let history take its course in each society. The United States and its allies had to act quickly and decisively to slam the door shut. In the 1950s, this thinking motivated a series of American-sponsored coups in Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, and elsewhere. In the 1960s, it led, most tragically, to Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

Kennan was the author of containment who, less than a decade after articulating his ideas, became a chief dissenter against their deployment by his government. He characterized the militarization and globalization of communist containment as yet another example of American decadence. The massive primeval American monster with the pin-sized brain was all-out or all-in. Now that it was all-in, the country was hyperactive, responding everywhere with force and money, even if national interests were not at stake and the solution was worse than the problem. Americans were unprepared for the new environments into which they entered with strong determination and very weak knowledge. Trying to anesthetize societies like Iran, Guatemala, and Vietnam from communism, the United States was undermining healthy forces it did not recognize, creating new indigenous enemies, and overextending itself.

Writing of American leaders in the early months of the Vietnam War, Kennan said, "it seems to me that they have taken leave of their senses." He was clearly dismayed. "I am absolutely appalled at what is going on," Kennan explained to his wife. "It looks to me as if Mr. J[ohnson] had lost his head completely."<sup>58</sup> Kennan famously went

public with his criticisms of the Vietnam War in particular, and American Cold War strategy as a whole, in 1965 and 1966.

He followed those criticisms in later decades with urgent calls for nuclear disarmament and peaceful cooperation with the Soviet Union. In the months after Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980 on a platform of getting tough with Moscow, Kennan became somewhat apocalyptic:

Adequate words are lacking to express the full seriousness of our present situation. It is not just that our government and the Soviet government are for the moment on a collision course politically; it is not just that the process of direct communication between them seems to have broken down entirely; it is not just that complications in other parts of the world could easily throw them into insoluble conflicts at any moment; it is also—and even more importantly—the fact that the ultimate sanction behind the policies of both these governments is a type and volume of weaponry that could not possibly be used without utter disaster for everyone concerned.<sup>59</sup>

The world had entered what Kennan called a “cloud of danger.”<sup>60</sup> American policies of communist containment had morphed into aggressive adventures that promoted foreign wars and violent dictatorships in regions far from core U.S. interests. Policies of containment also financed a gargantuan military in the United States. Oversupplied with nuclear weapons, this military was over-deployed around the globe, in Kennan's eyes.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an old and embittered Kennan renounced most of what was done by the United States in the name of containment. He came to regret how his early ideas had become justifications for rigid anti-communist policies and interventionist tendencies, which he abhorred. Kennan lamented the absence of enlightened American leaders who displayed the courage to return

to the flexible and limited vision of containment that he had initially intended. Kennan's ideas had changed over the years, but he blamed the presidents and other officials who implemented them for what he viewed as simplistic and short-sighted policies. Kennan still hoped for a sophisticated prince, who would listen closely to him—and read his writings attentively—on all strategic matters.<sup>61</sup>

He was, then, like Machiavelli, looking to instruct a prince who would empower him. Kennan relied on a combination of history and personal experience to make his arguments. On the model of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, he searched for lessons that would endure. In his most ambitious moments, Kennan embodied Machiavelli's mining of historical wisdom to elucidate the present. Machiavelli famously wrote:

When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently re-clothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me.<sup>62</sup>

Like Machiavelli more than four centuries earlier, Kennan lived in a world where few policymakers had the time or inclination for such serious contemplation. The irony of becoming the arch critic of his own misused words makes Kennan the American Machiavelli of the 20th century. The Florentine sage was frequently misunderstood—and condemned—in his own time, and his words have been repeatedly misused over five centuries to justify some of the worst horrors in politics. Machiavelli, like Kennan, was not justifying all forms of force against adversaries, nor was he empowering the prince to adopt any means in pursuit of his cause. Machiavelli's message was about balance, careful application of force, and the strategic pursuit

of the state's interests in a dangerous world. He emphasized limits as much as possibilities; attention to history and circumstances instead of simple answers.<sup>63</sup>

Writing from his own policy exile in 1513, Machiavelli warned Lorenzo de' Medici about the false allure of doctrinal consistency or the pursuit of power for its own sake. Machiavelli emphasized the aspiration to a "well-ordered state." And this required, in his famous account, a mix of love and fear, and an avoidance of hate:

A dispute arises, whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The response is that one would want to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to put them together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two....The prince should nonetheless make himself feared in such a mode that if he does not acquire love, he escapes hatred, because being feared and not being hated can go together very well.<sup>64</sup>

For Machiavelli, policy was a constant rebalancing of efforts to manipulate love and fear in citizens, allies, and adversaries alike. This required intelligence, courage, and careful use of force to win affection without inspiring hatred. The well-ordered state, in Machiavelli's estimation, protected its core interests by managing complex and respectful relations with different peoples for mutual gain. War was a last resort that the prince must prepare for, but he should fight infrequently, relying on persuasion and compromise more often.

Power, for Machiavelli, was in managing the opinions of others. Words and arms were tools, not ends in themselves. The state depended on how its leaders appealed (positively and negatively) to a wide range of actors in ever-changing circumstances. "Thus," Machiavelli wrote, "a prince who has a strong city and does not make himself hated cannot be attacked."<sup>65</sup>

Kennan and Machiavelli shared an iconoclastic temperament and a somewhat quixotic desire to be intellectuals and policymakers at the same time. They criticized their peers in the policy community who wielded more power with less thought. Both men suffered profound self-doubt and regret for the very limited influence they exercised directly over their societies' policies. Both were dismayed by the distortions of their ideas for contrary purposes.

Machiavelli began *The Prince* with an argument, in his dedicatory letter, that policymakers needed more knowledge than they possessed by virtue of their position: "to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people."<sup>66</sup> Machiavelli promised to use his experience and his deep reading of history to give the prince access to the knowledge he needed about the peoples and issues he confronted.

*The Prince* is filled with historical examples and the lessons derived from them, articulated for a leader without time to master that history. Machiavelli's short book does not recount the history in detail; it helps the reader to use some of that history to ask better policy questions. A leader, according to Machiavelli, "should be a very broad questioner, and then, in regard to the things he asked about, a patient listener to the truth." Historically informed questions would elicit better direction from advisers and allow for better decisions by the policy maker: "good counsel, for wherever it comes, must arise from the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince from good counsel."<sup>67</sup>

Kennan wrote for precisely this reason. He wanted to help American leaders (his intended readers) gain good counsel, especially from him. His first short book, *American Diplomacy*, was his adaptation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* for the Cold War. Based on six lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago in 1950, Kennan interrogated the history of American foreign policy from the Spanish American War of 1898 through the Second World War. He argued that this

history was useful to derive a “theoretical foundation” for policy. Exploring how the United States grew into a world power, and the deficiencies of the country’s preparations, Kennan hoped to offer a “stimulus to further thought on these problems and to worthier efforts by wiser and more learned people.”<sup>68</sup>

These worthier efforts, according to Kennan’s historical analysis, had to be aware of the inherited problems facing American policymakers. Echoing Machiavelli, Kennan was skeptical of public opinion, which his account described as myopic, inconsistent, and ill-informed. He was also critical of American moral self-righteousness, trumpeted by policymakers who were ignorant of foreign societies and beholden to their voters’ prejudices.

Kennan depicted a counterproductive rashness in America’s democratic behavior abroad, which was bouncing between the excesses of isolation and intervention, with advocates of each tactic promising a utopia of peace with minimal sacrifice. “I cannot resist the thought,” Kennan explained, “that if we were able to lay upon ourselves this sort of restraint and if, in addition, we were able to refrain from constant attempts at moral appraisal—if, in other words, instead of making ourselves slaves of the concepts of international law and morality, we would confine these concepts to the unobtrusive, almost feminine, function of the *gentle civilizer of national self-interest* in which they find their true value...posterity might look back upon our efforts with fewer and less troubled questions.”<sup>69</sup>

What Kennan called “feminine” restraint against moral self-righteousness and adherence to the national interest was the core of his argument. It was Machiavelli’s too. The prince, according to both men, had to see through the words and myths, focusing on the uses of power that best served a “well-ordered state,” and in Kennan’s time, a well-ordered world. Both Machiavelli and Kennan used history to show the perils of too much benevolence (love) or too much force (hate). Leaders had to find the right balance, mixing different

forms of power to build relationships between peoples that connected them around their histories and their interests.

The interests of the state were civilizing forces for Kennan and Machiavelli because they set limits on excesses of all kinds. Permanent peace was not possible, but permanent war was self-defeating. The interests of the state required circumstantial knowledge and constant adjustment. They were consistent and legible to friends and foes alike. And the interests of the state set achievable goals—some would say “realistic” goals—for leaders.

George Kennan was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s great oracles because he issued an uncomfortable, Machiavellian warning that policymakers often did not want to hear. American democracy empowered attitudes and behaviors that threatened its sustenance. Daniel Bell famously called these traits the “cultural contradictions of capitalism.”<sup>70</sup> Kennan was more focused on politics and foreign policy. With his razor-sharp prose, he diagnosed an ever-present American tendency to excess in consumption, militarization, and intervention. These tendencies were driven by high-minded idealism and grubby selfishness. They infected economic policy at home and foreign policy abroad.

Kennan’s writings have enduring appeal because they describe these phenomena and offer alternatives—from containment to negotiation to restraint. There are no silver bullets in Kennan, no easy escapes from the dilemmas he describes. But there is hope. And there is a worthy struggle in each of Kennan’s writings to make American policy fit the complexity of an ever-changing world. If Machiavelli is the place to start for modern politics, Kennan is the essential primer on foreign policy. His final sentences in *American Diplomacy* capture the everlasting dilemma of balancing capabilities with restraint, power with wisdom:

I am frank to say that I think there is no more dangerous delusion, none that has done us a greater disservice in the past or that threatens to do us a greater disservice in the future, than the concept of total victory....If we are to get away from it, this will not mean that we shall have to abandon our respect for international law....It will mean that we will have the modesty to admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding—and the courage to recognize that if our own purposes and undertakings here at home are decent ones, unsullied by arrogance or hostility toward other people or delusions of superiority, then the pursuit of our national interest can never fail to be conducive to a better world.<sup>71</sup>

Kennan carried Machiavelli into the Cold War, and beyond. We shall never stop arguing about these two difficult thinkers. We are better for these arguments, even as they shake our daily attitudes.

Kennan and Machiavelli demanded powerful states with strong leaders, but they warned against the excessive use of power and misguided displays of strength. They were idealists in their attachment to the noble purposes of enlightenment and self-rule; however, they justified repeated demands to abandon principle for survival. Most of all, Kennan and Machiavelli remind us that the world is not as we wish. We cannot re-make it in our image, but we cannot turn away in disgust either. We must make do and work on the edges, as best we can. Americans, like Florentines centuries earlier, still struggle to learn the frustrating art of statecraft.





*Richard Haass*

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# INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD HAASS

October 1, 2018

**Editors:** We'd like to begin with the natural connections you have with George Kennan, having been director of Policy Planning and then at the Council on Foreign Relations. You have two very important tent poles of Kennan's career, the Mr. X article and then his role as director of Policy Planning. We'd like to get your sense of the biggest impacts he had with these positions, with the article and the role of first director of Policy Planning. What has been important to you? What do you consider important today?

**Richard Haass:** I think when history considers George Kennan, the most important element is probably "The Long Telegram," which in a slightly revised form ended up in *Foreign Affairs*. And he will forever be known as the father, or whatever other word one wants to use, of containment. And the magazine publication, the *Foreign Affairs* publication of it, was obviously important for it as a public document because up until then it had been an internal document. But it was when it was an internal document, it gave shape to what some people were thinking. It just captured the moment. And then when it went public in the magazine, it was important because foreign policy never thrives if it's made only in private; you need public support. And containment, given its various dimensions, required a lot of public support. So the public articulation was just as important in its own way as the initial private articulation.

As for Kennan at Policy Planning, obviously he's the most famous director of the office. He got it started. It's had a very uneven history since then. My own sense is, he's less significant for the bureaucratic perch he occupied than for the particular memos and ideas he put forward. And that's simply because policy planning in many ways cannot be institutionalized. The impact of the office, the impact of the director, of the staff depends a great deal on the person in the job, on the appetite of the Secretary of State, on the openness of the administration to receive certain kinds of big ideas, and on the moment. Not every moment in history lends itself to big rethinks. Not every moment in history lends itself to big ideas.

But Kennan came at a time when people were looking for big ideas because it was one of those transitions in the world, in this case going from the World War II world into something else. And it was a moment where people were for obvious reasons searching for big ideas, for policies that would help the United States navigate this very different world. And so you have the context, you have Kennan who by temperament and background was able to produce big things. And in somebody like Marshall you had a Secretary of State who was open to it and then was in a position—given his relationship with Truman—he was in a position to promote it. So the stars aligned in ways for Kennan that I would argue they didn't align for any of his successors.

**E:** We want to follow up on context, on place and time as a matter of career and as a matter of policy. In our era, containment has a unique status. Other policy ideas can get rolled into some kind of dichotomy like hawk versus dove, or realist versus idealist. They basically fall into a more traditional version of the foreign policy debate, whereas containment stands on its own. And maybe that makes it more timeless. Do you have a perspective on that?

**RH:** Containment stands apart probably for at least two reasons. One is it did provide direction for U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War

and in particular towards the Soviet Union. I don't want to exaggerate it because we had fierce debates over, for example, Vietnam. And someone could believe in containment and support what we did in Vietnam and someone could support containment and oppose what we did in Vietnam. Containment wasn't a cookbook that gave you recipes. But still, it gave you a first order take and a direction on what the United States ought to do in the world at that time and it gave people an intellectual handle, and intellectual handles are important.

What's also interesting about containment is it has turned out to have more staying power than many might have predicted because it offers a framework for dealing with other imperial or expansive actors on either the regional or world stage. So even though it was devised as a response to the Soviet challenge in the late 1940s, at various times either in part or in whole it's provided at least some direction for how to deal with other countries. For example, one sees elements of it in the Iran debate today. So it actually turns out to be a slightly less context- or time-limited concept than I expect even Kennan would have imagined when he wrote it.

**E:** On the subject of Kennan's legacy, We were wondering if you could speak in somewhat personal terms about when you came to read Kennan for the first time, on the effect of his writing style, on the things that you might wish to emulate, and on what you have not sought to emulate either in your career as Policy Planning director or as an interpreter and commentator on international affairs?

**RH:** I would expect my answer will disappoint you. I read Kennan first as a graduate student at Oxford in the 1970s. And then and now it is impossible not to be impressed by the range of his intellect. What's so interesting about Kennan is he represents the kind of classical education that almost nobody gets any more. His ability to draw not just from history, but from literature, reflects a richness that we rarely see. English majors and historians and political science majors

are rarely to be found in the same person and Kennan was such a person.

Both the breadth and the depth stand out. But almost in some ways because of that, because of his background, there was almost a Europeanness to it. There was something about Kennan—I hope this is not misunderstood—but there are some parts about him that were not to me particularly American; they were much more European in certain ways.

It didn't have a big influence on me because that's not a league I can play in. I don't know who can but it's certainly not one that I can. And when I was at graduate school—and I don't mean to compare myself to either lest anyone get the wrong idea—but the people who influenced me more were Hedley Bull, an Australian academic who wrote a book called *The Anarchical Society*, which more than any other single book has framed my own outlook on the field, and Henry Kissinger. I read *A World Restored* when I was a graduate student. I remember reading it the fall of 1973 when I first started at Oxford and that had a tremendous impact on me.

So more than Kennan, those were the two individuals whose writing and thinking influenced my own. This idea that at any moment in history there are forces of anarchy and forces of society, and that is what gives the character of the world order, or lack of it, at any moment. And what I so liked about Kissinger was his ability to weave not just history into a narrative, but his ability to go back and forth between specific points of history and then to take a step back and provide a larger perspective, a larger take on what the specific pieces of history were telling us if only we were able to understand them. The metaphor that comes to mind is a camera that zooms in and zooms out and zooms in and zooms out. And I found both of them to be great influences.

Kennan was very much of the realist school. Indeed, he had very little time for thinking about promoting democracy abroad and re-

shaping other societies. I'm not as extreme as that but I lean in that direction. But he also had a pretty good understanding of the need to take the cultures, and histories, and philosophies, and perspectives of others into account. That led to a certain restraint. To use modern-day language, in no way was he a transformationalist. There was an understanding of history that I liked about Kennan because it made one a little bit more humble and a little bit more careful.

I absorbed that in the same way I did other people who were closer to the realist perspective. But in my own case, we never met that I can recall. Indeed, I wrote him when I was at S/P [the State Department Office of Policy Planning] and said I'd like to come see him and he basically said thanks but no thanks. He was one of the major contributors to the field. And if I were ever going to write, say, an intellectual history of American foreign policy, he would be a part of it.

But for me at least, he is not one of the top influences. And at S/P, again, when I was there I did not come to work and say "What would George Kennan have done?" Or when a problem came my way, I would not think of it in those terms. Again, I was simply trying to do what I could, given my abilities, my staff, and more important, given the context. Given the issues we were dealing with, given what the secretary of state, in this case Colin Powell, wanted, given what the interagency would tolerate or allow.

So, Kennan's experience at S/P didn't have great meaning for me with two exceptions. I kept on my desk a mug that said, "Avoid Trivia," and secondly, like every other person who sat in that position, there were days of satisfaction but also days of real frustration. The Policy Planning job, at the end of the day, is a job about influence, not power. And everybody who has sat in that job I expect had his or her moments of real frustration, simply because your ability to influence is not something dependent upon the power of your own prose.

**E:** You've mentioned Kennan having a salience that goes beyond

time and place, the enduring notion of containment. That suggests a lasting relevance after 1991. At the same time, the world changes fundamentally when the Cold War comes to its end.

**RH:** Sure.

**E:** So is it possible to argue for the fading away of at least some of his insights as we've entered a new era international in international affairs?

**RH:** It's a fair question. I've written myself that containment could survive and did survive everything except its success. I never thought I'd see the day that what Kennan basically called, what he predicted to be, I think his phrase was, "the mellowing of Soviet power," would happen. That after decades of frustration, that ultimately the second dimension of containment, this one of internal change inside the communist world, inside the Soviet Union, would occur. Most of the emphasis was on pushing back on the containing part, but it turns out that both dimensions of what Kennan had written about came to be after 40 years, quite suddenly in many ways. Like a lot of other people, I was taken by surprise.

I think after that Kennan was in a position more like others. And by that I mean containment and his whole argument there at the dawn of the Cold War gave him a unique place in the foreign policy firmament. But 40 years on, when, after containment, again, succeeded beyond the expectations of just about everyone, I would think, he was at that point one of the community offering ideas of what to come next. And just like not all of his previous ideas necessarily were taken or came to fruition (for example, some of his ideas on nuclear weapons were essentially flat out rejected), his ideas, say, about NATO enlargement were not welcomed by some and did not have much of an influence on U.S. policy.

So I'd say for most of his career he was an influential voice, but containment was the one moment where he was truly primus inter

pres, and had a special place and always will occupy a special place in the foreign policy pantheon because of it. But at other moments in the debate, he was an important voice; he was simply a respected voice. He would be writing in places, say, like the *New York Review of Books*, so he was in the foreign policy debate. He was a “liberal” voice who was arguing against, say, American overreach, as he saw it, something that became a persistent theme of his writings. Within that he was simply—and I don’t mean this with any disrespect—he was simply a voice, a respected voice but again, I don’t think he was ever able to re-create the kind of influence he had at the beginning of the Cold War when it came to other debates.

**E:** As far as I can tell, principally via a Tom Friedman quote in the 1990s, Kennan very clearly opposed any kind of NATO enlargement. You had a front seat for that debate and for the implementation with respect to the Baltic States in the early 2000s. Did you have access to Kennan’s argument at the table? Maybe you had some who were channeling that argument as it was expressed at that time? Who did the most justice to Kennan’s concern about overreach, about not reintegrating Russia into the kind of European, Euro-Atlantic, Western security and political world and instead about alienating them? And in what way was that argument defeated from your vantage point? How did that go?

**RH:** We didn’t have a full view on that, in part because most of that conversation took place during the eight years of the Clinton presidency. That was really the period at which the NATO enlargement policy was born, and debated, and initially implemented. So I was more aware of the external debate where, as you mentioned, Tom Friedman, Michael Mandelbaum, and others were against it, and obviously the preponderance of people in and out of the administration were for it.

When I worked for Bush 41 just before then—Clinton was 42—the debate was not about NATO enlargement, it was more about how



does one react to Gorbachev's predicament, to Yeltsin's succession, what sort of help do we give Russia under what terms. And if you remember at the time, it was Richard Nixon on the outside who was arguing the United States should be more generous and more ambitious given Soviet/Russian needs. And I think the Bush administration—this is 41's administration—largely held back. The president was always careful to be sensitive to Gorbachev, never to humiliate him or anything like that, to be sensitive to his position.

But we didn't do as much, say, as Nixon thought we should do for Russia at that juncture. I think Nixon had a point. If we had done that, no one could say whether it would have made an appreciable difference in Russia's trajectory, but I think there's a fair case for saying we should have been more forthcoming. The NATO enlargement debate largely took place over the next eight years and as I said, I was out of government. When I got back into government under Bush 43 and I was at Policy Planning—just to be clear when I worked for 41 I was on the NSC staff, I was overseeing the Middle East-Persian Gulf-South Asia directorate, though I did get involved in some other issues, including this question of aid to Russia, which I think came up in '92, if I remember correctly.

But in Bush 43 I remember arguing in a set a memos that we should rethink parts of NATO enlargement. I was never a big enthusiast of it. And I worried about two things. I worried about its impact on Russia and I worried about the obligations we were taking on. And I didn't understand why we were so quick to dismiss two other options, which was either making the Partnership for Peace more attractive or even bringing Russia into NATO. NATO by that point had become increasingly an out-of-area mechanism and countries essentially decided or chose whether they participated in this or that undertaking.

It was less and less of an all-or-nothing alliance so I actually put forward at one point the idea that we should either think about bol-

stering the Partnership for Peace or think about offering Russia some type of limited NATO membership. But those ideas went nowhere. By then NATO enlargement already had tremendous momentum. So I was going against some pretty powerful forces.

**E:** Starting in 2014 with the renewed crisis between Russia and Europe, Russia and the United States, George Kennan returned. People were claiming Kennan for several different and conflicting positions. Do you think that Kennan had a second life after 2014 and if so, in what fashion: as a critic of NATO expansion, as the author of containment? Which George Kennan has been the one that we've most needed since 2014? And in fact in a situation that resembles a new Cold War, then does that breathe new life into both the debate and the ultimate policy framework that governs our policy towards the first Cold War?

**RH:** Not particularly. Russia today poses a very different sort of challenge. We're not in a global competition in the same way that we were. I mean, it's much more interesting as a construct if you think about China. Russia seems to me to pose multiple challenges, whether in terms of European security, whether in terms of what it's doing in the Middle East, whether in terms of how it's using digital tools to interfere in our and others' elections. But I see Russia as a collection of specific security threats or challenges rather than something systemic. Russia is just too small and too weak to pose a systemic threat and intellectually it offers nothing. I mean, Putin's great failure has been Russia doesn't represent much of anything economically or politically whereas the Soviet Union did offer an alternative.

So if there's a parallel it's much more China. But when it comes to Russia now, the question is what kind of specific responses do we develop for each one of its probes, what do we do about Ukraine or what do we do about the European security challenge, what might we do about the Middle East, what might we do to the digital chal-

lenge. But it doesn't represent something larger. It doesn't represent something systemic and it doesn't represent a model of anything.

China is China. If there's an applicability it would be potentially China. One other thing. Russia under Putin has essentially rejected integration in many forms with the West, whereas China has not. China wants to be partially integrated. It also wants to, in some ways, change the rules of the game. In some cases it's creating an alternative game with things like Belt and Road. So to me the intellectual question would be how does one or could one dust off containment for dealing with the challenge of China.

I'm not wild about the comparison because again I've not given up on what I would call selective integration of China but China does represent, given its economic strength, its size, its growing ambitions as well as capabilities, more of a global challenge to the United States. So again, I don't think containment gives you the overall answer. There are elements of containment that might make sense but containment per se is not a particularly useful framework for either contemporary Russia or for China.

I think the country where it may make the most sense as a model, at least as a starting off point, is Iran. Iran is something of an imperial power in the Middle East. And the question is, if one needs to frustrate Iran's external push in the region, then the question is at the same time, can one bring about a mellowing of Iranian power? And so if there's a country out there where there's an applicability of containment, off the top of my head Iran probably comes closest.

**E:** We want to go back to Kennan and containment and the Soviet Union. How, in "The Long Telegram" and the X article, did Kennan address the threat from Russia—he used the term Russia—to how Americans defined themselves? One of the reasons that the case for renewed containment is compelling is the degree to which today's Russian challenge conjures up a similar internal panic in the

United States: election interference, manipulation of our deepest internal divisions and our most sensitive inequities, genuine unfairnesses and injustices in American society. All of this is being done cynically, just as it was by the Bolsheviks, by Putin's Russia and yet it boils down to a challenge that is about us, more than about where Russia is on the map.

**RH:** I don't see the parallel. For so much of the Cold War, we were worried about the appeal of the Soviet Union and that internal forces in various countries would be attracted to it, communist parties and other such fronts and the like. Nobody is worried about that now. Russia again has a willingness to use brute force, be it military force or energy. It's able to use digital tools to its advantage, mainly to weaken the fabric of other societies. But these are for specific situations. Again, Russia doesn't represent a model of any sort of political or economic development idea.

I think when Putin departs the scene, Russia is going to face a crisis, not only a succession crisis because there's no concept of legitimacy in Russia anymore, but it's going to face a crisis of its political and economic future. None of the foundations have been laid there. So I think it's wrong to exaggerate the Russia [threat]—that doesn't mean Russia is not dangerous, it's not a problem—but I think it's wrong to exaggerate or see it in any way as a new Cold War or justifying containment. It's not that kind of a challenge.

It's a challenge; I don't mean to underestimate it. But it's a different sort of challenge. Again, I think Iran is a better match in the region because it's not self-limiting and I think China potentially, globally, but again China is a more multifaceted country than the Soviet Union ever was. The Soviet Union developed economically largely apart. China is much more integrated. So I don't think containment particularly gives us the tools. But I don't find the parallel to Russia particularly helpful right now.

The challenge for U.S. policy toward China is not to push back all of the time—though in some cases it is—it’s more how to get China to continue its integration but on terms closer to ones we want to see. Where China has been most effective—say, economically harvesting the fruits of that integration without going through many of the disciplines or constraints of integration—that’s been a mistake on our part. The problem, and to me the mistake wasn’t letting China into the WTO, but it was not monitoring its trade behavior close enough after it got in and disciplining it and adapting to it along the way.

But China is not an outsider in many cases trying to overthrow the order, so much as use it for its own purposes, and that’s why, again, containment is not the best model. I also don’t think it particularly works for North Korea. North Korea is not a model to anyone or anything, it’s just a threat and we have to find ways to deter that threat, or one way or another reduce it through diplomacy or other tools. It’s a one-dimensional challenge and in that sense it’s closer to Russia.

But I think Iran is the one country out there, not on a global basis but a regional basis, where the idea of containment probably has its greatest applicability. For China, we’re going to have to come up with a new foreign policy approach, which may draw some elements of containment, but it will also draw many elements of integration. And I think we’ll have to come up with something that’s specific to China.

**E:** One final question. Kennan was a very deep area expert, having been schooled in the European school of humanities and in Russian studies. But he was also an intellectual who came very directly out of the Foreign Service. How are we doing on both of those fronts today, on area expertise and on human capital, in the Foreign Service?

**RH:** Well, area expertise is easier or less difficult to generate: one can study language, one can study history, one can go live in a certain place for a number of years. So, you know, the problem is sometimes with the bias towards rotation. So we seem to often move people around to the point where it’s hard to get sufficient

depth. But all things being equal, my own view, the challenge wasn't with area expertise—it was more, how do individuals who get area expertise not only get area expertise? How do we make sure they have the functional skills; how do we make sure they have the comparative understandings? How do we make sure they have the skills to think about policymaking and think strategically about the United States?

The biggest weakness of many Foreign Service officers, I found, wasn't their lack of knowledge of this or that country or region. Rather, it was that they weren't nearly as good at thinking about what the blue team should be doing, what should we, the United States, be trying to do. That to me reveals the limits of area expertise. Area expertise tells you about just that, a context; it doesn't tell you about how the United States ought to advance its interest in that context or with those countries.

Your second question about expertise more broadly, similar to what I just said, would apply. What I'm going to say now is not going to win me a lot of friends. With very few exceptions, the skills of Foreign Service officers, in many cases, were not strategic. They didn't have enough history and were better, again, at understanding the world of this or that country or this or that region than they were about thinking strategically about the means and ends of American foreign policy. And so I did not find, for the most part, Foreign Service officers all that useful when it came to thinking on the Policy Planning staff or elsewhere about what the United States should be doing in a particular part of the world. They were very good at describing the part of the world, about giving a better feeling for it, but they weren't very good about offering up creative or, if you will, quote unquote, offensive ideas about how we advance our own interests. There were some important exceptions. I can think of a number of individuals who were just that, but they were the exceptions in terms of the Foreign Service.

And it's one of the reasons, by the way, on Policy Planning staffs or National Security Council staffs, you always want to have a mix of people. You want to have a few FSOs, but you also want to have some military officers, and above all, you want to have what I would call scholar practitioners. People, if you will, in Kennan's mold, outsiders, people who were trained academically, people who were trained as historians, or political scientists, or economists, and you bring them in. And to me, often the most effective people in government were people who came to government with a rich background from academia, but they were also practical people who learned how to get things done.

One of the things about Kennan, by the way—I mentioned that when he wrote he often brought in aspects of literature. What I think Kennan's real gift was and what in some ways set him apart was not just the quality of prose or the quality of his thinking, but that he was better able than almost anyone else I know to integrate thinking about culture with other social sciences. So when he wrote about Russia, he could blend or incorporate aspects of understanding Russia, the Russian psyche, Russian culture with history, with political science, and then write about American foreign policy in that larger context. So many of the rest of us, we all come out of universities and we all reflect the training in this or that department.

But as I often tell people who work with me, universities have departments; the world does not. That was to me Kennan's great advantage. He was able to take things from different worlds, again, literature or history, and then combine them in ways that very few contemporary people, particularly those that come out of more quantitative traditions, or more, now, modern social sciences, they can't do. So people who have area studies tend to be narrowly area studies; too many social scientists tend to be narrowly social scientists.

Kennan was a much more—[he] had the kind of richness that comes with a kind of horizontal reach that went across disciplinary lines or de-

partmental lines. And that was his great advantage, so he could write something like "The Long Telegram," the X article, and have a profound understanding of Russian culture and Russian political culture and that provided the background to when he would be writing prescription. And there are very few people, in my experience, who can do that. Indeed, Kennan's one of the only ones.





*U.S. President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Sochi, Russia, April 6, 2008*

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# KENNAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY: LESSONS FROM (AND FOR) EAST ASIA

**Paul Heer**

**G**eorge F. Kennan's impact on American foreign policy was not confined to Russian and European affairs during the Cold War; the same is true for his contemporary relevance. Kennan exercised his most profound influence over U.S. foreign policy as the inaugural director (1947–50) of the State Department's Policy Planning staff. It was from that position that he proposed containing the Soviet Union and developed the strategic rationale for its original centerpiece: the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan). The purview of the Planning staff was global, however, and Kennan was deeply involved in formulating policies toward other parts of the world, including East Asia. Both his strategic approach to the Far East and his thinking about the Soviet Union during the Cold War apply to the primary strategic challenge the United States faces in East Asia today: the rise of China and its bid for regional and global influence.<sup>72</sup>

Although some analysts and policymakers advocate containment of China, he doctrine of containment itself, at least as he originally conceived it, is probably obsolete in East Asia. He never thought it was applicable to China. Kennan insisted that containment was aimed exclusively at preventing the spread of *Soviet* Communist influence. During the early Cold War years, Kennan was among those who assessed—correctly—that Beijing would never fall under the effec-

tive control of Moscow. He later deemed the Sino-Soviet split “the greatest single measure of containment that could be conceived.”<sup>73</sup>

The only place where Kennan thought containment applied in East Asia was Japan, a country he judged both strategically important to the United States and susceptible to Soviet infiltration. Japan was the only Asian country on his list of the five major industrial power centers on the globe; the United States, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union were the others. Kennan long dismissed China and the rest of mainland East Asia as incapable of posing a strategic threat to the United States. Only in Japan should U.S. policy aim at preventing Soviet influence and control. Accordingly, during 1947–48 Kennan was the leading bureaucratic driver of a redirection of American occupation policy in Japan. Policy moved away from a punitive approach and toward an economic reconstruction that would protect the country against potential Soviet inroads. This “reverse course” in occupation policy was essentially the East Asia counterpart to the Marshall Plan.

Kennan nonetheless later advocated elements of an approach to China that seemed to echo his original idea of containment. In the 1960s, he occasionally cited the need to erect barriers against any Communist Chinese influence that upset the post-war balance of power in East Asia. This sounded a lot like his definition of containment in the X article as the “adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.”<sup>74</sup> Kennan today would probably still be promoting policies and strategies for counterbalancing Chinese influence within East Asia relative to that of the United States), which appears to be a central strategic objective of current U.S. policy. It is precisely this objective, and American policies designed to advance it, which Chinese leaders routinely refer to as “containment.” Yet there is a persistent rhetorical disconnect between Washington’s denial that it seeks to “contain” China and Beijing’s firm belief that U.S. policy toward China constitutes “containment.”

Aside from this semantic difference, the key reason that Kennan's original doctrine of containment does not apply to today's China is that China—contrary to the narrative that has emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—does not represent the existential or ideological threat to the United States that the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Kennan would have recognized this, even though he was myopic in his longtime dismissal of China's strategic potential. In the X article, he specified that Soviet ideology asserted a "basic antagonism between the capitalist and socialist worlds" that excluded "any sincere assumption of a community of aims" and instead required Soviet leaders to recognize "that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders."<sup>75</sup>

Chinese Communist leaders have never subscribed to such a zero-sum, winner-take-all strategy. They have moved far beyond any fundamental antagonism between capitalism and socialism. Their "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is essentially a merger with capitalism. Moreover, Beijing's promotion of its governance and economic model abroad is meant to legitimize that model rather than to impose it on the rest of the world. Unlike the Soviet Union, Beijing is genuinely pursuing a "community of aims" with the United States and other Western powers on shared interests and transnational issues of mutual concern. Although Kennan did not anticipate the nature and scope of the strategic challenge from China today, he would have appreciated the differences between China today and the Soviet Union of the early Cold War. Old-school containment would not work against contemporary China.

## **COMPARING THE SOVIET UNION AND CHINA**

Several lessons follow from the distinctions between today's China and the Soviet Union that Kennan dealt with during the Cold War. First, it is crucial not to misattribute motives to an adversary. The current U.S. National Security Strategy characterizes China as a "revisionist power" that is "attempting to erode American security

and prosperity” and to “shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”<sup>76</sup> Kennan would have been duly skeptical of these assertions. Among the mistakes that he ascribed to U.S. policymakers after World War II were those “involved in attributing to the Soviet leadership aims and intentions it did not really have.”<sup>77</sup> Writing in the late 1970s, he criticized Washington for making several false assumptions about Moscow: that Soviet leaders were still “primarily inspired by a desire, and intention, to achieve world domination”; that the Soviet military served “primarily aggressive rather than defensive purposes”; and thus that “the differences in aim and outlook between the Soviet Union and the United States... can be resolved only by war or by the achievement of an unanswerable military superiority by the one party or the other.”<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, recent trends in the characterization of China’s strategic intentions are eerily reminiscent of a shift Kennan perceived in the 1970s toward a “frame of mind in which the Soviet Union appeared in a far more menacing posture than had been the case for the past decade.” He speculated that this “seemingly inexorable advance” of “hysteria of professed fear and hostility” was attributable to “a subconscious need on the part of a great many people for an external enemy...in the light of the frustrations and failures American society had been suffering at the time.” Whatever its causes, Kennan characterized its effects as “the sweeping militarization of the American view of East-West relations...the acceptance of the likelihood, if not the inevitability, of a Soviet-American war; [and] the contemptuous neglect of the more favorable possibilities.” In his estimation, all of these assumptions were “either quite incorrect or highly improbable” but “like all false prophecies and all false images of conflict and enmity, tend to be self-fulfilling.”<sup>79</sup> As he observed: “A war regarded as inevitable or even probable, and thus much prepared for, has a very good chance of eventually being fought.”<sup>80</sup>

Similar assumptions are widely echoed in American commentary and policy discussions about China today. As the U.S. policy documents cited above show, a menacing and militarized view of China has fueled the fear that Beijing's Communist leaders are determined to undermine American security, prosperity, values, and interests. But this exaggerates the nature and extent of China's strategic objectives, which are essentially focused on maximizing China's own security and prosperity relative to the United States. Beijing clearly is competing with Washington and is doing so broadly and relentlessly. The National Security Strategy correctly asserts that China "will compete across political, economic, and military arenas" using "technology and information...economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda" and "gain competitive advantages against the United States."<sup>81</sup> But this is not, and need not be, an existential winner-take-all contest. Chinese leaders almost certainly recognize that making it so would be destabilizing and probably futile. Yet the American presumption of such an absolutist China goal—and "neglect of the more favorable possibilities," as Kennan warned with regard to the Soviet Union—could be a self-fulfilling prophecy by prompting U.S. strategies that reinforce *Chinese* fears of absolutist *American* goals. This risk would be exacerbated if—as Kennan also suspected in the Soviet case—U.S. perceptions of the Chinese threat today reflect in part the "frustrations and failures of American society."

In another claim of central relevance to China, Kennan attributed Washington's misunderstanding and mischaracterization of Soviet intentions to an American failure to understand the Russians' historical mindset. "I tried to show," he wrote, "that this Soviet threat looked less dramatic when viewed from a historical perspective than when that perspective was absent."<sup>82</sup> The original X article was built on Kennan's analysis of Russian history as the primary source

of Moscow's world view and its approach to dealing with perceived external challenges. Similarly, the prevailing American understanding and characterization of Chinese strategic goals and behavior largely overlooks or dismisses the historical "sources of Chinese conduct"—especially what the Chinese call their "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers from the 1840s to the 1940s. For the U.S., lack of attention to this Chinese historical experience is a major source of bilateral distrust and misunderstanding. Too often Washington undervalues the crucial defensive element in China's historical mindset.

## **RATIONALIZING U.S. EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS IN EAST ASIA**

In addition to highlighting the risks of misunderstanding China, Kennan would also caution against expecting too much from China. In particular, China is unlikely to replicate American values and modes of governance or diplomatic conduct. Kennan long believed that U.S. policy towards East Asia (as elsewhere) was overly moralistic. He lamented the "tendency to achieve our foreign policy objectives by inducing other governments to sign up to professions of high moral and legal principle," and he specifically complained that this "seems to have achieved the status of a basic diplomatic method" in East Asia.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, Kennan would be skeptical of the current emphasis on Beijing's obligation to comply with Western "rules and norms" in its international behavior. In 1950, during a policy debate over whether Communist China should be admitted to the United Nations, Kennan criticized the "moral indignation about the Chinese Communists" that he saw infecting policy discussions. In another comparison with the Soviet Union, he warned that Washington was grappling with the same problem that had afflicted "we old Russia hands" 20 years earlier: "the fundamental ethical conflict between their ideals and ours." Kennan recommended that Washington not let this derail pragmatic diplomacy: "Let us recognize the legitimacy of differences of interest and philosophy" between countries "and

not pretend that they can be made to disappear behind some common philosophical concept.”<sup>84</sup> With regard to Russia, he said “there is no use in looking for...a capitalistic and liberal-democratic one, with institutions closely resembling those of our own republic.” Americans should “repress, and if possible...extinguish once and for all, our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves.”<sup>85</sup> Kennan would have said the same about China today. U.S. policies aimed at producing regime change or at restructuring China’s economic system to make it less competitive or easier to manage are likely to have only incremental if any success.

In the late 1970s, Kennan recommended a pragmatic approach to China: “tread warily and not too fast, recognizing the great differences in the psychology of the two peoples as well as those that mark the ideals and purposes of the two governments.” This could be done “without neglecting, or failing to manifest, the great respect Americans have traditionally had for Chinese civilization and the sympathy they have felt for the vicissitudes of Chinese life in the modern age.” His bottom line was straightforward: “Let us collaborate where we can, agree to differ where we cannot, and see whether we cannot contrive to live reasonably peaceably together for the time being, despite our differences, not asking too much of each other—or too little.”<sup>86</sup> Although the strategic challenge from China is substantially greater than Kennan anticipated when he wrote this in 1977, the same guidance seems wholly appropriate today.

Beyond advocating a moderation of American expectations of China, Kennan would go further: recommending a reassessment and recalibration of overall American strategic goals in East Asia. The perennial U.S. policy objectives in the region are: preventing the emergence of an exclusive, hostile hegemon there that threatens U.S. access and vital interests; and sustaining the United States’ own primacy as security guarantor in the Western Pacific. The latter is generally viewed as the best way to avert a hegemonic challenge from China. Kennan probably would be ambivalent about both of these premises. Although China probably does seek to restore what it sees as its



rightful place as the preeminent power in East Asia, there is no compelling evidence that it seeks to establish a hostile, exclusive hegemony that excludes a U.S. role or presence there. On the contrary, Beijing almost certainly sees this as neither achievable nor necessary, and Chinese pursuit of it as likely to be counterproductive, risking China's own security and economic prosperity.

In addition, U.S. primacy is itself not permanently sustainable in East Asia. Kennan was always carefully attentive to American capabilities, emphasizing the need to define interests and objectives so they did not exceed the country's grasp. This applied especially to East Asia, and it still does today. Kennan wrote in 1948 that Washington—despite its enormous international power in the wake of World War II—was “greatly over-extended in our whole thinking about what we can accomplish, and should try to accomplish,” in East Asia: “We will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives.” He advised that “we must observe great restraint in our attitude toward the Far Eastern areas” because “the day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts.”<sup>87</sup>

This thinking was only reinforced by the impact of the Korean War and later the Vietnam War, both of which confirmed the constraints on Washington's ability to secure its preferences and to dictate the course of events in East Asia. Today, given the shifts in the balance of power that have followed the Cold War, Washington again faces the need to “deal in straight power concepts” in the Western Pacific, and to adjust its policies and strategies there accordingly. This should include recognition that defining U.S. primacy in the region as a vital long-term interest would probably be counterproductive. It could fuel a “winner take all” contest that China itself would prefer to avoid.

## **PURSUING A NEW REGIONAL BALANCE**

Because a shifting balance of power in East Asia is eclipsing the “Pax Americana,” Kennan probably would support those who ad-

vocate proactive efforts by the United States and China to pursue a new balance of power in the region and not to risk an escalatory arms race or zero-sum struggle for hegemony. Here too his thinking about U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War is instructive. Kennan judged that Washington's failure to engage Moscow in just such a process in Northeast Asia had contributed to the Korean War: "We Americans had little interest in negotiating with the Russians a political settlement of the problems of that region, and particularly one which would have put an end to our military presence in Japan." In Kennan's view, this was likely because "we had already made up our minds that Moscow was determined to launch a new world war" for which Washington would need Japan "as a military outpost." But it was also because "Russia was already identified as the epitome of evil; and it wouldn't look good, from the domestic political standpoint, to be negotiating and compromising with evil."<sup>88</sup> Similar sentiments are now fueling reluctance or resistance to any kind of mutual accommodation with China, even though this might be the only viable path to avoiding a new cold war.

Central to this approach would be avoiding a military response to what are essentially non-military problems. China's territorial and maritime sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas are obvious dangers in this respect. Kennan spent the second half of his life insisting that he never intended containment to be a military strategy, and his approach to East Asia always emphasized the need to minimize U.S. military commitments in the region. His early Cold War vision for American policy there generated what became the "defensive perimeter" concept: an offshore balancing approach that excluded American forces or military commitments on the mainland of East Asia. Kennan's version went further in advocating the demilitarization and neutralization of Japan, with the exception of U.S. bases on the island of Okinawa. The Korean War, however, negated the defensive perimeter concept by providing the rationale for U.S. military alliances with South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan and the beginning of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Kennan had advised against all of this.

Nonetheless, and possibly because of that history, Kennan's warnings about the militarization of foreign policy problems remain valid in East Asia today. Here another comparison between China and the Soviet Union is illustrative. When Kennan perceived a "sweeping militarization of the American view" of U.S.-Russia relations in the 1970s, he asked rhetorically what impact this was likely to have on Russian officials, who "have always been prone to exaggerated suspicions." Given that, he predicted that "Soviet leaders will see sinister motives behind these various phenomena—that they will conclude, in particular, that we have come to see war as inevitable and have put out of our minds all possibilities for the peaceful accommodation of our differences"; if so, "then they, too, will tend to put such possibilities out of theirs."<sup>89</sup> This later formed the basis for Kennan's criticism of the U.S. decision to pursue NATO expansion in the 1990s. He correctly anticipated that the inclusion of former Soviet bloc countries in NATO would fuel post-Soviet Russia's threat perceptions and the subsequent hardening of Moscow's approach to Washington.

Similar worries accrue to Chinese perceptions of the emphasis on military alliances and deployments in the post-Cold War U.S. approach to East Asia. Beijing perceives a range of U.S. policies in the region as military challenges to Chinese interests and security, whereas Washington perceives China itself as expansionist and routinely dismisses the notion that Chinese military behavior is a response to steps taken by the United States or other countries. Recognizing this as a classic security dilemma, Kennan would have advised that U.S. policymakers help mitigate it by focusing more on diplomatic and economic engagement than on military posturing in order to defuse regional tension.

Kennan, however, would not have sought to abandon the U.S. alliance network in East Asia. Despite his reservations about the alliances and the rationale for their establishment, which echoed his resistance to the original establishment of NATO, he would concede their utility as vehicles for shared interests and goals. At the same

time, he cautioned against taking allies for granted. Although he subscribed to and even pioneered the notion that Japan should be the centerpiece of U.S. policy in East Asia, he was always skeptical of the military aspect of the alliance. He correctly anticipated that the U.S. military presence in Japan would become a source of bilateral tension, predicting that Tokyo would eventually seek to make independent judgments about its foreign and security policies. In the 1970s and 1980s, he even encouraged the Japanese to do so. Tokyo to some extent is following that advice today, partly because it is uncertain about the long-term reliability of Washington's attention to Japan's interests.

More broadly, Kennan advised against expecting too much from U.S. allies and partners in East Asia. He anticipated that their nationalism would chafe under perceived U.S. pressure, and observed that their comfort with and confidence in U.S. engagement in the region could be fickle. Referring specifically to the U.S. competition with China for regional influence, Kennan observed in 1964 that "we are working here with and through the reactions of people who are not under our power, and on whose loyalty and obedience we can lay no ultimate claim." In its engagement in the region, Washington was attached "not just to the virtues of our associates...but also to their weaknesses: to their domestic political ambitions, their inefficiencies, their blind spots, their internal rivalries and divisions, their ulterior commitments." The United States had been hampered "at one time or another, by short-sightedness, by timidity, by indifference, by misunderstanding, by deliberately inculcated error, by dislike of foreigners or anti-western prejudices, and above all, by the congenital tendency of people to respond to the efforts of outsiders towards their protection by slackening their own."<sup>90</sup>

All of these variables are amply visible in East Asia today, imposing limits on what the United States can presume to accomplish through its network of alliances and partnerships in the region. There are persistent and, in some cases, expanding fault-lines between U.S.

interests, objectives, and threat perceptions and those of U.S. allies in the region. These fault-lines have been exacerbated by growing uncertainties about the substance and sustainability of Washington's commitment to the region, given the constraints on the resources the United States can devote there. These trends have prompted many countries in the region, including U.S. allies, to recalibrate their foreign and security policies, reinforcing their reluctance to choose sides between the United States and China.

## **MAKING FOREIGN POLICY**

Kennan's wisdom on some East Asian issues notwithstanding, there were flaws and inconsistencies in his approach to the region that would encumber his contributions to foreign policymaking today. Some of his ideas were short-sighted or unrealistic, such as his dismissal of China's strategic potential and his proposal for the neutralization of Japan. His ethnocentric and racist attitudes toward East Asian peoples' capacity for governance, although typical of his generation, marred his judgment and would be anathema in diplomacy today. Some of his ideas were not politically viable because he was often inattentive to the domestic political drivers of foreign policy. He believed that foreign policy should be insulated from the vicissitudes of public opinion. Kennan would no doubt be appalled by the influence of social media on foreign policy today, and by the role that the press and party politics play in constraining policy options or forcing decisions.

He would be particularly dismayed by the marginalization of expertise that often occurs in the politicized fog of the decision-making process. During the intense policy debates in the summer of 1950, when Washington was grappling to understand the motives and actions of the various players in the Korean War, he characterized the debate as "a labyrinth of ignorance and error and conjecture, in which truth is intermingled with fiction at a hundred points [and] in which unjustified assumptions have attained the validity of premis-

es." He complained that substantive expertise was being dismissed as too arcane to serve as the basis for crucial policy decisions, bemoaning the discomfort among policymakers with input from experts "to analyze the probabilities involved in your enemy's mental processes or calculate his weaknesses. It seems safer to give him the benefit of every doubt in matters of strength and to credit him indiscriminately with all aggressive designs, even when some of them are mutually contradictory." Kennan lamented that he and his fellow Russia experts were "inclined to wonder...whether the day had not passed when the Government had use for the qualities of persons like ourselves."<sup>91</sup> The same problem is reflected in many of today's policy debates about China's strategic intentions and behavior, which often appear to be informed and driven by specious evidence, simplistic analysis, conspiracy theories, or ideological bias.

Another flaw in Kennan's approach to East Asia was his failure to reconcile his advocacy for strategic restraint with his belief that American credibility and prestige should not be compromised. He faced this dilemma on the Korean Peninsula, which he had dismissed as strategically unimportant but where he immediately supported U.S. intervention in the Korean War: he deemed the Communist advance an unacceptable setback for U.S. credibility in the region. Similarly, he had advised against U.S. involvement in Vietnam but did not advocate complete withdrawal until American prestige was irretrievably lost. Kennan was not alone in having no easy solution to this dilemma of credibility versus restraint, which continues to complicate U.S. foreign policy—particularly in East Asia, where Washington faces the challenge of adjusting to historical shifts in the balance of power.

Despite these flaws and inconsistencies, one element of Kennan's thinking merits close attention in the strategic environment the United States now confronts in East Asia. Kennan focused consistently on the *limits* on American power and influence and the need to take those limits into account when defining American strategic interests and objectives. His relatively narrow definition of U.S. interests and

his opposition to extensive foreign military commitments almost certainly reflected an understanding that the United States' position in East Asia after World War II was a historical anomaly that could not be eternal. Almost 75 years later, he would see validation of this in the tectonic shifts in the balance of power both within East Asia and globally that have been wrought by globalization, technological change and the rise and fall of great powers. Washington needs to acknowledge the impact of power shifts on its relative capabilities and to recalibrate its foreign policy wish list to bring it into alignment with what is reasonable and achievable.

Kennan would offer one final word of advice. He observed in the X article that the Soviet challenge was "in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations" and that American success in meeting that challenge would depend in large part on "the degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country that knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problem of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."<sup>92</sup> He reiterated this theme in the 1970s: "show me an America that has pulled itself together and is what it ought to be, then I will tell you how we are going to defend ourselves against the Russians."<sup>93</sup> As for the challenge of dealing with China today, these words are as applicable as they ever were.







*Anne-Marie Slaughter*

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# INTERVIEW WITH ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER

September 25, 2018

**Editors:** We'd like to ask you to expand on a legacy that must have been a daily presence for you at Princeton as well as at the Office of Policy Planning and then to comment on the various issues in which George Kennan played a big role, from Russia to global grand strategy to the interplay between American domestic affairs and our role in the world.

**Anne-Marie Slaughter:** George Kennan is a legend for anyone who came of age during the Cold War and studied international relations because international relations really was U.S.-Soviet politics and the ramifications of U.S.-Soviet politics.

He set the terms of U.S. policy and the Soviet response, not as he actually intended it to be, which is a large part of the irony of George Kennan; but containment was certainly the frame.

I would have said containment and engagement, although we paid more attention to the containment side, but for him it was containment of the Soviet Union and engagement of our allies.

From that point of view, I could have told you as an undergraduate who George Kennan was and what his containment policy was.

Indeed, I knew about the director of Policy Planning because of George Kennan.

In that role, he's the icon for all of us. But if you are the director of Policy Planning, and if you are as I was, the first woman director of Policy Planning, I felt a particular need to try to do important or lasting work. And if you're a Princeton graduate working in foreign policy, then he is doubly venerated as a great Princetonian. You can't move without thinking about George Kennan.

Indeed, immediately after I was named, I was given a copy of a photograph in the archives at Princeton of Kennan being sworn in as ambassador to the Soviet Union which I kept in my office when I was at Policy Planning and still have in my office now.

The shoes are even bigger to fill because, as director of Policy Planning, George Marshall said to Kennan: "Avoid trivia," which is the informal motto of the policy planning staff. Kennan acted on that advice by creating the Marshall Plan.

He was a towering figure, and his office was the nerve center of some of the most important policy initiatives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; I'm not sure anyone has ever lived up to that.

Some of those stories are probably apocryphal, but let's just say Kennan's shadow looms very large indeed.

**E:** You were not only the first woman to occupy the post of which George Kennan was the inaugural holder, but you were one of a relatively smaller number of scholars who served in this position.

**AMS:** Yes.

**E:** Kennan has an interesting mixed background. He had a very traditional scholarly grounding in Soviet affairs, Russian history, etc.

At the same time, he was a man who spent his career in government in the Foreign Service until he moved to the Institute of

Advanced Studies at Princeton. What are your thoughts about the balance between the role of scholar in policy planning and that of a policymaker?

**AMS:** I think it's gotten harder and harder in the intervening decades to straddle those two worlds. If you think about the OSS in World War II, plenty of the top diplomats and professors went in and out much more readily than they do now in large part because of the hyper specialization and quantification of what we now call political science. In Kennan's day the field would have been called politics or government or international affairs, which tells you a lot right there.

I think it was also easier for diplomats to be scholars. They were deeply specialized in the language and culture of a particular country or region and were encouraged to write wide-ranging analysis in cables.

Indeed, Kennan's long telegram is called "The Long Telegram" for a reason. It is essentially a scholarly article.

The idea that you could be a deep thinker and a scholar in the sense of someone who is extremely well-read, who is grounded in history and politics and culture and who can put new ideas together and have a role to play in the government and in the academy was something that was much more true in Kennan's era than it is today. Today there are only a handful of people of my generation who have held positions at our leading universities and also served in government, in politics. There are a number of economists, but I can name on one hand my colleagues who have done that.

Instead, you have people who are in think tanks, which did not exist in Kennan's day. Brookings did and the Council on Foreign Relations did, but you didn't have nearly the range of think tanks that you have now.

Those at think tanks, although they often have an advanced de-

gree, a doctoral degree—it's often from Britain, not from the United States—generally do not meet the criteria of academic departments in a particular discipline. The academics do more basic research; think tankers focus more on the details of policy, whereas Kennan really focused on history and culture and politics in a deep sense to inform policy. I think that's gotten harder to do.

**E:** We'd would like to ask about the possible difference in sensibility between yourself and Kennan. Educated as a historian and a Russianist, he always strikes me as an intelligent pessimist.

**AMS:** Yes.

**E:** We'd think that there's a certain optimism in the way you look at international politics. Is Kennan distant in that respect or do you feel a strong sense of that intellectual connection to him?

**AMS:** Yes, I think Kennan and I are—we're not opposites but we line up differently in the different schools of international relations. He'd call me a legalist/moralist. He would associate me with people who get the United States into trouble because we are too optimistic about human nature and about the United States and the potential of its power. And he would be right that I am more optimistic than he was.

On the other hand, I would say that some of these differing perspectives come with age and experience and the times you live in. Kennan had just come through World War I and World War II. He had seen the very worst of what man can do to man, and he understood the ways in which grand ideas and visions can go terribly, terribly wrong from World War II, obviously, but equally importantly, I think, from 1917.

If you're a Russianist, you've seen the hope of the early revolution against the czars and then you've seen what became of that and so you're suspicious of grand visions. Whereas if you're me, you've

come of age in the 1960s and 1970s and the early 1980s. The 1970s were a time of malaise and disarray. But fundamentally the United States had won the two great wars of the 20th century, fighting on the right side. The full implications of Vietnam had not yet been internalized.

1989 was this defining moment for my generation, a time of great hope, optimism, and human potential. I was 31 in 1989; the Cold War had ended essentially on Western terms; the peoples of Eastern Europe were rising up and claiming their universal rights. One of my very first scholarly articles was called “Revolution of the Spirit,” about the profoundly human dimension of those revolutions.

But I will say that 30 years after 1989 I’m probably more of a Kennan disciple. I still see the best of human nature and think it will triumph. But I am chastened by exactly what he warned us about, which is intervening and believing we can shape others without fully, deeply understanding who they are, what their culture is, what their motivations are.

In the telling of the history of the Truman administration, Kennan was the intellectual godfather of the Marshall Plan.

This exemplifies the reach of American power in shaping the intellectual, political, social, and economic context for much of the world. But we have never been able to duplicate what we achieved in the rebuilding of Europe and Japan.

**E:** So how could Kennan’s vision of human nature and his pessimism or skepticism have generated a policy vision like the Marshall Plan, which ended up being so successful?

**AMS:** Yes. I do think where Kennan was both prophetic and profound in a way that he gets less credit for was in understanding the domestic roots of foreign policy.

We think of containment as linked to structural realism, a doctrine

I think Kennan had very little time for. It focuses on geopolitical structures of hegemony, bipolarity, and multipolarity and assumes all state behavior can be deduced and predicted from that structure. I think the domestic dimensions of Kennan's thinking, which are also the historical dimensions of his thinking, don't get enough attention.

What he's really saying about Russia, or the Soviet Union, is: contain them and in the end they will destroy themselves because domestically they will not be able to succeed either economically or socially and, relatedly, they will not preserve their legitimacy with the Russian people.

The flip of this is that in designing the Marshall Plan he was not saying we will remake the world in America's image by re-imposing democracy. He's saying: let us enable these countries to chart their own course and then let us empower them to do that. And that's a really different view. It's the opposite of something like structural realism. It is understanding that you must let people find their own way to a version of liberal democracy. That could look very different in what would then have been West Germany or Italy. Or, as you say, originally he was thinking Poland or Hungary; let them make their own plans and then we will give them the money or at least the investment to realize those plans. It was an excellent way of framing American foreign policy.

Interestingly, I think that's closer to at least one interpretation of Woodrow Wilson than many people assume. John Milton Cooper has a whole article and part of a book on how when Wilson said, "the world must be made safe for democracy," what he is saying is we need to establish the peace that will allow different nations to find their own way. He was not saying, "we will create democracy everywhere." He was saying that nations will find their own way. The passive, "must be made safe for," was very deliberate.

At any rate, Kennan certainly saw the necessity of grounding economic and political developments in the cultures and history of dif-

ferent countries, and I think he also recognized a real role for historic individuals.

**E:** We've grounded Kennan here as a Europeanist. We've defined him as a pessimist and a product of his historical circumstances. But do you think that he was also something of a fatalist about certain peoples, groups, nations?

**AMS:** Yes.

**E:** What happens when we compare his sensibility to a globalized worldview, which favors the idea that everyone should have access to ideas and prosperity and opportunity? Do you think that Kennan was overly dismissive of the potential of East Asia, for example, or of Russia and Russians? Was part of his worldview archaic in that sense? Do you think it was a realistic assessment of the world as it was and maybe arguably where we've ended up now?

**AMS:** It's hard to answer that question without engaging in a certain amount of amateur psychoanalysis which probably isn't fair to him.

I think of him as somebody who went to Princeton myself and who understands the ways in which people of a particular social class can create very strong structures of being insiders and outsiders. And Kennan reflects this sense of being an outsider—we know this from John Lewis Gaddis's biography and some of his own writings.

He was the Midwesterner at Princeton who never quite fit, not in his own perception. He was a loner in many ways and I often wonder to what extent that shaped his view of different groups. In a world in which there's an in-group and an out-group, they're very carefully defined, and you really are pretty locked in.

That is far less true of Princeton today, I think, but it was true when I was at Princeton and that was in the 1980s; I can only imagine how it was for him. You can read about that. I wonder how that might have shaped his sense of social and cultural fixity as opposed to



a more modern sensibility where we're keenly aware of race and ethnicity and the ways in which discrimination and conscious and unconscious bias lock people in.

We're also aware that that can be transcended and we're in a world in which you can travel to China or Russia or Indonesia or Kenya and befriend people and stay in touch with them and see their children and the way they feel about their families in ways that are enduring and universal.

I do think Kennan had a set of attitudes about the fixity of groups and cultures that I understand from his own background. That's amateur psychoanalysis, but I think many of our attitudes are quite different today.

**E:** We want to ask about the Arab Spring.

**AMS:** Yes.

**E:** What if Kennan's insights in a different regional context and a different time and from a different sensibility were to have been applied to the Arab Spring and to the ways the United States engaged and failed to engage with it? Can you give us your retrospective assessment of how we did? What might have been missing from the approach that was taken?

**AMS:** Here when I think about Kennan it's both as an intellectual giant and as someone whose very long life contained multitudes. You can apply and invoke different parts of him.

With the Arab Spring, I think that the United States was at a moment of hope and change. That's what Barack Obama ran on. And we were only too ready to see that as a global moment.

Social media played right into that because you had the Twitter Revolution [in Moldova], the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Rose Revolution [in Georgia]. When you suddenly see Wael Ghonim

organizing 70,000 Egyptians on a Facebook page, you think, yes, this is now the Arab version of the ball—it's not Kennan, it's Jefferson—the ball of liberty rolling around the world.

This is subconscious as much as conscious, because it really was the mood. I was in the Obama administration for the first two years, and I left just as the Arab Spring was beginning. I left right after Tunisia; Egypt was happening as I was leaving; Syria began to erupt a month later. But we were on the right side of history, we thought. I still think so.

In that first flush of that kind of revolutionary moment, people have power and they can speak, and they can topple governments and old orders and establish new ones. From the vantage point of 2017 or 2018, of course, everything looks very different.

I still think the Arab Spring is like the French Revolution or even the American Revolution because the American Revolution, in many ways, needs to be understood together with the Civil War. It took a long time to get to something that looks like a real liberal democracy—and we are still not there for many Americans.

In the French Revolution, you have much sharper counter-reactions of extremism and absolutism and terror and empire, going through the revolutions of 1848. That's the way we need to understand the Arab Spring. We knew—and when I say we, I mean the Obama administration, the Bush administration (Condi Rice made a similar speech to Obama's "New Beginning with the Muslim World" speech), probably even the Clinton administration—that you cannot oppress people forever. Sooner or later, U.S. support for stable but deeply autocratic regimes was going to become unstable, and when it did, we were going to be on the wrong side.

That was a debate that broke open in the Obama administration very clearly in Egypt where Frank Wisner and Hillary Clinton are saying, "maybe we should slow this down." Ben Rhodes and Samantha

Power were saying, “we should support the demonstrators against Mubarak—we need to be on the right side of this.”

But, it’s very interesting to wonder what Kennan would have thought with his knowledge of 1917 and how quickly something that was genuinely idealistic turned into something cruel and distorted.

It would also have been interesting to see where he would have come down on the ultimate outcome. I believe that ultimately those young people will not be denied, that they will demand to join the world of countries that respect individual rights and freedoms for their citizens and try to achieve self-government, even if they do that in very different ways and even if it takes a long time.

**E:** A very brief follow up. When Kennan was asked late in his life—this may have been already after the Cold War altogether—what his biggest regret was in policymaking in his time in government, he said it was his support for various nationalist insurgents during the early Cold War inside the Soviet Union.

**AMS:** Wow.

**E:** Right. Well, as you said, he had a long life.

**AMS:** Yes.

**E:** In that light, if you think that the circumstances of the network, the Web reality we live in now, can you say that it is a fair game? Is it part of good foreign policymaking to take into account groups that cross the sovereignty boundary of other states whether they’re big states like Russia or China or—the medium-sized Middle Eastern powers? Is Kennan’s era over in this respect?

**AMS:** I think this is one of the fundamental questions. When I said earlier that I am chastened, I believe that the United States and other liberal democracies do need to support their compatriots or their

fellow members of global communities striving for the values and rights embedded in the UN Charter.

I think we do need to support them, but I am much warier about how. We lead people along, and that's a terrible thing. Kennan saw this in Prague and Hungary. That's what we've done in Syria in many ways. Who knows what would've happened if Barack Obama had not said, "It's time for Assad to go," if we had instead made clear to the Syrians that we were not prepared to help them in their struggle?

If you are a dissident in another country and a country as mighty as the United States says, "I support your movement," then you think they'll help. And I've come to believe that is immoral. If we are not going to actually provide the help that those groups believe they need, we need to be very clear about what we mean when we say we support them.

To the point about the Web world: I think it's critical that we engage the world in which there are affinities of all kinds, for good or ill, be it hate or racism or violent religious ideology or be it women's empowerment and democracy and human rights and lots of good things.

The kind of work that Kennan and many, many, many other Americans who have served officially in Russia or in non-governmental organizations have done with Russians who want a better country is right, but the question is not just how we manage expectations—that's such a gray, bureaucratic word or phrase. The question is how our obligation to our own people limits the amount of support we really can give to other people, and how we can be clear about this.

Again, I think I started out a Wilsonian and I'm creeping towards Jeffersonianism in upholding the power of our example more than the example of our power, a phrase Obama borrowed from Bill Clinton and used in his inaugural address.

**E:** We'd like to follow up with a question related to Russia. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton used to pressure his staff, Strobe Talbott and others, to come up with a doctrine as pithy as containment.

**AMS:** Yes, he did.

**E:** We can imagine that when you became the director of Policy Planning that Russia was one of several important issues but that it wasn't predominant. Of course, we're speaking about Medvedev's Russia, but could you speak about your own strategic thinking, that of your office, Secretary Clinton's, and the president's strategic thinking about Russia at that time?

**AMS:** It's striking because Russia was not really on the radar beyond engagement, which is hard to believe now. But engagement was a basic principle of Obama's foreign policy. In the beginning of the 1990s, when Clinton was pushing everybody to come up with an alternative grand strategy, the equivalent of containment, they came up with enlargement, which didn't exactly capture either the popular or bureaucratic imagination.

Enlargement meant enlarging the sphere of liberal democracy, and I remember Anthony Lake's speech on it at Harvard: it landed with a thud. And then Obama had engagement, which I have come to think of as a statement of philosophy. It was not a statement of strategy, but of a core belief that engaging countries is better than isolating them. Indeed, with Myanmar and Iran and Cuba, there were important diplomatic victories; many of which sadly have now been undone.

But engagement certainly applied to Russia. I was at the dinner in Switzerland and Geneva where Secretary Clinton presented the reset button to Foreign Minister Lavrov. Of course, we had mistranslated reset, but we were determined to reset relations with Russia. Obviously, with Medvedev there, there was an opportunity to engage positively.

But beyond that Russia was not a force. That's very important to understand because I remember in the 1990s giving talks about the world and not even mentioning Russia. I would mention China and the BRICS countries like Brazil and India and South Africa, but Russia had fallen off the global map, which for Russians was deeply, deeply humiliating. That humiliation is still driving Putin and the support for Putin today.

When I think back to what we were all thinking about, was there a doctrine? I remember Secretary Clinton gave a speech on a multi-partner rather than a multi-polar world. That didn't exactly capture public imagination either.

We actually had a debate within Policy Planning about whether it was a good idea to try to search for one overarching doctrine—we called it “the containment obsession.” Derek Chollet, my deputy who had been in the Clinton administration, had written about this effort to live up to Kennan, and said that this is a fool's errand. The world's too complex; let's forget about trying to look for one encapsulated strategy and recognize we've got lots of different strategies for different places.

I still felt that there was a way to capture overall themes of our policy, but I'm not sure we ever got there. It was not so much about specific countries, and to the extent it was it was certainly not about Russia.

I would say the biggest set of issues on the table in 2009 involved engagement with the Muslim world. The biggest foreign policy speech that Obama gave in his first year was his call for a new beginning with the Muslim world in June of 2009, which is interesting to think about in relation to the Arab Spring.

Then there was the whole effort to follow that up by engaging different majority Muslim countries, but of course, without the resources of the Marshall Plan.

I think there was a desire to engage the Muslim world very differently. And Obama himself saw that as a region where he could make progress.

And the other focal point for us was China. The Obama administration really came in thinking that we were not paying nearly enough attention to China. China and the Pacific are going to be the most important arena in this century, and we need to pivot from the Middle East and Europe to the Pacific basin. A tremendous amount of attention was paid to the strategic and economic dialogue with China and how we were going to engage China.

Russia was not really a focal point which, I think, has been a large part of Putin's desire: once again to make Russia unavoidable in U.S. strategy.

**E:** We would like to go back in time to a more prosaic question. This is about Kennan's criticism of NATO expansion and his criticism of the Iraq War. Could you offer your thoughts on these two issues from the vantage point of 2018?

**AMS:** As for NATO, I was part of a Council on Foreign Relations task force on NATO enlargement. I was invited to join by Charlie Kupchan, who was the executive director.

As a Russianist—I'd studied Soviet politics and Russian history in college—I knew far more about Russia than I did about Central and Eastern Europe. My starting point was to be opposed to NATO enlargement for all the reasons that Kennan and other Russianists said: that this would inflame the Russians, that our relationship with them is critically important and we're building it, and to do this will strengthen hardliners in Russia.

You had people like Zbigniew Brzezinski being very open about the Russian bear rising again and that we had better get the NATO line as close to its border as we possibly can.

I started that way. I changed my view because Richard Holbrooke came and gave a presentation to our study group where he said, “Look, you’ve got countries in the Balkans coming apart and governments that are trying to beat back nationalism, racism, authoritarianism, some of which we are seeing again today. Those governments need to have something to offer the people, and it’s going to take a long time for EU membership,” which I knew was true.

NATO is the umbrella of the West and if you don’t allow NATO to expand, these countries are going to come apart, he argued. We had already seen the war in Croatia and then it was in Bosnia.

When he talked about Romania and Hungary, Budapest and greater Hungary, that was persuasive to me. I still think that was right because in the end, if you measure success in terms of the number of people whose lives are better as a result of the expansion of NATO and then the expansion of the EU, I think that was worth it, even though it alienated Russia.

I have a view that says you don’t look at the international system only in terms of great power politics, You look at it in terms of people, and states are legitimate to the extent that they represent and serve their people, which is why the Chinese government—just as an aside—is not fully legitimate. But it’s a lot more legitimate than many governments in the world. It has lifted its people out of poverty, just as an aside.

So, I still feel that expanding NATO was the right thing to do, but not as a geopolitical strategy so much as a way of stabilizing Central and Eastern Europe; and I think that was worth it.

As for the war in Iraq, it was an unmitigated disaster. I opposed the war in Iraq absent a UN resolution. But had the UN supported the war, I would have been for it.

I did believe there were weapons of mass destruction, and I believed



that the Iraqis would greet us as liberators. There were a lot of things that I thought were true that were not, and I think the Iraq War is the best example of Kennan's attack on the Vietnam War, on legalism, moralism. Even though I don't actually think that George W. Bush was motivated by legalist moralist reasons, I think there was an illusion of our power that has had terrible, terrible consequences.

**E:** Kennan concludes "The Long Telegram" with lines that characterize the challenge from Russia—he says Russia, not the Soviet Union—as a challenge that is about our internal life. "The thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society," he writes.

Derek Chollet was right about the global landscape, that there are far too many and too disparate challenges to have a unified field theory for addressing them. And yet the precedent challenge is who we are. What's our outlook and how is that relevant for facing these challenges in the world? It seems to me Russia is where this comes to a head today because it seeks so explicitly to exploit the vulnerabilities of American identity.

**AMS:** Yes. I agree. I have been thinking a great deal recently about Russia in the 1950s and what we thought of as Russian propaganda pointing out U.S. racism and the effort to desegregate the schools and massive resistance and the role of women, all of which privileged white Americans saw as purely Russian propaganda, you know? We were a great country and they were just picking on us.

But from the vantage point of today, you look back at the very same pronouncements by Southern politicians and blocks of senators and on police using firehoses on civil rights demonstrators and hurling epithets at African American children going to all-white schools and you think, "well, well, wait a minute." Russia was no paradise, but as they were pointing out, neither were we. I think that we were closer to living our values than they were to living theirs, but I don't think either of us succeeded then or is succeeding now. But it is noteworthy

that plenty of defectors fled from Russia to the West; I don't know any other than spies who went the other way.

And I think that in my own life this is why I have moved from foreign policy to domestic policy, to running an organization called New America that is really about American renewal. I deeply believe we cannot be the force for good that we hope to be in the world without renewing ourselves at home— deeply, radically renewing ourselves at home—that our democracy is broken and we are going through a period of our history that is testing us the way the Civil War tested us. Fortunately, it is not as violent or bloody, but the stakes are comparable. Can we make it to a majority minority country, or better, a country of multiple pluralities because that's really what we will be? There will be a time when the default of "American" will no longer be a white Protestant person. It will be a person of any number of colors and any number of faiths. Can we get there and still be the country we say we are in terms of our Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, our founding values, our civic creed?

To the extent that Kennan understood that we face rot from within as much as conquests or conflict from without, I think he was exactly right. Right now, in many ways America is its own worst enemy, and we have to renew ourselves. I believe we can.

I use the term renew very advisedly because it is a question of filling those great words and ideals of Abraham Lincoln, of Martin Luther King, of Susan B. Anthony, and of the many, many, many Americans who have taken that founding creed and said, "Well, what does this actually mean and we're not living up to it and we must live up to it."

We're in that moment. I believe we'll prevail. I believe the country will renew itself, but I don't think it's a sure thing. I think right now we should be devoting more of our energies to making good on our values at home than to spreading them around the world.



*John Tefft*

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# GEORGE KENNAN'S IMPACT ON MY CAREER AS A U.S. FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER

**John Tefft**

I am a retired diplomat whose 45-year career in the United States Foreign Service focused primarily on Russia and Eastern Europe. Although I never met George Kennan and am by no means a Kennan scholar, I was, like most of the diplomats of my generation, strongly influenced by his example and thinking. This is an account of George Kennan's recurring impact on my career representing the United States in Russia and other nations of Eastern Europe both before and after the end of the Soviet Union.

I joined the Foreign Service in January 1972. I had grown up in Madison, Wisconsin and gone to Marquette University in Milwaukee. It was only natural that I was drawn to Kennan, a fellow Wisconsinite from Milwaukee, who made his way to Princeton and then to the U.S. Foreign Service. I read George Kennan's book, *Memoirs, 1925–1950*, early in my career. The book was one of the main contributing factors in my decision to devote the bulk of my professional career to Russia and neighboring countries.

I remember being impressed and humbled by Kennan's academic achievements and his formidable language skills. I was awed by his knowledge of Russia and the Russian people. What struck me the

most at that time, however, was Kennan's ability to transform his many ideas into practical policy initiatives and thereby to contribute to the formulation of American policy. His work as the director of the State Department Policy Planning staff and his role in the creation of the Marshall Plan were particularly impressive to young Foreign Service officers like myself.

Service officers like Chip Bohlen and Llewelyn Thompson became models for me and many of my colleagues who chose the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe more generally as our career path and who sought to have an impact on the evolution of our policy as the Soviet Union imploded and the new nations of the former Soviet Union came into being. I should mention that one of Henry Kissinger's main aides at this point was Larry Eagleburger, also a native of Milwaukee, a fact not lost on me or the few other Wisconsin natives then working in the department.

Although I never met Kennan, from 2003 to 2004 I served as the senior State Department officer at the National War College in the deputy commandant position in which Kennan had served in 1946. I sat for a year in the office and at the desk which I was told George Kennan used and at which he reportedly wrote a good portion of the 1947 Mr. X article, "Sources of Soviet Conduct," for *Foreign Affairs*. I thought it more than a little ironic that I took this position immediately after serving as U.S. Ambassador to Lithuania, during which NATO took the decision to admit the Baltic nations to NATO membership, a decision Kennan strongly opposed. As you might imagine, I was constantly teased at the War College about when I would write my own Mr. X article. My friends are still waiting.

Like Kennan, I used that year at the War College to ground myself in some of the classics of strategy. Although I had studied American and European diplomatic history, I had never engaged in a serious examination of how nations develop national security strategy, certainly not with the rigor with which they teach it at the War College.

We studied the great “strategic inflection points” in history, particularly the demise of the Soviet Union and its impact on seemingly every corner of international affairs. We also undertook a deep study of realism and idealism in foreign policy, with a focus on the then raging Iraq War. But inevitably those discussions drew me back to a concerted look at the role of U.S. policy in the post-Soviet space.

I think most of my State Department colleagues during these years understood clearly the role of Kennan and his articulation of the policy that came to be known as “containment.” We were all his intellectual protégés. We also understood how our policy had evolved in ways with which Kennan disagreed, in particular building NATO as a defensive military alliance of like-minded nations to resist Soviet aggression and prevent war in Europe. I became personally aware for the first time of the impact of Soviet domination during a tour of duty in Hungary from 1979 to 1982. Although Janos Kadar’s “goulash communism” was perhaps the mildest version of a Soviet-controlled communist regime, I saw every day the deleterious impact of this regime and its policies on people’s lives, not just in Hungary, but when I traveled to Romania, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. The severe limitation on people’s freedom had a deep effect on my thinking.

I was made keenly aware of the Soviet willingness to use force during my first week working on the Soviet desk at the State Department in 1983, when the Soviet Air Force shot down KAL 007. Later I watched as the Soviet Union walked out of the arms-control negotiations with us that were designed to stop the deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe. Subsequently, my position on the Soviet desk gave me a unique perspective on the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev and the Reagan administration’s early efforts to engage with him and end the Cold War. The eventual demise of the USSR seemed to open up a new set of strategic opportunities with which to engage Russia and the successor states that emerged from the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Bush administration set out on a dual task: to build a secure and prosperous relationship with Russia *and* build relationships with the newly independent nations of the former USSR. Secretary of State James Baker ordered the establishment of embassies in each of the new states and then traveled to each of them to start building relationships with their new political leaders. I was deeply involved in setting up those embassies and staffing them with Foreign Service officers who sought to build not only government-to-government ties but people-to-people connections. The Clinton administration continued these policies and simultaneously embarked on the first round of NATO enlargement in Central-East Europe.

Frequently, I found myself re-encountering Kennan and his ideas. I would read his interviews and criticism of the Clinton and Bush administration policies, particularly on NATO enlargement. I tried to understand his logic but was also only too aware of the contradictions in his approach, which his critics did not hesitate to point out. Too often at that time he seemed to almost be on the verge of preferring the continuation of the status quo rather than dealing with the new opportunities and dangers of the post-Soviet era.

In those days, many of us thought that the time had arrived to right the wrongs of the Yalta Agreement of 1945. It would give the nations of Central and Eastern Europe the chance to develop new, independent, and hopefully democratic societies which would enhance the interests of their people and in the process build a new order in Europe—a Europe whole, free, and at peace. Membership in NATO would also bring greater stability to a part of Europe that had been the source of instability and imperial competition for centuries.

I also understood the realist criticism of this approach—that we should take Russia on its own terms, a deeply insecure nuclear power whose history drove its leaders to constant efforts to secure a strategic buffer and spheres of influence in neighboring countries.

But how was this in America's long-term interest? Did this not condemn us to a continuation of the same Russian role we had seen during the Soviet period? And how did this square with a rising tide of nationalism in East-Central Europe and later in the post-Soviet period among the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union? Wasn't working with these new states also an essential component of realism as we approached a region that was changing so radically and so quickly? Was this not, as Kennan wrote in "The Long Telegram," putting "forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of the sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in the past"?<sup>94</sup>

In 1996, I was appointed deputy chief of mission in Moscow. I served with Ambassador Tom Pickering for four months and then began a period of ten months as *chargé d'affaires* before Ambassador Jim Collins arrived. During this interim period Secretary of State Madeline Albright held several meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, with a particular focus on finishing the negotiations of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Time and again, I saw Secretary Albright seemingly bend over backward in these negotiations to try and accommodate Russian concerns, which were often based on clear misunderstandings of NATO and its defensive mission, and to find a place for them within the new security structure the Clinton administration was trying to build in post-Soviet Europe.

Alas, Albright's efforts proved to be of no avail. Russian participation in the NATO-Russia Council never realized the hopes that had been initially invested in it. The more American officials argued that NATO and the EU would help stabilize the historically volatile regions on its periphery, the more it seemed that the Russian elite reverted to its zero-sum game approach to European security in the post-Soviet world. I am well aware of those who argue that this was a foolhardy mission, but I honestly do not think the Russians took advantage of the new possibilities which were discussed at that time. The Russian political elite could not bring itself to abandon or even modify



its long-held approach of wanting to control institutions and trying to dominate neighbors to satisfy its own unquenchable desire for security.

During my three years in Moscow, I came to appreciate that one of George Kennan's great gifts to us in the Foreign Service was the incisive brilliance of his analysis of Soviet society and his understanding of the Russian people. His analysis was matched by his craftsmanship in writing. Despite the limitations placed on Kennan and other staff when he worked at the embassy in Moscow, his understanding of Russia was a model for all of us who tried to penetrate the history, complexity, and contradictions of this huge nation. To paraphrase Susan Glasser in her December 23, 2011 *Washington Post* review of John Lewis Gaddis's biography, *George Kennan: An American Life*, I came to admire George Kennan the Russia hand more than I did George Kennan the American strategist.

I remember being particularly struck by the quote in Gaddis's book from an essay which Kennan wrote for Ambassador Averell Harriman on the historical contradictions which characterized the Soviet regime and Russians more generally. Glasser re-quotes it:

Russians were "used to extreme cold and extreme heat, prolonged sloth and sudden feats of energy, exaggerated cruelty and exaggerated kindness, ostentatious wealth and dismal squalor, violent xenophobia and uncontrollable yearning for contact with the foreign world, vast power and the most abject slavery, simultaneous love and hate for the same objects."<sup>95</sup>

Conscious of America's own paradoxes, I resolved not to forget Kennan's words as I tried to understand this fascinating yet paradoxical land. In the same essay, Kennan wrote another truism that has stuck with me throughout my career: "The strength of the Kremlin lies largely in the fact that it knows how to wait. But the strength of the Russian people lies in the fact that they know how to wait longer."<sup>96</sup> I have often thought of that characterization not just in terms

of Russia's own development but also in the context of the Kremlin's approach to negotiating with us. We are an impatient power in international affairs. Strategic patience is not a hallmark of American foreign policy.

In late 2013, I retired from the Foreign Service after completing an assignment as ambassador to Ukraine. My retirement was short-lived, as I was soon asked to serve as the United States ambassador to Russia. My wife Mariella and I lived in the ambassador's residence at Spaso House from 2014 to 2017. Rarely a day went by when something did not come up that reminded us of George Kennan. We encountered numerous stories about his impact on both the establishment of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and his abiding impact on Russian policy.

I had arrived in Moscow after America's relations with Russia had taken a deep plunge. The bloody confrontation on the Maidan had occurred in Kyiv, and President Yanukovich and his closest aides had fled to Russia. Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and sent "the little green men" into the Donbas, provoking a "hybrid war" which has cost thousands of lives. Europe and the United States had placed serious sanctions on Russia. In response, Russia placed limits on our work and that of our allied embassies in Moscow, particularly our access to some Russian officials. The situation did not improve substantially as long as I served in Moscow. Indeed, levels of harassment of the American embassy and our staff increased to levels unheard of since the darkest days of the Cold War.

Here again George Kennan entered the picture. Kennan had always argued that as we opposed the Soviet government, we had to do everything we could to stay in touch with the Russian people. My colleagues and I took this to heart and tried very hard to travel as frequently and as widely as possible throughout Russia.

It was not easy, as the government also sought to limit our access to official and ordinary Russians in the regions. This was a part of the

Russian leadership's fear of "colored revolutions" spreading in the country. The government had already closed our American Corners in regional libraries all over Russia before I arrived. Soon after I got to Moscow, it shut down our FLEX program, which brought talented Russian high school students to the United States for a year of study and a homestay with an American family. It forced our American cultural center to close in the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature, which left us no option but to reopen a center on the embassy compound. Finally, it passed laws labeling Russian individuals and organizations "foreign agents," clearly trying to intimidate them and limit ties to Western counterparts.

It was difficult to counter these repressive measures, and we tried to avoid putting our contacts in positions where they got in trouble with the authorities. In addition to travel and personal contacts, we also sought to employ social media to reach younger Russians by widely distributing articles and information about the United States. We gave interviews and press conferences on Russian language websites which reached all over the country. We employed a tried-and-true embassy approach of holding concerts at Spaso House, promoting American culture and U.S.-Russian cultural ties. Again, we used social media, building our capability to reach out to internet users all over Russia by streaming concerts live.

Today our relationship with Russia is even more complicated as we try to find a way to deal with our differences over Ukraine, Syria, Iran, the use of chemical weapons and agents, and, perhaps most importantly, Russian cyberattacks on our democratic institutions. I often wonder what Kennan would think of the array of issues that divide us today. Would he see Russian behavior today, with all the new information and military technologies and the techniques of hybrid warfare, as a further set of threats to be contained? If so, how? More sanctions, more robust military containment? More aggressive counter-cyber policies?

And beyond Kremlin policy, how would Kennan see Russian society? In many ways, Russia is still searching for its identity in the post-Soviet world. How would Kennan view resurgent Russian nationalism under Putin and the lack of Russian understanding of national sentiments among the nations of the former Soviet Union? What would he think of the new generation of young Russians who have no personal memory of the Soviet Union and communism? And how would he react to the continuing war in Ukraine and Russia's isolation from the West? What kind of future would Kennan see for Russia's post-imperial relations with many of its immediate neighbors who now view Moscow with great suspicion if not downright hostility?

Analyzing these and many other questions is the task before a new generation of Foreign Service officers who attempt to understand and work in Russia and the nations of Eurasia. In attempting to answer them, they could do well to take time to study the greatest analyst of Russia our Foreign Service ever produced, George Kennan.



*Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama, November 2012*

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# INTERVIEW WITH JAKE SULLIVAN

May 16, 2018

**Editors:** We wanted to start with some questions about your time as Policy Planning director. Perhaps we could begin with the agenda that you brought to the job.

**Jake Sullivan:** I was the director of Policy Planning from February of 2011—following the departure of Anne-Marie Slaughter, who was my immediate predecessor (she returned to Princeton)—until February of 2013, when I left the job a couple of weeks into Secretary Kerry’s tenure as secretary of state. I stayed on past the end of Secretary Clinton’s time just to provide a transitional phase and to support Secretary Kerry as he got up and running.

In terms of the main issue areas where I tried to drive the priority agenda of the policy planning staff, I would identify three. The first was what we called economic statecraft, which essentially was both sides of the coin of how economics and national security interact. So on the one hand, how to use economic tools to advance national security objectives; and then, on the other hand, how to use national security tools to advance America’s domestic economic objectives.

I had a number of members of my staff working on different angles of that broad agenda, trying to figure out (a), how the State Department itself could bring economics more to the center of its activities; and (b), how the U.S. government as a whole could be better organized to practice effective economic statecraft—especially at a time

when power is increasingly measured and exercised in economic terms and many of our main adversaries are much further along in integrating the economic dimensions into their grand strategy. That was one.

The second was how to give content to and more granular conceptual shape to the Asia-Pacific “pivot” or “rebalance.” So I worked closely with members of my team and Kurt Campbell, who was the assistant secretary for East Asia, on a seminal article Secretary Clinton wrote in 2011 called “America’s Pacific Century.” And then that led to a number of more tailored initiatives, including the work that Policy Planning did to support the opening to Burma/Myanmar and related projects.

The third was more of an inbox issue. It was how to think about the potential risks and opportunities of the Arab revolutions, which were unfolding right at the moment that I took the job on. And what was interesting about the time horizon on that particular set of activities was the U.S. government was operating day-to-day, hour-to-hour. And so for policy planning, mid-range to long range-planning became a week out, a month out, a year out rather than 5–10–25 years, as we were just trying to stay one step ahead and think through, you know, what all this meant, where it was all headed, and how the United States should respond.

Those were some of the main areas where I tried to bring a new thrust or perspective to the overall agenda of the policy planning staff.

**E:** If you were to step back and think about what that office had been, what it was meant to be, what it could be, how did you feel the mission fit the substance of what you set out to do? What is your sense of the ways in which Kennan shaped the office and its mission?

**JS:** Well, the threshold question for any Policy Planning director is

how do you implement the very simple directive that Secretary Marshall gave to George Kennan, which was to avoid trivia.

That is, in many ways, a piercing charge to be given. In other ways, it's a confounding charge because of course it leaves a huge space open for discretion to figure out: okay, in trying to look at the bigger picture, in lifting your head up above the smoke, as Marshall put it, and trying to see out to the horizon how do you (a) choose the issues and the relevant timeframes and (b) how do you then connect any of the work you're doing to decisions that policymakers are actually taking in the here and now—decisions around budget, decisions around priority, decisions around strategic choices in a particular region or a particular functional issue?

I think I, like every Policy Planning director from Kennan on forward, was faced with the really considerable challenge of how to actually think about making this office effective, both in helping the policy-making and decision-making apparatus look out beyond the immediate inbox, but also in doing so in a way that wasn't just interesting or academic but could be actionable in a meaningful way.

For me, I probably put more emphasis on having Policy Planning be a connecting node between the secretary of state and her priorities and the bureaus and embassies of the United States Department of State spread across the world. And I mean a connecting node traveling in both directions. So how to translate to the secretary what we were learning and hearing from the bureaus and the embassies in terms of their assessment of what was going on, what opportunities there were, what risk factors there were. And then I tried to communicate from the secretary down what her priorities were and how she hoped they would be implemented.

One of the things that really struck me when I took the job was that unlike the Pentagon—where there's something called Secretary's Policy Guidance where the secretary of defense is constantly firing off missives to the broader DOD bureaucracy saying, "Here's a



decision. I want it implemented. Here's a priority. I want it elevated. Here's a theme. I want it filled out and executed on in practical ways"—the State Department didn't do that at all.

One of the things I tried to bring to the job was to create a process for Secretary's Policy Guidance at the State Department. Hillary Clinton cared deeply about women and girls and wanted gender to be integrated into diplomacy. What did that actually mean? And how could an ambassador understand what he or she should be doing with that? Same with energy diplomacy. Same with, as I mentioned before, the Asia-Pacific rebalance, etc.

I think that is because of the way that the Department has grown and decision-making has changed from the Marshall-Kennan days, where it really was concentrated in a few people with a much more linear reporting relationship and much easier communication up and down the line.

Now, it's become so far-flung, so atomized in terms of the way that decisions are processed and then put out for implementation, that the job of Policy Planning director increasingly, in my view, has to be to serve in a substance role, first and foremost, but also a pretty important process role.

To the extent that was true for Kennan, I think it really frustrated him. He didn't like having to manage his way through the process. And I understand why, having done it myself for a couple of years. But it's so vital because if you don't have an effective process for translating priorities into policy, then the tenure of the secretary, the person to whom you report, is going to be significantly less effective.

The other big thing that I will say about the job is that in Kennan's time, the Policy Planning staff was the hub for the entire United States government when it came to foreign affairs strategic planning—period. In my time, the Policy Planning staff was one of several policy planning staffs spread across the government, including one

headquartered at the National Security Council.

The State Department itself was just one of more than a dozen cabinet agencies that saw itself as deeply involved in the advancement of America's foreign affairs mission. The Agriculture Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the Justice Department, the Energy Department, and on down the line, the Treasury Department, all had substantial elements of their bureaucracy devoted to foreign affairs and foreign policy.

Policy Planning at State suggested a division in responsibility and authority. But it also created a much more significant need for someone in that role to figure out: how do you try to bring some order to the long-term strategic outlook and planning across this very crowded space?

That was another aspect of the job that both bedeviled and energized me, and I put a lot of time into thinking about how could I help contribute to the entire American ship of state getting pointed in a direction toward the destination. Again, that meant the importance of process in addition to substantive strategic thinking. What are the priorities? What are the actual substantive answers?

**E:** Over time, the U.S. government became larger and more complicated, and that mandates a different role for policy planning. But the challenges have also shifted from the time George Marshall planned for the Second World War and Kennan planned for the Cold War. Did the end of the Cold War make the job of policy planning more difficult? Was it more difficult to establish clear priorities?

**JS:** At one point I wrote a memo for both the secretary and ultimately for the president while I was director of Policy Planning on the future of the Middle East. In that memo, I started by noting, a bit wryly, that Kennan had it easy because as Policy Planning director, and previously when he wrote "The Long Telegram," he started from a very simple premise. Which was: I can tell you how this story

ends. This story ends with the contradictions of the Soviet Union becoming increasingly exposed to its own people, and eventually those contradictions are going to doom the Soviet system.

And so that is the foundation for containment, his saying, “that’s where this is all headed—now we need a strategy that gets us from here to there.” That protects America’s interests and pushes back against Soviet expansionism but in a sense helps create the conditions for that result to unfold. He couldn’t say the timing or anything else, but he could say, “here’s where we’re going to end up and therefore here’s the prescription for how to get us from here to there.”

When it came to the Middle East, we couldn’t say, “okay here’s where it’s going to end up. So now let’s talk about getting from here to there.” There was immense dispute and debate about where it was going to end up.

That’s just one of many examples—to answer your question about the end of the Cold War—of how a conceptually simpler (still incredibly difficult but conceptually simpler) landscape for foreign policy and grand strategic decision-making lent itself to cleaner, sharper, more sustainable and durable strategies like containment. They were cleaner, sharper, and more sustainable compared to the messy, contingent, uncertain, and also incredibly varied landscape of the post-Cold War era, where not only did you have the continuation of geopolitical competition, but you had the rising strategic threat of terrorism and you had a series of transnational issues that required overcoming complex collective action problems and the mix of competition and cooperation and your adversary sometimes also being your partner.

This was the landscape we were dealing with in the post-Cold War era. I know that every Policy Planning director likes to say that his or her period was the most difficult, the most challenging, the most vexing period that there ever was. But in the case of the recent Poli-

cy Planning directors, I'm going to say, I'm going to go out on a limb and say it was actually true. We had it harder. I'm sort of joking about that but only sort of joking.

**E:** For the post-Cold War United States, we think you accurately describe a problem set that is both diverse and in flux. Given the array of vital interests the United States has had in this period, does the Marshall injunction to avoid trivia have meaning any longer? Is there a way to operationalize it or is policy planning yet another inbox-driven government entity where you're drinking from a firehose all the time?

**JS:** It has a tendency towards that, and I certainly fell prey to that, particularly being dual-hatted in the secretary's personal office and running the Policy Planning staff. I spent a fair amount of time on the road traveling with her, where I would get trapped by the tyranny of the inbox, with my team and my staff interested in helping solve those immediate problems as well.

There was a bureaucratic physics tending in that direction. But I would argue that the necessity of heeding Marshall's plea to the best extent possible, to avoid trivia, has only gone up as the speed and complexity and interconnectedness of these challenges has accelerated. Why? Because it's much harder now to figure out: what is the main thing? What are the priorities that the United States really should be investing in rather than going and chasing every rabbit, running out there across every continent on every issue under the sun?

It was easier in an earlier time, in a bipolar world, in a Cold War world, to know what the main thing was. And then you had to work through: what does that mean for the actual development and implementation of policy? But you had a sense of the big picture.

Now it's different. What is the ultimate thrust of America's foreign policy today? What are we trying to accomplish and why? Before you

even get to the “how.” If you’re not wrestling with that question in a systematic way, then you’re ultimately letting down the secretary and the president because you will get carried along by events.

And I can’t give myself an A grade on being able to do that as Policy Planning director. I don’t know any Policy Planning director in recent memory who would because it’s so hard. We are all struggling with long-term thinking. But we need to get better at it. We really do.

**E:** We’re also consuming a lot more news and information from more sources than we would have been 50 to 60 years ago.

**JS:** The advent of email has been disruptive to sound, sober, durable, strategic decision-making because it creates a rhythm and a tempo and a mode, an operating style, that is much more tactical and reactive and doesn’t leave time for people to step back and ask big, hard, conceptual questions that allow one to hang a frame around America’s foreign policy choices.

**E:** There may be other significant powers in the world which nonetheless have a narrower aperture for foreign policy planning. We would suggest that Russia is one of them. Do you think that’s true? Does Moscow, for example, have an easier job of setting foreign policy strategy?

**JS:** Let me say two things about that. The first is that Russia, China, other actors who operate in one way or another as revisionist actors—they have one massive advantage over the United States and that is: they are not the United States. They are relying upon the U.S. as the burden-bearer of last resort, as the main security broker in key regions. And they’re playing off against that.

And playing off against that kind of actor is just an easier game to play because you don’t have to face any of the contradictions or tensions nearly as squarely.

So just as an example, the Russians can be friends with the Iranians

and the Saudis, the Kurds, the Turks, and the Iraqis. They can bring the Sunni opposition groups and also sit down and talk to Hezbollah. And why is that? It's because they're not—no one's ultimately counting on them to produce outcomes as a broker, you know. They're a backer of Assad and so forth and the Saudis want to pull them away. But fundamentally, it is the presence of the United States that allows Russia to play that kind of role. If the U.S. disappeared tomorrow and Russia were thrust into a similar role, Moscow's job of policy planning and strategy would get a heck of a lot harder because they would have to deal with the contradictions and tensions that we're forced to struggle with on a regular basis. So that's one thing that's quite different.

Secondly, the United States has gotten less effective at strategy over the decades because we have been so rich and so powerful that effective strategy was not vital to us in achieving what we needed to achieve. Weaker states cannot simply throw resources and large numbers of friends and allies at the problem; they have to invest more in effective strategies to be able to get what we want.

And just to give you an example of this: a rich person who needs to get a loaf of bread doesn't have to be particularly strategic, does not have to be a strategic genius to get a loaf of bread. They go to their wallet, they take out money, and they go buy the bread. A poor person who has no money has to develop a strategy go to get that bread. Has to come up with, by hook or by crook, some way of getting their hand on that bread.

And that analogy to me says a lot about why I think there has been some atrophy in the strategic muscle memory of the United States, because our way of thinking about strategy is ends-ways-means. You know, we have the ways and the means. So we define the ends and then just put the ways and the means to work to get to those ends.

We are now entering a much more competitive phase where to maintain a competitive edge strategy is going to matter a whole lot more to the United States. I think we're going to have to get better at it as a strategic community. That's the second thing. And that says Russia relies more on strategy to get what it needs because of its relatively weaker position. The United States has not had to rely on it as much.

Even so, I view Russia in particular as having more of a tactical opportunistic approach to its strategy than some kind of coherent, comprehensive game plan that it is going out and executing on a daily basis. I think Putin gets more credit for being a strategic genius than he deserves. I think he has nerve and gumption and is willing to move fast and seize opportunities when they present themselves, but I think there's a lot more improvisation in what the Russians are up to than the conventional wisdom would suggest.

**E:** You've already recited from "The Long Telegram." Kennan's approach was to ask questions about, as he put it, "the sources of Soviet conduct" or the nature of the regime. These were questions that he answered through political analysis but also through reflections on history and literature. Was that approach was still active in your time as Policy Planning director? Or was it better to take another approach? This is a Russia question, but there might be other countries that come into play in this regard.

**JS:** There were two big priority areas for my time as director: where the Middle East was headed and this whole issue of economic statecraft. Digging into the academic literature and the history and talking to a lot of people who have looked at these questions not as policymakers but as historians or as theoreticians or as anthropologists—that was an important part of what we did. And my staff really dug in methodologically to the social sciences, to the history, to the theory, and then tried to generate papers that would be informed by all of that but not weighed down by it to the point where they be-

came irrelevant to ultimate decision-makers. But that was an important factor.

The other thing is we tried to integrate intelligence analysis as well into what we did. We tried to really use the tools especially that the State Department uniquely had through the INR Bureau—the Intelligence, Analysis, and Research Bureau—to think about: okay, how do you actually take all of the intelligence products of the United States intelligence community which are amassed and not just have them inform the decision of the next deputy’s committee meeting but have them paint a picture for you of what you’re up against and really try to think about how to make the best use out of the NIC [National Intelligence Council], the DNI [Director of National Intelligence], the agency [the CIA], and especially the State Department’s own intelligence arm.

So methodologically that’s how we approached things. And I have to say, on some issues it made us more effective, and on others it made us less effective, to be bringing a quasi-academic approach to some of the work that we did. I feel that on economic statecraft we produced a series of papers and secretary speeches that I actually think stand up really well if you go back and look at them in terms of what they suggested the United States should be doing. But they don’t stand up as well in terms of actually producing a change in U.S. policy or the orientation of our various foreign policy interests in economics questions. And that’s because they just were a little too abstract.

And that, you know, became one of the major balancing acts of being director of Policy Planning was how do you make sure that what you’re doing is not just the same thing everyone else is doing in government in terms of the policymaking process—that it has a deeper, a more contextual flavor to it. But on the other hand, to make it relevant and concrete enough that it could actually be used to shape decision-making.



Looking back at Kennan's thought process reveals a huge challenge: how to stay true to what it was that made him so good while at the same time make sure that the Policy Planning staff's products were actually really useful and guided policy. That was one of the things that frustrated him as he came to the end of his tenure.

**E:** You mention Kennan's frustrations, and we think from his vantage point he lost a lot of bureaucratic and policy battles. Even if some of his ideas that were adopted were not adopted in ways that he would have approved; containment is one example.

**JS:** Right.

**E:** We're curious about any sort of proposals that you made that went to the side of policy or that weren't enacted in the way you wanted them to be.

**JS:** First of all, nothing on the order of containment. I can tell you that. Nothing of the sweeping magnitude of the debates and fights that they were having. But I would say that we really gamely tried to make the case for some pretty meaningful shifts in the way that the United States practiced economic statecraft.

And some examples included creating a development finance institution, which the United States does not have but most of our major partners and competitors do—the Germans, the British, the Chinese, etc. Like thinking about the use of American economic leverage beyond financial sanctions and how to have a more systematic approach to that. Like thinking about how to integrate domestic economic policy priorities and questions with the way we thought about foreign economic policy priorities and questions. And those tended to be two very distinct conversations.

There were a number of different proposals being made in this regard that encountered a considerable amount of resistance from the economic agencies in the U.S. government, from some quarters in

the White House as well, but more often it wasn't so much that they encountered resistance as they encountered the problem that this was not the here and now. This was not the issue du jour, or it didn't present an inbox question.

That was frustrating to me because I think the U.S. continues to really lag in terms of being able to compete effectively on a global battlefield—not battlefield—on a global field of economic leverage. And the Chinese are leaps and bounds ahead of us on this. Now, they have certain advantages we don't have, but we have advantages, too. And that is a big area.

There are other things I'm proud of. We—the Policy Planning staff—worked very closely with Ben Rhodes at the White House and others on a set of papers around an opening to Cuba. If you go back and look at these papers from years before the opening to Cuba ever happened, they really laid out the roadmap to where we ultimately got.

In my time as head of Policy Planning, we did yeoman's work on Iran nuclear issues. And while the pivot and rebalance has not ended up in the way I would have hoped it would, it certainly got off to a really good start. And Policy Planning deserves a bit of credit for that.

So there are things I'm proud of, but also things that we really worked hard on that didn't really get us very far. And of course I think that's too bad, but that's just in the nature of the job.

**E:** We think you pithily captured the problem and solution proposed in “The Long Telegram”: wait for the internal contradictions of the Soviet system to bring it down and in the meantime contain the bad stuff the Soviet Union might do. If you were to advise on the content of a “Long Telegram” for today on Russia, what do you think the key elements of that would be?

**JS:** That is a great question and I'm going to give you a pass-

ing-grade answer but probably not something that's going to get honors. That's spoken as someone who's in the middle of grading final exams right now.

So number one, I think going back to what I was saying before about how Kennan got to his assessment of where the Soviet Union was headed and what the United States needed to do about it. He began really with the question of what to make of this country and what its mindset is and where it was headed. And I think we have to start in the same place with modern day Russia.

And for me, Vladimir Putin, who has consolidated and concentrated power in his own person, needs to be understood as having an overriding interest in preserving and extending his own power, first and foremost; secondly, in restoring the role and relevance of Russia on the global stage; and third, in ensuring, as a defensive proposition—which ends up having very offensive elements to it—that Russia is secure in its near abroad and has dominion in one way or another over the former Soviet space.

Starting from that perspective, that that's what's driving Putin and therefore what's driving his decision-making. One should understand his effort to divide and weaken NATO and the European Union, his effort to discredit democracy as an effective form of government, his effort to split the Transatlantic Alliance, all in the context of those goals—being able to say to his people: see, what we're doing here makes more sense than that totally messy democracy that's not working. That allows him to extend that defensive perimeter because he's weakening the effectiveness of European and American push-back, etc.

I think that our basic goal with Russia has to be that (a) we make it clear to Putin that we actually mean what we say with the Article Five guarantee, that we put skin in the game as we did in the latter years of the Obama administration by actually having boots on the ground in the Baltics and Poland and other places. And (b) that we

figure out a more effective and sustainable way to raise the cost to him for his continued disruption of democratic systems and efforts to weaken and divide the West.

But (c) that we offer him a path to some form of uneasy coexistence. There's never going to be the friendship one might have hoped for in the 1990s and 2000s but the relationship can be more durable, sustainable, and certainly de-escalated from where it is right now.

We should try to do this through an integrated, strategic conversation at the highest level. I think it's very hard with Donald Trump, who just doesn't think in these terms. But if you had a different president, who sat with his senior security team and Vladimir Putin with his, I do think that you could work out a modus vivendi between the United States, our European partners, and Russia that would be more durable, and would involve, to a certain extent, making it clear to Putin that while we will never back off of our values and we will always stand up and speak out on human rights, we're not in the business of trying to bring him down. Because I think that is one of the aspects of this that has become so destabilizing.

That's a 30,000-foot way of thinking about this, but fundamentally I think we have to say to Putin: we're not going to accept a notion of just a flat-out sphere of influence, but we're also going to try to understand your defensive interests in your own near abroad. That we say to him: we are not going to stand silent in the face of abuses of human rights, but we're also not in the regime-change business in Russia. That's for you and the people of Russia to work through.

And to say: here's what's going to happen to you if you continue down the path that you're on. These are the kinds of steps that we are going to be prepared to take in a predictable and consistent way that are going to impose very real costs on Putin and Russia if they keep going in this direction.

That would be how I would think about managing that relationship.

And you know, I'll just finish with an anecdote. Bill Burns and I were meeting with Sergei Ryabkov, the deputy foreign minister, in the context of the Iran negotiation, and we had to convince him that Russia should join us in the approach to the Iranians on a particular issue related to inspections and verification. And we convinced him, you know, we got him on board.

And then as we were leaving the room, we also had to say, by the way, today we just imposed sanctions on Ukraine. Thank you very much for your help on Iran.

And that anecdote goes to show you that there are issues on which we are going to have to continue to work with the Russians, including not just bilateral issues in our relationship like strategic stability but external issues like Iran and its nuclear program, even as we engage in this more competitive and adversarial dynamic that I've just described.

We have to be mature and sober about how we effectively manage the elements of cooperation and the elements of competition and pushback and not at any point turn our backs on the kind of core proposition of who we are, what values we stand for, who our friends are, and how we're going to stand up for them.





*Spaso House, Residence of the U.S.  
Ambassador in Moscow, Russian Federation*

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# GEORGE FROST KENNAN AND RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Ivan Kurilla

**G**eorge F. Kennan left a vast intellectual and political legacy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we still feel his influence on international relations every time policy options vis-à-vis a growing U.S.-Russia rivalry are discussed. Kennan's intellectual impact is no less important, but in many cases scholars and politicians still underestimate its significance. Paradoxically, some of his accomplishments could be better seen if we separate the highpoint of his political influence from the highpoint of his academic achievements. In addition, a number of his most striking discoveries pertained not to understanding Russia but to American foreign policy.

Regarding Kennan's impact on U.S.- Russian relations, historians tend to focus on containment (in his "Long Telegram" from 1946 and subsequent "Sources of Soviet Conduct" from 1947); on his later criticism of the arms race and "second Cold War;" and, institutionally, on his creation of the Policy Planning division at the State Department. Certainly, the United States and the West are looking for a new containment strategy toward Putin's Russia, a catchy one-word phrase signaling the creativity of a new generation of policy planners. Amid an almost universal cry of a "new Cold War," criticism of a "second Cold War" is surely in order now. The analytical capacity of State Department policymakers is not reas-



suring. Neither is the diminutive influence Russia experts have with present-day political leaders.

The complicated legacy of Kennan sheds new light upon pre-existing and current problems in bilateral relations and on foreign-policy decision-making in general. It is a good time to be re-reading him.

This chapter will challenge the presumption that Kennan's expertise in Russian affairs put him in a position of influence. At the start of his career, Kennan's understanding of Russia was comparatively limited and was still flawed in his State Department heyday. He had developed a much better knowledge of the USSR by the time a new generation of American diplomats was habitually rejecting his advice. Indeed, it was Kennan's very understanding of the Soviet Union that made him critical of the later stages of U.S. policy toward that country, preventing him from maintaining a government position. Kennan's success in the late 1940s derived not from his knowledge of Russia but from policy recommendations that hit at the exact center of a policy vacuum in Washington.

Secondly, this chapter will address Kennan's "system that essentially is not a system," as Jonathan Knight has put it. It will examine Kennan's particular concept of foreign policy in relation to domestic political affairs. In Knight's words, paraphrasing Kennan: "foreign policy cannot be understood apart from domestic forces which prescribe the goals of that policy or apart from international forces which hinder the achievement of those goals."<sup>97</sup> By equating "domestic forces" with "national interests," Knight places Kennan in the tradition of political realism, while "domestic forces" in Kennan's understanding are distinct from the realist reading of foreign-policy decision-making. There is thus a need to reconsider the relationship between foreign policy and domestic affairs in our understanding of Kennan's thinking.

By the time Kennan arrived in the USSR in 1933 he was probably the best-educated authority on Russia among the younger generation of American diplomats, an honorific that speaks as much to his capa-

cious knowledge as to the extremely low level of the Russia-related expertise in the State Department at this time. An anecdote that Kennan was proud of helps to tell this story. In 1936, Kennan, then a secretary of the U.S. Embassy in the Soviet Union, discovered dispatches in the embassy's archives that Neill Brown, an American minister to the Russian Empire in 1850–53, had sent to Washington decades before. Brown described life in Russia as repugnant and Russians themselves as distrustful. He insisted that “secrecy and misery characterize everything” and that “all they [Russians] have is borrowed. Except their miserable climate.” Brown informed his superiors that the Russian government “possesses in an exquisite degree the art of worrying a foreign representative without giving him even the consolation of an insult.” Kennan used those texts to compile a new report and made Ambassador William C. Bullitt sign it with some minor changes. He replaced “Russian Empire” with the “Soviet Union” and “Czar Nicholas” with “Stalin.” The young diplomat insisted that in other regards the dispatches of 1850s described precisely the USSR of 1936.

Later in his life, Kennan often returned to his discovery. He quoted Brown's dispatches in a lecture at the Foreign Service School in 1938 and again at the Canadian Defense College in 1948. He read them aloud into the Great Seal in the ambassador's office when in 1952 counterintelligence found that it had been bugged with a Soviet-made listening device and Kennan was asked to check whether it reacted to the ambassador's voice.<sup>98</sup>

This anecdote is intriguing, but it raises real questions about the differences between Nicholas I's Russia and Stalin's Soviet Union.

Brown was a former governor of Tennessee with little formal education, no prior diplomatic experience, no knowledge of Russian or French. In fact, he commanded no language other than English. Was he so brilliant as to find and describe Russia's core features and those destined to survive several czars and a revolution? Edu-

ard Stoeckl, the Russian diplomat who served in Washington at the same time Brown was in St. Petersburg, described his American counterpart as "a person of moderate principles and talents."<sup>99</sup> Brown arrived in Russia without his family. His modest salary did not permit him to attend aristocratic balls or to invite guests, and as a consequence, he felt lonely and frustrated. Without an international agenda he could work with, he devoted his reports to sarcastic commentaries on the Russian state and the Russian way of life.<sup>100</sup> Brown's dispatches were in fact a series of negative clichés about Russia. Other American diplomats such as Charles S. Todd (1841–46) and Thomas Seymour (1853–58) offered very different views in their reports. They praised Russian university education, described railroad construction, and cheered technology transfers from America to Russia.

Kennan, however, happened to find only Brown's texts relevant. This story proves the suspicion that the George Kennan of the 1930s was more eager to identify funny yet superficial resemblances between different epochs than to search for the distinctive features of the society he lived in as an expert specialist on Russia, as he was often called in retrospect.<sup>101</sup> Such a view on Russia was determined not by empirical analysis or deep knowledge of history and politics. Instead, Brown and Kennan (in his borrowing from Brown) relied on their perception of the country as a negation of everything Americans valued. Kennan's elder contemporary, Walter Lippmann, had introduced the term "stereotypes" into analysis of foreign relations, and even Kennan, with the attention he tried to pay to Russian history and literature, could fall victim to stereotyping the country around him, as he did during his first tenure in the Soviet capital.

By February 1946, Kennan had obtained a clearer image of the Soviet Union. He had realized the limitations of his own understanding and especially that of the State Department. He pointedly started "The Long Telegram" by warning against a "dangerous degree of over-simplification." The goal and the form of the cable were intended to alert Washington to a growing misunderstanding: Soviet leaders

use different language, employ different causation, and react differently to international challenges. In this text, Kennan had something of value to offer the U.S. government: a blueprint of Soviet views intuited by the American diplomat not through clichés but through Soviet political patterns.

The cable included several sharp observations of Soviet views and practices as well as some unsubstantiated findings and doubtful generalizations. (Kennan and most of his contemporary Americans used the words “Russian” and “Soviet” as synonyms.) For example, Kennan concluded his passage on a Soviet “feeling of insecurity” with the following highly critical words: the Russians “have learned to seek security only in patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it.” This was not a well-founded statement, since Russian czars had participated in European diplomacy since Peter the Great, making numerous compacts and compromises with their neighbors. Curiously enough, a generation later the revisionist historian of U.S. foreign policy Walter LaFeber would remind fellow Americans that similar suspicion had followed their own country since its international debut in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. LaFeber quoted British pamphleteer William Burke, responding to Benjamin Franklin’s demand for all of Canada after the French and Indian War: “It is leaving no medium between safety and conquest. It is to suppose yourself never safe, whilst your neighbor enjoys any security.”<sup>102</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, in his magisterial biography of Kennan, quoted his papers from 1947 and 1948 to show that Kennan was convinced that “the best way to avoid another such catastrophe would be to stay stronger than all potential adversaries”<sup>103</sup>—exactly the policy that, when implemented by the Soviet Union, was interpreted as proof of its aggressive plans. Kennan’s sharp phrasing helped to shape the perceptions of his fellow policymakers.

The most interesting part of “The Long Telegram” came at the end of the text, where Kennan compared the USSR to an “unruly and

unreasonable individual” and called for the “health and vigor of our own society.” He pushed the U.S. government to

formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security. They are seeking guidance rather than responsibilities.<sup>104</sup>

Kennan gave that advice at a moment when the United States was moving beyond its century-old role as an example of democracy and beacon of freedom and trying to be a creator of international order in a new world of global challenges. The U.S. diplomat in Moscow found or coined the word that the world needed, identifying the Soviet Union as the core threat to global security.

By articulating security in this way, Kennan was responding to the crisis in U.S.-Soviet relations. Less obviously but no less importantly, he was responding to the identity crisis that Americans themselves faced: their state’s rapid rise to superpower status left Washington policymakers intellectually unarmed and politically vulnerable. Kennan sketched a worldview and a plan of action. The word “containment” was never used in “The Long Telegram.” It first appeared in Kennan’s *Foreign Affairs* article, summing up the policy that the United States needed to implement.

Contrary to Kennan’s intentions, “The Long Telegram” and “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” did less to explain what the USSR was doing and less to provide a new “positive and constructive picture of sort of the world” than to shape a course of action for the U.S. The understanding of others’ and one’s own actions are not the same; they may not even be determined by one another.

In his seminal work *The Conquest of America* (1984), French-Bulgarian scholar Tsvetan Todorov stressed the relative independence of knowledge, judgement, and action in the relations between different cultures. An increase in knowledge, for instance, does not necessarily make the other's values more attractive or alter one's wish to change it. He writes that "knowledge does not imply love, nor the converse; and neither of the two implies, nor is implied by, identification with the other."<sup>105</sup> Kennan certainly had information and knowledge about Russia to impart to his compatriots. That information, however, was not the main factor in the Washington decision-making. Kennan did criticize Russia as a country that rejected such notions—dear to Americans—as liberty and democracy; but common values are not necessarily a prerequisite for rapprochement, just as divergent values do not lead inevitably to conflict. Kennan's policy recommendations were taken seriously and the U.S. policy toward the USSR shifted, as did U.S. policy globally. Kennan had hit the bullseye by furnishing Washington with a coherent strategy, whether or not it was grounded in Soviet realities and whether or not it exposed the true goals of Soviet leaders.

In my view, Kennan's impact on policy in the late 1940s substantiates the claim of constructivist Cold War historian David Campbell. Campbell argues that, "foreign policy is not the response of a pre-given domestic society to an external anarchic realm, but rather the means by which the U.S. produces and then reproduces itself."<sup>106</sup> The claim sounds radical for any foreign-policy practitioner, but it seems George Kennan, in the second half of his life, could find something appealing in it.

Kennan well understood the imbalance between diplomatic advice and state reaction. In a lecture about WWI given at the University of Chicago in the winter of 1950, he saw in this imbalance a problem with democracy:

I sometimes wonder whether...a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin: he lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat. You wonder whether it would not have been wiser for him to have taken a little more interest in what was going on at an earlier date and to have seen whether he could not have prevented some of these situations from arising instead of proceeding from an indiscriminating indifference to a holy wrath equally indiscriminating.<sup>107</sup>

Diplomats are informants about the environment who attempt—very often in vain—to awaken a democracy to an early response, Kennan was contending.

All too well aware personally of what he was writing, Kennan confessed 33 years later that:

since I was at that time [in 1950] even more ignorant than I am today of the general history of American diplomacy, I drew primarily on my own twenty-four years of diplomatic experience, and tried to look at the episodes in question from the standpoint of the lessons which that experience had taught.<sup>108</sup>

In 1960, Kennan elaborated on this criticism of American diplomacy, writing that “American public opinion has often been something like a decade behind the times” in devising “responses to the problem of Soviet power.”<sup>109</sup> Lagging behind, the public could not react to the changing international situation, complicating democratic decision-making in the foreign policy domain. Kennan explained the misunderstanding between Russia and the United States in 1917, clearly

bearing his own experience of the mid-1940s in mind: "There is, let me assure you, nothing in nature more egocentric than the embattled democracy....The idea of people wasting time and substance on any *other* issue seems to them preposterous. This explains why Allied statesmen were simply unable to comprehend how people in Russia could be interested in an internal Russian political crisis when there was a war on in the West."<sup>110</sup> A diplomat, Kennan understood that the difference in worldviews could not be bridged easily. He often blamed democracy for creating this problem.

Having been quickly promoted, Kennan had a rather brief State Department career. After retiring from the Foreign Service, he was freer to study Russia and the Soviet Union and their history, to criticize implementation of the containment policy he had devised (without believing it would last for decades), and even to become what Gaddis has called a "counter-cultural critic." Kennan did not fit well in the growing field of Soviet studies. In 1960, he caustically noted that some of the "professional 'sovietologists,' private and governmental...seem afraid to admit to themselves or to others that Stalin is really dead."<sup>111</sup>

He continued, however, to inhabit a political world. He contacted Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and commented in magazine articles on Ronald Reagan's policies toward the USSR. As Kennan's knowledge of Russia grew, it led him to unusual conclusions. Long before the collapse of the Soviet Union, he claimed that at some point the Russian people would overthrow the Bolsheviks and become a U.S. ally.

He would never reclaim the power and influence he had in the 1940s, but Kennan wanted to retain his reputation as the country's number one Soviet expert, and to some extent he did. New generations of Soviet experts mostly came from academia and learned more about U.S.-Soviet relations from books, but Kennan had been a part of those relations himself, a position few others could claim.

For scholars of international relations, Kennan remains a towering figure within the realist tradition, and realists used containment to structure decisions on military deployments and economic assis-



tance.<sup>112</sup> Yet Kennan's thought was wider and more versatile than any single political theory.

He published *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* in 1960. This book conveys the same concern that Kennan had expressed in the final part of "The Long Telegram": an urgent need to "formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of sort of world we would like to see." In the preface to *Russia and the West*, Kennan gave a rationale for its publication, which was to fill a gap in the Western study of Russia's relations with the outside world, "from the foundation of the Soviet regime down to the point where history merges with contemporary affairs." Kennan further pointed out that:

Soviet historians have recently been giving elaborate attention to certain phases of [this history]. The tendency of their labors has been to establish an image of this historical process which they conceive to be useful to the present purposes of the Soviet Communist Party but which is deeply discreditable to Western statesmanship and to the spirit and ideas of the Western people generally—so discreditable, in fact, that if the Western peoples could be brought to believe it, they would have no choice but to abandon their faith in themselves and the traditions of their national life.<sup>113</sup>

Kennan suggested that that narrative of Soviet-Western relations created by Soviet historians could be seen as credible by the peoples of the newly fashioned nations. By writing his own book he could provide a world public with the Western view on the history of Russian foreign policy.

A quarter of century later, in 1985, Kennan finished his introduction for the new edition of his 1951 book *American Diplomacy* with an observation of the "persistent tendency to fashion our policy towards others with a view to feeding a pleasant image of ourselves rather than to

achieving real, and desperately needed, results in our relations with others.”<sup>114</sup> In 1960, Kennan had lamented that a world public could believe the Soviet narrative of the Soviet-Western relations; hence the need to put forward an attractive “Western view.” In 1985, however, Kennan was criticizing Americans for focusing on a “pleasant image” of themselves instead of pursuing “real... results.”

In his criticism first of the Soviet Union and then of the United States, the development in Kennan’s understanding of foreign relations can be glimpsed. For American politicians, domestic politics always eclipsed the international challenges, although foreign policy could capture people’s attention during major international crises. For example, during WWII it would have been difficult to imagine that domestic issues could overtake President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Doctor Win-the-War.” Kennan suggested “Containment” not as foreign-policy advice but to calm the public mood. By 1960, the containment policy Kennan once suggested had turned international relations into an arena of strategic balancing where the competition spread from arms and economics to worldviews and historical narratives. A new field of competition included historians’ narratives in the battle for hearts and minds. Kennan’s own academic job had the potential to be an international weapon in this way.

The broadening of the rivalry into spheres other than the arms race was the new feature in the decade when Kennan wrote his passage about the competition in creating historical explanations of the recent events, and that feature definitely continued for another 30 years. During the Cold War, the need for an attractive narrative brought pressing domestic social issues to the fore. Indeed, Cold War competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union incentivized both technological (war-related) and social advances in hopes of overrunning the competitor. The arms race and the construction of international alliances were the most visible form of competition. Less visible was the race for better social conditions, for the reformed society that could attract the greatest global sympathy.<sup>115</sup>

Years later, Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power,” paying tribute to Kennan’s vision. In his words:

Containment led to success in the Cold War not just because of military deterrence but because, as George Kennan designed the policy, our soft power would help to transform the Soviet Bloc from within. Containment was not a static military doctrine but a transformational strategy, albeit one that took decades to accomplish. Indeed, Kennan frequently warned against what he regarded as the over-militarization of containment and was a strong supporter of contacts and exchanges.<sup>116</sup>

Cold War stability had an unexpected outcome: The primacy of domestic policy and of narratives rooted in domestic policy had marginalized international expertise. Kennan was starting to feel that the old art of diplomacy was becoming obsolete. Decision-makers could not take advice into account if the advice did not respond to domestic demand and fit the domestic discourse of the day. The subordination of foreign relations to a “view to feeding a pleasant image of ourselves” adeptly captures identity-construction in foreign policy. Kennan could feel vindicated in his earlier warnings against democracy as a system that neglects challenges from the external environment. Thus, his sharp thought traced the changes in the approach to international relations just emerging at the time and shaped them into conclusions and political advice that may be later claimed as their own by theorists from the neorealist to constructivist schools.

Going back to Kennan reminds us that we can project into current Russian-American relations David Campbell’s definition of foreign policy as the means by which the U.S.—and Russia as well, I might add—produces and then reproduces itself. From this viewpoint the current state of U.S.-Russian relations is the result of perceived challenges to the dominant domestic order. Challenges are met by identifying them with external threats—Russia or the United States respectively—which challenge the respective national ideas.

Since Alexis de Tocqueville's book, *Democracy in America*, the weakness of democracies in foreign affairs has been a matter of academic and political debate. Kennan added his strong opinions to the list of arguments skeptical of a democratic foreign policy. Even if Kennan exaggerated the problems that a democratic foreign policy creates, his characterization of these problems is cogent and salient. Politicians often understand domestic pressures and construct foreign threats in a manner relevant to domestic political pressures. The skillful diplomat, however, seeks to balance domestic pressures with international challenges and to find ways of preserving international order in concert with the domestic political realities.

Kennan's story was one of marrying his knowledge of Russia with his understanding of American politics. His success was based on his policy recommendations. Conventional American opinion that Kennan "explained what Stalin would do" and recommended the appropriate countermeasures presumes that Kennan was right about the USSR's plans and capacities. However, contemporary analyses of political history reveal that even in the Soviet Union, plans for the future were not so clear; they were always in the making. In addition, the U.S. policy of containment was not only a response to Soviet conduct; to some extent it shaped that conduct. This mutual "reinvention" of the United States and Soviet Union in the early stage of the Cold War was to a large extent Kennan's work. Along with Winston Churchill's "iron curtain," his policy of containment determined the political reference points for decades.

Containment and the Cold War's beginning shed light on domestic conditions in the United States and the use of the foreign policy that followed from those conditions. Kennan's biography is a case study in the difficulty of fulfilling domestic needs without spoiling long-term relations with an important international partner and without transforming it from a partner into an enemy.



*Secretary of State John Kerry and Jon Finer,  
London, United Kingdom, May 12, 2016*

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# GEORGE KENNAN: THE DIPLOMATIC LEGACY

**Jon Finer**

**W**hen I became director of the State Department's Office of Policy Planning, in the second term of the Obama administration, I received two gifts from thoughtful friends. The first was an early edition of *American Diplomacy*, inscribed by its author, George Kennan, who established the office I would soon be leading. The second was a color scan of a memo from Kennan to Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, dated May 23, 1947. Its cover letter was less than a page long and replete with the sort of excuses and caveats familiar to anyone who had ever tactfully tried to lower a boss's expectations. "It is only a few days since the Planning Staff, with an incomplete and provisional complement of personnel, was able to begin to give attention to the substance of its work," Kennan wrote. "Normally I would consider this far too short a time in which to consider and make recommendations on matters of such importance. But I recognize that the need for a program of action on this problem is urgent and the best answer we can give today is perhaps more useful than a more thoroughly considered study one or two months hence."<sup>117</sup>

The subject of the memo that followed was simply stated, even understated: “it deals with the question of aid to Western Europe.” Yet it proposed one of America’s most successful policy initiatives. Officially called the “European Recovery Program,” it is far better known as the Marshall Plan after the secretary of state who announced it to the world in a speech just two weeks after Kennan’s self-deprecating missive.

These gifts were the first of many ways I came to understand how much the lessons of George Kennan’s life and work motivated, inspired, but also overshadowed and humbled, those of his many successors. I suspect this has been the case for virtually every American diplomat and particularly those fortunate enough to follow in his professional footsteps. Since Kennan established it in the aftermath of World War II, the Office of Policy Planning has been providing the “best answer(s)” it could to the nation’s greatest international challenges often in a matter of days, when months would make for an easier task.

To say that Kennan was a tough act to follow does not do him justice. On more than a few occasions I joked (admittedly with some genuine concern) that the trajectory of Policy Planning from Kennan’s tenure to my own was among the clearest examples of American decline.

But there were also extraordinary benefits to succeeding George Kennan. In particular, he left myriad invaluable blueprints for how to approach the job. In a federal government that can be obsessively focused on the day-to-day, or, these days, on the minute-by-minute, the Policy Planning staff was intended to be and has remained a rare oasis of strategic discourse. George Marshall summed this up best in his characteristically pithy advice to Kennan: “avoid trivia.”

That is easier said than done. Policymaking ultimately boils down to setting, articulating, and implementing priorities. Inherently, this involves a tug-of-war between what President Eisenhower termed

the “urgent” and the “important.” In other words, tasks that must be accomplished right away must be balanced against longer-term imperatives or else the ship of state will list. In theory, the two dozen or so members of the Policy Planning staff are assigned to focus on the latter, leaving the former—everything from crisis response to press inquiries to the humdrum (but critically important) maintenance of foreign relations—to the thousands of other professional diplomats throughout the State Department. In practice, however, when Policy Planning has removed itself wholly from this more operational business of policymaking, it has risked relegating itself to an afterthought, an in-house think tank with ideas that rarely make it from the director’s desk to the real world.

It says a lot about how difficult producing actionable ideas can be that Kennan, architect of the office and by far its most celebrated occupant, harbored deep doubts about the success of his undertaking. “It occurred to me that it is time I recognized that my Planning Staff, started nearly three years ago, has simply been a failure,” he wrote in 1950, “like all previous attempts to bring order and foresight to the designing of foreign policy by special institutional arrangements within the department.”<sup>118</sup> History rightly rejects this analysis. And from the way Kennan did the job, one can distill and adhere to some valuable lessons.

The first is that, while Kennan had an academic bent, he never lost sight of the fact that policy planning is not just about having the best ideas. It is the alchemy of ideas and implementation. A thoughtful paper on how the United States should help rebuild its postwar adversaries might be good enough for a scholar seeking tenure. A successful policy planner would know how to use the levers of government, as he did, to turn mere insights into an assistance program (\$100 billion in today’s dollars) that helped turn our bitterest and most devastated wartime enemies into some of our closest and most prosperous allies. I encouraged members of the Policy Planning staff—a roughly equal mix of career foreign service officers, civil



servants, and political appointees from outside the government—to be entrepreneurs and evangelists for their work, building relationships around the State Department and across agencies, particularly among those who would have to carry out our best-laid plans.

A second lesson drawn from Kennan is that S/P, as it is known inside the Department, has the luxury to not only take a step back from the day-to-day, but also to take a step back in time, ensuring that a sense of history, of triumphs and failures in the past, informs and provides context for our policymaking and for the secretary's speeches. As a graduate student, my advisor was Yuen Foong Khong, whose *Analogies at War* chronicled the use and misuse of history by 20<sup>th</sup>-century foreign-policymakers.<sup>119</sup> Khong's analysis built on that of Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, two Harvard professors whose *Thinking in Time* both offered lessons on how to integrate history into policy analysis and recounted "horror stories" about how badly that is often done.<sup>120</sup>

In the pantheon of great diplomats, Kennan is one of the few who was also an accomplished historian. It is clear that each of his vocations informed the other. In a 1995 essay for *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan resurrected and explicated a relatively obscure 1821 speech by then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, whose thinking on foreign affairs Kennan had long admired. Adams's admonition that the United States "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," which Kennan often cited, had provided some of the historical and theoretical underpinning for two of his most celebrated stances—opposing the expansion of the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq.<sup>121</sup>

Contemporary policy debates involve frequent appeals to history, employed both to help win internal arguments and, most importantly, to get the answer right. In the administration in which I served, the dominant historical paradigm was the invasion of Iraq. We were led by a president who had been elected in no small part because,

like Kennan, he was an early opponent of it. Barack Obama's 2002 speech labeling the prospect of invading Iraq "a dumb war... a rash war" months before the invasion was the most important substantive distinction between his candidacy for president six years later and that of his main Democratic primary opponent, Hillary Clinton, and general election opponent, John McCain.<sup>122</sup> As president, Obama drew important lessons from the U.S. experience in Iraq. He concluded that difficult adversaries should be engaged, not just confronted; that the United States is stronger as part of a coalition than when acting alone; that adhering to international law matters; that military quagmires can swallow a presidency, particularly in the Middle East. These lessons informed many of our major initiatives, from drawing down troops from Iraq, to "rebalancing" our focus from the Middle East to East Asia, to seeking a nuclear agreement rather than war with Iran, to resisting pressure for greater military intervention in Syria. In Policy Planning, we tailored our work for Secretary Kerry, including papers that became memos he wrote to President Obama. We kept these lessons and this historical context very much in mind.

A third lesson of Kennan's time in Policy Planning was more of a cautionary tale. His diaries and posthumous biographies revealed antiquated views on race and an aversion to multiculturalism that, while perhaps unexceptional for a white man of his generation, are a disappointing aspect of his world view.<sup>123</sup> Suffice it to say, an office that seeks to generate and implement the best ideas on America's role in the world requires diversity, not just of thought, but of the full range of categories that comprise the American experience.

Fourth, and perhaps the most significant, were Kennan's reflections on the region of the world he knew best. Perhaps the greatest similarity between Kennan's tenure and my own was that both coincided with the rise of Russia (the Soviet Union in his case) as a preeminent foreign-policy challenge. The early years of the Obama administration were characterized by the "reset" in U.S. relations with Russia.

The reset allowed us to cooperate on a range of priorities, from building pressure on Iran to curtail its nuclear program, to updating the START arms control agreement, to facilitating the resupply of military operations in Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network. Far from seeing Russia primarily as an adversary, President Obama even ridiculed his 2012 general election opponent, Mitt Romney, for listing Russia as America's paramount security threat, quipping that "the 1980s are calling to ask for their foreign policy back."

But by the beginning of Obama's second term, tension between the United States and Russia was mounting rapidly. Disputes first arose over how to manage the Arab Spring uprisings. President Putin saw himself as a defender of stability and the status quo in the face of destabilizing rebellions. He came to believe that the United States had (1) encouraged similar demonstrations in Moscow during Russia's 2012 elections, (2) betrayed Russia by using a UN Security Resolution to justify military action that toppled the Libyan government, and (3) backed an "extremist" revolution in Syria.

It was the outbreak of unrest in Ukraine and eventually the fall of its government, the annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the Donbas that shattered the "reset" for good.

By the time I became director of Policy Planning, the administration was preoccupied with two major challenges emanating from Moscow—the conflict in Ukraine, which had entered its third year, and the conflict in Syria, which Russia had just inexorably altered by a direct military intervention in September of 2015. Those challenges, which dominated Secretary Kerry's myriad engagements with Russia over the final year in office, generated the most important work our Policy Planning office produced. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes unconsciously, we used Kennan as a guide.

He was the ghost in the room when we assembled eminent historians and other Russia scholars on the State Department's regal

eighth floor, for a dinner with Secretary Kerry to discuss the return of the Russia challenge. We sought to channel his insights when drafting a memorandum mimicking what we believed would have been President Putin's guidance to his own policy planners, laying out his worldview. And we developed detailed strategic plans for reorienting our approach to the Russia relationship, with the goal of handing off a more manageable situation to our successors.

We were soon confronted by a third dispute with Russia—one that Kennan would have likely found far less shocking than many in our administration did: Moscow's use of stolen and disseminated information, as well as disinformation, to successfully intervene in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. My staff, which included Russia experts from inside and outside the government, fixated on this problem as soon as it emerged and before it was acknowledged publicly. We sought, largely unsuccessfully, to push the Department and the administration to more quickly consider stricter sanctions and make a strong public statement about what we knew. As a last-ditch effort, we produced a memo for the president from Secretary Kerry calling for a bipartisan commission, modeled on the 9/11 Commission, to investigate what had happened and to make recommendations about how best to protect the country. Never approved, this idea looks wiser in hindsight.

To see how clearly Kennan's own thinking anticipated virtually all of these challenges, one need look no further than the most famous of his writings, the so-called "Long Telegram" of 1946.<sup>124</sup> Its five concrete recommendations, borne of his deep alarm about Josef Stalin's creeping authoritarianism, prove similarly prescient as the United States slowly came to terms with the threat posed by President Vladimir Putin's Russia. "Our first step," Kennan wrote in the telegram, "must be to apprehend, and recognize for what it is, the nature of the movement with which we are dealing. We must study it with same courage, detachment, objectivity, and same determination not to be emotionally provoked or unseated by it, with

which doctor studies unruly and unreasonable individual.”<sup>125</sup> By the time Russia had reemerged long after the end of the Cold War as a critical foreign-policy challenge, the Russia expertise that the U.S. government had developed over decades had atrophied, in favor of trendier regional specialties like the Middle East and East Asia. Russian linguists and cultural sages were in short supply at the State Department as well as in the military and intelligence community. It is a deficit we are still working to rectify.

Second, Kennan warned that, “we must see that our public is educated to realities of Russian situation. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this. Press cannot do this alone. It must be done mainly by Government, which is necessarily more experienced and better informed on practical problems involved.”<sup>126</sup> As our government’s policy focus shifted away from Russia, the American public also stopped paying as much attention to Russia as it should have. This helps to explain why Russia’s interference in our election was so incomprehensible—even unimaginable—to many Americans. They no longer remembered, if they had ever known, that Moscow had relentlessly engaged in lower-tech, less successful attempts at interference in American politics throughout the Cold War.

Kennan also wisely held up a mirror to American society by arguing that we are most vulnerable to Russian meddling when our domestic affairs are in relative turmoil. He wrote in his telegram,

Much depends on health and vigor of our own society. World communism is like malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is point at which domestic and foreign policies meets. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués. If we cannot abandon fatalism and indifference in face of deficiencies of our own

society, Moscow will profit—Moscow cannot help profiting by them in its foreign policies.”

That Moscow’s successful 2016 intervention came amid—and sought to exacerbate—a time of great domestic division in the United States would have come as no surprise to Kennan and those familiar with his work.

In his fourth piece of Russia-related advice, Kennan anticipated what is among the defining foreign-policy questions of our current moment. This is how to modernize and restore confidence in liberal democracy as a governance mode and in the norms, legal regimes, and institutions that comprise the international system established after World War II. With Europe and the United States in degrees of disarray, fueled by Russian interference, we can no longer take for granted that our way of life—the “power of our example,” in Bill Clinton’s famous phrase—will remain more compelling to the world than the autocrat’s bargain of greater order and diminished freedom. This, too, is something Kennan saw coming, writing in his telegram:

We must formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security. They are seeking guidance rather than responsibilities. We should be better able than Russians to give them this. And unless we do, Russians certainly will.

Finally, Kennan warned against the inclination, always present in American culture, to regress towards the sorts of nationalism, nativism, and autocracy that are hallmarks of the very foreign governments we should be standing against. His words certainly apply to a U.S. administration buttressed by those forces, more enamored with

authoritarians than with our fellow democrats around the world and willing to compromise core values, such as freedom of the press and the independence of political institutions, like the judiciary and intelligence community: “We must have courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism, is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping.”<sup>127</sup>

I left the government on January 19, 1957, but not Kennan’s long shadow. One of my first stops after leaving Washington was Princeton, New Jersey, to spend several months at the Institute for Advanced Study where Kennan was also a post-government transient before making it his professional home for many years. The Institute is best known for the world-changing work of its scientists, from founding director Abraham Flexner (whose seminal essay on “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge” would have made a good title for a Policy Planning paper), to Robert Oppenheimer (who led the Manhattan Project and recruited Kennan to the Institute), to Albert Einstein (who took up residence there upon arriving from Germany), to physicist John Nash (whose life story was depicted in the book and film, *A Beautiful Mind*).<sup>128</sup> At a time when the Trump administration was working feverishly to close the nation’s doors to immigrants and refugees and pursue energy and environmental policies that reject the very concept of scientific truth, I took solace in an institution that had welcomed some of the world’s scientific greatest minds as Europe was engulfed by the Second World War.

Among the non-scientists, Kennan was the Institute’s most notable member. On a granite structure overlooking the 600-acre Institute Woods, where scholars stroll to clear their minds, his words are inscribed alongside those of Flexner and Einstein. While working at the Institute, Kennan published more than a dozen books and won virtually every prestigious literary accolade, including two National Book Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes. “Your gifts are unique in the world,” the great Isaiah Berlin wrote to Kennan in 1965.<sup>129</sup>

But it is also clear that Kennan's life after government wasn't easy, a comforting realization for anyone struggling to find fulfillment amid the disorienting transition away from the front lines of public service. As Frank Costigliola, who edited Kennan's diaries, recounts, his faculty appointment was initially opposed by the Institute's mathematicians, who questioned his scholarly credentials. He contemplated a run for the U.S. Senate from New Jersey but was dissuaded by Oppenheimer, who insisted Kennan would have to give up his Institute appointment should he pursue elected office. And despite his subsequent ambassadorships in Belgrade and Moscow, Kennan's biographers describe an alienation from Washington's foreign policy establishment, whose foundation he had helped build but which misappropriated his ideas in support of approaches he rejected. Kennan wrote and spoke often of isolation, even loneliness.<sup>130</sup>

In important ways, Kennan remained, to the end of his 101 years, an unabashed optimist: he believed in the necessity of remaining engaged in the public debate and in the power of sound policy thinking to avoid unnecessary war. At key moments in the history through which he lived, Kennan refused to yield to the inevitability of armed conflict, even as it seemed to be taking on a momentum of its own. For example, in his December 1957 Reith Lectures, delivered at Oxford University and broadcast worldwide by the BBC, he warned of an overemphasis in the West on military alliances and escalation at the expense of softer foreign policy tools, like diplomacy. Amid the global obsession with Moscow's purported preeminence in military technology and the arms race spurred by the launch of the Sputnik satellite just two months earlier, he argued:

To me it is a source of amazement that there are people who still see the escape from this danger in the continued multiplication by us of the destructiveness and speed of delivery of the major atomic weapons. These people seem unable to wean themselves from the belief that it is relative changes



in the power of these weapons that are going to determine everything. They evidently believe that if the Russians gain the slightest edge on us in the capacity to wreak massive destruction at long range, they will immediately use it, regardless of our own power of retaliation. Conversely they seem to feel that if we can only contrive to get a tiny bit ahead of the Russians we shall in some way have won; our salvation will be assured; the road will then be paved for a settlement on our terms.... I scarcely need say that I see no grounds whatsoever for these assumptions.<sup>131</sup>

A decade later, as President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to build support for expanding the Vietnam War, Kennan enraged the White House by testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the United States should instead withdraw from Indochina “as soon as this could be done without inordinate damage to our prestige or stability in the area.”<sup>132</sup> And in 2002, at the dawn of the nation’s longest wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kennan told an interviewer asking about the wisdom of invading Iraq: “I could see justification only if the absence of it would involve a major and imminent danger to our own country, or, at worst, to our most intimate and traditional allies. Of this I see no evidence.” He continued: “I have seen no evidence that we have any realistic plans for dealing with the great state of confusion in Iraqian [sic] affairs which would presumably follow even after the successful elimination of the dictator.”<sup>133</sup>

While Kennan also held more than his share of dubious positions—such as that it would be a mistake to re-unify East and West Germany—there is no denying his prescience, or at least contrarian boldness, even after his most influential government positions were behind him. Standing so frequently against conventional wisdom

could only have deepened his sense of solitude. At least that is what his words, inscribed on the sculpture at the Institute for Advanced Study, seem to suggest:

True scholars often work in loneliness, compelled to find rewards in the awareness that they have made valuable, even beautiful contributions to the cumulative structure of human knowledge, whether anyone knows it at the time or not.

That may be true, to a point. But the “valuable, even beautiful” contributions of George Kennan, who passed away in 2005, were well known throughout his time. And they continue to guide those fortunate enough to learn from them.



*George F. Kennan at the Wilson Center*

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# CONCLUSION: GEORGE F. KENNAN, CONTAINMENT, AND THE WEST'S CURRENT RUSSIA PROBLEM

**Matthew Rojansky and Michael Kimmage**

**A**t the core of the Western strategy for managing the Cold War from the late 1940s to the 1980s was an American-led policy of “containment” of Soviet power and influence. Its principal author, George F. Kennan, diagnosed in Soviet foreign policy an expansionist undercurrent, which had the potential to threaten the foundations of economic prosperity and political stability on which vital Western interests depended. Accordingly, Kennan advised “a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies,” not only in Europe, but globally.<sup>134</sup>

Containment was a mode of East-West relations that many presumed would be relegated to the dustbin of history at the end of the Cold War. Yet the current period might accurately be dubbed the era of “new containment,” as *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin has called it, with many urging the United States, NATO, and Europe once again to contain, constrain, and counter what they view as Russia’s expansionist policies and malign influence on the world stage.<sup>135</sup>

Although circumstances around the conflict between Russia and the West today differ considerably from those of the Cold War, the conflict nonetheless poses a serious threat to European security and stability and demands a careful and comprehensive Western response. Containment is relevant today, if conceived and practiced as Kennan intended—as a primarily non-military strategy focused on recognition of the adversary’s vulnerabilities and on the West’s capacity to solve pressing problems, while inspiring others to do the same. Kennan’s prescription for investment in U.S. expertise on Russia is equally salient in light of today’s renewed conflict.

If the West is to benefit once more from Kennan’s insights, it must balance the collective political will to maintain a credible deterrent with the search for a negotiated settlement of differences, selective cooperation, and even eventual reconciliation in Russia-West relations overall. At a time when European and trans-Atlantic unity has been strained by relentless crises, striking this delicate balance will be no small challenge.

## **RUSSIA AND THE WEST IN THE COLD WAR AND TODAY**

Russia’s military interventions in the post-Soviet neighborhood, particularly in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014, have made other nearby European states nervous about their own security, pushing NATO’s “Article 5” promise of collective defense into the spotlight.<sup>136</sup> Following high-profile spy scandals and allegations of election interference, many in the United States and Europe now think of Russian influence per se as a malign force, in much the same terms that the West construed Soviet influence during the Cold War as inherently threatening.<sup>137</sup> Thus, in addition to imposing economic, diplomatic, and political sanctions as a direct response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Western governments have searched out and censured Russian investments, diplomatic and cultural activities, and links with Russian political actors within the borders of Western

countries. All of this is reminiscent of the Cold War's rivalry not only in arms but in ideologies, economics, and diplomacy.<sup>138</sup>

There are even surprisingly significant stylistic and structural similarities between the current East-West conflict and the Cold War. On both sides, demonization of the other has largely replaced reasoned dialogue, let alone introspection. As Robert Legvold has argued, both sides are now conditioned to thinking of the other side as entirely culpable for the current crisis. Each side portrays the other as intentionally and nefariously exploiting the situation to damage, disadvantage, and undermine the other's interests.<sup>139</sup> In fact, political leaders have consistently labeled one another as adversaries, and with very few exceptions have embraced simplistic narratives about the other's hostile intent.<sup>140</sup>

The reemergence of proxy conflicts between Russia and the West is the most troubling echo of the Cold War today. Armed clashes that involved Russian forces occasionally broke out around the post-Soviet periphery in the 1990s and afterwards, and during the same period Russia and the West disagreed sharply over the handling of crises and conflicts from the Balkans to the Middle East. Yet for the first time in decades, the past five years have witnessed not only direct military conflict between forces supported, equipped, and trained by the West against those backed by Russia in Syria and Ukraine, but also numerous close calls between NATO and Russian forces in the air and at sea. There is even one documented case of direct exchange of fire between U.S. and Russian state-controlled mercenaries in Syria, with hundreds of casualties.<sup>141</sup> Rather than isolated incidents in an otherwise harmonious international environment, these episodes illustrate the aspiration on both sides to separate friend from foe globally and to secure favorable international alignments or coalitions reminiscent of the Cold-War geopolitical "blocs."<sup>142</sup>

Confrontation between Moscow and Washington has also infused the domestic politics and worldviews of both sides. Russia's inter-

ference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and credible charges of ongoing Russian intelligence activities aimed at manipulating voters and inflaming U.S. public opinion have exacerbated already intense partisan warfare in Washington. Strident voices across the U.S. political spectrum, in the traditional press and in social media echo chambers, seek to score points by denouncing “ties to Russia,” however benign, remote, or implausible, as proof of nefarious, even treasonous, behavior.<sup>143</sup> In and around Capitol Hill, the dissemination of lists of Russian, European, and even U.S. entities and individuals that might be targeted for future sanctions requires that even the most outlandish claims be taken seriously enough to be disproven. The domestic political effects of Russia’s ongoing information, cyber, and intelligence operations do not yet amount to a new “Red Scare” in Washington, but they will do lasting damage.

The current conflict’s domestic political element may be even more pronounced on the Russian side. It is certainly more central to Moscow’s domestic political agenda. For more than a decade, and amid slowing economic growth and rampant corruption, Vladimir Putin has conjured a “siege mentality” of Russia against the hostile, U.S.-led West to justify his authoritarian rule.<sup>144</sup> Especially with Putin’s popularity declining in the years after his invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin beats a constant drum of propaganda to persuade Russians of their distinctly Eurasian values and identity and the need to resist U.S. power.<sup>145</sup> If anything, wave upon wave of U.S. sanctions have dovetailed with Putin’s own goals of “repatriating” Russian wealth and expunging foreign support for Russian NGOs. Severing ties between Russia and the West can be a means of limiting vulnerability to Western pressure. For Putin, it is also an instrument of domestic control.

If mutual isolation is the goal, however, neither side has yet achieved it. Despite hostile political climates, strident media narratives, and

the proliferation of sanctions and counter-sanctions, Russians and Westerners remain more interconnected by trade and by professional, community, and family ties than they were throughout the Cold War. Both are deeply engaged with China and the global economy. Ideological elements of the current conflict, while apparent in debates over human rights, democratic legitimacy, and international law, are still relatively limited by comparison with the Cold War's all-encompassing struggle of free market capitalism versus communism.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, despite the overall deterioration in relations, Washington and Moscow have maintained some channels of communication and have cooperated successfully on space, Arctic issues, counter-terrorism, and even some regional security challenges like Iran's nuclear program.<sup>147</sup>

A broad strokes analogy between the current Russia-West conflict and the Cold War clearly fails when one factors in the vast disparity between Russian and Western power today. While Russia has recovered from the economic, demographic, and political collapse it suffered after losing its East European and Soviet empires in 1989–91, it is far from the United States in economic, demographic, or conventional military terms, much less to NATO or the West as a whole. With a far wealthier and more developed China increasingly flexing its diplomatic and political muscles, Russia is no longer even the predominant power in Eurasia. The only geographic areas in which Russia can balance or potentially supersede the West are in its immediate post-Soviet periphery and even then only if it applies overwhelming force against relatively soft targets, while relying on its vast nuclear arsenal to deter a Western response.<sup>148</sup>

Reminders the Cold War is long in the past offer little comfort to governments and societies worried about Russian aggression in Europe. Even for those in the West who reject the new Cold War paradigm and perceive no direct threat from today's Russia, a new



containment policy might still be justifiable: reassuring nervous European neighbors could outweigh the cost of lost partnership and engagement with post-Soviet Russia, which might well have been illusory from the start. Russia hawks argue that Russian leadership has been habitually dishonest about its intentions in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere, while its state-funded media organs are engaged in a systematic global disinformation campaign.<sup>149</sup> How, they ask, can one work with a regime that one cannot trust?<sup>150</sup>

## THE NEED FOR CONTAINMENT THEN AND NOW

In both his famous “Long Telegram” of 1946 and his equally famous “Mr. X” article from the following year, Kennan argued for containment as the best form of resistance to Soviet expansionism. Kennan even described Soviet foreign policy in terms not dissimilar to those used in the growing Western consensus about Russian foreign policy today. Kennan assessed that the Soviet leadership was ideologically driven but pragmatic in its inclination to push outward only when “timely and promising,” and to hold back when resistance was encountered.<sup>151</sup>

Accordingly, Kennan called for “the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” in which he included both Western societies themselves, and the wider world in which Soviet and Western interests collided.<sup>152</sup> In Kennan’s view, the danger of an expansionist Soviet foreign policy came not only from the Bolsheviks’ distinct ideology but from their access to the vast power and potential of Russia itself.

Although ideological differences are now much less pronounced, Kennan’s assessment of the potential disruptive power of Russian foreign policy for Western interests should be given careful consideration today. “This political force,” Kennan wrote of the Kremlin in his famous telegram, “has complete power of disposition over energies of one of world’s greatest peoples and resources of world’s richest

national territory, and is borne along by deep and powerful currents of Russian nationalism.”<sup>153</sup>

While today’s Russia may bring to bear more modest resources in terms of wealth, population, and even military potential, it is still a force to be reckoned with, one of the world’s two nuclear super-powers, a major international power broker, and by far the strongest national military present in the European theater. Likewise, Russian “expansionism” today varies from overt seizure and annexation of territory, as in Crimea, to murkier “hybrid” interventions in neighboring states as in Ukraine’s Donbas region or Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to the assertion of a right to protect the ethnic Russian diaspora living beyond Russia’s borders, from the Baltics to Central Asia. Just as Kennan argued regarding Soviet expansionism, Russia’s current policy towards its neighborhood is pragmatic and flexible but appears inexorably focused on the establishment of a sphere of influence, at least in its so-called “near abroad.”<sup>154</sup>

The Kremlin today has little interest in promulgating its particular political ideology of state capitalism and a strong “power vertical” or in dominating territory beyond its immediate periphery. Yet it does seek to project influence globally in ways not unlike those described by Kennan during the Cold War. The main goals of Russian policy in the West were, according to Kennan in his “Long Telegram,” “to disrupt national self confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest [and] to stimulate all forms of disunity.” He warned that within Western societies, “poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents, etc.”<sup>155</sup> As any number of reports from Western governments and experts now confirm, these very approaches are central to Russia’s current information and influence operations in the West and worldwide.<sup>156</sup>

Much has been written in recent years on the topic of Russian-supported broadcast and online media activity around the world, which

Westerners have accused of promoting a deceptive and propagandized narrative.<sup>157</sup> Some even cite Kremlin-driven media activities as a core component of the so-called “hybrid” threat to Russia’s nearest neighbors.<sup>158</sup> The Russians themselves argue that their international media activity is no different from that of any other country and in particular no different from the U.S. media, which has for decades enjoyed an outsized international footprint.<sup>159</sup> Either way, there can be little doubt that Russian-backed TV and radio broadcasting, news agencies and web portals, and apparent armies of paid internet “trolls” all operate in the West today to “stir the pot” of anti-government political views, and more broadly to undermine public confidence in core Western institutions, from national and local government to major corporations and prominent NGOs.<sup>160</sup>

Russia’s media activities in the West are complemented by semi-covert activities aimed at advancing Russia’s interests (i.e. weakening the Western sanctions regime) and at establishing connections with fringe political groups on both the right and left of the political spectrum. These contacts go beyond merely fostering fellow-traveler sentiments among the most vocal critics of the United States, NATO, and the established European order to include providing direct financial assistance to political parties, and even payoffs to individual politicians.<sup>161</sup> Kennan’s assessment of Soviet interference in the domestic politics of Western countries could have described the present conflict: “Where suspicions exist,” he wrote, “they will be fanned; where not, ignited. No effort will be spared to discredit and combat all efforts which threaten to lead to any sort of unity or cohesion.”<sup>162</sup>

## **GETTING CONTAINMENT RIGHT**

To the degree that Kennan’s containment doctrine entailed vigilance, strength, and readiness to deter Russian expansion, it has already been widely endorsed and adopted by Western governments, and

even by NATO as a whole.<sup>163</sup> Yet close attention to Kennan's writings suggests he intended containment to entail much more than deploying countermeasures and closing Western ranks in response to any and every Soviet provocation. Kennan wanted the West, not the Kremlin, to control the agenda, believing that the challenge was "within our power to solve... without recourse to any general military conflict."<sup>164</sup>

Kennan's restraint derived from his analysis of the basic Russian approach to power projection. Because the Russians were inclined to think of geopolitical competition as a long-term struggle and were thus potentially prepared to cede ground on any given issue in the face of firm opposition, Kennan thought that deterrence could prevent divergent interests from sliding into general conflict between Russia and the West. "If the adversary has sufficient force and makes clear his readiness to use it, he rarely has to do so," Kennan reasoned, so that "if situations are properly handled there need be no prestige-engaging showdowns."<sup>165</sup>

By the same token, Kennan warned against needlessly bombastic, blustering responses to the Soviet threat, which he worried the Soviets might perceive as weakness. Un-strategic action from the West might push the Kremlin into a domestic political corner where it was forced to escalate:

While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism. The Russian leaders are keen judges of human psychology, and as such they are highly conscious that loss of temper and of self-control is never a source of strength in political affairs. They are quick to exploit such evidences of weakness. For these reasons, it is a sine qua non of successful

dealing with Russia that the foreign government in question should remain at all times cool and collected and that its demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.<sup>166</sup>

The most difficult dimension of a successful containment strategy may also be the most often forgotten or misconstrued from Kennan's original writings. Kennan flipped on its head the Marxist-Leninist contention that capitalism contained the "seeds of its own destruction" to argue that internal contradictions, reactionary leadership, and fundamental structural flaws would eventually destroy the Soviet system from within.<sup>167</sup> Rather than be provoked into rash action in the name of preventive security, or pursuing adventurist interventions inside Russia itself, Kennan advised the West to practice strategic patience. He was confident that much of what was threatening about Soviet power would be the cause of its own ultimate demise.

Here Kennan's insights offer vitally important lessons for Russia-West relations today. The Soviet leadership's innate hostility toward the West and the wider capitalist world—what Kennan referred to as the Kremlin's "aggressive intransigence"—betrayed the Bolshevik regime's paranoia and self-isolation.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, Kennan wrote, "the very disrespect of Russians for objective truth—indeed, their disbelief in its existence—leads them to view all stated facts as instruments for furtherance of one ulterior purpose or another."<sup>169</sup> Western politicians have lamented similar strains of self-isolating and deliberately dishonest or manipulative behavior on the part of the current Russian leadership.<sup>170</sup>

Even if it weathers the storm of economic and political isolation it has stirred up by its hostile actions in Ukraine, the Russian state in the coming decades faces existential challenges entirely of its own

making. The first among these is the lack of opportunity for Russia's best and brightest citizens within the current political and economic system, which causes continuing emigration of talent and capital, and is especially problematic in view of Russia's low birth rate and aging population. The second is the endemic corruption of Russian officialdom, from the obscenely wealthy inner circles of the Kremlin and the high echelons of state-supported industries, to regional elites and even street-level law enforcement. Finally, there is what Russians now call the "problem of 2024," how Vladimir Putin will manage to retain or transfer power at the end of his final term as president without provoking a succession crisis or even a revolution.

Kennan's version of containment took account of these very problems. He judged the Soviet regime as fundamentally weak, despite its outwardly strong appearance, arguing that its weakness would become evident as it attempted to perpetuate itself and propagate new leadership. Of Russians, he wrote: "That they can keep power themselves, they have demonstrated. That they can quietly and easily turn it over to others remains to be proved. Meanwhile, the hardships of their rule and the vicissitudes of international life have taken a heavy toll of the strength and hopes of the great people on whom their power rests."<sup>171</sup>

If the objective of Western policy is to achieve a radical transformation in Russian policy by altering the composition or the mindset of the Russian leadership today, it is doomed to fail. Such an approach would clearly overreach in terms of the West's actual capacity to influence events within Russia and its immediate neighborhood. As Kennan observed of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the Russians are "still by far the weaker force" when gauged against the West as a whole. He argued in his telegram that "their success will really depend on [the] degree of cohesion, firmness and vigor which Western World can muster. And this is [a] factor which it is within our power to influence."<sup>172</sup>

Effective containment, in Kennan's view, required not only cohesion for the sake of resisting the Kremlin's "divide and conquer" tactics within the Western camp, but also consistency over time and across many related areas of national life and state policy. He advised the United States to "formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of [the] sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in [the] past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of [the] past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security."<sup>173</sup> Far from a dated reference to Europe's exhaustion and vulnerability in the aftermath of World War II, Kennan's words capture the renewed sense of vulnerability to internal and external threats in Europe today. They also underscore the continuing indispensability of U.S. leadership.

The West's challenge in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its exploitation of far-right politics throughout Europe, and its influence activities around the globe is not only about defending against such measures. The West must strengthen the bulwarks of healthy and successful politics, security, and commerce, and it must offer a compelling alternative vision. In Kennan's words, "It is rather a question of the degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."<sup>174</sup> Kennan predicated containment as much on Western power, prosperity and liberty as on the need to devise a direct response to Soviet power.

## **THE MISSING PIECE: UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA**

In the policy recommendations at the conclusion of his telegram Kennan advised Americans to learn much more about Russia, cautioning, "there is nothing as dangerous or as terrifying as the un-

known.”<sup>175</sup> Those words could hardly be truer or more relevant today. Yet this absolutely central message of Kennan’s work has all but disappeared in the quarter century since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Even with Russia constantly in the headlines, there has been only limited investment in sustaining expertise on Russia in North America and Western Europe over the past two decades.

In the United States, Russian area expertise has fallen victim to trends promoting quantitative methodology in academia; to across-the-board cuts to government programs supporting Russian education and research, including cuts of over 50 percent to critical language training; and to near complete elimination of advanced research fellowships for Americans studying Russia and the region. These reductions in the overall pool of academic expertise have been reflected inside government as well, where analysts and diplomats working in support of policymakers have seen career incentives re-oriented in favor of other regions, such as the Middle East; or cross-cutting issues such as counter-terrorism or democracy promotion and development have taken precedent.<sup>176</sup> The situation in Western Europe has been similar, with increasing pressure in recent years for area expertise focused on the South, rather than the East.

As a recent study of Russia expertise in the United States concluded, “Russian studies within the social sciences are facing a crisis.” Political science faculties in the top three-dozen U.S. universities have together awarded an average of only seven PhDs per year with at least a minimum (defined as 25 percent or more) focus on Russian area studies. The situation in economics and sociology is even more dismal, with a grand total of only four economics and five sociology PhDs with a focus on Russia awarded since 2009. Even the broader field of Slavic Studies, which includes language, literature, and culture experts, is in decline, with barely a quarter of its PhD graduates from this decade employed in tenure-track teaching jobs.<sup>177</sup> Given declining interest in Russian studies among incoming



students reported for most of the past decade, and the elimination of many faculty positions that were previously earmarked for Russian specialists, it is no surprise that universities have fewer students enrolled in Russia-focused electives and core courses that might equip America's future political, social, and business leaders with even a basic knowledge of Russia.

The news is not uniformly negative about Russia expertise in the West. Eastern European, Central European and Scandinavian states have tended to maintain a much stronger capacity to understand and analyze Russia, which has in many cases proven indispensable to NATO and the European Union. In fact, the divergence of expertise between East and West had become so pronounced by the end of the last decade that in many intra-European and Euro-Atlantic forums, a *de facto* division of labor emerged in which representatives of Central and East European member states assumed primary responsibility for analyzing and developing collective policy recommendations towards Russia and the former Soviet space. Yet for the United States, understanding Russia by proxy is patently inadequate to the task at hand.

If we are to follow Kennan's advice to study Russia with "courage, detachment [and] objectivity," what can we now do to enhance Western capacity for developing and implementing an effective, comprehensive policy towards Russia? First, the United States and Western Europe must restore financial support for the development of robust Russian area expertise as a top national security priority.<sup>178</sup>

Kennan himself underwent his early training in Russian studies at the University of Berlin, and then gained close-up expertise on the Soviet economy while serving at the U.S. legation in Riga, Latvia. Now, as then, universities and research institutions must remain bastions of intellectual freedom, while fostering contacts with government and offering timely and policy-relevant insights through publications, seminars, and media commentary. Kennan's own academic and

professional experience crisscrossing the United States and Europe reminds us that the development of Western expertise on Russia should be a shared undertaking. Individual institutions and experts from North America and all parts of Europe should be encouraged by their governments to collaborate.

A few rules of thumb should inform government programs supporting scholarship on Russia, and should likewise guide the policy-oriented work of Russia experts themselves. Far too often, the call for expertise on Russia from the press, civic groups, private grant-makers, and government agencies is focused primarily on “understanding Putin” or explaining some specific aspect of “Putin’s Russia.” This preoccupation with Putin is echoed in what might be called the “new Kremlinology” of think tanks and universities. As one prominent Russian observer has pointed out, the focus by Westerners on “Putin’s Russia” gets it exactly backwards, because the current occupant of the Kremlin would be much better understood as “Russia’s Putin.”<sup>179</sup> Though he is certainly an authoritarian ruler, Putin holds onto power by coopting and giving voice to broadly held views in Russian society, reflective of current and past experiences shared by millions of Russians.<sup>180</sup>

Finally, while close study of Russia can cast considerable light on the trends and context influencing elite decision-making, there is generally little basis for the type of palantir-gazing “Kremlinology” depicted in films and spy novels. These approaches also seem to neglect a vital lesson of the Cold War, during which not even the most ingenious Russia watchers had much success reading the minds of the Kremlin elite, much less predicting the most consequential developments in Soviet foreign policy or within the Soviet Union itself. As a former senior U.S. diplomat recalled, even by the summer of 1991, most Russia experts in government and universities were expecting that during the following year, Moscow would at most slightly relax

its control over the Baltic republics, but that the Soviet Union would remain intact for a long time to come.<sup>181</sup>

## THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

Kennan's firsthand analysis of Russia in the early years of the Cold War, and his recipe for a sophisticated, sustained containment policy, have enjoyed renewed relevance to key elements of the recent Western policy response to Russia. Faced with the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine, the West has imposed punitive economic, political, and diplomatic sanctions, maintaining a broadly united front against considerable political countercurrents, thereby deepening Russia's self-imposed isolation from much of the global economy. Western government assistance has also strengthened Ukraine's ability to defend its sovereignty and to conduct extremely difficult but vital reforms aimed at rooting out corruption and breaking the monopoly on power of a few oligarchic cliques.

These efforts have hardly had a transformative impact on either Russian policy or Ukraine's political, social, and economic hardships, but if considered in terms of Kennan's containment doctrine, they need not do so. Rather, Western policy toward Russia today, just as in the Cold War, should be oriented towards success over the longer term. Strengthening the pillars of the West's manifold economic, political, and cultural accomplishments will attract individuals and whole societies caught between the geopolitical forces of Russia and the West, and by the same token blunt Russian interventions designed to exploit internal weakness, to manipulate civilizational divides (such as the divide between Latin and Orthodox Christianity in Europe) or to sow divisions within NATO or the European Union.

The West can also choose not to let Russia set the agenda of tit-for-tat competition worldwide. This will deny the Kremlin one of its most powerful fonts of anti-Western propaganda and leave Russians to

decide for themselves whether they are satisfied with their political leaders and their country's role in the world. Targeted and sustained investments in enhancing the West's capacity to understand Russia can help divorce fact from fantasy and illuminate not only what Russians think about their own country and the world, but why they think it.

Today, some in the West might find Kennan's vision of containment unsatisfying. Many already argue that Russia's military aggression, defiance of basic international norms, and attempts at geopolitical and even historical revisionism deserve a tougher and more immediate response.<sup>182</sup> Kennan faced strenuous opposition from more hawkish colleagues, most famously Paul Nitze, who thought about the Cold War as "a battle of will and numbers," and argued for overwhelming the Soviets with superior capabilities and deployments across the board.<sup>183</sup>

A policy of containment will not succeed if it is perceived as the path of least resistance, or if the term is invoked merely to paper over internal political differences. If the West is to revive containment as a guiding principle of its Russia policy, then it is essential to give it the full and consistent application Kennan intended. Only a new containment doctrine of this kind is the right response to Russia's current challenge.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The John Lewis Gaddis biography of Kennan contains an extraordinary passage recounting Kennan's warmth of connection to Russia and relative distance from (some) American culture: "Russia seems something poignantly familiar and significant to me [Kennan wrote]...as though I had lived here in childhood.' Wandering the streets of Moscow and rambling through the nearby countryside left him with 'an indescribable satisfaction to feel myself back in the midst of these people—with their tremendous, pulsating warmth and vitality.' He [Kennan] sometimes felt he would rather be sent to Siberia with them, 'which is certainly something that would happen to me without delay if I were a Soviet citizen,' than to live among the 'stuffy folk' on Park Avenue." *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 178.
- 2 Kennan took Woodrow Wilson to task for theorizing a world without the balance of power, without conflict, without violations of sovereignty, arguing (in a book originally published in 1951) that, "under the shadow of this theory Wilson went to Versailles unprepared to face the sordid but all-important details of the day of reckoning. Under this theory he suffered his tragic and historic failure." "World War I," in *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 72. Whatever Kennan's disagreements were with Wilson, he did allow the Kennan Institute, which he founded, to be housed within the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- 3 Dean Acheson quoted in "Obituary: George Kennan," *Economist*, March 23, 2005, <https://www.economist.com/obituary/2005/03/23/george-kennan>.
- 4 Kennan drew an explicit connection between good policy making and the admission of error: "a nation which excuses its own failures by the sacred untouchableness of its own habits can excuse itself into complete disaster." "World War I" in *American Diplomacy*, 78.
- 5 On Kennan's increasingly distant relationship to official Washington see chapters 24 and 25 of Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*.
- 6 Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 102–103. For an argument that Kennan's xenophobia and anti-Semitism structured his strategic thinking see David Greenberg, "U.S. Cold War Policy Was Designed by a Bigot," *New Republic*, April 19, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117174/george-f-kennans-diaries-reviewed>.
- 7 See Henry Adams, "A Letter to American Teachers of History," which he published in 1910 and in which he, combining scientific metaphors with visions of civilizational decline, predicted a catastrophic global conflict in 1921. Kennan was drawn to Henry Adams and to his even more pessimistic brother, Brooks Adams, who in the 1890s "probably came closer than any American of his day to the sort of an intellectual premonition of what the future had in store for us." "The War with Spain," in *American Diplomacy*, 6.
- 8 For a monograph that communicates excitement about the end of the Cold War, starting with its title, see Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe*

*Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

- 9 Kennan argued that Berlin “should become the first purely European city, carrying on under the aegis of whatever structure of European unity might then exist (today it would have been the EU); and that it should be encouraged to serve as a transportation hub, an economic and business center, and a cultural center for all of northern and north-central Europe, its zone of useful activity to extend, without infringing on the sovereign independence of any of the respective peoples, to adjoining territories such as the Baltic countries and parts of Scandinavia and Poland.” “A Letter on Germany,” December 3, 1998, *New York Review of Books*.
- 10 Tom Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Now a Word from X,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1998.
- 11 Friedman.
- 12 Richard Ullman, “The U.S. and the World: An Interview with George Kennan,” *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1999. In ways relevant to these claims about Crimea, Kennan was unusually receptive, for an American diplomat and foreign-policy thinker, to “spheres of influence” arguments. This attitude comes out clearly in one of his 1950 Walgreen lectures, in his evisceration of the Open Door Policy titled “Mr. Hippisley and the Open Door.” In this lecture, Kennan presents “a refusal by the United States government to recognize the spheres of influence [in China] at all” as intellectually muddled and hypocritical. “Mr. Hippisley and the Open Door,” in *American Diplomacy*, 33.
- 13 Ullman. Kennan’s position in 1991 was consistent with his thinking in 1951 when he speculated that “no members of future Russian governments will be aided by doctrinaire and impatient well-wishers in the West who look to them, just because they are seeking a decent alternative to what we know today as Bolshevism, to produce in shorter order a replica of the Western democratic dream.” “America and the Russian Future,” in *American Diplomacy*, 141.
- 14 Kennan made his thoughts public about a possible war in Iraq in a September 2002 interview: “Anyone who has ever studied the history of American diplomacy, especially military diplomacy, knows that you might start in a war with certain things on your mind as a purpose of what you are doing, but in the end, you found yourself fighting for entirely different things that you had never thought of before....In other words, war has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it. Today, if we went into Iraq, like the president would like us to do, you know where you begin. You never know where you are going to end.” Quoted in Albert Eisele, “George Kennan Speaks Out About Iraq,” History News Network (website), <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/997>.
- 15 Although Kennan identified no democratic tradition in Russian governance, he was convinced that Russians had a love of liberty and that Russian culture (literature especially) had within it a deep reservoir of liberal sentiment. “There is no liberal tradition finer than the strain which was existed in the [pre-Soviet] Russia of the past,” Kennan wrote in a 1951 essay. “America and the Russian Future,” in *American Diplomacy*, 141.
- 16 Kennan applied static civilizational categories to international affairs much as Samuel Huntington did—to the consternation of many of his readers in the 1990s—in *The*

*Clash of Civilizations* (1997). In “The Long Telegram,” Kennan noted the Kremlin’s “oriental secretiveness,” adding that “Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form, fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of Western countries.” All “Long Telegram” quotes taken from the copy archived at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.

- 17 “The War with Spain,” in *American Diplomacy*, 6.
- 18 Kennan offered the following description of democracy’s penchant for mood change: “day before yesterday, let us say, the issues at stake between ourselves and another power were not worth the life of a single American boy. Today, nothing else counts; our cause is holy; the cost is no consideration; violence must know no limitations short of unconditional surrender.” “World War I,” in *American Diplomacy*, 70.
- 19 Kennan had high praise for a series of pre-Cold War diplomats—John Hay, Elihu Root, Charles Evans Hughes, Henry Stimson—not only for what they did but for who they were. They “embodied that pattern of integrity of mind and spirit, moderation and delicacy of character, irreproachable loyalty in personal relations, modesty of person combined with dignity of office, and kindness and generosity in the approach to all who were weaker and more dependent, which constitutes, it seems to me, our finest contribution to the variety of the human species in this world and comes closest to embodying our national ideal and genius.” “Diplomacy in the Modern World,” in *American Diplomacy*, 98.
- 20 Richard Ullman, “The U.S. and the World: An Interview with George Kennan,” *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1999.
- 21 Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” in *American Diplomacy*, 134. Kennan was prone to characterizing the history of American foreign policy as a falling away from the Founders’ moderation and wisdom. He writes, for example, of the Americans of 1898 forgetting “a great deal that had been known to their forefathers of a hundred years before.” “The War with Spain,” in *American Diplomacy*, 5.
- 22 A key insight of Kennan’s is that “the national state system as it had grown up in the West” is not universal; neither are “Western concepts of state sovereignty and international amenities.” “America and the Orient,” in *American Diplomacy*, 44, 45. Kennan did not dismiss the Westphalian system or Western notions of state sovereignty, but he did think that Western diplomats should be aware of other angles of vision—prevalent in China, Japan, and Russia. Diplomats could only fail if beholden to “a community of outlook among nations which did not really exist” or if they acted as “slaves of the concepts of international law and morality.” “America and the Orient,” in *American Diplomacy*, 50, 57.
- 23 Quoted in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 688. Kennan published an academic essay on Chekhov in 1932, while he was a Foreign Service officer. He hoped to write a biography of Chekhov and devoted his personal time to the Chekhov Publishing House, which put out paperback editions of classic Russian literature in translation.
- 24 X, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, <https://www.foreignaf->

[fairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct](https://www.fairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct). The year before, he had written his famous “Long Telegram,” which was an inside State Department document.

- 25 Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 171.
- 26 David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), chapters 5–7.
- 27 Milne, *Worldmaking*, 317.
- 28 Jussi Hahnimaki and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 131.
- 29 Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 67.
- 30 George F. Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>.
- 31 James Goldgeier, “Bill and Boris: A Window into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship,” *Texas National Security Review*, August 28, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/2018/08/bill-and-boris-a-window-into-a-most-important-post-cold-war-relationship/>.
- 32 Kimberly Marten, “Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s,” *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (June 2018): 135–161, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-international-security/article/reconsidering-nato-expansion-a-counterfactual-analysis-of-russia-and-the-west-in-the-1990s/356448EA9D5C63C53BE1EC6B33FE470A>.
- 33 Thomas L. Friedman, “Mideast Tensions; U.S. Jobs at Stake in Gulf War, Baker Says,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/14/world/mideast-tensions-us-jobs-at-stake-in-gulf-baker-says.html>.
- 34 Jenny Thompson and Sherry Thompson, *The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America’s Man in Cold War Moscow* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 41.
- 35 Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 134. See also Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, 315–16.
- 36 Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, 289.
- 37 George Kennan diary entry, November 4, 1951, in Frank Costigliola, ed., *The Kennan Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 299.
- 38 See, most famously, Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1965). See also Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1960).



- 39 George Kennan (“Mr. X”), “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, <https://shafr.org/sites/default/files/XArt.pdf>.
- 40 George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 2012 edition), 99–100.
- 41 *American Diplomacy*, 70.
- 42 See George F. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).
- 43 See Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 696.
- 44 On this point, see Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 45 Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 697.
- 46 The best analysis of Kennan’s thinking about civilizations and diplomacy, in this context, remains Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). See also Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power: A History of the Domino Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 133–65.
- 47 The merger of the U.S. Diplomatic and Consular Services in 1924 created the U.S. Foreign Service.
- 48 On this point, see David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), especially 217–68.
- 49 George F. Kennan, Moscow, to Secretary of State, Washington DC, February 22, 1946, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf).
- 50 Kennan (“Mr. X”), “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, 566–82.
- 51 Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.”
- 52 Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.”
- 53 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 343.
- 54 The best analysis of Kennan’s thinking about containment remains John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005 edition), 24–86.
- 55 Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 361–518.
- 56 On this point, see Ernest May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 57 See, among many others, Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 87–271.

- 58 Quotations from Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 591.
- 59 George F. Kennan, “A Modest Proposal,” *New York Review of Books*, July 16, 1981.
- 60 George F. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977).
- 61 On this point, see Walter Hixson, *George Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 62 Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513, reprinted in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998 edition), 109–110.
- 63 My understanding of Machiavelli’s ideas, and their various misinterpretations, is indebted to many authors, especially Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001 edition), 25–79.
- 64 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 66–67.
- 65 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 44.
- 66 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 4.
- 67 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 95.
- 68 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, lii.
- 69 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 57. Italics added.
- 70 Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).
- 71 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 109.
- 72 Some material in this chapter is adapted from Paul Heer, *Mr. X and the Pacific: George F. Kennan and American Policy in East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018) and used by permission of the publisher.
- 73 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 367.
- 74 George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25:4 (July 1947), reprinted in George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 120.
- 75 Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” in *Diplomacy*, 111, 113, 115.
- 76 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017.
- 77 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 171.
- 78 Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), 166–7.
- 79 Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet American Relations in the Atomic Age*, ex-

- panded edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), xix–xxvi.
- 80 Kennan, *Cloud of Danger*, 202.
- 81 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017.
- 82 Kennan, *Nuclear Delusion*, xix.
- 83 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 46.
- 84 Kennan diary entry, July 28, 1950; quoted in Paul Heer, *Mr. X and the Pacific: George F. Kennan and American Policy in East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 193.
- 85 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 131, 135–36.
- 86 Kennan, *Cloud of Danger*, 231, 106.
- 87 Policy Planning Staff Paper #23, “Review of Current Trends: U.S. Foreign Policy,” February 24, 1948, quoted in Heer, *Mr. X and the Pacific*, 34.
- 88 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 162–3.
- 89 Kennan, *Nuclear Delusion*, xxvi–xxvii.
- 90 Kennan speech, “The United States and the Problem of China,” State Bar of California, October 1, 1964, quoted in Heer, *Mr. X and the Pacific*, 231.
- 91 Kennan diary entries, July 12 and August 14, 1950, quoted in Heer, *Mr. X and the Pacific*, 162–3.
- 92 Kennan, “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” reprinted in *American Diplomacy*, 126–8.
- 93 Kennan, *Nuclear Delusion*, 74.
- 94 “The Long Telegram.”
- 95 Susan B. Glasser, “George Kennan Biography Showcases the Man Who Got Russia Right,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-kennan-biography-showcases-the-man-who-got-russia-right/2011/12/20/gIQAp0YPEP\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fc3aa667bcd2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-kennan-biography-showcases-the-man-who-got-russia-right/2011/12/20/gIQAp0YPEP_story.html?utm_term=.fc3aa667bcd2).
- 96 Glasser, “George Kennan Biography.”
- 97 Jonathan Knight, “George Frost Kennan and the Study of American Foreign Policy: Some Critical Comments,” *Western Political Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (March 1967): 149–160.
- 98 John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 110, 465, 503, 710.
- 99 Eduard Stoeckl to Karl Nesselrode, no 5, January 22 and February 3, 1850, in Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI), Moscow. Fond 133. Kantselyaria, 1850. Opis’ 469. Delo 138. List 77 ob.

- 100 See also Kenneth E. Shewmaker, “Neill S. Brown’s Mission to Russia, 1850–53,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 12, no. 4 (December 2001): 81–98; and Ivan Kurilla, *Za-okeanskije Partnery (Partners Across Oceans)* (Volgograd: Volgograd State University Press, 2005).
- 101 For example, Kennan’s biographer Gaddis boldly claims that “by the end of [Kennan’s] first decade in the Foreign Service he was explaining Russian society far better than Russians were doing for themselves.” John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 117. The statement is rather dubious.
- 102 Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1994), 15.
- 103 Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 374.
- 104 “The Long Telegram,” headed “The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State. SECRET. Moscow, February 22, 1946,” is found in the National Security Archives, Cold War documents, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>.
- 105 Todorov proposed a scheme for understanding relations between different cultures. Three independent “axes” define one’s attitude toward the “other”: epistemic, or knowledge-based; axiological, or values-based; and praxeological, or practice-based (a desire to change oneself or the “other”). Todorov stressed the independence of all three variables. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 186.
- 106 David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- 107 George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 60th anniversary expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 70.
- 108 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 165.
- 109 George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), 370–371.
- 110 Kennan, *Russia and the West*, 11–12.
- 111 Kennan, *Russia and the West*, 371.
- 112 It is hardly a coincidence that the leading contemporary realist scholar of the U.S. foreign relations, John J. Mearsheimer, wrote an introduction to the 60th anniversary edition of Kennan’s *American Diplomacy* in 2012.
- 113 Kennan, *Russia and the West*, v.
- 114 Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, xlvii.
- 115 See, for example, an analysis of the impact of the Cold War on the federal support to the Civil Rights movement in Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image*

- of *American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 116 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power and American Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 268–269.
- 117 U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian (website), “[Letter from Director of Policy Planning George F. Kennan to Under Secretary Dean Acheson](#),” May 23, 1947, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v03/d135>.
- 118 George F. Kennan, *The Kennan Diaries*, ed. Frank Costigliola (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 232.
- 119 Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 120 See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986). See also Ernest R. May, “*Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 121 George F. Kennan, “On American Principles,” *Foreign Affairs*, April/May 1995.
- 122 [Speech by Barack H. Obama](#), October 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois.
- 123 See, for example, *The Kennan Diaries*, page 603: “I have no confidence in the prospects for anything like a mingling of the races in South Africa, nor can I permit myself to hope that the whites will be permitted to retain very much of the quality of their own lives, or indeed of the vitality of the economy, in a country dominated, on the principle of one-man, one-vote, by a large African majority. I would expect to see within five or ten years’ time only desperate attempts at emigration on the parts of the whites, and strident appeals for American help from an African regime unable to feed its own people from the resources of a ruined economy.” See also page 507: “I sit, in the plane, next to an oriental woman, with a sweet, well-behaved child. I am waited on, or at least offered things, by one colored girl and two or three white ones. I remember that I am to visit, day after tomorrow, the Los Angeles area, where the majority of the births are to people of Latin origin, and where people of British origin, from whose forgers the constitutional structure and political ideals of the early America once emerged, are not only a dwindling but a disintegrating minority. . . . The Latin, Levantine, African, and Oriental elements that now make up so large a part of this population: they, too, are destined, for the most part, to lose their character, their traditions, their unique coloration, and to melt into a vast polyglot mass, devoid of all three things: a seal of helpless, colorless, humanity, as barren of originality as it is of nationality, as uninteresting as it is unoriginal—one huge pool of indistinguishable mediocrity and drabness.”
- 124 The Chargé of the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, February 22, 1946, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178.pdf>. Note: It is one of the great accidents of history that Kennan’s views, laid out here in “The Long Telegram” and a similarly celebrated (and anonymously authored) article in *Foreign Affairs*, were misunderstood to be arguing for a military, as opposed to primarily political and diplomatic, approach to containing the Soviet Union.

- 125 "The Long Telegram."
- 126 "The Long Telegram."
- 127 "The Long Telegram."
- 128 Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," *Harper's*, October 1939.
- 129 Frank Costigliola, "George F. Kennan and the Institute," IAS (website), 2010, <https://www.ias.edu/ideas/2010/costigliola-kennan>.
- 130 Costigliola, "Kennan and the Institute."
- 131 George F. Kennan, "Lecture 4: The Military Problem," Reith Lectures 1957: Russia, the Atom and the West, December 1, 1957, [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/1957\\_reith4.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/1957_reith4.pdf).
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