

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

George 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.¹

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.² 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.”³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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."⁶

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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.'"¹⁰

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.”¹¹

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.”¹²

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.”¹³

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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 21ST 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.²¹

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.²²

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.’”²³ 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.