

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

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INTERVIEW WITH DENNIS ROSS

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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.