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## **GEORGE F. KENNAN,** **1904-2005**

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### *A Brief Note to Readers:*

*The following essay on George Kennan is a longer version of Anders Stephanson's entry in the Dictionary of Communism [Einaudi, 2006]. H-Diplo would like to thank Professor Stephanson and Einaudi for granting us permission to post this essay.*

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**W**hen George F. Kennan was born, Theodore Roosevelt was in the White House and still only in his first administration. A very different kind of Republican regime chose to honour the venerable Kennan on his hundredth birthday in February 2004 by linking the containment policy he is supposed to have authored with the continuing operation in Iraq. Kennan had actually criticized in print that venture as imprudent and wrongheaded. It was probably the last in a series of seemingly endless quarrels during his enormously long life as a policymaker, historian, critic of culture, writer of note and public intellectual, one of the most prominent of the 20th century in the United States.

Many of these controversies have indeed concerned what exactly he meant by containment when he articulated the idea in 1947 and the extent to which the ensuing grand policy in fact followed his concept; but his views on a whole range of issues, views that have sometimes coincided with those of the left, sometimes those of the right, have always occasioned debate and sometimes scorn. Thus Kennan was one of the first within the US mainstream in the 1950s to criticize the cold war posture he himself was said in no small measure to have created. He always remained a vociferous critic of commercialized mass culture, environmental degradation and the unlimited growth and rapaciousness of industrial society; but he was staunchly against all egalitarianism and what he took to be popular (or vulgar) democracy. Kennan always disliked and sometimes detested the political culture of the United States. To the US public, and to himself as well, this has seemed a strange, contradictory and almost radical outlook. In fact, Kennan's stance has always been that of an "organicist conservative," or, in today's parlance, a communitarian of the right: a strong belief in a natural, hierarchical and "organic" order, where the inherent limits of things are recognized and strictly observed, where the best and the brightest rule for the benefit of the many and the innate tendency of humankind to transgress against nature and the natural is kept tightly under wraps. To this view he added a strong "civilizational" emphasis. What mattered to him was the west, not because it was necessarily superior but because it was home or where home was supposed to be. The United States, from that perspective, was singularly ill-fitted to become civilizational leader: with its fractured political structure and lack of consistent,

intelligent and far-sighted direction, it was immature and mindless, well-meaning to be sure but congenitally given to translating domestic concepts literally and falsely onto the realities of the world.

Born into a Presbyterian family of Scots-Irish provenance, Kennan suffered the loss of his mother when he was two. His father, a lawyer of Progressive bent who wrote the first income tax law in the state, was 52 years old at the time of birth and remained for him a relatively distant figure. Kennan was sent to a military academy for schooling but eventually ended up at Princeton for his college education. He was not socially prominent. Afterwards, far from clear on his future, he applied successfully in the mid-1920s to the Foreign Service and was subsequently selected to special training as a Soviet specialist, among the first "experts" of any kind in the State Department. Training in Berlin, he was directed by the Department to focus on traditional pre-Soviet Russia. Partly as a result, partly because of personal proclivities, the deeper dynamics of revolution would never much interest him, nor the intricacies of Leninist Marxism. Indeed, the problem of ideology, its role and efficacy, would haunt him throughout his sovietological career. He was opposed to diplomatic recognition of Moscow; but when Franklin D. Roosevelt did so in 1933, Kennan became a junior member of the new embassy. His negative view of the regime as essentially illegitimate and ineligible for international society was not altered when Moscow swung sharply in the mid-30s to the politics of anti-fascist alliances. Transferred to Prague, he thus favoured the Munich agreements. His political sympathies at this point lay with authoritarian, putatively organic regimes such as Salazar's in Portugal and Kurt von Schuschnigg's in Austria which exhibited none of the demotic aspect of mass mobilization found in the fascist systems proper.

Not surprisingly, therefore, he found deeply discomfiting the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. In 1944, he was sent back to the Moscow embassy to assist in facilitating that very alliance. It was a frustrating experience for the return occasioned no change in his view of the Soviet Union and no change in his view of the monumental illusions harboured by his own government with regard to that that country. Profoundly disaffected, he advocated privately towards the end of the war that the western powers cease cooperation with Moscow and retain the armistice division of Europe. For this negative policy, generated by exasperation with what Kennan took to be Rooseveltian naiveté, there was of course no support at this stage. A year later, the atmosphere had changed dramatically. In February 1946, Kennan fired off an extended, blistering assessment of the Soviet position and foreign policy in the world, a document which has since become known as the Long Telegram. Brilliantly and seductively composed, it had a powerful impact internally among the senior officialdom in Washington. Developed in the pseudonymous "X-Article" in the July issue of *Foreign Affairs* in 1947, Kennan's thesis boiled down to four propositions (i) that Moscow, for various historical, ideological and geographical reasons, was a regime defined by its deep insecurity and thus in need, paradoxically, of foreign enemies to preserve its own character and power; (ii) that it was an inherently expansionist regime committed "fanatically" to the destruction of all power not under its own control and so entirely opposed to every compromise with such rivals; (iii) that nothing could be done from the outside for the foreseeable future to change the nature of the regime and its internal necessities; (iv) that the outward thrust of this regime and its auxiliaries could be "contained" because the west was far stronger and if it only recognized the realities of the situation and refused to engage in any deals unless from a position where the western

position could be dictated to the Soviets, then the problem was manageable and eventually the regime would in fact change.

Containment, strictly speaking, was a simple idea indicating nothing more than systematic resistance to the systematic expansionism he had posited. Indeed, though he used the word "contain," Kennan's argument was not put across in the name of some grandly designed "containment." His account, however, could be read in different ways, not least because the language was typically metaphorical and suggestive. Semantically, the term drew chiefly on two discursive sources. Most immediately, it referred to the field of disease and disease control, the containment of "a malignant parasite," as he liked to say, or perhaps an epidemic. What successful containment required first here is proper diagnosis: intensive examination for the purpose of determining the identity, origin and developmental dynamic of the malignancy. The Soviet Union, he was suggesting, should be thought of as a malicious biological agent and studied under a microscope as though by a doctor. Precise diagnostic knowledge would be combined with spatial isolation and encirclement, so as to deprive the agent of further ground to invade and consume. Healthy tissue would be reinforced prophylactically (inoculation, medicine, maintenance, general invigoration). Without of room to grow, the malignancy would naturally peter out or die. Secondly, apart from the language of health and disease, Kennan used the imagery of a bursting river, flowing into every empty crevice and opening, unless, that is, it were contained by dams and walls. The implication was that the menacing object could be brought under control; it was not clear if and how the river itself would dry up and disappear.

In the end, whether Moscow was a contagious disease or a river out of control or maybe a wind-up toy mindlessly marching on in its given direction until stopped by an insuperable obstacle (another of his metaphors), Kennan's basic point was the same. Because Soviet policy was wholly a product of the "nature" of the regime, an object unto itself, and because that nature was wholly antagonistic to all rival forms of power, nothing by way of outside diplomatic interaction and dialogue could really affect its policy. The Soviet regime was a body in motion, a body whose destructive and hostile motion was inscribed in its very being (or DNA as it were). Hence it could only be stopped. When stopped, it would eventually stop being itself since it required outward expansion for sustenance and reproduction. On the issue how exactly it should be stopped, Kennan was less forthcoming. It was a matter of the individual case. He was always wary of broad prescriptions because they threatened to become abstractions. This attitude has since given rise to much debate, fuelled not least by Kennan himself, as to whether he meant (as he later claimed) political containment of a political threat as opposed to the militarized version that actually ensued. The problem is misconceived: Kennan thought the threat was total and the countereffort too had to be "total;" and thus he included military means and impressive shows of potential force. Still, he believed that the conflict, if properly conducted, could be carried out by means short of war, politically and by covert action.

In essence, then, Kennan was saying that the United States and the west should cease normal diplomacy until the Soviet Union, on its part, ceased being the Soviet Union. This view was to be the overdeterminant ingredient of the emerging cold war. It had several drastic shortcomings. For one thing Kennan was conflating hostility to the outside with inherent expansionism. He was also wrong about compromises since Moscow, historically, had engaged in a whole series of such deals and virtually from the inception of the Bolshevik government. He was unable,

moreover, to specify if Moscow really was a revolutionary marxist regime. Indeed, the very place of doctrine and ideology in its outlook was unclear. Most important, his analysis of Soviet policy (or "conduct") was entirely derived from the domestic character of the regime: external events were meaningless or only secondary. The procedural "objectification" of the Soviet regime thus left the account without any explanation for Moscow's many actual changes of policy. It was as though the rise of fascism in the 1930s had had no real effect on Soviet foreign policy and the move towards interstate alliances. Kennan did not adhere to such absurdities; but he considered such shifts as mere tactics, surface actions hiding the kind of fundamental, unalterable realities he thought he had identified. The analytical effect was to make all attempts at genuine agreement with Moscow delusional and counterproductive. Thus he had laid the ideological foundations for a US refusal to sort out the postwar issues, chiefly in Europe, that needed urgent resolution, the foundations for unilateral US restoration of western Europe and the seemingly permanent division of the continent.

This he quickly realized. One reason was that Walter Lippmann, the powerful columnist, immediately took him to task in the fall of 1947 precisely for forgetting about the need for traditional diplomacy and negotiation, if nothing else in order to get the Red Army out of central Europe. Having grasped the force of Lippmann's critique and, moreover, sensed the danger of simplistic analyses of the Soviet Union, Kennan began gradually in 1948 to develop a critical stance. He did this from one the most powerful policymaking positions in the State Department. For in the spring of 1947, he had become head of the Policy Planning Staff instituted by the new Secretary of State George Marshall. In this capacity Kennan would determine, guide or influence almost every important policy decision for the next three years, though not always in the direction he would have preferred. At the time of the X-Article, Kennan had already been a central figure in the development of the Marshall Plan. Five events in the first part of 1948 pushed him to change: the beginning of a western military alliance system, the Prague Coup, the defeat of the left in Italy, the successful airlift against the Berlin blockade, and, finally, Tito's split with Stalin. Kennan concluded that the political stability of western Europe and especially Germany was better than he had feared, and that, inversely, Moscow had suffered grievously across the board, not least by Tito's defection. More profoundly, he realized that a militarized version of the Marshall project would render the division of Europe permanent as there would be no way for Moscow safely to relax its rule over Eastern Europe. Thus he proposed a plan for disengagement and possible neutralization of Germany. He also developed a grander strategic vision based on the premise that, in effect, there were only four regions of the world that, materially, could form a military threat to the United States and only one of these, the Soviet Union, was actually hostile; as long, therefore, as none of the other three (the United Kingdom and auxiliaries, continental Europe and Japan) did not fall away, one might safely ignore much of the rest of the world, including the rapidly disintegrating Nationalist regime in China. Restoration of the former enemies to health was therefore essential. Kennan, accordingly, took an decisive role in supporting the conservative turn in US-occupied Japan. Preventing the other three power centers from becoming a threat did not involve any global US role and certainly not any US- led militarized system of alliances. On the contrary, the whole point would be to restore the old, more "natural" centers of power to counterbalance the Soviet threat, thus allowing the United States, combining asymmetrically massive material superiority with unsettling political immaturity, to retreat into a properly limited role in the world.

Of this vision, nothing much came to pass. "Containment" and the image of the "fanatical" destroyer, predictably, were appropriated instead into a sharply dichotomous view of world of good and evil, a world which was either free or communist where the free had to be led by the land of the free. With such ideological simplicity, Kennan had no patience. His approach was certainly not without a moral component. His chief complaint about the Soviet system was in fact not its collective qualities but its presumed lack of ethical limits, the crude reduction of everything to the single aim of increasing power. Nevertheless, containment as such necessitated no moral argument or ideological passion. For one could not blame, so to speak, a malignant parasite for being a malignant parasite; and the same went for the bursting river. Stopping the inimical force was a clinical matter of study and disease control, alternatively an engineering problem of building dams. In either case one is in the realm of detachment and cold efficiency, the precise, analytical weighing of alternatives, often alternatives in shades of grey. Moreover, even if containment implied the principle of activity, it was easy to see it as essentially negative activity, a project of holding the line while the other side had the power of initiative, the choice of where and when to attack. From here it was not a long step to argue that containment was really passive; and to be passive in the face of a limitlessly evil empire was to have fallen into the deepest moral turpitude. Such sentiments were intensified by the realization that, on reflection, Kennan's premise - inherent expansionism stopped equals eventual change of structure in the agent - might not hold true or might only be true in such a long perspective as to make the strategy dangerous, if not meaningless. In 1949, the dual setbacks of Communist success in China and the Soviet atomic bomb created particular problems in this regard.

Thus was born the supposedly active counterprinciple of "rollback," the destruction of enemy power itself. Though it became a Republican slogan in the early 1950s, it was already present in veiled form in NSC 68, the global policy document that the State Department articulated in the winter and spring of 1950, much to Kennan's chagrin. In terms of concrete policy, there was not much difference between containment and rollback, the latter being on the whole practically impossible. As an idea and project, however, it fit much better the crusading coldwar spirit of eradicating evil. By then, Kennan had become increasingly marginalized and he would in fact leave the State Department de facto that year for secluded study at Robert Oppenheimer's new Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. The Korean War momentarily brought him back but, apart from ambassadorial posts in Moscow in 1952 (a disaster) and Belgrade in the early 1960s, Kennan from then on was primarily to be a public intellectual and a historian.

His prescription in 1946-47 for the malignancy had been to focus on creating western health. If health could be preserved and strengthened, there was not that much to worry about. For Kennan, however, there was always reason to worry about western health. He was now beginning to think that feverish cold war politics and obsession with military alliances were signs of some malady at home. Once outside the policy world, consequently, he turned to study not the Soviet Union but the United States. *American Diplomacy 1900- 1950*, a short, successful book of lectures (1951), articulated a critique of what he took to be congenital universalism and legalism in the US approach to the world. His earlier inclination towards classical realism in international relations came to the fore. As an exceedingly vocal public intellectual here in the 1950s, Kennan became perhaps the sharpest critic within the establishment of Washington's cold war policy and the "intellectual straightjacket" he thought marked it. He was profoundly troubled by the focus on all things nuclear and the escalating arms race it entailed, a position he

had expressed already within the State Department in his opposition to the development of the hydrogen bomb. He also proposed mutual withdrawal from Germany and subsequent neutralization so as to allow easing of tensions and possible easing of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe as well. As this view generated a savagely dismissive response from the orthodox establishment, Kennan was once again becoming intensely critical of the political system along with the mass culture of consumption in the United States, "the cult of production for the sake of production, the belief that economic development is an absolute good." In denouncing McCarthyism earlier in the decade, he was especially critical of the silence and timidity of the establishment, the emergence of "fantastic internal security arrangements, which no one dares to question."

It is important, again, to understand that he offered these views as a conservative, a radical conservative in the US context but a conservative nonetheless. His refusal, for instance, of hackneyed cold war binaries and divisions of the world in good and evil, his refusal of universals in the name of particularity, meant too that he was able to denounce third-world nationalism while defending, in some cases, colonial rule. In the 1960s, when he was criticizing the war in Vietnam he was also an adamant supporter of Portugal's empire in Africa and opposed to any action against the white apartheid regime in South Africa. His disdainful view of the conformist culture of the 1950s, specifically among students, was replaced in the 1960s by vitriolic rebuke of the student rebellion, his desire for diversity having now become a desire for order. Throughout, however, he retained his favourable stance on rapprochement with the Soviet Union, which, by the time of Khrushchev's thaw in the late 1950s, he had begun to look upon as a regime in transition towards authoritarianism, a form of rule he considered by western standards unremarkable. He also retained his consistently strong advocacy of nuclear disarmament, becoming in the 1980s a formidable critic of Ronald Reagan's buildup. Henceforth he was in strong sympathy with Mikhail Gorbachev's reform program. Because he was always contemptuous of nationalism while exhibiting deep historical affinities with the multi-ethnic, multilingual Austro-Hungarian empire, he was not unambiguously favourable to the emergence of post-Soviet states of suspect nationality (as he must have been revolted by the appearance of McDonald's restaurants in central Moscow).

Kennan's historical works have typically taken two forms, on the one hand books of lectures, dealing synthetically with large topics, primarily Soviet ones, on the other, monographs of diplomatic history such as his two-volume account of the allied intervention in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution (1956, 1958) and his two volumes on the genesis of the First World War (1976, 1982), a conflagration he has always considered the central calamity of modern western history. The early work on intervention suffered from excessive detail and atypical lack of analysis, flaws emanating from a certain anxiety about his empirical mettle as a historian without academic training. The monographs on the late 19th century, by contrast, are masterful examples of diplomatic history of a traditional kind, remarkable investigations of the limits, existential choices and tragic predicaments of policymakers not unlike himself and the deeper structural circumstances beyond their control. These works rank among the best diplomatic histories ever written in the United States. Kennan's literary reputation, however, will rest mainly on his two volumes of autobiography, *Memoirs* (1967 and 1971). Though he left a good deal out, the first volume is nothing less than an American classic within the genre.

Gardener's "Long Essay" on Cold War History, an H-Diplo essay

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(See also the forthcoming authorized biography by John Lewis Gaddis.)

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