

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

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A COMPLEX MAN WITH A SIMPLE IDEA

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When 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.”²⁴ 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?”²⁵

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.²⁶

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."²⁷ 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.”²⁸

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.”²⁹

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.”³⁰

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.³¹ 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.³²

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 hegemons 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."³³ 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."³⁴

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."³⁵

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."³⁶

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.