

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

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GEORGE FROST KENNAN AND RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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