

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

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GEORGE KENNAN: AMERICAN MACHIAVELLI

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When man is given (as he can be given only for relatively brief periods and in exceptional circumstances) freedom both from political restraint and from want, the effect is to render him childlike in many respects: fun-loving, quick to laughter and enthusiasm, unanalytical, unintellectual, outwardly expansive, preoccupied with physical beauty and prowess, given to sudden and unthinking seizures of aggressiveness, driven constantly to protect his status in the group by an eager conformism—yet not unhappy.

—George Kennan, 1951³⁷

George Kennan witnessed the triumph of democracy over fascism, and he predicted it would outlast communism too. Yet, he feared democracy would defeat itself. The tendencies toward materialism, moral sanctimony, and militarism frightened him in the earliest days of the Cold War, when the United States simultaneously invested in consumerism and exhibited cruel intolerance. The expansive promises of education and homeownership through the G. I. Bill went hand-

in-hand with the repressive witch-hunts of McCarthyism. Mid-century America was going in too many contradictory directions at the same time. It was both over-exuberant and paranoid.³⁸

This was the context for Kennan's famous advice to American policy-makers about containment: "The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation."³⁹ Americans had to confront aggression firmly abroad as they also curbed their excesses at home. Tradition and preservation were the key words—along with containment—for a conservative-minded man like Kennan. The United States had to defend democracy without becoming too democratic.

Democracy was a problem because it discouraged what Kennan believed were the essential qualities of effective diplomacy: patience, restraint, compromise, and consistency. Citizens wanted immediate results, especially after long decades of economic depression and world war. They treasured boldness and tenacity in pursuit of their goals. They rejected cooperation with adversaries, and they switched policies with each election, and often in between.

Kennan believed these damaging behavioral tendencies were inevitable with public participation in policymaking. "A good deal of our trouble seems to have stemmed from the extent to which the executive has felt itself beholden to short-term trends of public opinion in the country and from what we might call the erratic and subjective nature of public reaction to foreign policy questions," he said. "What passes for our public opinion in the thinking of official Washington," he continued, "can be easily led astray into areas of emotionalism and subjectivity which make it a poor and inadequate guide for national action."⁴⁰

The emotionalism and subjectivity of populist policymaking induced stupidity, according to Kennan. He wrote one of his most memorable

and controversial descriptions just five years after American victory in the Second World War:

I sometimes wonder whether in this respect 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.⁴¹

This is hardly the language one expects from the man who authored the framework—“containment”—for American foreign policy in the Cold War. This is not the attitude one frequently encounters from American diplomats. And this is decidedly not the optimism about American power and righteousness that constitutes the vernacular of mission and purpose for most successful American politicians.

How, then, did the grumpy Kennan come to matter for so much, and for so long? Why do scholars, pundits, and policymakers remain obsessed with him? What is his enduring legacy?

These are difficult questions to answer because Kennan does not fit any standard category. In fact, he disdained them all. He found classical realists too power hungry and ignorant of foreign cultures. He viewed liberals as too idealistic and ignorant of diplomacy. And he criticized institutionalists for overstating the force of law and understating the enduring pull of the nation-state. In Kennan’s estimation, the United Nations was never the correct place to conduct great power diplomacy.

His views were an unstable and messy mix. When criticized for his inconsistency, Kennan wrote an eloquent little book that included

complaints about automobiles, televisions, and big cities—not a coherent philosophy.⁴² His most thorough biographer finds many endearing impulses—patriotism, restraint, balance, and a belief in inherited wisdom—at the center of Kennan’s thinking. Yet, a policy temperament and a diplomatic style emerge from a full rendering of his life, not an enduring philosophy: “Kennan disliked theory,” John Lewis Gaddis writes, “and never regarded himself as practicing that dark art.”⁴³

There might have been a Kennan doctrine of containment, but there was no Kennan school of thought as there was for some of his peers, Henry Kissinger especially.⁴⁴ Although many policymakers were influenced by Kennan, few credit him as a mentor or a guide or even a close friend. He was more of an island—“an outsider in his own time,” according to John Lewis Gaddis—than an institution. Loneliness was his frequent and self-pitying condition.⁴⁵

Perhaps that is the source of Kennan’s endurance. He exposed and challenged core American assumptions about the world, as he also supported American purposes in trying to protect stability, prosperity, and national independence. Kennan did not believe in making the world look like the United States in its politics, economy, or culture. In fact, he thought that would be a horrible idea. He was neither a universalist nor a cultural relativist but instead a particularist.

Drawing on the conventional wisdom of the nineteenth century, Kennan perceived that different cultures and traditions emerged over time, and that they remained distinctive. Influenced by social Darwinists, Kennan believed in a world of hierarchal civilizations that manifest themselves in nations and empires that the United States could neither eradicate nor reform. Instead, America had to encourage favorable behavior from the civilizations that had the most to contribute (Europe and Japan), while ignoring those that did not (Africa and Latin America), and containing those that threatened destruction (especially Russia under communism). Kennan noticeably

favored northern light-skinned societies, and he frequently disdained tropical climates, cultures, and communities. His worldview was racialized and Orientalist, as one would expect from a man educated in his early 20th-century Euro-American milieu.⁴⁶

For all its limits, that canonical education produced valuable insights, especially for one of the oldest international professions: diplomacy. Kennan entered the newly created U.S. Foreign Service because it offered an opportunity to travel and interact in cosmopolitan, elite circles.⁴⁷ The Foreign Service did not exist to change the world but to make sense of it for policymakers, businesspeople, and ordinary citizens. Kennan never thought of himself as a “change-agent” (a term popularized in the late 20th century.) He was an interpreter of a large, complex world to a distant and ignorant American public.

Diplomacy for Kennan, therefore, meant managing and influencing a diverse, historical cocktail of world civilizations from the margins. Kennan had a keen eye for foreign societies and a good ear for foreign languages. He traveled extensively in Europe and eventually made his way to Russia, reading intensely about the history of these societies as he interacted with their leaders and ordinary citizens. Kennan was not bringing America to them; he was bringing them to America in his frequent telegrams and reports to Washington DC, as well as his prolific letters and diary entries. Kennan’s goal was to penetrate the mysteries of these civilizations, explain them to Americans, and help improve mutual relations. This was diplomacy as anthropology and not as imperialism or intervention.

Kennan did not think the United States could act as an empire, or a hegemon, or even a world policeman, even if it wanted to. It was a big, self-serving, distant island nation that interacted with others, while remaining far removed from their cultures and traditions. (Hence, his infamous comparison of the United States to a prehistoric monster “with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin.”) Even after World War II, Kennan suspected that American

complaints about automobiles, televisions, and big cities—not a coherent philosophy.¹⁸⁴ His most thorough biographer finds many endearing impulses—patriotism, restraint, balance, and a belief in inherited wisdom—at the center of Kennan’s thinking. Yet, a policy temperament and a diplomatic style emerge from a full rendering of his life, not an enduring philosophy: “Kennan disliked theory,” John Lewis Gaddis writes, “and never regarded himself as practicing that dark art.”¹⁸⁵

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power was not all that it was cracked up to be. The United States had proven that it could fight in a coalition to defeat fascist states, but it did not have the will, knowledge, experience, or resolve to govern abroad.

The history of the Cold War would confirm Kennan's astute, but often unpopular, judgment of American limits. Kennan was an early critic of the Vietnam War and a consistent detractor from most American military interventions outside Western Europe and East Asia. And even in Europe, he opposed the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which he feared would divide Europe permanently and antagonize neighbors. Kennan favored opening relations with Communist China long before President Richard Nixon's overdue visit in 1972. Kennan's loudest critics were generally more idealistic and militaristic, and history has not judged many of them well. That verdict explains Kennan's continuing influence. It helps that numerous American misadventures seem to have confirmed his predictions.⁴⁸

Kennan's most influential policy documents—his "Long Telegram" from Moscow on February 22, 1946 and his X article published in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947—brilliantly reconciled the limits on American power with the need to combat Soviet aggressiveness. Kennan described how the Soviet system under Josef Stalin was "committed fanatically" to conflict with the capitalist world, but also "highly sensitive to [the] logic of force."⁴⁹ That meant Stalin was not like Hitler; the United States did not have to fight a war to stop his aggression. There were other strategic alternatives: "the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," he wrote.⁵⁰

Kennan called on the United States to "create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a World Power, and which

has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time." Kennan did not want the imposition of American ideas abroad; instead, he favored aid for other societies to find their way free of communism, in partnership with the United States. He wrote, "to the extent that such an impression can be created and maintained, the aims of Russian Communism must appear sterile and quixotic, the hopes and enthusiasm of Moscow's supporters must wane, and added strain must be imposed on the Kremlin's foreign policies."⁵¹

Careful defensive military power, according to Kennan, served a vital role as an accompaniment to the political pressure he advocated. Kennan never argued that the United States could defeat the Soviet Union by force of arms. Military power would enforce limits on Moscow, just as it reflected America's own limits. Military power would give American political actions time and space to encourage positive internal dynamics within societies (including Russia), reflecting their own unique histories. Communism was an alien intruder, and the United States would stand on the side of independence and self-government, not an alternative imposition. That comparison would give the United States and its partners "reasonable confidence" in "a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world."⁵²

Containment, as articulated by Kennan, was not a military or an ideological policy. It was a political strategy to nurture developments within societies, on their own terms, that would benefit American interests. That was all.

The first, and perhaps most important, step in containment was to stop Soviet advances and allow European and Japanese citizens to rebuild their societies based on the particularities of their own respective histories. Recipients of American aid, Kennan explained,

“should themselves take the initiative in drawing up a program and should assume central responsibility for its terms.”⁵³ The Marshall Plan in Europe and the Reverse Course in Japan were anti-communist and pro-capitalist, but they left a lot of openness for local institutions and traditions to set the contours for political-economic development. Despite the horrors of fascism, Kennan looked for continuity in supporting new regimes that resurrected enduring pre-fascist traditions. West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Japanese Emperor Hirohito—neither of whom were American-style leaders—embodied the historically grounded anti-communists that containment privileged. The local and national traditions defined the nature of postwar democracy for Kennan, not American models, which Kennan always found ill-suited and undesirable.⁵⁴

Early success in containing communism and helping national leaders build alternatives encouraged Kennan’s counterparts, including figures like Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles, to increase American ambitions. After the shock of the North Korean invasion of South Korea, with Soviet and Chinese communist collaboration, American policymakers undertook a breathtaking set of global investments in nation-building throughout East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and soon Africa. Fears of communist penetration in the Western Hemisphere, and a long-standing tradition of American intervention in the region, had already driven this dynamic close to U.S. borders in the early 1950s. In the compelling analysis of one historian, the defensive posture of communist containment slipped into an aggressive pursuit of preponderant power around the globe.⁵⁵

The lingering trauma of the Second World War made it hard for American leaders to maintain perspective on foreign threats. Communist aggression on the Korean peninsula and elsewhere evoked memories of Nazi and Japanese war making, which triggered panic and an overwhelming response. American leaders also believed that they now commanded military and economic power that was absent

a decade earlier. They intended to use their newfound power, often flagrantly, to bolster morale at home.⁵⁶

Threat inflation and an overestimation of American power characterized NSC-68, an influential document written by Kennan's successor on the Policy Planning staff at the State Department, Paul Nitze. Containment now became a clarion call for American intervention around the globe to attack communist sympathizers and support preferred American leaders. There was no time to let history take its course in each society. The United States and its allies had to act quickly and decisively to slam the door shut. In the 1950s, this thinking motivated a series of American-sponsored coups in Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, and elsewhere. In the 1960s, it led, most tragically, to Vietnam.⁵⁷

Kennan was the author of containment who, less than a decade after articulating his ideas, became a chief dissenter against their deployment by his government. He characterized the militarization and globalization of communist containment as yet another example of American decadence. The massive primeval American monster with the pin-sized brain was all-out or all-in. Now that it was all-in, the country was hyperactive, responding everywhere with force and money, even if national interests were not at stake and the solution was worse than the problem. Americans were unprepared for the new environments into which they entered with strong determination and very weak knowledge. Trying to anesthetize societies like Iran, Guatemala, and Vietnam from communism, the United States was undermining healthy forces it did not recognize, creating new indigenous enemies, and overextending itself.

Writing of American leaders in the early months of the Vietnam War, Kennan said, "it seems to me that they have taken leave of their senses." He was clearly dismayed. "I am absolutely appalled at what is going on," Kennan explained to his wife. "It looks to me as if Mr. J[ohnson] had lost his head completely."⁵⁸ Kennan famously went

public with his criticisms of the Vietnam War in particular, and American Cold War strategy as a whole, in 1965 and 1966.

He followed those criticisms in later decades with urgent calls for nuclear disarmament and peaceful cooperation with the Soviet Union. In the months after Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980 on a platform of getting tough with Moscow, Kennan became somewhat apocalyptic:

Adequate words are lacking to express the full seriousness of our present situation. It is not just that our government and the Soviet government are for the moment on a collision course politically; it is not just that the process of direct communication between them seems to have broken down entirely; it is not just that complications in other parts of the world could easily throw them into insoluble conflicts at any moment; it is also—and even more importantly—the fact that the ultimate sanction behind the policies of both these governments is a type and volume of weaponry that could not possibly be used without utter disaster for everyone concerned.⁵⁹

The world had entered what Kennan called a “cloud of danger.”⁶⁰ American policies of communist containment had morphed into aggressive adventures that promoted foreign wars and violent dictatorships in regions far from core U.S. interests. Policies of containment also financed a gargantuan military in the United States. Oversupplied with nuclear weapons, this military was over-deployed around the globe, in Kennan's eyes.

By the end of the 20th century, an old and embittered Kennan renounced most of what was done by the United States in the name of containment. He came to regret how his early ideas had become justifications for rigid anti-communist policies and interventionist tendencies, which he abhorred. Kennan lamented the absence of enlightened American leaders who displayed the courage to return

to the flexible and limited vision of containment that he had initially intended. Kennan's ideas had changed over the years, but he blamed the presidents and other officials who implemented them for what he viewed as simplistic and short-sighted policies. Kennan still hoped for a sophisticated prince, who would listen closely to him—and read his writings attentively—on all strategic matters.⁶¹

He was, then, like Machiavelli, looking to instruct a prince who would empower him. Kennan relied on a combination of history and personal experience to make his arguments. On the model of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, he searched for lessons that would endure. In his most ambitious moments, Kennan embodied Machiavelli's mining of historical wisdom to elucidate the present. Machiavelli famously wrote:

When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently re-clothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me.⁶²

Like Machiavelli more than four centuries earlier, Kennan lived in a world where few policymakers had the time or inclination for such serious contemplation. The irony of becoming the arch critic of his own misused words makes Kennan the American Machiavelli of the 20th century. The Florentine sage was frequently misunderstood—and condemned—in his own time, and his words have been repeatedly misused over five centuries to justify some of the worst horrors in politics. Machiavelli, like Kennan, was not justifying all forms of force against adversaries, nor was he empowering the prince to adopt any means in pursuit of his cause. Machiavelli's message was about balance, careful application of force, and the strategic pursuit

of the state's interests in a dangerous world. He emphasized limits as much as possibilities; attention to history and circumstances instead of simple answers.⁶³

Writing from his own policy exile in 1513, Machiavelli warned Lorenzo de' Medici about the false allure of doctrinal consistency or the pursuit of power for its own sake. Machiavelli emphasized the aspiration to a "well-ordered state." And this required, in his famous account, a mix of love and fear, and an avoidance of hate:

A dispute arises, whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The response is that one would want to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to put them together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two....The prince should nonetheless make himself feared in such a mode that if he does not acquire love, he escapes hatred, because being feared and not being hated can go together very well.⁶⁴

For Machiavelli, policy was a constant rebalancing of efforts to manipulate love and fear in citizens, allies, and adversaries alike. This required intelligence, courage, and careful use of force to win affection without inspiring hatred. The well-ordered state, in Machiavelli's estimation, protected its core interests by managing complex and respectful relations with different peoples for mutual gain. War was a last resort that the prince must prepare for, but he should fight infrequently, relying on persuasion and compromise more often.

Power, for Machiavelli, was in managing the opinions of others. Words and arms were tools, not ends in themselves. The state depended on how its leaders appealed (positively and negatively) to a wide range of actors in ever-changing circumstances. "Thus," Machiavelli wrote, "a prince who has a strong city and does not make himself hated cannot be attacked."⁶⁵

Kennan and Machiavelli shared an iconoclastic temperament and a somewhat quixotic desire to be intellectuals and policymakers at the same time. They criticized their peers in the policy community who wielded more power with less thought. Both men suffered profound self-doubt and regret for the very limited influence they exercised directly over their societies' policies. Both were dismayed by the distortions of their ideas for contrary purposes.

Machiavelli began *The Prince* with an argument, in his dedicatory letter, that policymakers needed more knowledge than they possessed by virtue of their position: "to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people."⁶⁶ Machiavelli promised to use his experience and his deep reading of history to give the prince access to the knowledge he needed about the peoples and issues he confronted.

The Prince is filled with historical examples and the lessons derived from them, articulated for a leader without time to master that history. Machiavelli's short book does not recount the history in detail; it helps the reader to use some of that history to ask better policy questions. A leader, according to Machiavelli, "should be a very broad questioner, and then, in regard to the things he asked about, a patient listener to the truth." Historically informed questions would elicit better direction from advisers and allow for better decisions by the policy maker: "good counsel, for wherever it comes, must arise from the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince from good counsel."⁶⁷

Kennan wrote for precisely this reason. He wanted to help American leaders (his intended readers) gain good counsel, especially from him. His first short book, *American Diplomacy*, was his adaptation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* for the Cold War. Based on six lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago in 1950, Kennan interrogated the history of American foreign policy from the Spanish American War of 1898 through the Second World War. He argued that this

history was useful to derive a “theoretical foundation” for policy. Exploring how the United States grew into a world power, and the deficiencies of the country’s preparations, Kennan hoped to offer a “stimulus to further thought on these problems and to worthier efforts by wiser and more learned people.”⁶⁸

These worthier efforts, according to Kennan’s historical analysis, had to be aware of the inherited problems facing American policymakers. Echoing Machiavelli, Kennan was skeptical of public opinion, which his account described as myopic, inconsistent, and ill-informed. He was also critical of American moral self-righteousness, trumpeted by policymakers who were ignorant of foreign societies and beholden to their voters’ prejudices.

Kennan depicted a counterproductive rashness in America’s democratic behavior abroad, which was bouncing between the excesses of isolation and intervention, with advocates of each tactic promising a utopia of peace with minimal sacrifice. “I cannot resist the thought,” Kennan explained, “that if we were able to lay upon ourselves this sort of restraint and if, in addition, we were able to refrain from constant attempts at moral appraisal—if, in other words, instead of making ourselves slaves of the concepts of international law and morality, we would confine these concepts to the unobtrusive, almost feminine, function of the *gentle civilizer of national self-interest* in which they find their true value...posterity might look back upon our efforts with fewer and less troubled questions.”⁶⁹

What Kennan called “feminine” restraint against moral self-righteousness and adherence to the national interest was the core of his argument. It was Machiavelli’s too. The prince, according to both men, had to see through the words and myths, focusing on the uses of power that best served a “well-ordered state,” and in Kennan’s time, a well-ordered world. Both Machiavelli and Kennan used history to show the perils of too much benevolence (love) or too much force (hate). Leaders had to find the right balance, mixing different

forms of power to build relationships between peoples that connected them around their histories and their interests.

The interests of the state were civilizing forces for Kennan and Machiavelli because they set limits on excesses of all kinds. Permanent peace was not possible, but permanent war was self-defeating. The interests of the state required circumstantial knowledge and constant adjustment. They were consistent and legible to friends and foes alike. And the interests of the state set achievable goals—some would say “realistic” goals—for leaders.

George Kennan was one of the 20th century’s great oracles because he issued an uncomfortable, Machiavellian warning that policymakers often did not want to hear. American democracy empowered attitudes and behaviors that threatened its sustenance. Daniel Bell famously called these traits the “cultural contradictions of capitalism.”⁷⁰ Kennan was more focused on politics and foreign policy. With his razor-sharp prose, he diagnosed an ever-present American tendency to excess in consumption, militarization, and intervention. These tendencies were driven by high-minded idealism and grubby selfishness. They infected economic policy at home and foreign policy abroad.

Kennan’s writings have enduring appeal because they describe these phenomena and offer alternatives—from containment to negotiation to restraint. There are no silver bullets in Kennan, no easy escapes from the dilemmas he describes. But there is hope. And there is a worthy struggle in each of Kennan’s writings to make American policy fit the complexity of an ever-changing world. If Machiavelli is the place to start for modern politics, Kennan is the essential primer on foreign policy. His final sentences in *American Diplomacy* capture the everlasting dilemma of balancing capabilities with restraint, power with wisdom:

I am frank to say that I think there is no more dangerous delusion, none that has done us a greater disservice in the past or that threatens to do us a greater disservice in the future, than the concept of total victory....If we are to get away from it, this will not mean that we shall have to abandon our respect for international law....It will mean that we will have the modesty to admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding—and the courage to recognize that if our own purposes and undertakings here at home are decent ones, unsullied by arrogance or hostility toward other people or delusions of superiority, then the pursuit of our national interest can never fail to be conducive to a better world.⁷¹

Kennan carried Machiavelli into the Cold War, and beyond. We shall never stop arguing about these two difficult thinkers. We are better for these arguments, even as they shake our daily attitudes.

Kennan and Machiavelli demanded powerful states with strong leaders, but they warned against the excessive use of power and misguided displays of strength. They were idealists in their attachment to the noble purposes of enlightenment and self-rule; however, they justified repeated demands to abandon principle for survival. Most of all, Kennan and Machiavelli remind us that the world is not as we wish. We cannot re-make it in our image, but we cannot turn away in disgust either. We must make do and work on the edges, as best we can. Americans, like Florentines centuries earlier, still struggle to learn the frustrating art of statecraft.