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George F. Kennan—Architect of Containment

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Tuesday, March 22, 2005

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George F. Kennan was born in Milwaukee, though he would be thrust on the world scene as a very young man. After attending Princeton University, Kennan signed up with the newly-organized U.S. Foreign Service, and he would have a front-row seat for some of the most significant events of the 20th century.

Kennan had studied in Germany and was proficient in several European languages, including Russian. That alone put him in a very small group of specialists who would turn attention to the Soviet Union soon after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Later, Kennan would be posted to Berlin, where he would eventually be arrested by the Nazis and held in an internment camp for five months. After the war, he became the primary ideological architect of American foreign policy, influencing both Republican and Democratic administrations, and framing America's approach to the world in terms of a "containment" of Soviet power and influence.

From 1944 to 1946, Kennan served as Chief of Mission in Moscow, functioning as Ambassador Averell Harriman's primary consultant. Kennan was an ardent anti-Communist, and he offered what was recognized as a clear-eyed exhumation of Soviet intentions when many Americans found the Soviet Union increasingly perplexing.

To be specific, America faced a host of questions once World War II had been won—and among the most important of these questions was America's relationship with the Soviet Union. During the war, Americans had grown accustomed to seeing the Soviet Union as a crucial ally against the Nazis. American propaganda—largely framed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt—transformed the tyrannical Joseph Stalin into "Uncle Joe."

Nevertheless, once the war was over, the Soviet Union returned to its expansionist ambitions and threw American diplomats into consternation. President Harry S. Truman, newly thrust into the responsibilities of the presidency, was looking for a credible interpretation of Soviet ambitions and intentions. In George F. Kennan, he found an adviser he could understand and appreciate.

During Ambassador Harriman's absence from Moscow, Kennan had functioned as the chief U.S. representative. His fluency in the Russian language and his access to Soviet officials, coupled with his experience before, during, and after the war, put him in a unique position to advise the American president.

Kennan's advice took the form of his famous "long telegram" of 1946. In that remarkable document, Kennan established the shape of American foreign policy for decades to come.

Kennan began by arguing that Communism had found a unique opportunity in backward Russia. "It was no coincidence that Marxism, which had smoldered ineffectively for half a century in Western Europe, caught hold and blazed for the first time in Russia. Only in this land which had never known a friendly neighbor or indeed any tolerant equilibrium of separate powers, either internal or international, could a doctrine thrive which viewed economic conflicts of society as insoluble by peaceful means."

Insightfully, Kennan argued that Marxism functioned as ideological cover for the paranoid political instincts of the new Soviet ruling class. "In the name of Marxism they sacrificed every single ethical value in their methods and tactics," Kennan noted. "Today they cannot dispense with it. It is [the] fig leaf of their moral and intellectual respectability. Without it they would stand before history, at best, as only the last of that long succession of cruel and wasteful Russian rulers who have relentlessly forced [their] country onto ever new heights of military power in order to guarantee external security of their internally weak regimes. This is why Soviet purposes must always be solemnly clothed in trappings of Marxism, and why no one should underrate importance of dogma in Soviet affairs."

Behind all this, Kennan understood the Soviet posture to be an extension "of uneasy Russian nationalism, a centuries old movement in which conceptions of offense and defense are inextricably confused."

In conclusion, Kennan argued that the Soviet Union could be trusted to serve its own purposes at all times and to seek an expansion of Soviet influence around the world. "World communism is like [a] malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue," he remarked.

Called back to Washington the following year, Kennan would make his mark in history through the anonymous publication of an article in *Foreign Affairs*, the journal of the Council on Foreign Relations. The article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," became the centerpiece of American foreign policy during the Cold War. Though its author was identified only as "X," policy-makers knew that Kennan was the author of the article. He became, in effect, the most well-known anonymous author in foreign policy history.

In this 1947 article, Kennan argued that the Soviet Union would understand only one language—the language of power. Driven by paranoia mixed with nationalism, Soviet leaders sought above all, Kennan argued, to protect and extend their own power. "They have endeavored to secure it primarily against forces at home," he noted, "within Soviet society itself. But they have also endeavored to secure it against the outside world. For ideology, as we have seen, taught them that the outside world was hostile and that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders."

Leaning into psychology, Kennan also argued that "it lies in the nature of the mental world of the Soviet leaders, as well as in the character of their ideology, that no opposition to them can be officially recognized as having any merit or justification whatsoever." Thus, the Soviet ideology depended upon an inflexible opposition between Communism and capitalism, described by Kennan as "a basic antagonism between the capitalist and Socialist worlds." The Soviets depended upon this "semi-myth of implacable foreign hostility" in order to justify their actions abroad and their repression at home.

As he had previously explained to President Truman, Kennan now sought to convince the foreign policy establishment that America would "continue for a long time to find the Russians difficult to deal with." As he continued, "It does not mean that they should be considered as embarked upon a do-or-die program to overthrow our society by a given date. The theory of the inevitability of the eventual fall of capitalism has the fortunate connotation that there is no hurry about it. The forces of progress can take their time in preparing the final coup de grace."

Kennan's article provided genuinely brilliant insights, such as the fact that, because they believed time to be on their side, "the Kremlin has no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force." The Soviets had effectively learned to trade tactical retreat for strategic advance.

Kennan's advice was to meet Soviet force with counter-force and to limit the expansion of Soviet influence abroad. With the Soviet Union understood to be America's main competitor on the world scene, Kennan argued that its existence

should simply be taken as a fact, and that American policy should be limited to thwarting Soviet ambitions.

Kennan's proposal was reducible to just a few clear sentences: "In these circumstances it is clear that 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. It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of 'toughness.' While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism."

The first sentence of that passage provided the single word that became the theme for Kennan's approach—containment. Kennan argued that America should not seek to eradicate Communism, nor should it confront Soviet leaders about the repression of their own people. Instead, Kennan's form of realism in foreign policy led him to argue that containing Soviet influence around the world was the only option that would minimize the risk of war with the Soviets and maximize American influence.

Kennan's approach became standard operating procedure for American presidents from Truman to Jimmy Carter, though Kennan would later complain that his approach had been misconstrued and misapplied on countless occasions. For most of the Cold War, America simply accepted the existence of the Soviet Union as a fact, and made only limited symbolic gestures toward the reality of Soviet oppression. Containment became the major strategic doctrine of American foreign policy, and successive American diplomats—from John Foster Dulles and Dean Acheson to Henry Kissinger—would accept much, if not all, of Kennan's approach as orthodoxy.

Kennan was a champion of detente, though by that time he had left government service and was teaching at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies. He opposed American efforts to confront Soviet human rights abuses, and felt that American democracy simply could not be exported to the world. Kennan's policy of containment would be symbolically and substantially refuted by President Ronald Reagan's identification of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." He opposed Reagan's military build-up, and never conceded that Reagan's refusal to accept the permanence of Communism had effectively led to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

George F. Kennan, along with a handful of others who comprised a rare and influential intellectual elite, exerted a remarkable and now controversial impact on America and the world. Most Americans living today would be shocked by Kennan's refusal to advocate for human rights around the world and his acceptance of the Soviet Union as a brute fact. Charity requires that Kennan's critics remember that the Cold War was a real war, and that the threat of a massive nuclear exchange framed the realism Kennan so ardently defended in foreign policy.

Still, from the vantage point of history, Kennan's policy of containment is seen to be tragically devoid of moral purpose. Furthermore, Kennan emerges not only as an anti-Communist, but also as a severe critic of American democracy. Most Americans would be shocked to know that the man who exerted so much influence over American foreign policy for over half a century was an elitist and anti-democrat who believed, among other things, that women should not be allowed to vote and that African-Americans should be understood as wards of the state. Toward the end of his life, Kennan argued that the United States of America should be broken up into 12 geographic republics, ruled over by an appointed elite of intellectuals. Kennan's "Council of State" would function something like Plato's concept of enlightened autocrats. Once described by William F. Buckley, Jr. as one of "the premiere ambiguitists in public life in America," Kennan was clearly unambiguous in his rejection of democracy—even of the representative democracy that is embodied in the U.S. Constitution. Averell Harriman, the American ambassador to Moscow whom Kennan served, once remarked that Kennan was "a man who understood Russia but not the United States."

Those who would understand America must understand the individuals who frame national policy and the worldviews from which they operate. The death of George F. Kennan closes over a century of life and a major chapter in American foreign policy. Understanding Kennan's ideas and the influence he exerted is a good start toward understanding our own times and our own challenges.

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