

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

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GEORGE KENNAN'S IMPACT ON MY CAREER AS A U.S. FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER

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I am a retired diplomat whose 45-year career in the United States Foreign Service focused primarily on Russia and Eastern Europe. Although I never met George Kennan and am by no means a Kennan scholar, I was, like most of the diplomats of my generation, strongly influenced by his example and thinking. This is an account of George Kennan's recurring impact on my career representing the United States in Russia and other nations of Eastern Europe both before and after the end of the Soviet Union.

I joined the Foreign Service in January 1972. I had grown up in Madison, Wisconsin and gone to Marquette University in Milwaukee. It was only natural that I was drawn to Kennan, a fellow Wisconsinite from Milwaukee, who made his way to Princeton and then to the U.S. Foreign Service. I read George Kennan's book, *Memoirs, 1925–1950*, early in my career. The book was one of the main contributing factors in my decision to devote the bulk of my professional career to Russia and neighboring countries.

I remember being impressed and humbled by Kennan's academic achievements and his formidable language skills. I was awed by his knowledge of Russia and the Russian people. What struck me the

most at that time, however, was Kennan's ability to transform his many ideas into practical policy initiatives and thereby to contribute to the formulation of American policy. His work as the director of the State Department Policy Planning staff and his role in the creation of the Marshall Plan were particularly impressive to young Foreign Service officers like myself.

Service officers like Chip Bohlen and Llewelyn Thompson became models for me and many of my colleagues who chose the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe more generally as our career path and who sought to have an impact on the evolution of our policy as the Soviet Union imploded and the new nations of the former Soviet Union came into being. I should mention that one of Henry Kissinger's main aides at this point was Larry Eagleburger, also a native of Milwaukee, a fact not lost on me or the few other Wisconsin natives then working in the department.

Although I never met Kennan, from 2003 to 2004 I served as the senior State Department officer at the National War College in the deputy commandant position in which Kennan had served in 1946. I sat for a year in the office and at the desk which I was told George Kennan used and at which he reportedly wrote a good portion of the 1947 Mr. X article, "Sources of Soviet Conduct," for *Foreign Affairs*. I thought it more than a little ironic that I took this position immediately after serving as U.S. Ambassador to Lithuania, during which NATO took the decision to admit the Baltic nations to NATO membership, a decision Kennan strongly opposed. As you might imagine, I was constantly teased at the War College about when I would write my own Mr. X article. My friends are still waiting.

Like Kennan, I used that year at the War College to ground myself in some of the classics of strategy. Although I had studied American and European diplomatic history, I had never engaged in a serious examination of how nations develop national security strategy, certainly not with the rigor with which they teach it at the War College.

We studied the great “strategic inflection points” in history, particularly the demise of the Soviet Union and its impact on seemingly every corner of international affairs. We also undertook a deep study of realism and idealism in foreign policy, with a focus on the then raging Iraq War. But inevitably those discussions drew me back to a concerted look at the role of U.S. policy in the post-Soviet space.

I think most of my State Department colleagues during these years understood clearly the role of Kennan and his articulation of the policy that came to be known as “containment.” We were all his intellectual protégés. We also understood how our policy had evolved in ways with which Kennan disagreed, in particular building NATO as a defensive military alliance of like-minded nations to resist Soviet aggression and prevent war in Europe. I became personally aware for the first time of the impact of Soviet domination during a tour of duty in Hungary from 1979 to 1982. Although Janos Kadar’s “goulash communism” was perhaps the mildest version of a Soviet-controlled communist regime, I saw every day the deleterious impact of this regime and its policies on people’s lives, not just in Hungary, but when I traveled to Romania, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. The severe limitation on people’s freedom had a deep effect on my thinking.

I was made keenly aware of the Soviet willingness to use force during my first week working on the Soviet desk at the State Department in 1983, when the Soviet Air Force shot down KAL 007. Later I watched as the Soviet Union walked out of the arms-control negotiations with us that were designed to stop the deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe. Subsequently, my position on the Soviet desk gave me a unique perspective on the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev and the Reagan administration’s early efforts to engage with him and end the Cold War. The eventual demise of the USSR seemed to open up a new set of strategic opportunities with which to engage Russia and the successor states that emerged from the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Bush administration set out on a dual task: to build a secure and prosperous relationship with Russia *and* build relationships with the newly independent nations of the former USSR. Secretary of State James Baker ordered the establishment of embassies in each of the new states and then traveled to each of them to start building relationships with their new political leaders. I was deeply involved in setting up those embassies and staffing them with Foreign Service officers who sought to build not only government-to-government ties but people-to-people connections. The Clinton administration continued these policies and simultaneously embarked on the first round of NATO enlargement in Central-East Europe.

Frequently, I found myself re-encountering Kennan and his ideas. I would read his interviews and criticism of the Clinton and Bush administration policies, particularly on NATO enlargement. I tried to understand his logic but was also only too aware of the contradictions in his approach, which his critics did not hesitate to point out. Too often at that time he seemed to almost be on the verge of preferring the continuation of the status quo rather than dealing with the new opportunities and dangers of the post-Soviet era.

In those days, many of us thought that the time had arrived to right the wrongs of the Yalta Agreement of 1945. It would give the nations of Central and Eastern Europe the chance to develop new, independent, and hopefully democratic societies which would enhance the interests of their people and in the process build a new order in Europe—a Europe whole, free, and at peace. Membership in NATO would also bring greater stability to a part of Europe that had been the source of instability and imperial competition for centuries.

I also understood the realist criticism of this approach—that we should take Russia on its own terms, a deeply insecure nuclear power whose history drove its leaders to constant efforts to secure a strategic buffer and spheres of influence in neighboring countries.

But how was this in America's long-term interest? Did this not condemn us to a continuation of the same Russian role we had seen during the Soviet period? And how did this square with a rising tide of nationalism in East-Central Europe and later in the post-Soviet period among the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union? Wasn't working with these new states also an essential component of realism as we approached a region that was changing so radically and so quickly? Was this not, as Kennan wrote in "The Long Telegram," putting "forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of the sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in the past"?⁹⁴

In 1996, I was appointed deputy chief of mission in Moscow. I served with Ambassador Tom Pickering for four months and then began a period of ten months as chargé d'affaires before Ambassador Jim Collins arrived. During this interim period Secretary of State Madeline Albright held several meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, with a particular focus on finishing the negotiations of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Time and again, I saw Secretary Albright seemingly bend over backward in these negotiations to try and accommodate Russian concerns, which were often based on clear misunderstandings of NATO and its defensive mission, and to find a place for them within the new security structure the Clinton administration was trying to build in post-Soviet Europe.

Alas, Albright's efforts proved to be of no avail. Russian participation in the NATO-Russia Council never realized the hopes that had been initially invested in it. The more American officials argued that NATO and the EU would help stabilize the historically volatile regions on its periphery, the more it seemed that the Russian elite reverted to its zero-sum game approach to European security in the post-Soviet world. I am well aware of those who argue that this was a foolhardy mission, but I honestly do not think the Russians took advantage of the new possibilities which were discussed at that time. The Russian political elite could not bring itself to abandon or even modify

its long-held approach of wanting to control institutions and trying to dominate neighbors to satisfy its own unquenchable desire for security.

During my three years in Moscow, I came to appreciate that one of George Kennan's great gifts to us in the Foreign Service was the incisive brilliance of his analysis of Soviet society and his understanding of the Russian people. His analysis was matched by his craftsmanship in writing. Despite the limitations placed on Kennan and other staff when he worked at the embassy in Moscow, his understanding of Russia was a model for all of us who tried to penetrate the history, complexity, and contradictions of this huge nation. To paraphrase Susan Glasser in her December 23, 2011 *Washington Post* review of John Lewis Gaddis's biography, *George Kennan: An American Life*, I came to admire George Kennan the Russia hand more than I did George Kennan the American strategist.

I remember being particularly struck by the quote in Gaddis's book from an essay which Kennan wrote for Ambassador Averell Harriman on the historical contradictions which characterized the Soviet regime and Russians more generally. Glasser re-quotes it:

Russians were "used to extreme cold and extreme heat, prolonged sloth and sudden feats of energy, exaggerated cruelty and exaggerated kindness, ostentatious wealth and dismal squalor, violent xenophobia and uncontrollable yearning for contact with the foreign world, vast power and the most abject slavery, simultaneous love and hate for the same objects."⁹⁵

Conscious of America's own paradoxes, I resolved not to forget Kennan's words as I tried to understand this fascinating yet paradoxical land. In the same essay, Kennan wrote another truism that has stuck with me throughout my career: "The strength of the Kremlin lies largely in the fact that it knows how to wait. But the strength of the Russian people lies in the fact that they know how to wait longer."⁹⁶ I have often thought of that characterization not just in terms

of Russia's own development but also in the context of the Kremlin's approach to negotiating with us. We are an impatient power in international affairs. Strategic patience is not a hallmark of American foreign policy.

In late 2013, I retired from the Foreign Service after completing an assignment as ambassador to Ukraine. My retirement was short-lived, as I was soon asked to serve as the United States ambassador to Russia. My wife Mariella and I lived in the ambassador's residence at Spaso House from 2014 to 2017. Rarely a day went by when something did not come up that reminded us of George Kennan. We encountered numerous stories about his impact on both the establishment of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and his abiding impact on Russian policy.

I had arrived in Moscow after America's relations with Russia had taken a deep plunge. The bloody confrontation on the Maidan had occurred in Kyiv, and President Yanukovich and his closest aides had fled to Russia. Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and sent "the little green men" into the Donbas, provoking a "hybrid war" which has cost thousands of lives. Europe and the United States had placed serious sanctions on Russia. In response, Russia placed limits on our work and that of our allied embassies in Moscow, particularly our access to some Russian officials. The situation did not improve substantially as long as I served in Moscow. Indeed, levels of harassment of the American embassy and our staff increased to levels unheard of since the darkest days of the Cold War.

Here again George Kennan entered the picture. Kennan had always argued that as we opposed the Soviet government, we had to do everything we could to stay in touch with the Russian people. My colleagues and I took this to heart and tried very hard to travel as frequently and as widely as possible throughout Russia.

It was not easy, as the government also sought to limit our access to official and ordinary Russians in the regions. This was a part of the

Russian leadership's fear of "colored revolutions" spreading in the country. The government had already closed our American Corners in regional libraries all over Russia before I arrived. Soon after I got to Moscow, it shut down our FLEX program, which brought talented Russian high school students to the United States for a year of study and a homestay with an American family. It forced our American cultural center to close in the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature, which left us no option but to reopen a center on the embassy compound. Finally, it passed laws labeling Russian individuals and organizations "foreign agents," clearly trying to intimidate them and limit ties to Western counterparts.

It was difficult to counter these repressive measures, and we tried to avoid putting our contacts in positions where they got in trouble with the authorities. In addition to travel and personal contacts, we also sought to employ social media to reach younger Russians by widely distributing articles and information about the United States. We gave interviews and press conferences on Russian language websites which reached all over the country. We employed a tried-and-true embassy approach of holding concerts at Spaso House, promoting American culture and U.S.-Russian cultural ties. Again, we used social media, building our capability to reach out to internet users all over Russia by streaming concerts live.

Today our relationship with Russia is even more complicated as we try to find a way to deal with our differences over Ukraine, Syria, Iran, the use of chemical weapons and agents, and, perhaps most importantly, Russian cyberattacks on our democratic institutions. I often wonder what Kennan would think of the array of issues that divide us today. Would he see Russian behavior today, with all the new information and military technologies and the techniques of hybrid warfare, as a further set of threats to be contained? If so, how? More sanctions, more robust military containment? More aggressive counter-cyber policies?

And beyond Kremlin policy, how would Kennan see Russian society? In many ways, Russia is still searching for its identity in the post-Soviet world. How would Kennan view resurgent Russian nationalism under Putin and the lack of Russian understanding of national sentiments among the nations of the former Soviet Union? What would he think of the new generation of young Russians who have no personal memory of the Soviet Union and communism? And how would he react to the continuing war in Ukraine and Russia's isolation from the West? What kind of future would Kennan see for Russia's post-imperial relations with many of its immediate neighbors who now view Moscow with great suspicion if not downright hostility?

Analyzing these and many other questions is the task before a new generation of Foreign Service officers who attempt to understand and work in Russia and the nations of Eurasia. In attempting to answer them, they could do well to take time to study the greatest analyst of Russia our Foreign Service ever produced, George Kennan.