

The Realist Kennan

The architect of containment understood the limits of power—and of democracy.

By Lee Congdon

WITH THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION of his role in the promotion of covert intelligence operations, a role he came to regret, no aspect of the late George Kennan's remarkable career has stirred more controversy than his authorship of the policy of containing Russia's expansive tendencies. Did that policy not, as one critic put it, contribute "to the impulse to overstate the hostility of the Soviets to the United States, their military capability in respect to America, and their interest in an armed contest?" Those who read, in Kennan's famous "X" article of 1947, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," that Soviet pressure could be "contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points" might be forgiven for thinking such criticism valid.

In fact, Kennan did forgive them, holding himself responsible for failing to clarify his intended meaning. Containment, he used every opportunity to insist, was to have been understood in a political rather than a military sense. We know that he was telling the truth and not simply hoping to escape blame for the militarization of Cold War thinking because he had made it clear—even before the Soviet Union detonated a nuclear "device"—that he did not believe war to be either necessary or inevitable.

Although by no means a pacifist, Kennan recognized that a U.S.-USSR war would have been one of annihilation. Such a conflict was terrible enough before the dawn of the nuclear age. In 1949, while serving as director of the

State Department's Policy Planning Staff, he made a fact-finding trip to Germany. What he witnessed in Hamburg, where in the past he had been posted as a Foreign Service officer, sickened him. From July 24 to Aug. 3, 1943, the Allies had subjected the city to a series of devastating air raids—code-named Operation Gomorrah. On one night—July 27–28—739 Allied planes unloaded 9,000 tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs that created an unimaginable firestorm; 35,000 men, women, and children perished.

Six years later, the extent of the destruction was still evident. "For the first time," Kennan wrote in his diaries, "I felt an unshakable conviction that no momentary military advantage ... could have justified this stupendous, careless destruction of civilian life and of material values, built up laboriously by human hands over the course of centuries for purposes having nothing to do with this war." The atom bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had already convinced him that a nuclear exchange would result in millions of casualties and an environmental catastrophe from which the planet would never recover. In 1961, therefore, when Walt Rostow assumed the directorship of the Policy Planning Staff and announced it as his view that a nuclear war could be won, Kennan exploded in anger. He would rather see his children dead, he told Rostow, than have them experience such a war.

Kennan's attitude toward what he called the "nuclear delusion" was dic-

tated not only by his recognition of the suicidal nature of nuclear weapons but by his deepening conviction that humanity's survival should not be placed at risk for a West that was exhibiting clear signs of internal dissolution. "I can see very little merit," he told interviewer George Urban in 1976, "in organizing ourselves to defend from the Russians the porno shops in central Washington." But even if the decline of the West could be reversed—and Kennan was not optimistic—no rational political purpose could be served by the universal ruin that nuclear weapons would bring about.

Kennan agreed with Clausewitz, who famously asserted, "war is nothing but the continuation of politics with the admixture of other means." He believed that war, to be justified, had to serve realistic political goals. "The political object is the goal," the German had written, "war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes." When, for example, news reached him that North Korea had invaded the south, Kennan knew that the incursion would have to be met with resistance, but he argued that military action should have the limited aim of advancing only to the former demarcation line along the 38th parallel. To continue beyond that point, even if militarily feasible, would be to risk a wider conflict that might involve the Russians or the Chinese.

Years later, while conducting research for a study of the diplomatic background to the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894, a

pivotal event in the lead up to the Great War, Kennan made a startling discovery. The alliance, in its final form, was “a purely military document. Nothing was said in it about the political objectives for which one might be fighting.” To formulate such objectives would have been to set limits, but the Great War, in Kennan’s view the event that marked the beginning of the West’s decline, was limitless in its aims. “Victory,” he wrote, “was to be either total or overwhelmingly decisive; and it was, in this sense, regarded as an objective in itself.” Total victory demanded unconditional surrender, which ensured the prolongation of hostilities and eventual casting off of all moral restraint. It inflamed hatreds and made a compromise peace impossible.

Kennan was sharply critical of Franklin Roosevelt for insisting upon unconditional surrender during World War II. That principle may have relieved the president of the difficult task of coming to some understanding with the Soviet Union with regard to the shape of postwar Europe, but it made it all but impossible to form a clear picture of what Stalin had in mind for Eastern Europe. Kennan did not, to be sure, maintain that negotiation with Hitler would have proved fruitful or even possible, but he did believe that talks with leaders of the German resistance—one of whom, Count Helmuth von Moltke, had been a revered friend—could have been pursued.

The admiration he felt for the martyred von Moltke, together with his long years of diplomatic service in Germany, had made of Kennan a Germanophile. It is not surprising, then, that he respected the approach to war taken by the great practitioner of realpolitik Otto von Bismarck. In a time of exclusive nationalism, that “towering figure” remained an old-fashioned Prussian patriot. True, he provoked, fought, and won three wars between 1864 and 1871, but he always

projected concrete and realistic political objectives. Having secured them, he made an end to hostilities; never did he attempt to destroy his enemies. In fact, he did not regard rival states as “enemies” but as temporary obstacles to his effort to increase his country’s security. Having achieved his goal by creating “Germany,” he endeavored to restore good relations with those states that had been humbled by Prussian arms. During the period from 1871-90, no one worked for peace in Europe with more skill and resolve than the Iron Chancellor.

BISMARCK HAD NO DESIRE FOR IMPERIAL ADVENTURES OR FOR INTERVENTIONS IN FOREIGN LANDS—AND NEITHER DID KENNAN, WHO DID NOT “THINK IT OUR BUSINESS TO TRY TO DETERMINE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN OTHER COUNTRIES.”

Bismarck had no desire for imperial adventures or for interventions in foreign lands—and neither did Kennan, who did not “think it our business to try to determine political developments in other countries.” Although not primarily attempts of that kind, the Allied interventions in north Russia and Siberia during the early months of Soviet rule were ill-conceived, as Kennan showed in the second volume of his award-winning study of Soviet-American relations, 1917-1920, *The Decision to Intervene*. After Russia left the war in March 1918, the Allies feared that war supplies in Archangel and Vladivostok, supplies they had provided, might fall into German hands. The British and Japanese therefore landed small forces to secure them.

President Wilson resisted British and French appeals to send American troops into civil-war-torn Russia—until he learned of the Czech Legion. Lenin’s government had granted the legion, comprised of Russian-born Czechs and Slovaks and former prisoners of war,

permission to move across Siberia to Vladivostok, whence Allied ships were to transport it around the world to France. As a result of a complicated series of events, however, hostilities broke out between the Czechs and the Bolsheviks. Rather than have the former shoot their way through to Vladivostok, the British and French thought they might use them to reopen the eastern front.

Wilson did not think much of the idea, but after meeting with Thomas Masaryk, the philosophy professor who was working for Czechoslovak independence, he

dispatched some 7,000 troops to Vladivostok to aid the Czechs, whom he mistakenly believed to be fighting Germans and Austrians. In the end, as Kennan made clear, neither the Americans nor their allies achieved anything of value. On the contrary, by extending military aid to the anti-Bolshevik “Whites,” the British succeeded only in compromising them. More important, Lenin and his successors could and did repeat endlessly the false charge that the Allies had launched an all-out military effort to overthrow the Soviet government.

Kennan always looked with disfavor upon talk of overthrowing the Soviet or any other government. There was, to begin with, the problem of finding a viable alternative. And even if a ready force waited in the wings, one could never be certain that it would bring about an improvement in conditions. As a cautionary tale, Kennan cited the efforts of his relative and namesake, author of the anti-tsarist *Siberia and the Exile System*, to win support for Russia’s revolutionaries—his assump-

tion having been that they would preside over a new and better Russia.

Nor did Kennan show any sympathy for proposals to spread democracy around the world. To begin with, he rejected egalitarianism because it was predicated on an observable falsehood and appealed to base instincts. It was with distaste that he recalled how Soviet rule had developed in many what Tocqueville called “a depraved taste for equality” that reduced men “to prefer equality in slavery to inequality with freedom.” Something of that same taste could be observed in Western welfare states that encouraged the belief that no one should live better than anyone else. Such *ressentiment* was foreign to Kennan, who recognized that those who lived well set a tone and standard to which others might aspire. An unapologetic elitist, he argued that elites were indispensable, to be judged by the quality of their character and the degree of their competence.

In any event, Kennan could think of no reason to suppose that democracy, in the European and American sense of the word, was the destiny of the world’s peoples. Most governments, past and present, were nondemocratic, products in most cases of the unique historical experience of a people and a region. He was not prepared to condemn every one of them because they failed to embrace what Americans believed to be the only legitimate form of government. In the words of Edmund Burke, whom he much admired, he reprobated “no form of government merely upon abstract principles.”

Kennan did not deny that millions of people lived under less than inspiring regimes, but, he added, “so what? We are not their keepers. We never will be.” Not for him, then, crusades to ensure that all governments respected “human rights,” said to be discoverable and universally binding; the notion of rights

“remote from human authorship, leads ... into philosophical thickets where I cannot follow.” While he could understand human rights as ideal projections of Western liberal principles, he could not conceive of them as already existing in the absence of a granting authority, an enforcing agency, and a set of corresponding duties.

Many evils exist in the world, but Kennan did not think it the responsibility of the United States government to root all of them out. “Government,” he wrote in an essay on morality and foreign policy, “is an agent, not a principal. Its primary obligation is to the *interests* of the national society it represents, not to the moral impulses that elements of that society may experience.” Interventions in the affairs of foreign governments in obedience to some moral imperative could only be defended, he insisted, if the practices against which they were directed were “seriously injurious to our interests, rather than just our sensibilities.”

Kennan was certain, for example, that the United States should avoid entanglements in the Near East. On his way to Moscow in 1944, he made a stop in Baghdad, where he encountered a quite formidable religious fanaticism. He thought then, as he thought later, that it was not the responsibility of the United States to improve conditions of life there; Near Eastern problems would have to be solved, if at all, by the peoples of the region. Not surprisingly, then, he evinced no sympathy for talk of “regime change” in Iraq. “I have seen,” he told an interviewer in 2002, “no evidence that we have any realistic plans for dealing with the great state of confusion in Iraqi affairs which would presumably follow even after the successful elimination of the dictator.”

Although Kennan did not object to a characterization of his general outlook as “isolationist,” what he advocated was

not isolation (it was too late for that) but a recognition of limits and a policy of restraint. He knew, of course, that the United States had made commitments, from some of which it could not simply turn away. In the 1970s, he spoke of a responsibility to Western Europe, though even then he called for a gradual withdrawal from the old continent. And although he had argued that the creation of the state of Israel was inimical to U.S. interests, he believed, when his reasoned judgment was ignored, that his country had incurred an obligation to do all in its power—“short of the actual dispatch and employment of combat forces”—to ensure the country’s survival.

There were other commitments as well, but insofar as possible Kennan wished to see them reduced in number. At the root of his defense of a less ambitious foreign policy lay his belief that Tocqueville was right when he wrote that “a democracy can only with great difficulty regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles. It cannot combine its measures with secrecy or await their consequences with patience.”

An equally important reason for that position was his conviction that the United States could influence the world most effectively by setting a moral example. To do that, however, it would have to begin to face up to pandemic crime, the widespread use of narcotics, the reluctance to censor pornography, the decay of cities, the disappearance of educational standards, the effects of mindless consumerism, and the thoughtless exploitation of nature. No self-congratulatory efforts to improve others could relieve Americans of the painful necessity of confronting themselves. ■

Lee Congdon is writing a book on George Kennan.

Special Relationship

A one-sided U.S. policy toward Israel endangers both countries' interests.

By Leon Hadar

DISCUSSING THE U.S.-ISRAELI relationship on a radio talk show recently, I discovered that Americans are misinformed about their country's ties to the Jewish state. One listener, taking it for granted that Israel maintains a formal military alliance with Washington, speculated that since "the Americans established Israel after the Holocaust, maybe we can set it up now in Florida." But contrary to this misconception, the relationship between the two countries has never been grounded in strong geostrategic roots; it reflects the sentiments and interests of powerful American groups.

Israeli politicians, unlike their counterparts in Washington, recognize this reality. They will never romanticize the U.S.-Israel connection unless they are discussing it with American visitors. Similarly, much of the analysis of the relationship in the Israeli media is concerned almost exclusively with its utilitarian aspects: Will Washington back Israeli policy? Will the U.S. Congress increase aid to Israel? Is the new American president "pro-Israeli?" *Ha'aretz* recently convened a panel of experts to follow the 2008 U.S. presidential race and issue occasional reports on "who is the best presidential candidate for Israel." (The winner in the last poll was Rudy Giuliani.)

In short, Israelis are the ultimate realpolitik buffs when it comes to their relationship with Washington. The notion that the U.S. and Israel are allied together in the cause of spreading democracy in the Middle East and worldwide would be scoffed at by Israeli

pundits. After all, their government has been strengthening its military ties with China despite U.S. opposition. Israelis are not "pro-American" because of their commitment to Jeffersonian values—the Jewish state has yet to adopt a constitution—but because they concluded that their interests and those of the U.S. are compatible now. But they see this "special relationship" not as marriage but as an affair. And like any affair, it could end.

Indeed, there was a time when Israelis were pro-Soviet and pro-French. In 1948, Stalin's Soviet Union was the most enthusiastic supporter of establishing Israel, which it hoped would be a leading anti-imperialist post in the Middle East, while Secretary of State George Marshall pressed Harry Truman not to recognize the new state, warning that it could harm America's position in the region. Hence Moscow recognized Israel immediately after the state was proclaimed and provided it with arms, while it took the Americans more than a year to grant *de jure* recognition to Israel, on which they imposed an arms embargo. At the height of the In-Russia-With-Love mood in Israel, the expectation was that the new state would remain neutral in the evolving Cold War.

Then Israel had its French kiss. It was France that served as Israel's main source of arms in the 1950s and early 1960s and helped it develop its nuclear arsenal. Israel was embracing then a European orientation and forming close ties with an emerging Franco-German bloc to help resist U.S. pressure to end its nuclear program. The Israeli alliance

with France reached a peak in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez campaign during which the two conspired (with Britain and against U.S. wishes) to oust Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Their interests were seen to be compatible as the French tried to suppress the Nasser-backed struggle for independence in Algeria. But after Charles de Gaulle's decision to grant independence to Algeria, the relationship between Israel and France cooled; they soured after Israel rejected the aging French leader's advice not to attack Egypt in 1967.

It was only after Israel's 1967 victory over Egypt, a Soviet ally, that the intellectual predecessors of today's neoconservatives started popularizing the idea of Israel as an American "strategic asset" in the Middle East. Similarly, neoconservatives in the Reagan administration argued that Israel should become America's leading ally in the region during the renewed Cold War tensions, while depicting the Palestine Liberation Organization as a Soviet stooge. But even as Israel and the U.S. were strengthening their ties, there was recognition in both governments of the strategic constraints on their relationship. America could not maintain its position in the Middle East without establishing a presence in the Arab world, while Israel's friendship with America could not substitute for the acceptance of Israel by its Arab neighbors. Washington's efforts to bring about Middle East peace were part of a strategy to advance U.S. and Israeli interests.

Indeed, Washington's ability to play the role of an honest broker between