[George Kennan: A Writing Life, Lee Congdon, ISI, 183 pages]

Literary Ambassador

By Walter Hudson

IN HIS FAMOUS 1947 ARTICLE, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," George Frost Kennan (under the now famous pseudonym Mr. X), sought to explain the motivations behind the Soviet dictatorship. For insight, he sought not Marx or Trotsky, but Edward Gibbon: "From enthusiasm to imposture … how the conscience may slumber in a mixed and middle way between self-illusion and voluntary fraud." Near the end of his article, Kennan turned to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, that towering work of familial decay and doom. Kennan speculated that, just as the Buddenbrooks family had shone most brilliantly at the point when its inner decay was most advanced, so did the Soviet Union appear on the surface to be most terrifyingly powerful even as it bore within it the seeds of its own destruction. Self-deception, hubris, and ignorance—human frailties took control of the engine of dialectical materialism. Marxism, according to Mr. X, was "a highly convenient rationalization for [Russian revolutionaries'] instinctive desires."

The informing sensibility of containment was, as Lee Congdon makes clear in *George Kennan: A Writing Life*, a literary one. Kennan was, first and always, a man of letters. Like Jefferson, he could not live without books. Congdon notes how he actually "released his frustration" by reading. Kennan's devotion to the Russian masters, especially Chekhov, was profound. He made literary pilgrimages to places where the great writer-doctor lived, seriously contemplated writing a book about him, and more than once, used Chekhov's story, "A Case in Practice," to show that the truth of the workers' plight was found not in Marxist abstractions, but in rather common human weaknesses.

With Congdon's help, we see Kennan's career and prolific output in a new way. Many books have picked apart Kennan's thought. The debate has gone on for decades about what containment really meant and whether Kennan was, as the Cold War revisionists claimed, really a hawk or, as the neoconservatives argued, a revisionist. But Kennan, despite spending the first part of his long life as a diplomat and policy planner in the State Department, was always defined by his sense as a writer, not as a strategist or policymaker. As Congdon says, "he gave so much of himself to his writing, official and personal, and labored with such determination to perfect his style."

Indeed, with no other major public figure of the last century do we have such a rich and diverse source of writing. Congdon reviews Kennan's written words carefully, giving unfamiliar readers a fruitful introduction. One part of this writing is public. This includes the public-policy statements, most famously the Mr. X article that helped define the Cold War. Down the years, these became increasingly pessimistic pronouncements about the state of the West, the arms race, and America's befuddled relations with the Soviet Union—books with titles such as *The Cloud of Danger* and *The Nuclear Delusion*.

Then there are the histories, mostly dealing with 19th- and early 20th-century high diplomacy and the early years of the Soviet Union. In his elegant prose, Kennan went against the grain of the various "new history" trends of his era. He focused on personalities as much as events. Despite the density of their scholarship, his historical works make compelling reading. His two volumes on early U.S.-Soviet relations are modern historical classics.

To help us understand these policy pronouncements and scholarly explorations, Congdon places his subject in a literary-historical context. He fits Kennan squarely into the tradition of political realists, especially Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann and Henry Kissinger. He shows us Kennan's resemblance to Oswald Spengler and his pessimism; to Gibbon and his arguments for self-control and moderation; to Freud and his notions of the subconscious and of desire's ability to limit human reason. Congdon also notes his admiration for Rachel Carson. Kennan's conservationist impulses made him an agrarian-environmentalist and even gave him metaphors for policy: "We must be gardeners and not mechanics in our approach to world affairs," he once wrote, "We must come to think of the development of international life as an organic and not a mechanical process."

Then there are Kennan's personal writings: his two volumes of memoirs; his more informal reflections (appropriately called *Sketches From a Life*); his fascinating, almost strange "personal philosophy," *Around the Cragged Hill*, in which he argued, among other things, that the United States should be broken up into smaller governing entities. And then we have his last book, a history of his own family entitled *The Kennans: The First Three Generations*. Written as he neared his centenary, wisdom and fealty combined to produce both a moving tribute to his New England ancestors and a reflection on what he thought a realized life should be. Commenting on his forefathers, he wrote, "They seemed all to have been 'whole' persons, content with their background, afflicted with neither inferiority nor of superiority vis-à-vis others, pretending to be nothing other than what they actually were."

To be "whole," to know and rest assuredly in oneself, was Kennan's goal. Congdon contends that Kennan's sense of himself came as an intensely literate and literary man. He tirelessly worked on his daily journals and labored over his diplomatic dispatches. He did not report like a diplomat or a government functionary; he tried to make sure his observations were both accurate and artful. It is the reflection in Kennan's writings that makes them so compelling and allows them to transcend the political limits of their time.

If we take these public and personal writings together, we begin to understand that Kennan was arguing for a

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change not so much of policies but of sensibility. As he wrote in his lectures on "The Realities of American Foreign Policy," given at the height of anticommunist fervor in the 1950s: "do not permit [communism] to preoccupy your thoughts but rather insist on the right to proceed with your positive undertakings in spite of it."

Kennan's sense of himself was unique but not singular. He had some resemblances to the fictional Gatsby: a Midwestern boy transplanted into the East Coast establishment, who remained consciously unassimilated, standing apart from the party that he started. After providing the first strategy of containment, Kennan spent much of his life redefining or disowning what most people thought that it was. And he also began to resemble, Congdon notes, that typical American literary expatriate, a Henry James or T.S. Eliot, alienated from his country, or what his country had become.

The resemblance to Eliot, the modernist mandarin, is close. Both were Midwesterners with New England roots; both sought out a deeper sense of themselves in Europe; both were aristocratic and elitist in outlook; both were suspicious of the excesses of American democracy. And both were distrustful of excesses of sentiment. Eliot came upon the objective correlative as a way to express symbolically and intellectually states of feeling—an aesthetic vehicle or "container" for emotion. Kennan, for his part, sought to rein in American Exceptionalism and messianism in his own formulation of containment: "such a policy," he said, "has nothing to do with outward histrionics; with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward toughness."

Kennan believed in a variation of the seemingly quaint Romantic notion of poets as mankind's unacknowledged legislators. Congdon observes that Kennan humbly acknowledged that even his greatest efforts as a historian would not reach into the "inner world" of his subjects as much as a literary master could. He could dutifully inspect exteriors, but it took a Chekhov to cast light on "the anarchy, the tenderness, and the brutality of the individual soul." Even more anachronistically, Kennan believed that such great art transcended politics. Congdon quotes his address as president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters: "The vicissitudes of war and politics," he wrote, "should never be permitted to interfere with the work of the creative artist."

Astute commentators have picked up on Kennan's literary qualities. Eugene V. Rostow wrote that Kennan was "an impressionist, a poet, not an earthling. His mind has never moved along mathematical lines, and never will." Secretary of State George Marshall admired Keenan's insights and appreciated his unique talents. On the other hand, Dean Acheson, a much less substantive man than his predecessor, did not and dismissed him as a kind of diplomat-dreamer.

But Kennan's subtle literary intuition was integral to his policy successes. Take the European Recovery (aka Marshall) Plan, for which he drew the broad outlines. The plan was not simply or even primarily an economic tool—some conservatives badly misunderstand this and thus discount its efficacy. It was a carefully calibrated, deliberately limited political move (it emphasized self-recovery; it limited itself to Europe), a powerful resonating symbol of American resolve that delegitimized Soviet influence in France, Italy, and Germany without resorting to arms.

Congdon shows that the Marshall Plan and Kennan's idea of containment were informed by a profound literary humanism that naturally inclined toward distinction and moderation in world affairs. Kennan's was not a secular humanism, however. As has become apparent, secular humanism—especially today's boorish, atheistic kind—has itself become an implacable ideology, complete with straw men (religious fundamentalists, "Islamofascists") and "scientific" dogmas (think "racial biology") as stultifying as those of the last century. Kennan's humanism respected traditions, especially religious ones. He recognized that a religion is not defined by its ideological components. Kennan saw religious traditions as bringing out the best in men, and as providing comfort and dignity to fallen human beings.

This sense of fallen man informed Kennan's histories as well. In them, he warns us against excesses of zeal: the Wilsonian imperatives that split up the Hapsburg Empire; the angered revanchism that pushed together the disastrous Franco-Russian alliance; the misguided sympathies that Americans felt for the Russian revolutionaries, crudely projecting their notions of "democracy" and "freedom" upon them. Kennan's encounter with the great literary traditions of Russia also gave him a deep love of that nation and its people. If Americans today think of Russians as little more than drunken, sex-trafficking gangsters, we can read Kennan with profit to learn otherwise. He profoundly respected Russian orthodoxy, with its beautiful ritual and music and its "ready acceptance of the mysteries of faith," and he was one of the first Anglo-Americans to overcome the deep sense of Russia as part of the other, uncivilized Europe.

Kennan's sensibility helped him transcend the political configuration of Right and Left, to move beyond rigid ideologies. He was conservative in his appreciation for the past and in his respect for tradition and his ancestors. He also lamented the militarization of American foreign policy and was critical of unfettered capitalism and the destruction it wrought upon the environment. At the same time, he deplored the mainstreaming of hedonism and the breakdown of traditional values in the West, at times in language so strong one might wonder if Kennan thought the West worth defending at all.

What was worth defending, however, was the tradition that Kennan embodied. Lee Congdon has, through Kennan's writings, revealed some of the best examples of this tradition, provided to us in the previous and most terrible century. ■

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[Fighting Words: A Tale of How Liberals Created Neo-Conservatism, Ben J. Wattenberg, Thomas Dunne Books, 384 pages]

Right-wing Liberal

By W. James Antle III

BEN WATTENBERG is an engaging television commentator and by almost all accounts a nice guy. But if *Fighting Words: A Tale of How Liberals Created Neo-Conservatism* is the best in post-Iraq War neoconservative apologetics, the movement is in far more trouble than the defeat of John McCain would suggest.

Where Wattenberg focuses on his personal story as a former presidential speechwriter, campaign adviser, and author, he is a charming and gifted raconteur. When he shifts into ideologue mode, his latest book becomes reminiscent of a Max Boot op-ed—one can't quite shake the thought that it might have been ghosted by a paleoconservative satirist writing under an assumed name.

True, there are some unmistakable differences. Nowhere does Wattenberg call for anything as outlandish as raising vast armies of illegal aliens to man the latest crusade for global democracy. The *Fighting Words* author is more of a happy warrior than a cold ideological enforcer. But like Boot, a great deal of what Wattenberg writes—inadvertently and in some cases deliberately—makes the paleos' case that contemporary neoconservatives are really the "boat people of the McGovern revolution" rather than real conservatives.

Perhaps this is understandable. Although present at the creation, Wattenberg was always more reluctant than some first-generation neoconservatives to sign up with the Right. He remains a registered Democrat and recounts fond memories of his years as a speechwriter for Lyndon Johnson, a president with whom he still substantially agrees. He adopts a tone of sorrow rather than anger—much like Joe Lieberman's concession speech after losing the Democratic primary to Ned Lamont—when talking about the way his party has turned its back on the legacy of hawkish senator Scoop Jackson.

This vestigial loyalty to the party of FDR, Harry Truman, and LBJ comes in handy for Wattenberg's latest project: rehabilitating, even humanizing, neoconservatism. And how better to do so in an era of liberal resurgence than to drop the conservatism and emphasize the neo? Neoconservatism, he complains, is too often "confused with conservatism, with the key differences never quite understood."

Wattenberg works hard to make those differences plain. Rejecting Ronald Reagan's formulation that government could be the problem rather than the solution in favor of a "muscular role for the state, and for America in particular," he writes, "I have never been against government, big, small or medium size." Wattenberg specifically defends the programs of the Great Society, saying, "in general, the ideas they espoused made sense." This includes laws requiring automobile manufacturers to include seatbelts—such a measure "does indeed have Constitutional backing through the Interstate Commerce Clause," he writes, reasoning like a Warren Court justice—and much of the War on Poverty.

"We should (reasonably) protect the environment," Wattenberg continues, apparently burnishing his non-conservative credentials. "And poor people should get health care." Wattenberg even distances himself from Charles Murray, an American Enterprise Institute scholar and important domestic-policy thinker often identified with neoconservatism, for claiming in his landmark book *Losing Ground* "that the Johnson programs were among the principal culprits that were driving America down." Wattenberg disagrees, though he does concede some of LBJ's handiwork was "taken overboard." "On balance," he writes, "the Great Society has helped the American people. How far would an elected official get today if he ran on a platform of eliminating Medicare?"

If this is what passes for conservatism in America today, neo or otherwise, how far indeed? But perhaps this is the point. "Today, it is said that the country has moved to the conservative Right," Wattenberg notes, "but governments controlled completely by Republicans run deficits to increase domestic spending, much to the chagrin of conservatives and some neo-cons." None of this bothers Wattenberg, however. He writes that "many neo-cons have no visceral dislike for moderately high big-government spending provided the programs can be shown to work and can be changed if they don't. I extend that to most of the so-called pork-barrel and earmarked spending."

Wattenberg goes out of his way to bolster the liberal credentials of leading neoconservatives and vice versa. He quotes former House Speaker Tom Foley as saying, "Scoop [Jackson] was the closest one in the Congress I can remember to a European Social Democrat." On the other hand, Wattenberg maintains that Lyndon Johnson was "in some important ways … a neo-con." So was Hubert Humphrey, whose 1970 election to the Senate after having served as Johnson's vice president was "a national win for the neo-conservative notion that a candidate could be liberal, kind, tough on domestic issues, and a winner." Even Bobby Kennedy is described as "having some neo-con tendencies," though Wattenberg says Ronald Reagan also fits the bill because "he hated Commies, and prior to becoming governor, was a liberal Democrat."

There are some old Democrats Wattenberg won't claim as is own, however. He chastises Francis Fukuyama for using the phrase "Wilsonian realism": "Woodrow Wilson was a racist." But Wilson is a rare exception. Wattenberg boasts that liberal journalists "toilet trained by the neo-cons" must now "grudgingly accept the media-savvy, intellectually studious neo-cons in a way they would never have accepted criticism from rigid, old-fashioned conservatives." Wattenberg says "to use an old union phrase, it is the conservatives who are the free riders" benefiting from neo-

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