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# EAST & WEST

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## The Two Minds of George Kennan

*How To Un-Learn from Experience—By LEOPOLD LABEDZ*



*"My feelings change; my judgment does not."*

MONTAIGNE

*"Nothing is more tiresome than to have to explain what everybody should know."*

BAUDELAIRE

THE IDEAS AND ARGUMENTS of George Kennan on contemporary international problems have been reaching the public for 30 years;

he has been developing them for 50 years. Government dispatches and memoranda, articles and interviews, lectures and broadcasts, and many, many books have made Kennan's views widely familiar. His opinions on the current situation formulated in detail in his most recent work, *The Cloud of Danger*,<sup>1</sup> were conveniently summarised in the speech delivered at a November 1977 meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations (published in the March issue of *ENCOUNTER*).

In the past George Kennan has been attacked from the most diverse quarters. The Soviet and East European press referred to him regularly as "the architect of the Cold War"; our own *Morning Star*, reviewing his *Memoirs* (on 15 March 1973), still called him "a true servant and ideologue of American imperialism"; Professor Anatol Rapoport, an American academic scientist, likened his views to those of Fred Schwartz, the leader of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade. But he was also severely criticised by John Foster Dulles and William Buckley's conservative *National Review*.

At present, no less curiously, his writings have been praised as "wise" by such diverse commentators as James Reston in the *New York Times*

and Georgi Ratiani in *Pravda* (21 January 1978). Another *Pravda* commentator, G. Gerasimov, wrote (12 July 1977) that "Kennan's views have substantially evolved in the direction of common sense" and that many pages of his latest book

"are devoted to convincingly showing the utter groundlessness, lies and malice of constant statements by the Western bourgeois press that the Soviet Union is nurturing plans to attack Western Europe and America and that it is generally striving for 'world hegemony'."

The book "can be recommended for the reference libraries of the State Department and of the White House itself." Coming from *Pravda* it is quite a commendation for the author of the once-notorious "Containment" policy!

GEORGE KENNAN denies inconsistency. When confronted by some of his own contrasting statements (for instance by George Urban in an interview published in *ENCOUNTER* in September 1976), he either refuses to admit their contradictory character or belittles its significance: "All Russian reality is contradictory, and so perhaps are some of my attitudes to Russia" (the first proposition cannot be taken as logically countenancing the second). Presented with the two opposite recommendations which he made in 1946 and 1952 respectively, Kennan explains it all away by arguing that "each of the two, seemingly irreconcilable, strands of my argument were entirely justified in the context in which it was put forward." Or again:

"For the purposes of the argument, I am given to overstating a case; and that is one of the reasons why you accuse me of contradiction. If one wants to see both sides of a coin, one has, momentarily at least, to bring out each side in exaggerated relief."

Rereading George Kennan's numerous writings (including his dispatches from pre-War Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union) makes one realise that there is nothing "momentary" about his contradictions, that in spite of his profound

<sup>1</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*. By GEORGE F. KENNAN. Little, Brown, \$8.95; Hutchinson, £5.95.

conviction that he has been basically right throughout the four decades covered by these writings, they betray very clearly the fact that over a period of time his attitudes and counsels have reflected not a balanced judgment, but an almost schizoid political dualism; and it is this which has made him a butt of such diametrically opposite criticism. No amount of logic-chopping can reconcile these flagrant contradictions; the only consistency one can detect—with some difficulty—is not logical, but psychological.

THIS MAY SOUND harsh and it is painful to have to say it so bluntly in view of the sterling qualities of George Kennan's intellect and character. Those who have criticised him (and with whom he has disagreed)—Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze, Raymond Aron and Hugh Seton-Watson, Adam Ulam and Richard Pipes—have all been highly complimentary about his talents, historical knowledge, and sophistication. And these were not just conventional tributes. They were deservedly given and I can only endorse them.<sup>2</sup> This makes an inquest on George Kennan's political writings a melancholy occasion: one is aware of how right and perspicacious he has been on many subjects. Not only Kennan *Mark I*, but occasionally even Kennan *Mark II*. Yet *amicus Plato*...

KENNAN *Mark I* is of course "Mr X", the man who articulated the "Containment" idea. Kennan *Mark II* is the man who evolved from his original position of advising resistance to Soviet expansionism to the present one of advocating its accommodation. This evolution was punctuated by occasional relapses, i.e. when

<sup>2</sup> In his *Memoirs* (Part II, p. 237) George Kennan puzzles about a similar juxtaposition (occasioned by his Reith Lectures, 1957):

"The criticisms, almost without exception, were cast in terms respectful of myself as a person and designed to spare, if possible, my own feelings. . . . Never, surely, has anyone been so widely and generously forgiven as a person for what were, in the eyes of his critics, such grievous errors as a thinker."

Kennan believes that such reaction was due "to the happenings and the atmosphere of the day." In fact, it has been repeated by friendly critics again and again for a quarter-of-a-century. There is nothing paradoxical or strange about admiring Kennan's attainments and considering his political judgment wrong on many occasions.

<sup>3</sup> The above quotations are from Kennan's dispatches from Moscow. Cf. *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. V (1945) & Vol. VI (1946), Department of State (Washington, 1967 & 1969). The concluding one is from: "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947).

he said after Prague 1968: "I have never understood this talk about *détente*. I have never seen any evidence of *détente* and I wouldn't trust any so-called *détente* if it is not supported by free contacts between governments and peoples." But the overall direction of his evolution is unmistakable (which explains why *Pravda* endorses him now). Here is Kennan *Mark I*:

"It is not our lack of knowledge which causes us to be puzzled by Russia. It is that we are incapable of understanding the truth about Russia when we see it."  
(September 1944)

"It is no concern of the Soviet government to disabuse the American public of prejudices highly favourable to Soviet interests. It is entirely agreeable to Moscow that Americans should be indulged in a series of illusions which lead them to put pressure on their government to accomplish the impossible and to go always one step further in pursuit of the illusive favour of the Soviet government. They observe with gratification that in this way a great people can be led, like an ever-hopeful suitor, to perform one act of ingratiation after the other without ever reaching the goal which would satisfy its ardour and allay its generosity. . . . No English or American politician can pass up any half-way adequate opportunity for claiming that he has been successful in gaining Russian confidence and committing the Russians to a more moderate course of action. In other words, they consider that Anglo-Saxon opinion can always be easily appeased in a pinch by a single generous gesture, or even in all probability by a few promising words, and that Western statesmen can always be depended upon to collaborate enthusiastically in this appeasement."  
(May 1945)

"I have no hesitation in saying quite categorically, in the light of some eleven years' experience with Russian matters, that it would be highly dangerous to our security if the Russians were to develop the use of atomic energy. . . . It is thus my profound conviction that to reveal to the Soviet government any knowledge which might be vital to the defense of the United States, without adequate guarantees for the control of its use in the Soviet Union, would constitute a frivolous neglect of vital interests of our people."  
(September 1945)

"The Soviet régime is a police régime par excellence, reared in the dim half-world of Tsarist police intrigue, accustomed to think primarily in terms of police power. This should never be lost sight of in gauging Soviet motives. Soviet power, unlike that of Hitlerite Germany, is neither schematic nor adventuristic. It does not take unnecessary risks. Impervious to logic of reason, it is highly sensitive to logic of force."  
(February 1946)

"I think there can be no more dangerous tendency in American public opinion than one which places on our government an obligation to accomplish the impossible by gestures of good will and conciliation towards a political entity constitutionally incapable of being conciliated."  
(March 1946)

"It is clear that the main element of any US policy towards the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."  
(July 1947)<sup>3</sup>

EVER SINCE THEN George Kennan has kept explaining that "Mr X" has been misunderstood. In his *Memoirs* he maintains that this was largely his own fault. He confesses to responsibility for the "misunderstandings" because of the three "serious deficiencies" of the article: (1) the failure to mention "the difficulties with which the Soviet leaders were faced in their attempt to exercise political dominion over Eastern Europe"; (2) "the failure to make clear that what I was talking about when I mentioned the containment of Soviet power was not the containment by military means of a military threat, but the political containment of a political threat"; (3) the failure "to make clear that the 'containment' of which I was speaking was not something that I thought we could, necessarily, do everywhere successfully, or even needed to do everywhere successfully, in order to serve the purpose that I had in mind."

At least partly as a result of what he calls these "egregious errors", Mr Kennan sadly reflects, "the myth of the 'doctrine of containment' has never fully lost its spell." He has, as he put it in the Urban ENCOUNTER interview, "oversold his bill of goods." Thirty years after the publication of the "Mr X" article, Kennan complained that it has dogged his "footsteps ever since, like a faithful but unwanted and somewhat embarrassing animal", a remark triumphantly quoted in *Pravda* (21 January 1978).

But like the Shakespearean lady (whom he himself invokes), George Kennan doth protest too much. This can be seen not only from the ambiguities and contradictions accompanying his arguments, but also from the shifting premises of such arguments in the course of his political evolution. It can be gauged from the comparison of the tenor of his earlier pronouncements with those being made by Kennan *Mark II*.

IN HIS *Memoirs* Mr Kennan describes his frustration at trying to explain to American officials and politicians the nature of the problem presented by post-War Soviet Russia,

"For eighteen long months I had done little else but pluck people's sleeves, trying to make them understand the nature of the phenomenon with which we in the Moscow embassy were daily confronted and which our government and people had to learn to understand if they were to have any chance of coping successfully with the problems of the post-war world. So far as official Washington was concerned, it had been to all intents and purposes like talking to a stone. . . . Now, suddenly, my opinion was being asked. . . . Here was a case where nothing

but the whole truth would do. Now, by God, they would have it." (Vol. I, p. 293)

The result was a "long telegram" (of 22 February 1946, quoted above) in which Kennan analysed the basic features of the "post-War Soviet outlook" and which, he says, established his reputation. "My voice now carried."

It is more than ironical that Kennan now considers the "long telegram" as hardly justifying such an outcome:

"I read it over today [1967] with a horrified amusement. Much of it reads exactly like one of those primers put out by alarmed Congressional committees or by the Daughters of the American Revolution, designed to arouse the citizenry to the dangers of the Communist conspiracy." (p. 294)

Actually, it does not. Kennan exaggerates his anti-Bolshevik self-criticism. If he were in fact wrong then he should say so plainly, instead of building an elaborate edifice of rationalisations for his basic change of political position. To attribute it solely to a change in the (objective) situation only indicates that Kennan has not the courage of his (changed) convictions.

When revisionist historians or ideologues of the New Left or *Pravda* dismiss the Soviet danger to the West, an attitude towards which George Kennan has increasingly gravitated during the last 30 years, they themselves have at least some measure of consistency. Kennan has none. He knows from personal experience that the revisionist historians indulge in myth-making. There was no anti-Soviet Western conspiracy which started the Cold War. If anything, the "Good Uncle Joe" era of illusions in the West contributed to that appeasement of Stalin against which Kennan himself warned. He has never had any sympathy for the *enragé* New Revolutionaries of the 1960s, with their fanaticism, violence, shallow millenarianism and historical ignorance.<sup>4</sup> He has always been repelled by "progressive" double standards:

"Any régime that chooses to call itself Marxist can be sure that its brutalities and oppression will be forgiven, whereas any régime that does not is stamped as being of the Right, in which case the slightest invasion of the rights or liberties on its territory at once becomes the object of intense indignation."

Nor was he ever tempted by Marxism. Indeed, he considers that "its irrelevance has been amply demonstrated at every turn." As for *Pravda*, he has never had anything but contempt for Soviet mendacity. In his Reith Lectures he said:

"From the time of their seizure of power, forty years ago, the Russian Communists have always been characterised by their extraordinary ability to cultivate falsehood as a deliberate weapon of policy. . . . Their habitual carelessness about the truth has tended to obliterate in their minds the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. George Kennan, *Democracy and the Student Left* (1968). Also his "Rebels Without a Program", *The New York Times Magazine*, 21 January 1968.

distinction between what they do believe and what they merely find it convenient to say. . . . A wise Western policy will insist that no single falsehood or distortion from the Soviet side should ever go unanswered . . . would make it harder for them to ignore the distinction between the real and the unreal, and would place limitations—thus far not visible—on their use of falsehood as a weapon of political policy.”

Today, twenty years later, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* (and Soviet Communists in general) are as mendacious as ever. Whatever other changes might have occurred in the Soviet Union, this particular official habit of mind has endured and, even now, as Kennan wrote in 1946, “Soviet people are fed by Soviet government and Party propaganda a distorted and often vicious picture of the USA. . . .”

THE CONTRAST WITH the attitudes of Kennan *Mark II* cannot be more pronounced, even though he is too sophisticated and intelligent a person not to soften it by introducing qualifications, conditional clauses, and other eristic ploys to rationalise the shift in his attitude towards Western policy.

His fundamental premise is of course the argument that the Soviet Union has changed.

“[With] some people the trouble seems to be that they are unaware of the changes . . . between 1947 and 1977, [people] who talk of the problems of Soviet-American relations in terms identical with those used at the height of the Cold War—who sometimes seem in fact unaware that Stalin is dead.”<sup>5</sup>

His subordinate premise is that during that period the Western world has “not at all been able to make the pretence [of a higher moral departure-point] valid.” Kennan *Mark II* concluded therefore that “as things are, I can see very little merit in organising ourselves to defend from the Russians the porno-shops in central Washington.”<sup>6</sup> As a dismaying indication of Western decadence it may be a legitimate reflection; as a logical argument about the defence of Western civilisation it is absurd.

Is the question of changes in post-Stalin Russia something which the serious critics of Kennan have in fact truly overlooked? Some of these critics have been following the “thaws”, the “liberalisation”, and “bourgeoisification” problems as closely as he did himself. Ulam, Pipes, Seton-Watson, Laqueur, Schapiro, Conquest,

Grossman, or myself cannot really be charged with ignorance in this respect; so George Kennan is, to use his own expression, creating a dummy only “to treat it as if it were real.” The question is not whether there were changes—no sane person, no open-eyed student of society, would deny it. But what is their character and significance, how relevant are they to the problem of Soviet expansionism and *a fortiori* to Western policy? Not *any* change is sufficient to diminish the Soviet danger to Europe and America. There was relaxation under Khrushchev, but it did not prevent Soviet intervention in Hungary after the 20th CPSU “De-Stalinisation” Congress nor did it hinder the placing of missiles in Cuba after the 22nd “De-Stalinisation” Congress. And under Brezhnev Stalin became less dead than before.

IN 1945 KENNAN *Mark I* expressed his deep concern that because of the illusions

“kept alive among large sections of the American public, the Kremlin will not give up the hope that the Western democracies may, for the time being, be used as the greatest and most powerful auxiliary instrument in the establishment of Russian power in Eastern and Central Europe.”

In 1946 he wrote to the Secretary of State:

“We must see that our public is educated to the realities of the Russian situation. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of this.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1977, when America has lost its military superiority and the Soviet Union is fighting proxy wars in Africa, Kennan *Mark II* writes that “the creation of the satellite area of Eastern and Central Europe . . . was in reality a revival [*sic*] of traditional Russian power in that region”, that “the tendency to border expansion . . . does not play a prominent role in the motivation of Soviet leaders today”, that their “motivation is essentially defensive and . . . riveted primarily to the unsolved problems of economic development within their own country.”<sup>8</sup> The Soviet government’s action in Angola may have demonstrated “its newly acquired ability to project its military presence to distant and peripheral points”, but that *Mark I* insight does not bother Kennan *Mark II*:

“The effort to assist to the seats of power in distant countries factions whose aims seem reasonably compatible with one’s own is, as I have already noted, not foreign to the normal practice of great powers, including the United States. Why it should cause such great surprise or alarm when it proceeds from the Soviet Union I fail to understand.”<sup>9</sup>

There is, therefore, no need to worry about all those Cubans on African battlefields and the Soviet billion-dollar arms-airlift to embattled Ethiopia. After all, the Russians “have not even

<sup>5</sup> ENCOUNTER, March 1978.

<sup>6</sup> ENCOUNTER, September 1976.

<sup>7</sup> *Foreign Relations*, Vol. V (1945), p. 858; Vol. VI (1946), p. 708.

<sup>8</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, pp. 176, 177-8; ENCOUNTER, March 1978.

<sup>9</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, pp. 154, 179.



sent their own forces abroad into other countries", says Kennan *Mark II*.

I DO NOT FIND IT unduly surprising that he now repudiates the lessons which once upon a time he learnt in Moscow.

In his *Memoirs* (Vol. 1, pp. 291–2) he already "partly" retracted his famous 1946 rules of conduct *vis-à-vis* the Russians which now (in 1967) he claimed to be only "a useful set of rules for dealing with the Stalin régime":

*"Don't act chummy with them . . . Don't assume a community of aims with them which does not really exist . . . Don't make fatuous gestures of good will . . . Do not be afraid to use heavy weapons for what seems to us to be minor matters . . . Do not be afraid of unpleasantness and public airing of differences,"*

etc. Ten years later he has gone on to forget them altogether. In his last book he declared that no Soviet objectives which are in conflict with those of the United States

"seem to be of such nature as to challenge any vital interest of ours—the only possible exception being Berlin."

The growing Soviet strategic proximity to the Western sources of oil and the life-lines to them are pooh-poohed, but then Kennan *Mark II* has become rather solicitous about Soviet strategic interests. He is very much concerned about the Soviet leaders'

"feelings [which] must be supplemented with a new element of alarm as they sit and watch the pouring of these unconscionable quantities of American weaponry into Saudi Arabia and, more disturbing still, into the neighbouring Iran."

They are, presumably, worried about the threat from the Shah and the Saudi King to "the security of their sensitive southern border" which Kennan solemnly invokes in this context.

NOR IS IT VERY SURPRISING, given this new Kennan *Mark II* attitude, to hear him concluding that there is no cause for alarm for the West although, as we have just seen, this is not necessarily true for the Soviet leaders who do have sensitive causes for alarm. Our own Western apprehensions,

"which have been used to justify appeals for a totally negative, hostile, and militaristic attitude towards the Soviet Union, have little substance behind them and are not responsive to the real profile of the problem which the existence of the Communist power in Russia presents for American statesmanship."<sup>10</sup>

What can one conclude from this but that Mr

Kennan's equanimity has increased *pari passu* with the rise of the Soviet Union as a global power and the shrinkage of American power?

IT TOOK Kennan 20 years to learn about Russian and Soviet expansionism and 30 subsequent years of experience to un-learn it.

When it comes to China, he wisely reminds us in his latest book

"of the danger of building too extensively, in our foreign relations, on individual personalities at the head of a foreign state. These come and go; the state remains. When it comes to laying out American policies designed to stand the test of time, it is better to look at the long-term interests, and the long-term behaviour, of a state than at the personalities who momentarily head it."

But when it comes to Russia this is forgotten by Kennan *Mark II*. "Stalin is dead"—as some of us have evidently failed to notice—and

"the régime is headed by a moderate, in fact, conservative man; a man who, whatever failings of outlook he may have, is a man of the middle, a skilled balancer among political forces—a man confidently regarded by all who know him as a man of peace."

Apart from disregarding his own analytical precepts, this kind of assertion raises the simple question: How does George F. Kennan know that Brezhnev "is a man of peace"? And what does he mean by it? Stalin too was "a man of the middle, a skilled balancer among political forces", and neither Stalin nor Khrushchev wanted a global war. Brezhnev does not want it either. But does that make him "a man of peace"? Czechoslovakia, Angola, Somali, and Ethiopia remind us of the contrary. Nor do they indicate, as Kennan asserts, that "as this leadership looks abroad, it sees more dangers than inviting opportunities. Its reactions and purposes are therefore much more defensive than aggressive."<sup>11</sup> He can tell that to the marines—of Admiral Gorshkov operating along the shores of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

One can only applaud Mr Kennan when he calls for an act of humility—"the confession that none of us knows too much about what we are talking about", but I do not find it reassuring to hear him telling us in a curious passage that the present elderly Soviet leadership wants to end

"its own days peacefully—its members going down in history as constructive leaders who contributed, much more than Stalin and at least as much as Khrushchev, to the advancement of the glory of the Soviet Union and the cause of world communism."<sup>12</sup>

Kennan reiterates in *ENCOUNTER* the argument about the "peaceful" character of Soviet gerontocrats. He sees them "as highly conservative

<sup>10</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, pp. 179, 180.

<sup>11</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, p. 100; *ENCOUNTER*, March 1978; *The Cloud of Danger*, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, p. 200.

men, perhaps the most conservative ruling group to be found anywhere in the world, markedly advanced in age, approaching the end of their tenure, and given to everything else but rash adventure. . . ." This may be true as far as it goes, but does it go far enough? Stalin was over seventy at the time of the Korean war; and in any case, as Kennan himself says, the Leaders come and go but the State remains. Surely the argument about age as an indicator of the "peacefulness" of post-Stalin Russia is just a rationalisation of an older George Kennan's wishful thinking. I remember him at a seminar in Switzerland (which I also attended) expressing similar convictions about Khrushchevian Russia on the basis of the exactly opposite premise: the impending inevitable *rejuvenation* of the Soviet political élite. . . .<sup>13</sup> It is, I fear, no less incongruous to hear Kennan *Mark II* arguing that the Soviet Union is today only concerned with its security:

"Just as the security (not the expansion) of their own power is the prime consideration for the Soviet leaders when they face their own country, so it is when they face the outside world."

This was the standard argument at the time of the Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences of those men of illusions whom Kennan *Mark I* criticised so harshly in his diplomatic dispatches and who were ready, therefore, to sacrifice to the Russians Eastern Europe which, as Kennan (sarcastically, and inappositely for him today) puts it, "we, by our tacit consent, assigned to their good graces in 1945 . . ."<sup>14</sup> But it was clear then, as it is clear now, that expansion creates new security problems for the Soviet Union and new "sensitive borders" in turn prompt further expansion. This is another lesson which George Kennan has somehow consigned to the memory-hole.

**D**ESPITE HIS APPEALS for a "detached" and "unemotional" analysis of Soviet developments, he is himself rather emotional; it is a not unendearing human trait, but one that results in some vagaries and inconsistencies. I offer only a few additional examples: one where his sentiments vitiate his *Realpolitik*, and another one where his *Realpolitik* vitiates his Puritan conscience. (Someone has, I think rightly, called him

a preacher and a Machiavellian at the same time.)

It is clear from Kennan's *Memoirs* that he does not like the Chinese (who seem to him "lacking in the capacity for pity and the sense of sin") and that he does like the Russians for whom he feels a special affinity ("a spontaneous meeting of minds and temperaments . . . a kinship that comes from being a citizen of a large continental country.") But although China is also "a large continental country", Kennan feels no kinship with it, which is understandable enough; but the sentiments of the kin of Russia lead the *Realpolitiker* to get smothered under the "sense of sin" of a moralist.

"A real aberration of American thinking about the future of our relations with China is the view that we should 'tilt' our relations with China against the Soviet Union, should try, in other words, to make use of China as an instrument for the advancement of our interests, and the reduction of the Soviet ones, in the Soviet-American relationship. I find it difficult to say how strongly I disapprove of any such suggestion. . . . The Western community must find other, more solid and more positive ways than this of improving its relationship to the Soviet Union than by trying to play China off against it, if the catastrophe we all fear is to be averted and if the great constructive possibilities of the Soviet-American relationship are ultimately to be realized."<sup>15</sup>

Is, then, a balance-of-power policy today just too sinful? Only yesterday "containment" and its ensuing balance for peace were both realistic and moral. Again, it is not surprising that Moscow Radio (on 9 July 1977) quoted these Kennan *Mark II* remarks with satisfaction.

What about the "human rights" question? Here Kennan *Mark II* has strange inhibitions for such an upright man with such a decent record of public and private support for the humane cause of liberalism. This time it is the Moralistic who gets smothered by a *Realpolitiker*.

"The Soviet government asked for trouble, of course, when it signed the Helsinki declarations on human rights. The Western governments are formally on good ground in making this an issue of their relations with Moscow, if they care to do so. But the question remains whether it is wise for them to proceed much further along this path. . . . I should perhaps explain that I yield to no one in my admiration for such men as Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov; I would place them among the greatest Russians of the modern age. Were I a Russian, they would have my deepest gratitude and . . . support. But I am not a Russian." (p. 215)

What is he then? Mr Kennan now admits that he is an American Isolationist, a tag he does not like because of "its extreme connotations." He still advocates the defence of Europe and Japan, and he even grudgingly concedes the need to strengthen the conventional forces of NATO. But

<sup>13</sup> Cf. R. Aron; G. F. Kennan; R. Oppenheimer, et al., *Les colloques de Rheinfelden* (Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1959). Kennan also emphasised his hopes about the "coming generation" in the Soviet Union in his conversation with Melvin J. Lasky (ENCOUNTER, March 1960).

<sup>14</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, pp. 179, 186.

<sup>15</sup> *The Cloud of Danger*, p. 106.

he is quite ready to give up all kinds of strategic and military positions. He wants to induce Greece and Turkey to withdraw from NATO; he wants to abandon Korea and the Philippines; and above all he wants to give up the nuclear deterrent by signing an agreement with Russia about the "non-first use of nuclear weapons." Faced with the overwhelming Soviet conventional superiority the Europeans are offered only the advice to strengthen their conventional defences—and to be prepared for civil action and guerrilla warfare . . . under occupation. A wise counsel? A "realistic" prospect? Kennan refers to the heroic resistance during the last War, but forgets that it was only sustained by the hope of an Allied military victory.

In his 1938–1940 dispatches from occupied Prague,<sup>16</sup> Kennan records his sympathies with those "more responsible Czech leaders" who felt that "the cornerstone of any long-term Czech policy must be a *modus vivendi* with the Germans." He deplored "the tendency to romanticism in political thought" among the Czechs (of all people!), and he rejected "the romantic solution of hopeless resistance rather than the humiliating but truly heroic one of realism."<sup>17</sup>

Today Kennan is "not sure that Hacha and the Czechs were wise to yield."<sup>18</sup> But in the wider context it is his original reaction to the consequences of Munich (1938) (which he characterises in his *Memoirs* as one of "temperate optimism" and "not devoid of hope") which underlies his present position. In his dispatch from Prague after Munich, he expressed hope that

"such changes as occur will lead in the direction of greater economic security and greater racial tolerance for [the Czechoslovak] people sadly in need of both. . . ."

Kennan's evolution is a clean example that "*On revient toujours à ses premiers amours. . . .*" After a life of foreign experience and the emergence of global problems, George Kennan wants to return home to the Middle West, to the homely illusion that America, even with Europe and Japan feeling increasingly abandoned, could withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous

fortune in a hostile world. No less illusory is his assertion that Western Europe has no reason to fear "Finlandisation." He even thinks that "today the Finns enjoy complete freedom in their internal affairs", which is palpably untrue.

HE ADVOCATED in 1947 as "Mr X" an "adroit and vigilant application of counterforce" against Soviet expansionism. In 1966 in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, although he emphasised his objections to the way "Containment" was applied, he still thought it necessary. Now, he has in effect given it up. For all practical purposes he has replaced the idea of resistance to Soviet expansionism by appeasement and isolationism.

HOW DID THIS STRANGE EVOLUTION from Containment to Isolationism come about? What led him to such a curiously "unvirtuous and defeatist" attitude? What turned Hamlet into a King Lear who despite his age and experience could not know which of his three daughters was truly attached to him?

He was not altogether wrong about his "self-criticisms" of the three "grievous errors" of "Mr X", even though they were afterthoughts rather than (as he implied) disclaimers. There was indeed little real thought (as against rhetoric) about Eastern Europe. But so-called disengagement, which he proposed, was not a practical solution.

I would be the first to agree that there was indeed an underestimation of the political—as against the military—factor. But Kennan, as Dean Acheson said, "never grasped the realities of power relationships", and he still cannot comprehend the political function of military and strategic factors. At any rate, the increased emphasis on the *political* element in the Containment policy would have intensified rather than diminished what the Russians call "the ideological struggle" (which they have never renounced, unlike George Kennan). Nor can Western strategy be safely reduced to Kennan's simple withdrawal-to-the-industrial-heartland scheme. The price of this isolationist luxury—unprompted declarations of territorial disinterestedness (as in Dean Acheson's ill-fated Korea statement)—is that defence becomes at once more difficult and more expensive, not easier and cheaper.

I would agree with Kennan that there was indeed an error in "globalism": not in the idea of military resistance where necessary, but in the mindless schematism which prevented flexibility and a clear-eyed choice of global strategic priorities.

<sup>16</sup> Kennan, *From Prague after Munich* (Princeton, 1968), pp. 5, 240.

<sup>17</sup> *Memoirs*, Vol. I, p. 96. I cannot help comparing Kennan's reaction to the Czech events with that of Dorothy Thompson at the time: "I for one believe that if ever the time comes that the antennae of this country are not sensitive to assaults on liberty, wherever these assaults may occur, then this country will have degenerated into an unvirtuous and defeatist senility." *Let the Record Speak* (London, 1939), p. 381.

<sup>18</sup> ENCOUNTER (September, 1976), p. 34.

BUT GEORGE KENNAN has thrown the baby out with the bathwater. His frustrations led him increasingly to abandon his original concern about the Soviet danger which he began "to wish away" concurrently (as I have pointed out) with the rise of Soviet strength. Yet he cannot explain, in terms of his own arguments, why the Soviet Union spends more on "defence" than the USA—out of a Gross National Product which is half of the American GNP—if the military factor ceases to be effective above a certain level of destructiveness ("overkill"). He attributes to Soviet policy changes which have not occurred and good will which it does not possess.

He is also preoccupied with the search for scapegoats. He admits that at least some people critical of the pseudo-*Détente* policy are "honourable people", indeed his "friends"; and he does "not suspect or disrespect their motives." But he still lumps them all as "the Right." He caricatures their views and cannot conceive "in the bowels of Christ" (in spite of his professed humility) that *he* may be mistaken. He mentions no names, but it behoves him to distinguish between the "chauvinist Right Deviation" and the people whom I mentioned earlier and who differ with George Kennan in their reasoned assessment of the world problems and risks. He even produces a spurious symmetry between "Mr X"-Kennan *Mark I*'s criticism of the Left Deviation and Kennan *Mark II*'s criticism of the Right Deviation. In fact, the Yalta appeasement was not just a matter of the Left, unless he includes therein all his official Establishment superiors in Washington; and the intellectual anti-pseudo-*Détente* critique is not at all just a

matter of the Right, unless the word is used in its Orwellian sense and one becomes Right by definition if one is not "friendly to the Soviet Union." (In this sense Kennan *Mark II* moved to the Left but in no other respect, as New Left ideologues would be the first to recognise.)

Without mentioning any names, George Kennan constantly attacks those who, according to him, think that a war with the USSR is "inevitable." But who are they? Only the official Chinese thesis maintains it (and now only in a somewhat diluted form). None of Kennan's serious critics whom he deplores believes it. Why, then, the imputation?

Because originally "Containment" contained two elements: resistance to Soviet expansionism and the avoidance of war. George Kennan knows this only too well. But now that he has abandoned one of the elements, he feels impelled to stress the other one against his critics. But why should he doubt that they are every bit as much concerned with the survival of humanity as he is? They do not believe, however, that appeasement is the way to do it. If it leads to the defeat of the West the nuclear danger will not disappear.<sup>19</sup> The prospect of peaceful world-politics in a world of Nuclear Communist powers is not exactly hopeful, as the Sino-Soviet, Vietnamese-Cambodian, and Somali-Ethiopian military clashes indicate. Lenin used to say "Capitalism brings with it war as the cloud brings with it the storm." It is not true today, if it ever was.

GEORGE KENNAN has misjudged "the cloud of danger." The survival of Western civilisation is a necessary pre-condition of holding back "the cloud", and his proposals would only undermine the chances of such survival. His assessment of the world situation tells us more about his psychological evolution than about the real historical perils which the policy of Containment, however inadequate, has so far contributed to avoid. After all, we should not forget the Berlin Blockade (1948–9) and Cuba (1962) when Soviet military threats were decisively frustrated and indeed contained. Nor should we forget that Japan is as closely related, geopolitically, to Korea as Western Europe is to the Middle East. That Containment worked in all these contexts, but above all that it worked in the overall context of the global balance of power, is no mean achievement and no reason moodily and irascibly to abandon it when new perils arise and the balance has already been altered to the West's disadvantage.

<sup>19</sup> George Kennan wrote in *ENCOUNTER* (September 1976) that "no one in his right senses would yield to any such thing as nuclear blackmail", that it cannot "be used for gaining political advantage except against people who, as Stalin said, have weak nerves." He evidently rates European nerves very highly. But he seems to have forgotten European reaction to the Cuban 1962 missile crisis and the 1973 oil embargo, not to mention the possible impact of the Soviet projection of both nuclear and conventional power. In a game of "nuclear chess" defeat can be conceded without playing all the moves to the bitter end.

Kennan himself reminded us how the Chinese used to fight their battles. "When they had figured out which side had the stronger forces, victory would be conceded to that side without shooting." In any case, if there is no reason to fear nuclear blackmail, why is Kennan so apprehensive about the possibility of nuclear war and so denunciatory about the bogey-men who allegedly maintain that it is "inevitable"?

<sup>20</sup> The two roles are interestingly juxtaposed in the incident of Mr Kennan's expulsion from the Moscow ambassadorship (1952). When he compared the conditions of foreign diplomats there with those in Nazi Germany, he was declared *persona non grata*. In his *Memoirs* he criticises himself for being foolish. As a diplomat he undoubtedly was; but as a person and as an intellectual he has only told the truth.

KENNAN'S EVOLUTION, as I said at the outset, was rooted in a dualism which he obviously could not overcome.<sup>20</sup> The Preacher and the



Machiavellian, the diplomat and the intellectual, the official and the non-conformist, the nostalgic conservative and the liberal "progressive", the sophisticated cosmopolitan and the embarrassed isolationist—all these and other dualities have created an imbalance in his political judgment. Dean Acheson was right when he characterised one of his memoranda as

"typical of its gifted author, beautifully expressed, sometimes contradictory, in which were mingled flashes of prophetic insight and suggestions, as the document itself conceded, of total impracticality."<sup>21</sup>

This applies to the whole political evolution of George Kennan. He has now made a full circle.

He is still under the illusion that "it is much

easier for some Americans to understand the Soviet Union than it is for most qualified Continental Europeans and Englishmen. . . ." It would, of course, be silly to generalise about such matters; they are best assessed on the basis of individual performance. But if there is a valid element of the "sociology of knowledge" in the assessment of the evolution of East-West attitudes and views, perhaps I may be permitted to surmise that it is not without significance that George Kennan comes from the Middle West, the cradle of America's traditional isolationism. Even so, his evolution is a very personal matter and it is deplorable that he has unlearned the lessons of Russian and European history. He seems no longer concerned with the need to learn from history. For a politician this is a weakness, for a diplomat an error, for an historian a sin.

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<sup>21</sup> *Present at the Creation* (1969), p. 446.

## Mill Ruins

One morning  
The shuttle's spirit failed to come back  
(Japan had trapped it  
In a reconstructed loom  
Cribbed from smiling fools in Todmorden).

Cloth rotted, in spite of the nursing.  
Its great humming abbeys became tombs.

And the children  
Of rock and water and a draughty absence  
Of everything else  
Roaming for leftovers

Smashed all that would smash  
What would not smash they burned  
What would not burn

They levered loose and rolled down hillsides.

Then trailed away homeward aimlessly  
Like the first  
Homeless Norsemen.

*Ted Hughes*