

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

Edited by Michael Kimmage
and Matthew Rojansky



GEORGE KENNAN: THE DIPLOMATIC LEGACY

Jon Finer

When I became director of the State Department's Office of Policy Planning, in the second term of the Obama administration, I received two gifts from thoughtful friends. The first was an early edition of *American Diplomacy*, inscribed by its author, George Kennan, who established the office I would soon be leading. The second was a color scan of a memo from Kennan to Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, dated May 23, 1947. Its cover letter was less than a page long and replete with the sort of excuses and caveats familiar to anyone who had ever tactfully tried to lower a boss's expectations. "It is only a few days since the Planning Staff, with an incomplete and provisional complement of personnel, was able to begin to give attention to the substance of its work," Kennan wrote. "Normally I would consider this far too short a time in which to consider and make recommendations on matters of such importance. But I recognize that the need for a program of action on this problem is urgent and the best answer we can give today is perhaps more useful than a more thoroughly considered study one or two months hence."¹¹⁷

The subject of the memo that followed was simply stated, even understated: “it deals with the question of aid to Western Europe.” Yet it proposed one of America’s most successful policy initiatives. Officially called the “European Recovery Program,” it is far better known as the Marshall Plan after the secretary of state who announced it to the world in a speech just two weeks after Kennan’s self-deprecating missive.

These gifts were the first of many ways I came to understand how much the lessons of George Kennan’s life and work motivated, inspired, but also overshadowed and humbled, those of his many successors. I suspect this has been the case for virtually every American diplomat and particularly those fortunate enough to follow in his professional footsteps. Since Kennan established it in the aftermath of World War II, the Office of Policy Planning has been providing the “best answer(s)” it could to the nation’s greatest international challenges often in a matter of days, when months would make for an easier task.

To say that Kennan was a tough act to follow does not do him justice. On more than a few occasions I joked (admittedly with some genuine concern) that the trajectory of Policy Planning from Kennan’s tenure to my own was among the clearest examples of American decline.

But there were also extraordinary benefits to succeeding George Kennan. In particular, he left myriad invaluable blueprints for how to approach the job. In a federal government that can be obsessively focused on the day-to-day, or, these days, on the minute-by-minute, the Policy Planning staff was intended to be and has remained a rare oasis of strategic discourse. George Marshall summed this up best in his characteristically pithy advice to Kennan: “avoid trivia.”

That is easier said than done. Policymaking ultimately boils down to setting, articulating, and implementing priorities. Inherently, this involves a tug-of-war between what President Eisenhower termed

the “urgent” and the “important.” In other words, tasks that must be accomplished right away must be balanced against longer-term imperatives or else the ship of state will list. In theory, the two dozen or so members of the Policy Planning staff are assigned to focus on the latter, leaving the former—everything from crisis response to press inquiries to the humdrum (but critically important) maintenance of foreign relations—to the thousands of other professional diplomats throughout the State Department. In practice, however, when Policy Planning has removed itself wholly from this more operational business of policymaking, it has risked relegating itself to an afterthought, an in-house think tank with ideas that rarely make it from the director’s desk to the real world.

It says a lot about how difficult producing actionable ideas can be that Kennan, architect of the office and by far its most celebrated occupant, harbored deep doubts about the success of his undertaking. “It occurred to me that it is time I recognized that my Planning Staff, started nearly three years ago, has simply been a failure,” he wrote in 1950, “like all previous attempts to bring order and foresight to the designing of foreign policy by special institutional arrangements within the department.”¹¹⁸ History rightly rejects this analysis. And from the way Kennan did the job, one can distill and adhere to some valuable lessons.

The first is that, while Kennan had an academic bent, he never lost sight of the fact that policy planning is not just about having the best ideas. It is the alchemy of ideas and implementation. A thoughtful paper on how the United States should help rebuild its postwar adversaries might be good enough for a scholar seeking tenure. A successful policy planner would know how to use the levers of government, as he did, to turn mere insights into an assistance program (\$100 billion in today’s dollars) that helped turn our bitterest and most devastated wartime enemies into some of our closest and most prosperous allies. I encouraged members of the Policy Planning staff—a roughly equal mix of career foreign service officers, civil

servants, and political appointees from outside the government—to be entrepreneurs and evangelists for their work, building relationships around the State Department and across agencies, particularly among those who would have to carry out our best-laid plans.

A second lesson drawn from Kennan is that S/P, as it is known inside the Department, has the luxury to not only take a step back from the day-to-day, but also to take a step back in time, ensuring that a sense of history, of triumphs and failures in the past, informs and provides context for our policymaking and for the secretary's speeches. As a graduate student, my advisor was Yuen Foong Khong, whose *Analogies at War* chronicled the use and misuse of history by 20th-century foreign-policymakers.¹¹⁹ Khong's analysis built on that of Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, two Harvard professors whose *Thinking in Time* both offered lessons on how to integrate history into policy analysis and recounted "horror stories" about how badly that is often done.¹²⁰

In the pantheon of great diplomats, Kennan is one of the few who was also an accomplished historian. It is clear that each of his vocations informed the other. In a 1995 essay for *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan resurrected and explicated a relatively obscure 1821 speech by then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, whose thinking on foreign affairs Kennan had long admired. Adams's admonition that the United States "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," which Kennan often cited, had provided some of the historical and theoretical underpinning for two of his most celebrated stances—opposing the expansion of the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq.¹²¹

Contemporary policy debates involve frequent appeals to history, employed both to help win internal arguments and, most importantly, to get the answer right. In the administration in which I served, the dominant historical paradigm was the invasion of Iraq. We were led by a president who had been elected in no small part because,

like Kennan, he was an early opponent of it. Barack Obama's 2002 speech labeling the prospect of invading Iraq "a dumb war... a rash war" months before the invasion was the most important substantive distinction between his candidacy for president six years later and that of his main Democratic primary opponent, Hillary Clinton, and general election opponent, John McCain.¹²² As president, Obama drew important lessons from the U.S. experience in Iraq. He concluded that difficult adversaries should be engaged, not just confronted; that the United States is stronger as part of a coalition than when acting alone; that adhering to international law matters; that military quagmires can swallow a presidency, particularly in the Middle East. These lessons informed many of our major initiatives, from drawing down troops from Iraq, to "rebalancing" our focus from the Middle East to East Asia, to seeking a nuclear agreement rather than war with Iran, to resisting pressure for greater military intervention in Syria. In Policy Planning, we tailored our work for Secretary Kerry, including papers that became memos he wrote to President Obama. We kept these lessons and this historical context very much in mind.

A third lesson of Kennan's time in Policy Planning was more of a cautionary tale. His diaries and posthumous biographies revealed antiquated views on race and an aversion to multiculturalism that, while perhaps unexceptional for a white man of his generation, are a disappointing aspect of his world view.¹²³ Suffice it to say, an office that seeks to generate and implement the best ideas on America's role in the world requires diversity, not just of thought, but of the full range of categories that comprise the American experience.

Fourth, and perhaps the most significant, were Kennan's reflections on the region of the world he knew best. Perhaps the greatest similarity between Kennan's tenure and my own was that both coincided with the rise of Russia (the Soviet Union in his case) as a preeminent foreign-policy challenge. The early years of the Obama administration were characterized by the "reset" in U.S. relations with Russia.

The reset allowed us to cooperate on a range of priorities, from building pressure on Iran to curtail its nuclear program, to updating the START arms control agreement, to facilitating the resupply of military operations in Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network. Far from seeing Russia primarily as an adversary, President Obama even ridiculed his 2012 general election opponent, Mitt Romney, for listing Russia as America's paramount security threat, quipping that "the 1980s are calling to ask for their foreign policy back."

But by the beginning of Obama's second term, tension between the United States and Russia was mounting rapidly. Disputes first arose over how to manage the Arab Spring uprisings. President Putin saw himself as a defender of stability and the status quo in the face of destabilizing rebellions. He came to believe that the United States had (1) encouraged similar demonstrations in Moscow during Russia's 2012 elections, (2) betrayed Russia by using a UN Security Resolution to justify military action that toppled the Libyan government, and (3) backed an "extremist" revolution in Syria.

It was the outbreak of unrest in Ukraine and eventually the fall of its government, the annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the Donbas that shattered the "reset" for good.

By the time I became director of Policy Planning, the administration was preoccupied with two major challenges emanating from Moscow—the conflict in Ukraine, which had entered its third year, and the conflict in Syria, which Russia had just inexorably altered by a direct military intervention in September of 2015. Those challenges, which dominated Secretary Kerry's myriad engagements with Russia over the final year in office, generated the most important work our Policy Planning office produced. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes unconsciously, we used Kennan as a guide.

He was the ghost in the room when we assembled eminent historians and other Russia scholars on the State Department's regal

eighth floor, for a dinner with Secretary Kerry to discuss the return of the Russia challenge. We sought to channel his insights when drafting a memorandum mimicking what we believed would have been President Putin's guidance to his own policy planners, laying out his worldview. And we developed detailed strategic plans for reorienting our approach to the Russia relationship, with the goal of handing off a more manageable situation to our successors.

We were soon confronted by a third dispute with Russia—one that Kennan would have likely found far less shocking than many in our administration did: Moscow's use of stolen and disseminated information, as well as disinformation, to successfully intervene in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. My staff, which included Russia experts from inside and outside the government, fixated on this problem as soon as it emerged and before it was acknowledged publicly. We sought, largely unsuccessfully, to push the Department and the administration to more quickly consider stricter sanctions and make a strong public statement about what we knew. As a last-ditch effort, we produced a memo for the president from Secretary Kerry calling for a bipartisan commission, modeled on the 9/11 Commission, to investigate what had happened and to make recommendations about how best to protect the country. Never approved, this idea looks wiser in hindsight.

To see how clearly Kennan's own thinking anticipated virtually all of these challenges, one need look no further than the most famous of his writings, the so-called "Long Telegram" of 1946.¹²⁴ Its five concrete recommendations, borne of his deep alarm about Josef Stalin's creeping authoritarianism, prove similarly prescient as the United States slowly came to terms with the threat posed by President Vladimir Putin's Russia. "Our first step," Kennan wrote in the telegram, "must be to apprehend, and recognize for what it is, the nature of the movement with which we are dealing. We must study it with same courage, detachment, objectivity, and same determination not to be emotionally provoked or unseated by it, with

which doctor studies unruly and unreasonable individual.”¹²⁵ By the time Russia had reemerged long after the end of the Cold War as a critical foreign-policy challenge, the Russia expertise that the U.S. government had developed over decades had atrophied, in favor of trendier regional specialties like the Middle East and East Asia. Russian linguists and cultural sages were in short supply at the State Department as well as in the military and intelligence community. It is a deficit we are still working to rectify.

Second, Kennan warned that, “we must see that our public is educated to realities of Russian situation. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this. Press cannot do this alone. It must be done mainly by Government, which is necessarily more experienced and better informed on practical problems involved.”¹²⁶ As our government’s policy focus shifted away from Russia, the American public also stopped paying as much attention to Russia as it should have. This helps to explain why Russia’s interference in our election was so incomprehensible—even unimaginable—to many Americans. They no longer remembered, if they had ever known, that Moscow had relentlessly engaged in lower-tech, less successful attempts at interference in American politics throughout the Cold War.

Kennan also wisely held up a mirror to American society by arguing that we are most vulnerable to Russian meddling when our domestic affairs are in relative turmoil. He wrote in his telegram,

Much depends on health and vigor of our own society. World communism is like malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is point at which domestic and foreign policies meets. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués. If we cannot abandon fatalism and indifference in face of deficiencies of our own

society, Moscow will profit—Moscow cannot help profiting by them in its foreign policies.”

That Moscow’s successful 2016 intervention came amid—and sought to exacerbate—a time of great domestic division in the United States would have come as no surprise to Kennan and those familiar with his work.

In his fourth piece of Russia-related advice, Kennan anticipated what is among the defining foreign-policy questions of our current moment. This is how to modernize and restore confidence in liberal democracy as a governance mode and in the norms, legal regimes, and institutions that comprise the international system established after World War II. With Europe and the United States in degrees of disarray, fueled by Russian interference, we can no longer take for granted that our way of life—the “power of our example,” in Bill Clinton’s famous phrase—will remain more compelling to the world than the autocrat’s bargain of greater order and diminished freedom. This, too, is something Kennan saw coming, writing in his telegram:

We must formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security. They are seeking guidance rather than responsibilities. We should be better able than Russians to give them this. And unless we do, Russians certainly will.

Finally, Kennan warned against the inclination, always present in American culture, to regress towards the sorts of nationalism, nativism, and autocracy that are hallmarks of the very foreign governments we should be standing against. His words certainly apply to a U.S. administration buttressed by those forces, more enamored with

authoritarians than with our fellow democrats around the world and willing to compromise core values, such as freedom of the press and the independence of political institutions, like the judiciary and intelligence community: “We must have courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism, is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping.”¹²⁷

I left the government on January 19, 1957, but not Kennan’s long shadow. One of my first stops after leaving Washington was Princeton, New Jersey, to spend several months at the Institute for Advanced Study where Kennan was also a post-government transient before making it his professional home for many years. The Institute is best known for the world-changing work of its scientists, from founding director Abraham Flexner (whose seminal essay on “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge” would have made a good title for a Policy Planning paper), to Robert Oppenheimer (who led the Manhattan Project and recruited Kennan to the Institute), to Albert Einstein (who took up residence there upon arriving from Germany), to physicist John Nash (whose life story was depicted in the book and film, *A Beautiful Mind*).¹²⁸ At a time when the Trump administration was working feverishly to close the nation’s doors to immigrants and refugees and pursue energy and environmental policies that reject the very concept of scientific truth, I took solace in an institution that had welcomed some of the world’s scientific greatest minds as Europe was engulfed by the Second World War.

Among the non-scientists, Kennan was the Institute’s most notable member. On a granite structure overlooking the 600-acre Institute Woods, where scholars stroll to clear their minds, his words are inscribed alongside those of Flexner and Einstein. While working at the Institute, Kennan published more than a dozen books and won virtually every prestigious literary accolade, including two National Book Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes. “Your gifts are unique in the world,” the great Isaiah Berlin wrote to Kennan in 1965.¹²⁹

But it is also clear that Kennan's life after government wasn't easy, a comforting realization for anyone struggling to find fulfillment amid the disorienting transition away from the front lines of public service. As Frank Costigliola, who edited Kennan's diaries, recounts, his faculty appointment was initially opposed by the Institute's mathematicians, who questioned his scholarly credentials. He contemplated a run for the U.S. Senate from New Jersey but was dissuaded by Oppenheimer, who insisted Kennan would have to give up his Institute appointment should he pursue elected office. And despite his subsequent ambassadorships in Belgrade and Moscow, Kennan's biographers describe an alienation from Washington's foreign policy establishment, whose foundation he had helped build but which misappropriated his ideas in support of approaches he rejected. Kennan wrote and spoke often of isolation, even loneliness.¹³⁰

In important ways, Kennan remained, to the end of his 101 years, an unabashed optimist: he believed in the necessity of remaining engaged in the public debate and in the power of sound policy thinking to avoid unnecessary war. At key moments in the history through which he lived, Kennan refused to yield to the inevitability of armed conflict, even as it seemed to be taking on a momentum of its own. For example, in his December 1957 Reith Lectures, delivered at Oxford University and broadcast worldwide by the BBC, he warned of an overemphasis in the West on military alliances and escalation at the expense of softer foreign policy tools, like diplomacy. Amid the global obsession with Moscow's purported preeminence in military technology and the arms race spurred by the launch of the Sputnik satellite just two months earlier, he argued:

To me it is a source of amazement that there are people who still see the escape from this danger in the continued multiplication by us of the destructiveness and speed of delivery of the major atomic weapons. These people seem unable to wean themselves from the belief that it is relative changes

in the power of these weapons that are going to determine everything. They evidently believe that if the Russians gain the slightest edge on us in the capacity to wreak massive destruction at long range, they will immediately use it, regardless of our own power of retaliation. Conversely they seem to feel that if we can only contrive to get a tiny bit ahead of the Russians we shall in some way have won; our salvation will be assured; the road will then be paved for a settlement on our terms.... I scarcely need say that I see no grounds whatsoever for these assumptions.¹³¹

A decade later, as President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to build support for expanding the Vietnam War, Kennan enraged the White House by testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the United States should instead withdraw from Indochina “as soon as this could be done without inordinate damage to our prestige or stability in the area.”¹³² And in 2002, at the dawn of the nation’s longest wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kennan told an interviewer asking about the wisdom of invading Iraq: “I could see justification only if the absence of it would involve a major and imminent danger to our own country, or, at worst, to our most intimate and traditional allies. Of this I see no evidence.” He continued: “I have seen no evidence that we have any realistic plans for dealing with the great state of confusion in Iraqian [sic] affairs which would presumably follow even after the successful elimination of the dictator.”¹³³

While Kennan also held more than his share of dubious positions—such as that it would be a mistake to re-unify East and West Germany—there is no denying his prescience, or at least contrarian boldness, even after his most influential government positions were behind him. Standing so frequently against conventional wisdom

could only have deepened his sense of solitude. At least that is what his words, inscribed on the sculpture at the Institute for Advanced Study, seem to suggest:

True scholars often work in loneliness, compelled to find rewards in the awareness that they have made valuable, even beautiful contributions to the cumulative structure of human knowledge, whether anyone knows it at the time or not.

That may be true, to a point. But the “valuable, even beautiful” contributions of George Kennan, who passed away in 2005, were well known throughout his time. And they continue to guide those fortunate enough to learn from them.