

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

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INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD HAASS

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Editors: We'd like to begin with the natural connections you have with George Kennan, having been director of Policy Planning and then at the Council on Foreign Relations. You have two very important tent poles of Kennan's career, the Mr. X article and then his role as director of Policy Planning. We'd like to get your sense of the biggest impacts he had with these positions, with the article and the role of first director of Policy Planning. What has been important to you? What do you consider important today?

Richard Haass: I think when history considers George Kennan, the most important element is probably "The Long Telegram," which in a slightly revised form ended up in *Foreign Affairs*. And he will forever be known as the father, or whatever other word one wants to use, of containment. And the magazine publication, the *Foreign Affairs* publication of it, was obviously important for it as a public document because up until then it had been an internal document. But it was when it was an internal document, it gave shape to what some people were thinking. It just captured the moment. And then when it went public in the magazine, it was important because foreign policy never thrives if it's made only in private; you need public support. And containment, given its various dimensions, required a lot of public support. So the public articulation was just as important in its own way as the initial private articulation.

As for Kennan at Policy Planning, obviously he's the most famous director of the office. He got it started. It's had a very uneven history since then. My own sense is, he's less significant for the bureaucratic perch he occupied than for the particular memos and ideas he put forward. And that's simply because policy planning in many ways cannot be institutionalized. The impact of the office, the impact of the director, of the staff depends a great deal on the person in the job, on the appetite of the Secretary of State, on the openness of the administration to receive certain kinds of big ideas, and on the moment. Not every moment in history lends itself to big rethinks. Not every moment in history lends itself to big ideas.

But Kennan came at a time when people were looking for big ideas because it was one of those transitions in the world, in this case going from the World War II world into something else. And it was a moment where people were for obvious reasons searching for big ideas, for policies that would help the United States navigate this very different world. And so you have the context, you have Kennan who by temperament and background was able to produce big things. And in somebody like Marshall you had a Secretary of State who was open to it and then was in a position—given his relationship with Truman—he was in a position to promote it. So the stars aligned in ways for Kennan that I would argue they didn't align for any of his successors.

E: We want to follow up on context, on place and time as a matter of career and as a matter of policy. In our era, containment has a unique status. Other policy ideas can get rolled into some kind of dichotomy like hawk versus dove, or realist versus idealist. They basically fall into a more traditional version of the foreign policy debate, whereas containment stands on its own. And maybe that makes it more timeless. Do you have a perspective on that?

RH: Containment stands apart probably for at least two reasons. One is it did provide direction for U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War

and in particular towards the Soviet Union. I don't want to exaggerate it because we had fierce debates over, for example, Vietnam. And someone could believe in containment and support what we did in Vietnam and someone could support containment and oppose what we did in Vietnam. Containment wasn't a cookbook that gave you recipes. But still, it gave you a first order take and a direction on what the United States ought to do in the world at that time and it gave people an intellectual handle, and intellectual handles are important.

What's also interesting about containment is it has turned out to have more staying power than many might have predicted because it offers a framework for dealing with other imperial or expansive actors on either the regional or world stage. So even though it was devised as a response to the Soviet challenge in the late 1940s, at various times either in part or in whole it's provided at least some direction for how to deal with other countries. For example, one sees elements of it in the Iran debate today. So it actually turns out to be a slightly less context- or time-limited concept than I expect even Kennan would have imagined when he wrote it.

E: On the subject of Kennan's legacy, We were wondering if you could speak in somewhat personal terms about when you came to read Kennan for the first time, on the effect of his writing style, on the things that you might wish to emulate, and on what you have not sought to emulate either in your career as Policy Planning director or as an interpreter and commentator on international affairs?

RH: I would expect my answer will disappoint you. I read Kennan first as a graduate student at Oxford in the 1970s. And then and now it is impossible not to be impressed by the range of his intellect. What's so interesting about Kennan is he represents the kind of classical education that almost nobody gets any more. His ability to draw not just from history, but from literature, reflects a richness that we rarely see. English majors and historians and political science majors

are rarely to be found in the same person and Kennan was such a person.

Both the breadth and the depth stand out. But almost in some ways because of that, because of his background, there was almost a Europeanness to it. There was something about Kennan—I hope this is not misunderstood—but there are some parts about him that were not to me particularly American; they were much more European in certain ways.

It didn't have a big influence on me because that's not a league I can play in. I don't know who can but it's certainly not one that I can. And when I was at graduate school—and I don't mean to compare myself to either lest anyone get the wrong idea—but the people who influenced me more were Hedley Bull, an Australian academic who wrote a book called *The Anarchical Society*, which more than any other single book has framed my own outlook on the field, and Henry Kissinger. I read *A World Restored* when I was a graduate student. I remember reading it the fall of 1973 when I first started at Oxford and that had a tremendous impact on me.

So more than Kennan, those were the two individuals whose writing and thinking influenced my own. This idea that at any moment in history there are forces of anarchy and forces of society, and that is what gives the character of the world order, or lack of it, at any moment. And what I so liked about Kissinger was his ability to weave not just history into a narrative, but his ability to go back and forth between specific points of history and then to take a step back and provide a larger perspective, a larger take on what the specific pieces of history were telling us if only we were able to understand them. The metaphor that comes to mind is a camera that zooms in and zooms out and zooms in and zooms out. And I found both of them to be great influences.

Kennan was very much of the realist school. Indeed, he had very little time for thinking about promoting democracy abroad and re-

shaping other societies. I'm not as extreme as that but I lean in that direction. But he also had a pretty good understanding of the need to take the cultures, and histories, and philosophies, and perspectives of others into account. That led to a certain restraint. To use modern-day language, in no way was he a transformationalist. There was an understanding of history that I liked about Kennan because it made one a little bit more humble and a little bit more careful.

I absorbed that in the same way I did other people who were closer to the realist perspective. But in my own case, we never met that I can recall. Indeed, I wrote him when I was at S/P [the State Department Office of Policy Planning] and said I'd like to come see him and he basically said thanks but no thanks. He was one of the major contributors to the field. And if I were ever going to write, say, an intellectual history of American foreign policy, he would be a part of it.

But for me at least, he is not one of the top influences. And at S/P, again, when I was there I did not come to work and say "What would George Kennan have done?" Or when a problem came my way, I would not think of it in those terms. Again, I was simply trying to do what I could, given my abilities, my staff, and more important, given the context. Given the issues we were dealing with, given what the secretary of state, in this case Colin Powell, wanted, given what the interagency would tolerate or allow.

So, Kennan's experience at S/P didn't have great meaning for me with two exceptions. I kept on my desk a mug that said, "Avoid Trivia," and secondly, like every other person who sat in that position, there were days of satisfaction but also days of real frustration. The Policy Planning job, at the end of the day, is a job about influence, not power. And everybody who has sat in that job I expect had his or her moments of real frustration, simply because your ability to influence is not something dependent upon the power of your own prose.

E: You've mentioned Kennan having a salience that goes beyond

time and place, the enduring notion of containment. That suggests a lasting relevance after 1991. At the same time, the world changes fundamentally when the Cold War comes to its end.

RH: Sure.

E: So is it possible to argue for the fading away of at least some of his insights as we've entered a new era international in international affairs?

RH: It's a fair question. I've written myself that containment could survive and did survive everything except its success. I never thought I'd see the day that what Kennan basically called, what he predicted to be, I think his phrase was, "the mellowing of Soviet power," would happen. That after decades of frustration, that ultimately the second dimension of containment, this one of internal change inside the communist world, inside the Soviet Union, would occur. Most of the emphasis was on pushing back on the containing part, but it turns out that both dimensions of what Kennan had written about came to be after 40 years, quite suddenly in many ways. Like a lot of other people, I was taken by surprise.

I think after that Kennan was in a position more like others. And by that I mean containment and his whole argument there at the dawn of the Cold War gave him a unique place in the foreign policy firmament. But 40 years on, when, after containment, again, succeeded beyond the expectations of just about everyone, I would think, he was at that point one of the community offering ideas of what to come next. And just like not all of his previous ideas necessarily were taken or came to fruition (for example, some of his ideas on nuclear weapons were essentially flat out rejected), his ideas, say, about NATO enlargement were not welcomed by some and did not have much of an influence on U.S. policy.

So I'd say for most of his career he was an influential voice, but containment was the one moment where he was truly primus inter

pres, and had a special place and always will occupy a special place in the foreign policy pantheon because of it. But at other moments in the debate, he was an important voice; he was simply a respected voice. He would be writing in places, say, like the *New York Review of Books*, so he was in the foreign policy debate. He was a “liberal” voice who was arguing against, say, American overreach, as he saw it, something that became a persistent theme of his writings. Within that he was simply—and I don’t mean this with any disrespect—he was simply a voice, a respected voice but again, I don’t think he was ever able to re-create the kind of influence he had at the beginning of the Cold War when it came to other debates.

E: As far as I can tell, principally via a Tom Friedman quote in the 1990s, Kennan very clearly opposed any kind of NATO enlargement. You had a front seat for that debate and for the implementation with respect to the Baltic States in the early 2000s. Did you have access to Kennan’s argument at the table? Maybe you had some who were channeling that argument as it was expressed at that time? Who did the most justice to Kennan’s concern about overreach, about not reintegrating Russia into the kind of European, Euro-Atlantic, Western security and political world and instead about alienating them? And in what way was that argument defeated from your vantage point? How did that go?

RH: We didn’t have a full view on that, in part because most of that conversation took place during the eight years of the Clinton presidency. That was really the period at which the NATO enlargement policy was born, and debated, and initially implemented. So I was more aware of the external debate where, as you mentioned, Tom Friedman, Michael Mandelbaum, and others were against it, and obviously the preponderance of people in and out of the administration were for it.

When I worked for Bush 41 just before then—Clinton was 42—the debate was not about NATO enlargement, it was more about how

does one react to Gorbachev's predicament, to Yeltsin's succession, what sort of help do we give Russia under what terms. And if you remember at the time, it was Richard Nixon on the outside who was arguing the United States should be more generous and more ambitious given Soviet/Russian needs. And I think the Bush administration—this is 41's administration—largely held back. The president was always careful to be sensitive to Gorbachev, never to humiliate him or anything like that, to be sensitive to his position.

But we didn't do as much, say, as Nixon thought we should do for Russia at that juncture. I think Nixon had a point. If we had done that, no one could say whether it would have made an appreciable difference in Russia's trajectory, but I think there's a fair case for saying we should have been more forthcoming. The NATO enlargement debate largely took place over the next eight years and as I said, I was out of government. When I got back into government under Bush 43 and I was at Policy Planning—just to be clear when I worked for 41 I was on the NSC staff, I was overseeing the Middle East-Persian Gulf-South Asia directorate, though I did get involved in some other issues, including this question of aid to Russia, which I think came up in '92, if I remember correctly.

But in Bush 43 I remember arguing in a set a memos that we should rethink parts of NATO enlargement. I was never a big enthusiast of it. And I worried about two things. I worried about its impact on Russia and I worried about the obligations we were taking on. And I didn't understand why we were so quick to dismiss two other options, which was either making the Partnership for Peace more attractive or even bringing Russia into NATO. NATO by that point had become increasingly an out-of-area mechanism and countries essentially decided or chose whether they participated in this or that undertaking.

It was less and less of an all-or-nothing alliance so I actually put forward at one point the idea that we should either think about bol-

stering the Partnership for Peace or think about offering Russia some type of limited NATO membership. But those ideas went nowhere. By then NATO enlargement already had tremendous momentum. So I was going against some pretty powerful forces.

E: Starting in 2014 with the renewed crisis between Russia and Europe, Russia and the United States, George Kennan returned. People were claiming Kennan for several different and conflicting positions. Do you think that Kennan had a second life after 2014 and if so, in what fashion: as a critic of NATO expansion, as the author of containment? Which George Kennan has been the one that we've most needed since 2014? And in fact in a situation that resembles a new Cold War, then does that breathe new life into both the debate and the ultimate policy framework that governs our policy towards the first Cold War?

RH: Not particularly. Russia today poses a very different sort of challenge. We're not in a global competition in the same way that we were. I mean, it's much more interesting as a construct if you think about China. Russia seems to me to pose multiple challenges, whether in terms of European security, whether in terms of what it's doing in the Middle East, whether in terms of how it's using digital tools to interfere in our and others' elections. But I see Russia as a collection of specific security threats or challenges rather than something systemic. Russia is just too small and too weak to pose a systemic threat and intellectually it offers nothing. I mean, Putin's great failure has been Russia doesn't represent much of anything economically or politically whereas the Soviet Union did offer an alternative.

So if there's a parallel it's much more China. But when it comes to Russia now, the question is what kind of specific responses do we develop for each one of its probes, what do we do about Ukraine or what do we do about the European security challenge, what might we do about the Middle East, what might we do to the digital chal-

lenge. But it doesn't represent something larger. It doesn't represent something systemic and it doesn't represent a model of anything.

China is China. If there's an applicability it would be potentially China. One other thing. Russia under Putin has essentially rejected integration in many forms with the West, whereas China has not. China wants to be partially integrated. It also wants to, in some ways, change the rules of the game. In some cases it's creating an alternative game with things like Belt and Road. So to me the intellectual question would be how does one or could one dust off containment for dealing with the challenge of China.

I'm not wild about the comparison because again I've not given up on what I would call selective integration of China but China does represent, given its economic strength, its size, its growing ambitions as well as capabilities, more of a global challenge to the United States. So again, I don't think containment gives you the overall answer. There are elements of containment that might make sense but containment per se is not a particularly useful framework for either contemporary Russia or for China.

I think the country where it may make the most sense as a model, at least as a starting off point, is Iran. Iran is something of an imperial power in the Middle East. And the question is, if one needs to frustrate Iran's external push in the region, then the question is at the same time, can one bring about a mellowing of Iranian power? And so if there's a country out there where there's an applicability of containment, off the top of my head Iran probably comes closest.

E: We want to go back to Kennan and containment and the Soviet Union. How, in "The Long Telegram" and the X article, did Kennan address the threat from Russia—he used the term Russia—to how Americans defined themselves? One of the reasons that the case for renewed containment is compelling is the degree to which today's Russian challenge conjures up a similar internal panic in the

United States: election interference, manipulation of our deepest internal divisions and our most sensitive inequities, genuine unfairnesses and injustices in American society. All of this is being done cynically, just as it was by the Bolsheviks, by Putin's Russia and yet it boils down to a challenge that is about us, more than about where Russia is on the map.

RH: I don't see the parallel. For so much of the Cold War, we were worried about the appeal of the Soviet Union and that internal forces in various countries would be attracted to it, communist parties and other such fronts and the like. Nobody is worried about that now. Russia again has a willingness to use brute force, be it military force or energy. It's able to use digital tools to its advantage, mainly to weaken the fabric of other societies. But these are for specific situations. Again, Russia doesn't represent a model of any sort of political or economic development idea.

I think when Putin departs the scene, Russia is going to face a crisis, not only a succession crisis because there's no concept of legitimacy in Russia anymore, but it's going to face a crisis of its political and economic future. None of the foundations have been laid there. So I think it's wrong to exaggerate the Russia [threat]—that doesn't mean Russia is not dangerous, it's not a problem—but I think it's wrong to exaggerate or see it in any way as a new Cold War or justifying containment. It's not that kind of a challenge.

It's a challenge; I don't mean to underestimate it. But it's a different sort of challenge. Again, I think Iran is a better match in the region because it's not self-limiting and I think China potentially, globally, but again China is a more multifaceted country than the Soviet Union ever was. The Soviet Union developed economically largely apart. China is much more integrated. So I don't think containment particularly gives us the tools. But I don't find the parallel to Russia particularly helpful right now.

The challenge for U.S. policy toward China is not to push back all of the time—though in some cases it is—it’s more how to get China to continue its integration but on terms closer to ones we want to see. Where China has been most effective—say, economically harvesting the fruits of that integration without going through many of the disciplines or constraints of integration—that’s been a mistake on our part. The problem, and to me the mistake wasn’t letting China into the WTO, but it was not monitoring its trade behavior close enough after it got in and disciplining it and adapting to it along the way.

But China is not an outsider in many cases trying to overthrow the order, so much as use it for its own purposes, and that’s why, again, containment is not the best model. I also don’t think it particularly works for North Korea. North Korea is not a model to anyone or anything, it’s just a threat and we have to find ways to deter that threat, or one way or another reduce it through diplomacy or other tools. It’s a one-dimensional challenge and in that sense it’s closer to Russia.

But I think Iran is the one country out there, not on a global basis but a regional basis, where the idea of containment probably has its greatest applicability. For China, we’re going to have to come up with a new foreign policy approach, which may draw some elements of containment, but it will also draw many elements of integration. And I think we’ll have to come up with something that’s specific to China.

E: One final question. Kennan was a very deep area expert, having been schooled in the European school of humanities and in Russian studies. But he was also an intellectual who came very directly out of the Foreign Service. How are we doing on both of those fronts today, on area expertise and on human capital, in the Foreign Service?

RH: Well, area expertise is easier or less difficult to generate: one can study language, one can study history, one can go live in a certain place for a number of years. So, you know, the problem is sometimes with the bias towards rotation. So we seem to often move people around to the point where it’s hard to get sufficient

depth. But all things being equal, my own view, the challenge wasn't with area expertise—it was more, how do individuals who get area expertise not only get area expertise? How do we make sure they have the functional skills; how do we make sure they have the comparative understandings? How do we make sure they have the skills to think about policymaking and think strategically about the United States?

The biggest weakness of many Foreign Service officers, I found, wasn't their lack of knowledge of this or that country or region. Rather, it was that they weren't nearly as good at thinking about what the blue team should be doing, what should we, the United States, be trying to do. That to me reveals the limits of area expertise. Area expertise tells you about just that, a context; it doesn't tell you about how the United States ought to advance its interest in that context or with those countries.

Your second question about expertise more broadly, similar to what I just said, would apply. What I'm going to say now is not going to win me a lot of friends. With very few exceptions, the skills of Foreign Service officers, in many cases, were not strategic. They didn't have enough history and were better, again, at understanding the world of this or that country or this or that region than they were about thinking strategically about the means and ends of American foreign policy. And so I did not find, for the most part, Foreign Service officers all that useful when it came to thinking on the Policy Planning staff or elsewhere about what the United States should be doing in a particular part of the world. They were very good at describing the part of the world, about giving a better feeling for it, but they weren't very good about offering up creative or, if you will, quote unquote, offensive ideas about how we advance our own interests. There were some important exceptions. I can think of a number of individuals who were just that, but they were the exceptions in terms of the Foreign Service.

And it's one of the reasons, by the way, on Policy Planning staffs or National Security Council staffs, you always want to have a mix of people. You want to have a few FSOs, but you also want to have some military officers, and above all, you want to have what I would call scholar practitioners. People, if you will, in Kennan's mold, outsiders, people who were trained academically, people who were trained as historians, or political scientists, or economists, and you bring them in. And to me, often the most effective people in government were people who came to government with a rich background from academia, but they were also practical people who learned how to get things done.

One of the things about Kennan, by the way—I mentioned that when he wrote he often brought in aspects of literature. What I think Kennan's real gift was and what in some ways set him apart was not just the quality of prose or the quality of his thinking, but that he was better able than almost anyone else I know to integrate thinking about culture with other social sciences. So when he wrote about Russia, he could blend or incorporate aspects of understanding Russia, the Russian psyche, Russian culture with history, with political science, and then write about American foreign policy in that larger context. So many of the rest of us, we all come out of universities and we all reflect the training in this or that department.

But as I often tell people who work with me, universities have departments; the world does not. That was to me Kennan's great advantage. He was able to take things from different worlds, again, literature or history, and then combine them in ways that very few contemporary people, particularly those that come out of more quantitative traditions, or more, now, modern social sciences, they can't do. So people who have area studies tend to be narrowly area studies; too many social scientists tend to be narrowly social scientists.

Kennan was a much more—[he] had the kind of richness that comes with a kind of horizontal reach that went across disciplinary lines or de-

partmental lines. And that was his great advantage, so he could write something like "The Long Telegram," the X article, and have a profound understanding of Russian culture and Russian political culture and that provided the background to when he would be writing prescription. And there are very few people, in my experience, who can do that. Indeed, Kennan's one of the only ones.