

A KENNAN FOR OUR TIMES:

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

Edited by Michael Kimmage
and Matthew Rojansky



INTERVIEW WITH ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER

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Editors: We'd like to ask you to expand on a legacy that must have been a daily presence for you at Princeton as well as at the Office of Policy Planning and then to comment on the various issues in which George Kennan played a big role, from Russia to global grand strategy to the interplay between American domestic affairs and our role in the world.

Anne-Marie Slaughter: George Kennan is a legend for anyone who came of age during the Cold War and studied international relations because international relations really was U.S.-Soviet politics and the ramifications of U.S.-Soviet politics.

He set the terms of U.S. policy and the Soviet response, not as he actually intended it to be, which is a large part of the irony of George Kennan; but containment was certainly the frame.

I would have said containment and engagement, although we paid more attention to the containment side, but for him it was containment of the Soviet Union and engagement of our allies.

From that point of view, I could have told you as an undergraduate who George Kennan was and what his containment policy was.

Indeed, I knew about the director of Policy Planning because of George Kennan.

In that role, he's the icon for all of us. But if you are the director of Policy Planning, and if you are as I was, the first woman director of Policy Planning, I felt a particular need to try to do important or lasting work. And if you're a Princeton graduate working in foreign policy, then he is doubly venerated as a great Princetonian. You can't move without thinking about George Kennan.

Indeed, immediately after I was named, I was given a copy of a photograph in the archives at Princeton of Kennan being sworn in as ambassador to the Soviet Union which I kept in my office when I was at Policy Planning and still have in my office now.

The shoes are even bigger to fill because, as director of Policy Planning, George Marshall said to Kennan: "Avoid trivia," which is the informal motto of the policy planning staff. Kennan acted on that advice by creating the Marshall Plan.

He was a towering figure, and his office was the nerve center of some of the most important policy initiatives of the 20th century; I'm not sure anyone has ever lived up to that.

Some of those stories are probably apocryphal, but let's just say Kennan's shadow looms very large indeed.

E: You were not only the first woman to occupy the post of which George Kennan was the inaugural holder, but you were one of a relatively smaller number of scholars who served in this position.

AMS: Yes.

E: Kennan has an interesting mixed background. He had a very traditional scholarly grounding in Soviet affairs, Russian history, etc.

At the same time, he was a man who spent his career in government in the Foreign Service until he moved to the Institute of

Advanced Studies at Princeton. What are your thoughts about the balance between the role of scholar in policy planning and that of a policymaker?

AMS: I think it's gotten harder and harder in the intervening decades to straddle those two worlds. If you think about the OSS in World War II, plenty of the top diplomats and professors went in and out much more readily than they do now in large part because of the hyper specialization and quantification of what we now call political science. In Kennan's day the field would have been called politics or government or international affairs, which tells you a lot right there.

I think it was also easier for diplomats to be scholars. They were deeply specialized in the language and culture of a particular country or region and were encouraged to write wide-ranging analysis in cables.

Indeed, Kennan's long telegram is called "The Long Telegram" for a reason. It is essentially a scholarly article.

The idea that you could be a deep thinker and a scholar in the sense of someone who is extremely well-read, who is grounded in history and politics and culture and who can put new ideas together and have a role to play in the government and in the academy was something that was much more true in Kennan's era than it is today. Today there are only a handful of people of my generation who have held positions at our leading universities and also served in government, in politics. There are a number of economists, but I can name on one hand my colleagues who have done that.

Instead, you have people who are in think tanks, which did not exist in Kennan's day. Brookings did and the Council on Foreign Relations did, but you didn't have nearly the range of think tanks that you have now.

Those at think tanks, although they often have an advanced de-

gree, a doctoral degree—it's often from Britain, not from the United States—generally do not meet the criteria of academic departments in a particular discipline. The academics do more basic research; think tankers focus more on the details of policy, whereas Kennan really focused on history and culture and politics in a deep sense to inform policy. I think that's gotten harder to do.

E: We'd would like to ask about the possible difference in sensibility between yourself and Kennan. Educated as a historian and a Russianist, he always strikes me as an intelligent pessimist.

AMS: Yes.

E: We'd think that there's a certain optimism in the way you look at international politics. Is Kennan distant in that respect or do you feel a strong sense of that intellectual connection to him?

AMS: Yes, I think Kennan and I are—we're not opposites but we line up differently in the different schools of international relations. He'd call me a legalist/moralist. He would associate me with people who get the United States into trouble because we are too optimistic about human nature and about the United States and the potential of its power. And he would be right that I am more optimistic than he was.

On the other hand, I would say that some of these differing perspectives come with age and experience and the times you live in. Kennan had just come through World War I and World War II. He had seen the very worst of what man can do to man, and he understood the ways in which grand ideas and visions can go terribly, terribly wrong from World War II, obviously, but equally importantly, I think, from 1917.

If you're a Russianist, you've seen the hope of the early revolution against the czars and then you've seen what became of that and so you're suspicious of grand visions. Whereas if you're me, you've

come of age in the 1960s and 1970s and the early 1980s. The 1970s were a time of malaise and disarray. But fundamentally the United States had won the two great wars of the 20th century, fighting on the right side. The full implications of Vietnam had not yet been internalized.

1989 was this defining moment for my generation, a time of great hope, optimism, and human potential. I was 31 in 1989; the Cold War had ended essentially on Western terms; the peoples of Eastern Europe were rising up and claiming their universal rights. One of my very first scholarly articles was called “Revolution of the Spirit,” about the profoundly human dimension of those revolutions.

But I will say that 30 years after 1989 I’m probably more of a Kennan disciple. I still see the best of human nature and think it will triumph. But I am chastened by exactly what he warned us about, which is intervening and believing we can shape others without fully, deeply understanding who they are, what their culture is, what their motivations are.

In the telling of the history of the Truman administration, Kennan was the intellectual godfather of the Marshall Plan.

This exemplifies the reach of American power in shaping the intellectual, political, social, and economic context for much of the world. But we have never been able to duplicate what we achieved in the rebuilding of Europe and Japan.

E: So how could Kennan’s vision of human nature and his pessimism or skepticism have generated a policy vision like the Marshall Plan, which ended up being so successful?

AMS: Yes. I do think where Kennan was both prophetic and profound in a way that he gets less credit for was in understanding the domestic roots of foreign policy.

We think of containment as linked to structural realism, a doctrine

I think Kennan had very little time for. It focuses on geopolitical structures of hegemony, bipolarity, and multipolarity and assumes all state behavior can be deduced and predicted from that structure. I think the domestic dimensions of Kennan's thinking, which are also the historical dimensions of his thinking, don't get enough attention.

What he's really saying about Russia, or the Soviet Union, is: contain them and in the end they will destroy themselves because domestically they will not be able to succeed either economically or socially and, relatedly, they will not preserve their legitimacy with the Russian people.

The flip of this is that in designing the Marshall Plan he was not saying we will remake the world in America's image by re-imposing democracy. He's saying: let us enable these countries to chart their own course and then let us empower them to do that. And that's a really different view. It's the opposite of something like structural realism. It is understanding that you must let people find their own way to a version of liberal democracy. That could look very different in what would then have been West Germany or Italy. Or, as you say, originally he was thinking Poland or Hungary; let them make their own plans and then we will give them the money or at least the investment to realize those plans. It was an excellent way of framing American foreign policy.

Interestingly, I think that's closer to at least one interpretation of Woodrow Wilson than many people assume. John Milton Cooper has a whole article and part of a book on how when Wilson said, "the world must be made safe for democracy," what he is saying is we need to establish the peace that will allow different nations to find their own way. He was not saying, "we will create democracy everywhere." He was saying that nations will find their own way. The passive, "must be made safe for," was very deliberate.

At any rate, Kennan certainly saw the necessity of grounding economic and political developments in the cultures and history of dif-

ferent countries, and I think he also recognized a real role for historic individuals.

E: We've grounded Kennan here as a Europeanist. We've defined him as a pessimist and a product of his historical circumstances. But do you think that he was also something of a fatalist about certain peoples, groups, nations?

AMS: Yes.

E: What happens when we compare his sensibility to a globalized worldview, which favors the idea that everyone should have access to ideas and prosperity and opportunity? Do you think that Kennan was overly dismissive of the potential of East Asia, for example, or of Russia and Russians? Was part of his worldview archaic in that sense? Do you think it was a realistic assessment of the world as it was and maybe arguably where we've ended up now?

AMS: It's hard to answer that question without engaging in a certain amount of amateur psychoanalysis which probably isn't fair to him.

I think of him as somebody who went to Princeton myself and who understands the ways in which people of a particular social class can create very strong structures of being insiders and outsiders. And Kennan reflects this sense of being an outsider—we know this from John Lewis Gaddis's biography and some of his own writings.

He was the Midwesterner at Princeton who never quite fit, not in his own perception. He was a loner in many ways and I often wonder to what extent that shaped his view of different groups. In a world in which there's an in-group and an out-group, they're very carefully defined, and you really are pretty locked in.

That is far less true of Princeton today, I think, but it was true when I was at Princeton and that was in the 1980s; I can only imagine how it was for him. You can read about that. I wonder how that might have shaped his sense of social and cultural fixity as opposed to

a more modern sensibility where we're keenly aware of race and ethnicity and the ways in which discrimination and conscious and unconscious bias lock people in.

We're also aware that that can be transcended and we're in a world in which you can travel to China or Russia or Indonesia or Kenya and befriend people and stay in touch with them and see their children and the way they feel about their families in ways that are enduring and universal.

I do think Kennan had a set of attitudes about the fixity of groups and cultures that I understand from his own background. That's amateur psychoanalysis, but I think many of our attitudes are quite different today.

E: We want to ask about the Arab Spring.

AMS: Yes.

E: What if Kennan's insights in a different regional context and a different time and from a different sensibility were to have been applied to the Arab Spring and to the ways the United States engaged and failed to engage with it? Can you give us your retrospective assessment of how we did? What might have been missing from the approach that was taken?

AMS: Here when I think about Kennan it's both as an intellectual giant and as someone whose very long life contained multitudes. You can apply and invoke different parts of him.

With the Arab Spring, I think that the United States was at a moment of hope and change. That's what Barack Obama ran on. And we were only too ready to see that as a global moment.

Social media played right into that because you had the Twitter Revolution [in Moldova], the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Rose Revolution [in Georgia]. When you suddenly see Wael Ghonim

organizing 70,000 Egyptians on a Facebook page, you think, yes, this is now the Arab version of the ball—it's not Kennan, it's Jefferson—the ball of liberty rolling around the world.

This is subconscious as much as conscious, because it really was the mood. I was in the Obama administration for the first two years, and I left just as the Arab Spring was beginning. I left right after Tunisia; Egypt was happening as I was leaving; Syria began to erupt a month later. But we were on the right side of history, we thought. I still think so.

In that first flush of that kind of revolutionary moment, people have power and they can speak, and they can topple governments and old orders and establish new ones. From the vantage point of 2017 or 2018, of course, everything looks very different.

I still think the Arab Spring is like the French Revolution or even the American Revolution because the American Revolution, in many ways, needs to be understood together with the Civil War. It took a long time to get to something that looks like a real liberal democracy—and we are still not there for many Americans.

In the French Revolution, you have much sharper counter-reactions of extremism and absolutism and terror and empire, going through the revolutions of 1848. That's the way we need to understand the Arab Spring. We knew—and when I say we, I mean the Obama administration, the Bush administration (Condi Rice made a similar speech to Obama's "New Beginning with the Muslim World" speech), probably even the Clinton administration—that you cannot oppress people forever. Sooner or later, U.S. support for stable but deeply autocratic regimes was going to become unstable, and when it did, we were going to be on the wrong side.

That was a debate that broke open in the Obama administration very clearly in Egypt where Frank Wisner and Hillary Clinton are saying, "maybe we should slow this down." Ben Rhodes and Samantha

Power were saying, “we should support the demonstrators against Mubarak—we need to be on the right side of this.”

But, it’s very interesting to wonder what Kennan would have thought with his knowledge of 1917 and how quickly something that was genuinely idealistic turned into something cruel and distorted.

It would also have been interesting to see where he would have come down on the ultimate outcome. I believe that ultimately those young people will not be denied, that they will demand to join the world of countries that respect individual rights and freedoms for their citizens and try to achieve self-government, even if they do that in very different ways and even if it takes a long time.

E: A very brief follow up. When Kennan was asked late in his life—this may have been already after the Cold War altogether—what his biggest regret was in policymaking in his time in government, he said it was his support for various nationalist insurgents during the early Cold War inside the Soviet Union.

AMS: Wow.

E: Right. Well, as you said, he had a long life.

AMS: Yes.

E: In that light, if you think that the circumstances of the network, the Web reality we live in now, can you say that it is a fair game? Is it part of good foreign policymaking to take into account groups that cross the sovereignty boundary of other states whether they’re big states like Russia or China or—the medium-sized Middle Eastern powers? Is Kennan’s era over in this respect?

AMS: I think this is one of the fundamental questions. When I said earlier that I am chastened, I believe that the United States and other liberal democracies do need to support their compatriots or their

fellow members of global communities striving for the values and rights embedded in the UN Charter.

I think we do need to support them, but I am much warier about how. We lead people along, and that's a terrible thing. Kennan saw this in Prague and Hungary. That's what we've done in Syria in many ways. Who knows what would've happened if Barack Obama had not said, "It's time for Assad to go," if we had instead made clear to the Syrians that we were not prepared to help them in their struggle?

If you are a dissident in another country and a country as mighty as the United States says, "I support your movement," then you think they'll help. And I've come to believe that is immoral. If we are not going to actually provide the help that those groups believe they need, we need to be very clear about what we mean when we say we support them.

To the point about the Web world: I think it's critical that we engage the world in which there are affinities of all kinds, for good or ill, be it hate or racism or violent religious ideology or be it women's empowerment and democracy and human rights and lots of good things.

The kind of work that Kennan and many, many, many other Americans who have served officially in Russia or in non-governmental organizations have done with Russians who want a better country is right, but the question is not just how we manage expectations—that's such a gray, bureaucratic word or phrase. The question is how our obligation to our own people limits the amount of support we really can give to other people, and how we can be clear about this.

Again, I think I started out a Wilsonian and I'm creeping towards Jeffersonianism in upholding the power of our example more than the example of our power, a phrase Obama borrowed from Bill Clinton and used in his inaugural address.

E: We'd like to follow up with a question related to Russia. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton used to pressure his staff, Strobe Talbott and others, to come up with a doctrine as pithy as containment.

AMS: Yes, he did.

E: We can imagine that when you became the director of Policy Planning that Russia was one of several important issues but that it wasn't predominant. Of course, we're speaking about Medvedev's Russia, but could you speak about your own strategic thinking, that of your office, Secretary Clinton's, and the president's strategic thinking about Russia at that time?

AMS: It's striking because Russia was not really on the radar beyond engagement, which is hard to believe now. But engagement was a basic principle of Obama's foreign policy. In the beginning of the 1990s, when Clinton was pushing everybody to come up with an alternative grand strategy, the equivalent of containment, they came up with enlargement, which didn't exactly capture either the popular or bureaucratic imagination.

Enlargement meant enlarging the sphere of liberal democracy, and I remember Anthony Lake's speech on it at Harvard: it landed with a thud. And then Obama had engagement, which I have come to think of as a statement of philosophy. It was not a statement of strategy, but of a core belief that engaging countries is better than isolating them. Indeed, with Myanmar and Iran and Cuba, there were important diplomatic victories; many of which sadly have now been undone.

But engagement certainly applied to Russia. I was at the dinner in Switzerland and Geneva where Secretary Clinton presented the reset button to Foreign Minister Lavrov. Of course, we had mistranslated reset, but we were determined to reset relations with Russia. Obviously, with Medvedev there, there was an opportunity to engage positively.

But beyond that Russia was not a force. That's very important to understand because I remember in the 1990s giving talks about the world and not even mentioning Russia. I would mention China and the BRICS countries like Brazil and India and South Africa, but Russia had fallen off the global map, which for Russians was deeply, deeply humiliating. That humiliation is still driving Putin and the support for Putin today.

When I think back to what we were all thinking about, was there a doctrine? I remember Secretary Clinton gave a speech on a multi-partner rather than a multi-polar world. That didn't exactly capture public imagination either.

We actually had a debate within Policy Planning about whether it was a good idea to try to search for one overarching doctrine—we called it "the containment obsession." Derek Chollet, my deputy who had been in the Clinton administration, had written about this effort to live up to Kennan, and said that this is a fool's errand. The world's too complex; let's forget about trying to look for one encapsulated strategy and recognize we've got lots of different strategies for different places.

I still felt that there was a way to capture overall themes of our policy, but I'm not sure we ever got there. It was not so much about specific countries, and to the extent it was it was certainly not about Russia.

I would say the biggest set of issues on the table in 2009 involved engagement with the Muslim world. The biggest foreign policy speech that Obama gave in his first year was his call for a new beginning with the Muslim world in June of 2009, which is interesting to think about in relation to the Arab Spring.

Then there was the whole effort to follow that up by engaging different majority Muslim countries, but of course, without the resources of the Marshall Plan.

I think there was a desire to engage the Muslim world very differently. And Obama himself saw that as a region where he could make progress.

And the other focal point for us was China. The Obama administration really came in thinking that we were not paying nearly enough attention to China. China and the Pacific are going to be the most important arena in this century, and we need to pivot from the Middle East and Europe to the Pacific basin. A tremendous amount of attention was paid to the strategic and economic dialogue with China and how we were going to engage China.

Russia was not really a focal point which, I think, has been a large part of Putin's desire: once again to make Russia unavoidable in U.S. strategy.

E: We would like to go back in time to a more prosaic question. This is about Kennan's criticism of NATO expansion and his criticism of the Iraq War. Could you offer your thoughts on these two issues from the vantage point of 2018?

AMS: As for NATO, I was part of a Council on Foreign Relations task force on NATO enlargement. I was invited to join by Charlie Kupchan, who was the executive director.

As a Russianist—I'd studied Soviet politics and Russian history in college—I knew far more about Russia than I did about Central and Eastern Europe. My starting point was to be opposed to NATO enlargement for all the reasons that Kennan and other Russianists said: that this would inflame the Russians, that our relationship with them is critically important and we're building it, and to do this will strengthen hardliners in Russia.

You had people like Zbigniew Brzezinski being very open about the Russian bear rising again and that we had better get the NATO line as close to its border as we possibly can.

I started that way. I changed my view because Richard Holbrooke came and gave a presentation to our study group where he said, “Look, you’ve got countries in the Balkans coming apart and governments that are trying to beat back nationalism, racism, authoritarianism, some of which we are seeing again today. Those governments need to have something to offer the people, and it’s going to take a long time for EU membership,” which I knew was true.

NATO is the umbrella of the West and if you don’t allow NATO to expand, these countries are going to come apart, he argued. We had already seen the war in Croatia and then it was in Bosnia.

When he talked about Romania and Hungary, Budapest and greater Hungary, that was persuasive to me. I still think that was right because in the end, if you measure success in terms of the number of people whose lives are better as a result of the expansion of NATO and then the expansion of the EU, I think that was worth it, even though it alienated Russia.

I have a view that says you don’t look at the international system only in terms of great power politics, You look at it in terms of people, and states are legitimate to the extent that they represent and serve their people, which is why the Chinese government—just as an aside—is not fully legitimate. But it’s a lot more legitimate than many governments in the world. It has lifted its people out of poverty, just as an aside.

So, I still feel that expanding NATO was the right thing to do, but not as a geopolitical strategy so much as a way of stabilizing Central and Eastern Europe; and I think that was worth it.

As for the war in Iraq, it was an unmitigated disaster. I opposed the war in Iraq absent a UN resolution. But had the UN supported the war, I would have been for it.

I did believe there were weapons of mass destruction, and I believed

that the Iraqis would greet us as liberators. There were a lot of things that I thought were true that were not, and I think the Iraq War is the best example of Kennan's attack on the Vietnam War, on legalism, moralism. Even though I don't actually think that George W. Bush was motivated by legalist moralist reasons, I think there was an illusion of our power that has had terrible, terrible consequences.

E: Kennan concludes "The Long Telegram" with lines that characterize the challenge from Russia—he says Russia, not the Soviet Union—as a challenge that is about our internal life. "The thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society," he writes.

Derek Chollet was right about the global landscape, that there are far too many and too disparate challenges to have a unified field theory for addressing them. And yet the precedent challenge is who we are. What's our outlook and how is that relevant for facing these challenges in the world? It seems to me Russia is where this comes to a head today because it seeks so explicitly to exploit the vulnerabilities of American identity.

AMS: Yes. I agree. I have been thinking a great deal recently about Russia in the 1950s and what we thought of as Russian propaganda pointing out U.S. racism and the effort to desegregate the schools and massive resistance and the role of women, all of which privileged white Americans saw as purely Russian propaganda, you know? We were a great country and they were just picking on us.

But from the vantage point of today, you look back at the very same pronouncements by Southern politicians and blocks of senators and on police using firehoses on civil rights demonstrators and hurling epithets at African American children going to all-white schools and you think, "well, well, wait a minute." Russia was no paradise, but as they were pointing out, neither were we. I think that we were closer to living our values than they were to living theirs, but I don't think either of us succeeded then or is succeeding now. But it is noteworthy

that plenty of defectors fled from Russia to the West; I don't know any other than spies who went the other way.

And I think that in my own life this is why I have moved from foreign policy to domestic policy, to running an organization called New America that is really about American renewal. I deeply believe we cannot be the force for good that we hope to be in the world without renewing ourselves at home— deeply, radically renewing ourselves at home—that our democracy is broken and we are going through a period of our history that is testing us the way the Civil War tested us. Fortunately, it is not as violent or bloody, but the stakes are comparable. Can we make it to a majority minority country, or better, a country of multiple pluralities because that's really what we will be? There will be a time when the default of "American" will no longer be a white Protestant person. It will be a person of any number of colors and any number of faiths. Can we get there and still be the country we say we are in terms of our Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, our founding values, our civic creed?

To the extent that Kennan understood that we face rot from within as much as conquests or conflict from without, I think he was exactly right. Right now, in many ways America is its own worst enemy, and we have to renew ourselves. I believe we can.

I use the term renew very advisedly because it is a question of filling those great words and ideals of Abraham Lincoln, of Martin Luther King, of Susan B. Anthony, and of the many, many, many Americans who have taken that founding creed and said, "Well, what does this actually mean and we're not living up to it and we must live up to it."

We're in that moment. I believe we'll prevail. I believe the country will renew itself, but I don't think it's a sure thing. I think right now we should be devoting more of our energies to making good on our values at home than to spreading them around the world.