

Reflections on George F. Kennan: An American Life

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Reading John Lewis Gaddis's biography of George F. Kennan, I could not help feeling a certain sense of completion. My first encounter with Gaddis (in print, not the flesh) came more than three decades ago, in early 1982, while working on my undergraduate senior history thesis, which dealt with, inter alia, the origins of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. Entering the college bookstore one day, I discovered a stack of freshly minted paperbacks of *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Strategy*, a simple black-on-white cover with no photograph. Because relatively few surveys of post-World War II national security policy had relied extensively on declassified documentation, I found the story riveting and engaging, confirming my fascination with the topic.

The high point of the narrative, and the achievement that won Gaddis's esteem, was Kennan's development of the containment doctrine, as expressed in the "Long Telegram" from the U.S. embassy in Moscow in February 1946, and then, after moving to Washington to run the National War College, in his July 1947 "X" article in *Foreign Affairs*, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." But unlike Gaddis's earlier *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947*, published in 1972, *Strategies of Containment* also tracked Kennan's evolving views beyond those highpoints. So I was not surprised when I soon learned that Gaddis had taken on the job of writing Kennan's biography.

By then, I had decided to try to expand into a book my own undergraduate thesis on former Harvard University president James B. Conant, who had earlier been a Manhattan Project administrator, scientist, and diplomat. In doing so, I joined a small cohort of scholars already chiseling away on biographies of important Cold War figures, *long-term* projects that spanned years and even decades: my thesis adviser, Martin J. Sherwin, along with

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Priscilla J. McMillan and Gregg Herken, on J. Robert Oppenheimer; William C. Taubman on Nikita Khrushchev; Kai Bird on John J. McCloy; Stan Goldberg on Leslie Groves; Bill Lanouette on Leo Szilard; and others. One by one the tomes (even mine) all finally appeared, some only after a coauthor helped them across the finish line (sadly, in Goldberg's case, posthumously).¹

Only Gaddis remained absent, like a mysterious precinct that failed to report on election night—although he had the plausible excuse of having agreed with Kennan to publish only after the latter died, a pact complicated by Kennan's longevity (he died in 2005 at age 101). In the meantime, others completed excellent portraits of Kennan.² Gaddis did not exactly twiddle his thumbs while awaiting his subject's demise, however. He published an array of widely read books and essays that consolidated his status as the oracle of Cold War post-revisionism, although after the Soviet collapse he seemed, by general consensus, to have drifted closer to neo-orthodoxy (especially in his esteem for Ronald Reagan's foreign policies) or even neoconservatism, considering his praise for George W. Bush.³

But now the long-delayed biography has appeared, to almost but not quite universal acclaim, including a Pulitzer Prize (to match that won by Taubman for his Khrushchev biography and Sherwin and Bird for their Oppenheimer opus). What did Gaddis gain by waiting more than a quarter of a century to tackle the job? Perspective, obviously, not only on Kennan's full life but on the entire Cold War—Gaddis, like the other biographers, belongs

1. Kai Bird, *The Chairman: John J. McCloy and the Making of the American Establishment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); William Lanouette, *Genius in the Shadows: A Biography of Leo Szilard, the Man behind the Bomb* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992); James Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Robert S. Norris, *Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie R. Groves, the Manhattan Project's Indispensable Man* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2002); Gregg Herken, *Brotherhood of the Bomb: The Tangled Lives and Loyalties of Robert Oppenheimer, Ernest Lawrence, and Edward Teller* (New York: Holt, 2002); William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003); Martin J. Sherwin and Kai Bird, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Knopf, 2005); and Priscilla McMillan, *The Ruin of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Viking, 2005).

2. See, for example, Barton Gellman, *Contending with Kennan: Toward a Philosophy of American Power* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1984); Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986); David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Wilson D. Miscamble, *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

3. Among other scholarly activities, Gaddis deserves great credit for helping to found the Cold War International History Project, at the Woodrow Wilson Center, to encourage the opening, translation, and dissemination of formerly inaccessible Communist-bloc sources. Full disclosure: despite our occasional historiographical differences, Gaddis has been extremely supportive of my professional career development.

to that unique transitional group who were formed intellectually and psychologically during the post–World War II superpower standoff yet completed their portraits of key Cold War actors after the conflict ended and its outcome (at least in the short term) was known. By virtue of his pact with Kennan, Gaddis also gained access to some strikingly intimate sources that remained off-limits to other scholars, including voluminous (albeit at times frustratingly episodic) personal journals and family correspondence.

One has to wonder about the subtitle of the book, *An American Life*. Kennan was famously inconsistent, routinely taking utterly contradictory positions, always with eloquent prose and compelling arguments, but if one theme ran through his private writings, it was his profound alienation and estrangement from, and even disgust with, the country in which he was born and raised, and which he represented abroad during his diplomatic career—its culture, its rowdy and ill-informed politics, its materialism, its commerce-disfigured landscape, even its foreign policy when he was no longer in a position to shape it; in short, almost every aspect of American civilization as expressed in the latter half of the twentieth century (as opposed to his sepia-toned idealized past).⁴ Not only did he spend much of his professional life overseas, he felt spiritually far closer to adoptive homelands Russia and Norway, and he regularly and wistfully imagined relocating permanently abroad or, even better, to an earlier (and, in his view, more civilized) century. Of course, Gaddis may have intended the subtitle ironically, more or less in the same vein that David Halberstam chose *The Best and the Brightest* to evoke the brilliantly hubristic architects of disaster in Vietnam. Gaddis insists that the choice of subtitle was “no accident,” yet he never really explains why. An equally accurate and in some ways more fitting choice (and a dig at the House Un-American Activities Committee, whose McCarthyist excesses Kennan despised) would have been *An Un-American Life*.

The story’s climax remains Kennan’s emergence in 1946–1947 as the containment doctrine’s father or “architect”—the title routinely bestowed on him, even though, like Dr. Frankenstein, he lost control of his creation almost as soon as it sprang to life, and watched, with increasing horror, as it bounded off in directions he never intended (arming West Germany, creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, justifying thermonuclear stockpiles, and, worse still, rationalizing escalation in Vietnam). Although the tale has been

4. Immediately after finishing Gaddis’s book, I happened to read Alan Brinkley’s biography of Henry Luce—*The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York: Random House, 2010)—and was struck by how, in this respect, Luce’s life inverted Kennan’s. Though born and raised in China, not Wisconsin, the *Time/Life* magnate thoroughly embraced and, through his publications, molded and glorified the middlebrow mid-century American mass culture and simplistic politics and foreign policies (especially a reflexive anti-Communism) that Kennan so scorned.

told countless times, and well, Gaddis adds some new wrinkles from his sources, not only placing the evolution of Kennan's views of the Cold War's birth in the context of the U.S.-Soviet falling-out, but tracing their connections to biographical, intellectual, and even literary influences. In particular, he convincingly connects Kennan's thinking about the durability of the Soviet empire, particularly in East-Central Europe, to Kennan's close reading of Edward Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Gaddis maintains that Kennan derived from Anton Chekhov a conviction that patience and gradual chipping away, not war or other rapid, simplistic, emotionally satisfying actions were the best way to respond to the Soviet challenge.

To Gaddis's credit, despite evident admiration and affection for his protagonist, he does not unduly sugarcoat the more unsavory aspects of Kennan's life. For instance, Gaddis quotes an early (1927) Kennan journal entry describing the Bolsheviks who had seized power in Russia as a "little group of spiteful Jewish parasites"—and carefully points out, in an endnote, that Kennan omitted the word "Jewish" from the entry published in *Sketches from a Life*.⁵ Quoting an egregious 1932 journal allusion to "more or less inferior races" and the impossibility of improving the situation "as long as we allow the unfit to breed copiously and to preserve their young," Gaddis acknowledges that a "literal reading" of Kennan's private "rants" might suggest he was turning into "a dysfunctional fascist" (although he quickly notes more positive qualities).⁶ Gaddis describes Kennan's notorious 1938 unpublished manuscript suggesting that the United States transform its political system by entrusting supreme power to an educated, informed, technocratic elite—denying suffrage to "aliens" and "naturalized citizens," as well as to "negroes" and "delicate, high-strung, unsatisfied, flat-chested and flat-voiced" women. Although Gaddis contextualizes these undemocratic views, he hardly excuses or endorses them.⁷ Also, he forthrightly relates the often cryptic evidence of Kennan's repeated infidelities, as alluded to in sometimes self-flagellating diary admissions (though it is not always clear whether they concerned betrayals in the flesh or "in the heart," as Jimmy Carter once said).

When I mentioned Gaddis's book to a prominent colleague, he commented, "Yeah, but he gives him [Kennan] a pass on covert action." Does he? Kennan, from his perch at the State Department's newly formed Policy Planning Staff when the Central Intelligence Agency was in its infancy, was

5. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), pp. 43, 706n16.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 114–119.

outspoken in promoting some of the earliest Cold War anti-Communist clandestine operations. He can certainly be described as the father of Cold War covert action, a sobriquet that has as much plausibility as his paternity for the containment doctrine. Although Gaddis is constrained by massive gaps in the declassified record and although he offers the exculpatory context of comparable Soviet subversive meddling through local Communist parties, he acknowledges Kennan's central role in establishing a covert action capability ("a sustained covert complement to the Marshall Plan") as a key component of containment, beginning with the crucial (and still only sketchily documented) anti-Communist interventions in France and Italy in 1947–1948.⁸ Gaddis concedes that Kennan "had few if any moral or legal qualms about such activities."⁹

What of Frank Costigliola's charge in *The New York Review of Books* that Gaddis's "political predilections" warp his account?¹⁰ In particular, Costigliola, who is the editor of the Kennan diaries project (all 20,000 pages, by his reckoning), complains that Gaddis, after his lovingly fine-grained rendering of Kennan's "heroic" years of forging the containment doctrine, downplays or disparages his later advocacy of views that dissented from prevailing Cold War orthodoxy, particularly regarding nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. Although Gaddis dutifully recounts such efforts, he could have lavished far more detail and drama upon Kennan's engagement with both subjects. Kennan's decades-long efforts to control the bomb—from his futile attempt to persuade Dean Acheson to turn away from thermonuclear weapons in the fall of 1949 to his far more controversial crusade after he left office (beginning with his 1957 Reith lectures on BBC Radio and running through his loud advocacy of deep cuts in the Reagan years)—progressively alienated more "realistic" policymakers (like Acheson) and confirmed Kennan's rebranding as an idiosyncratic, at times emotionally "erratic," policy dissenter, even iconoclast, rather than Cold War oracle.¹¹ Kennan's opposition to escalation in Vietnam, highlighted by his testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee and his later support for Eugene McCarthy's antiwar candidacy, de-

8. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

10. Frank Costigliola, "Is This George Kennan?" *New York Review of Books*, 8 December 2011.

11. As a former senior official who then embraced nuclear disarmament, Kennan blazed the trail that was followed later (*much* later) by far more conventional thinkers. See Philip Taubman, *The Partnership: Five Cold Warriors and Their Quest to Ban the Bomb* (New York: Harper, 2012), an important study that, alas, completely ignores Kennan's own foreshadowing quest. Gaddis posits a missed harmonic convergence of sorts between Kennan and Ronald Reagan insofar as both were, in their own ways, nuclear abolitionists, but this is not wholly convincing given their dramatically divergent basic attitudes and approaches to dealing with the Soviet Union.

serves far closer attention and was heroic in its own way for lending a quasi-establishment (“father of containment”) stamp of approval to the emerging student-led antiwar protest movement (much of which Kennan abhorred).

Well, we all have our “predilections” and pointing this out merely underscores the obvious: Gaddis has given us the most important study yet of this iconic, fascinating, and enigmatic figure, but—and Gaddis would surely agree—it is hardly the last word.¹²

12. Another prime area for further fruitful delving into Kennan’s career concerns foreign archives. Although, with the help of colleagues, Gaddis has located a few tidbits from Russian-language sources, a more systematic probing into the Moscow archives (as well as those in Belgrade, from the time when Kennan was ambassador there during the Kennedy administration) could yield further insights into Kennan’s actions and impact.