

Gaddis, Kennan, and the Cold War: An Assessment of the Biography

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This significant book will richly reward diverse audiences, from those in the obvious constituency—interested in twentieth-century international history, the USSR, diplomatic practice, geopolitical strategy, the Cold War—to students of biography, cultural criticism, and the mysterious workings of personality. Naturally, among readers there will be gradations of satisfaction with John Lewis Gaddis's explanation of various matters. Not everyone, for instance, will be as willing as Gaddis to endorse the purported wisdom of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy or to accept Gaddis's insistence on the parallels between George Kennan's thinking and U.S. handling of the final phases of the Cold War. Still, everyone should be impressed by the book's abundant virtues, characteristic of Gaddis's scholarship and long familiar to his fellow historians, even those who have strenuously disagreed with him. The prose in his Kennan biography is crisp, often elegant. The interpretations are thoughtful and judicious. The analytical edge is sharp. The research is exhaustive.

Concerning that research, Gaddis has made fine use of materials available in archival collections, in the scholarly literature, in memoirs, and in published government documents. He has also conducted extensive interviews with Kennan (from the early 1980s onward) and with people near to him: friends, colleagues, family members. Moreover, Gaddis has enjoyed privileged access to Kennan's private papers and voluminous diary (whose entries were made over decades) and, unexpectedly, to Kennan's dream journal. The result is a masterly and comprehensive biography of a man whose discontent with American life and foreign policies, and with people whom he considered intellectually dull, was minor compared to his gnawing anxieties and periodic self-condemnation. Gaddis's book might properly have been titled *Kennan Agonistes*. What emerges from it is a portrait of an intense person of literary

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gifts and rare ability to grasp historical-political complexities, a person who could unblinkingly gaze upon—examine and revile—his personal failings, imagined and real.

Kennan's doings and habits of mind have not always made for pleasant contemplation by people who have studied him, including, one can infer, his authorized biographer. Kennan's self-absorption, his—again, surprisingly—adulterous adventures, and his emotional fragility are nevertheless adroitly handled by Gaddis. He does not psychologize. He does not sensationalize the infidelities or portray Kennan's Norwegian wife, Annelise née Sorensen, as a woman martyred by her husband's straying. Instead he portrays her as a practical person devoted to the well-being of her home and four children. Gaddis's tone is unfailingly respectful but never fawning. The book is scholarship in the grand style, unencumbered by hagiographical treacle or other defects that commonly mar authorized biographies. Gaddis seldom intrudes himself, although he does not hesitate to correct, even to chastise, Kennan (as well as previous chroniclers of his career) by providing a broader context. Mercifully for readers who might tire of Kennan's jeremiads, vanity, gloomy introspection, and ceaseless need of reassurance, Gaddis leavens the narrative with illustrations of Kennan's lapses into good humor—never exactly mirthfulness—and self-deprecating wit. By resorting to quotations from Kennan's letters, diaries, and publications, Gaddis lets Kennan speak for himself, to sometimes stirring effect. Here, for example, at age 76, Kennan addresses a plea to Soviet and U.S. leaders, at the time in possession of arsenals whose combined holdings surpassed 50,000 nuclear weapons:¹

For the love of God, of your children, and of the civilization to which you belong, cease this madness. You have a duty not just to the generation of the present—you have a duty to civilization's past, which you threaten to render meaningless, and to its future, which you threaten to render nonexistent. You are mortal men. You are capable of error. You have no right to hold in your hands—there is no one wise enough and strong enough to hold in his hands—destructive powers sufficient to put an end to civilized life on a great portion of our planet. No one should wish to hold such powers. Thrust them from you. The risks you might thereby assume are not greater—could not be greater—than those which you are now incurring for us all.²

Gaddis's treatment of Kennan pivots on a sturdy structure of straight chronology, divided into five sections. In the first, Gaddis retrieves for readers the early life of Kennan. Born in 1904 to an earnest Presbyterian home in

1. John Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 746, n62.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 645–646.

Milwaukee, Kennan attended (at age thirteen) an austere boarding school, St. John's Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin. He matriculated at Princeton University in 1921, from which four years later he was graduated without particular note. A shortage of disposable income, dearth of poise, and Midwestern provincialism undid his quest for undergraduate distinction. In 1926, Kennan entered the U.S. Foreign Service and won a rigorous diplomatic apprenticeship, which entailed immersion in Robert Kelley's Russian/Soviet studies program. He married Annelise in 1931, and the two remained husband and wife until Kennan's death in 2005. He received his first commission in 1933 to the U.S. embassy in Moscow, presided over by an ebullient but not wholly stable William Bullitt.

The second section of Gaddis's book takes Kennan from his 1930s diplomatic duty in Iosif Stalin's Moscow to rotation back to Washington and assignment to the State Department's Soviet desk. Thence, Kennan was sent to Prague, where he witnessed the 1939 German occupation of that city. Then he was posted to Berlin, until taken into custody (along with other U.S. diplomats and nationals) after the commencement of German-U.S. hostilities in December 1941. Upon release from confinement at Bad Nauheim, Kennan saw wartime service in Lisbon, where he helped to disentangle Portuguese-U.S. snarls tied to the Allied use of Azorean military bases. He next was posted to London, where he worked with Ambassador John Winant—plus British and Soviet representatives—on the European Advisory Commission, a frustrating enterprise that enjoyed scant support from the Allied heads of state. This section of the book culminates in Kennan's service in wartime Moscow, his interaction with the exacting ambassador W. Averell Harriman, and his dispatching of the fabled 1946 "Long Telegram" to Washington.

The focus of part three (1946–1950) is on Kennan the Washington-based strategic thinker and policy counselor, serving initially as deputy commandant for foreign affairs at the National War College, then as the first director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. Gaddis is at his most authoritative in providing exegesis and analysis of Kennan's containment idea, vital contribution to the European Recovery Program (Marshall Plan), advice on Japanese rehabilitation, and then his conversion to a new role: establishment dissenter. This last was connected to Kennan's unhappiness with the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Truman's decision to develop the hydrogen bomb, both programs contriving in Kennan's view to intensify the Cold War and deepen the East-West division of Germany and Europe.

Gaddis concentrates the book's fourth section on the period 1950 to 1963. During this time, Kennan found his footing as a diplomatic historian,

sustained by tenure at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He emerged as a celebrated and controversial commentator on international affairs. He gave the 1951 Walgreen lectures at the University of Chicago and the Reith lectures over BBC Radio in 1957. He also produced scholarly books and articles (notable was a two-volume study of Soviet-U.S. relations in 1917–1920), as well as publications dealing with contemporaneous questions. Kennan twice allowed himself to be diverted from scholarship and punditry. Never without ambition for recognition or high public office, he obtained two ambassadorships: to Moscow (1952) in the waning months of Stalin's life, later to Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia (1961–1963). Neither ambassadorship was brilliant, as Gaddis reminds his readers. Kennan's Soviet tour ended abruptly and embarrassingly when his hosts declared him *persona non grata*, following his delivery on 19 September 1952 of careless remarks in which he likened his life in Moscow to what he had experienced in Adolf Hitler's Berlin. As for the Yugoslav posting, anti-Communist fundamentalists in Congress struck Kennan as oblivious to the advantages that accrued to the West of having decent relations with a renegade Marxist regime that had defied the USSR since 1948. Kennan was unable to discourage Congress's revocation of Most Favored Nation status and its interdiction of Yugoslav-U.S. economic agreements. Congress's observance of Captive Nations Week, upheld by a reluctant President John F. Kennedy, constituted in the estimation of Kennan yet another gratuitous insult to the Belgrade regime and hastened his resignation.

The book's final section is organized around Kennan's career from the mid-1960s onward, when he solidified his place as historian, memoirist, public intellectual, cultural critic, and foreign policy maven of dissenting bent. He conducted research on, and wrote about, the deep origins of World War One. He published two volumes of memoirs, the first of which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. He testified in congressional hearings against the deepening U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Meanwhile, he disparaged the workings of U.S. democracy as infantile and anarchic, and he deplored the character and intellect of the country's political class, with only a few exceptions (Kennedy, Adlai Stevenson). He excoriated the counterculture, bemoaned what he perceived as the rapacious appetites and vulgarity of American (and Western) society, and—despite the constraints and accumulating infirmities of old age—condemned the nuclear arms race of the 1980s and warned against U.S. policies that he perceived as driving heedlessly to Armageddon. Gaddis ends his book with a meditation on greatness, a trait he attributes to Kennan as architect of early Cold War strategy, historian of Russia and diplomacy, high literary stylist, and unsparing student of self à la *The Education of Henry Adams* and Augustine's *Confessions*.

People

Gaddis deftly weaves into each section of the book the prominent personalities with whom Kennan dealt closely. In addition to those mentioned above, these included Dean Acheson, Isaiah Berlin, Charles Bohlen, John Paton Davies, George Marshall, Paul Nitze, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Stalin's disillusioned daughter, Svetlana Allilueva. To such people Kennan remained devoted, even though fierce disputes—with Acheson, Bohlen, Nitze—over questions of foreign policy might have normally cracked the links of affection and trust. Kennan, despite his complexes and exaggerated sensitivities, had a genius for friendship.

Yet such generosity of spirit, as Gaddis makes plain, was not otherwise always apparent. Kennan managed to produce resentment or incredulity among various colleagues. John Hickerson, a Cold War-era director of the State Department's Office of European Affairs, wondered about Kennan's equilibrium of mind and sobriety. Acheson's under secretary of state, David Bruce, refrained in 1952 from reading Kennan's Moscow dispatches because, he grumbled, "they were so long-winded and so blatantly seeking to be literary rather than provide information." Hugh Cumming, counselor at the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1952, thought Kennan "egocentric" and emotionally disordered. Owen T. Jones at the U.S. embassy in Belgrade confided in his diary, "I am repelled by [Kennan's] self-centered egoism . . . his mercurial moods, his meticulous arrogance." Alas, Kennan was also not averse to inflicting injury upon subordinates or people who were in other ways exposed. In the cases of Malcolm Toon and Richard Davies, youthful members of his Moscow mission in 1952 (and later ambassadors in their own right to Moscow and Warsaw respectively), Kennan had both men transferred and filed damning fitness reports that nearly torpedoed their careers. Why? Because Toon and Davies had jointly authored an essay—submitted for a competition under auspices of the State Department's *Foreign Service Journal*—that criticized containment as insufficient to loosen the East European satellite states from Moscow's grip. Many years later, a livid Kennan helped to drive C. Ben Wright (who had earned his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in 1972) out of the academic profession for having had the temerity in a *Slavic Review* article to suggest that Kennan had favored a more militarily oriented version of containment than acknowledged in his memoirs. Gaddis observes that the aging "Kennan gained the reputation of devouring young scholars at dinner."³

In other ways, too, Kennan's sympathies and imagination could be

3. *Ibid.*, 306, 453, 462–464, 570, 683.

pinched, at times most chillingly. Brooding about the faults of modern civilization in July 1932, while serving as third secretary in the U.S. legation in Riga, Kennan recorded in his diary: “We have only a group of more or less inferior races, incapable of coping adequately with the environment which technical progress has created. . . . No amount of education and discipline can effectively improve conditions as long as we allow the unfit to breed copiously and to preserve their young.”⁴ Regarding African Americans, Kennan gave vent to unvarnished racist thought; for example, in 1942 he explained to his sister Jeanette that blacks were “a gentle and lovable people” but prone in their simplicity to follow “every sort of quack or extremist.”⁵ How did Kennan overlook or trivialize such figures of the day as Marian Anderson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, and Walter White?

As a young man and later, Kennan also revealed prejudice against Jews. Bolshevik Moscow in 1927 was led by “spiteful Jewish parasites.” In Prague’s outdoor cafes after the 1938 Munich conference, “fat Jews” anxiously sipped their coffee. When Kennan served as second secretary at the U.S. embassy in Berlin in 1939–1941, he was exasperated with some desperate Jewish applicants for visas to the United States. The petitioners maneuvered too stealthily for his taste through legal tangles to gain visas for themselves and their families. In 1983 he recollected of himself and his embassy colleagues: “We were jolly well fed up with them.”⁶ Although Gaddis chooses not to treat it in his book, Kennan in 1967 published lingering resentment toward a party of Jewish refugees who escaped to the United States. Their scheduled departure by ship to the New World threatened at one point to delay (not cancel) the return to the United States of half the diplomats detained in Bad Nauheim.

Individual Congressmen, anxious to please individual constituents, were interested in bringing these refugees to the United States, and this—although the refugees were not citizens—was more important than what happened to us. The [State] Department was obviously more concerned to relieve itself of congressional pressures than to worry about a group of its own employees . . . whose fidelity to duty . . . had caused them to fall into enemy hands.⁷

Kennan’s complaint went beyond routine grousing. It hinted at the old canard about untoward Jewish influence, a view widely held at the time in the Foreign Service, then unselfconsciously larded with anti-Semitism. Still, Kennan could rise above himself and perform better than a recital of his prejudices suggests. As Gaddis relates, Kennan helped Frieda Por, a Jewish doctor

4. *Ibid.*, 67.

5. *Ibid.*, 161.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 122, 143, 713n56.

7. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 139.

who treated him in 1935, to escape to the United States from post-Anschluss Austria. She became a lifelong friend of Kennan and his wife. He also helpfully counseled Jewish acquaintances in Prague after the Wehrmacht swept into the Czechoslovak capital in March 1939. When he was stationed in Lisbon, he and his wife sheltered a number (unspecified by Gaddis) of Jewish youngsters who had escaped German clutches.⁸ And of course Kennan did enjoy genuine friendships with two eminent Jewish intellectuals: Berlin and Oppenheimer. Yet the fact remains that Kennan did not brim with feeling for the Jewish victims of Nazi malice. In vain does one look in Kennan's voluminous postwar oeuvre for any sustained reflection on the Shoah. "He was interned in Germany," Walter Pozen, a Jewish son-in-law of Kennan's, once complained. "He knew what was going on. And he never wrote a word about it."⁹

Of the people whom Kennan encountered during World War II, none more impressed him than the Germans connected to the anti-Nazi resistance, above all Count Helmuth James von Moltke. Kennan, who secretly met with von Moltke in 1940–1941, wrote, "I consider him, in fact, to have been the greatest person, morally, and the largest and most enlightened in his concepts, that I met on either side of the battle lines in the Second World War."¹⁰ Three years younger than Kennan, von Moltke valued any connection to the outside world but seems to have been disappointed by Kennan, whom he described blandly after one meeting (late November 1941) as "nice and harmless."¹¹ Kennan apparently promised more than he could deliver. Precisely what he had in mind remains murky, but it did involve quitting the Foreign Service and somehow advancing the cause of anti-Nazi Germans to Washington officialdom. Not for the first time, nor for the last, did he threaten to quit the Foreign Service or stumble because of complications stemming from an extra-marital fling.¹² He confessed in September 1941 to Moltke: "You know, my personal affairs are all in a muddle just now and I did not know how to get out of it; but this work will put me right again and I hope by that way to be able to repay my debt of gratitude to Europe for the most important 15 years of my existence."¹³

Circumstantial evidence, by no means conclusive, also suggests that when Kennan was ambassador in Moscow, he became ensnared in a dangerous liai-

8. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 111, 127, 170.

9. Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), p. 239.

10. Kennan, *Memoirs*, p. 121.

11. Beate Ruhm von Oppen, ed., *Helmuth James von Moltke: Letters to Freya 1939–1945* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 190.

12. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 140–141.

13. Ruhm von Oppen, ed., *Von Moltke*, p. 161.

son and might have prepared to commit suicide to escape from it (though the evidence is not ironclad). Hugh Cumming later asserted that Kennan had become entangled “with some ‘dame’ and thought the Russians might in some way publicize it.”¹⁴ If true, getting himself declared *persona non grata* may have involved a subconscious motive of self-preservation—expediting removal from an untenable jam.

Unanswered Questions

One of the impressive achievements of Gaddis is his tracing the course of Kennan’s ideas as they made their way through the maw of Washington machinery during his years of government service. Gaddis not only pinpoints how, where, and the degree to which Kennan’s ideas were approved by superiors, but also reviews the effects (both intended and unintended) of these ideas when they were implemented fully or in part. However, Gaddis is less inclined to delve deeply into the origins of Kennan’s philosophical assumptions. It would be illuminating to know in some detail whence came Kennan’s ideas in the early 1930s about the lamentably fecund lower orders of humanity, his disdain for democratic politics (especially the U.S. variant), and his preference for dirigisme and for rule by “wise men.” Equally, one must wonder how Kennan imagined himself in intellectual relationship to other American thinkers of his day, not just commentators like Walter Lippmann but also Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau. Appropriately, some of Gaddis’s predecessors have compared the latter two with Kennan, especially in the “dark art” (Gaddis’s term) of international relations theory.¹⁵

Of more distant thinkers, Gaddis convincingly demonstrates that Edward Gibbon influenced Kennan’s outlook, but Gaddis only asserts—he does not demonstrate—that Leo Tolstoy, Fedor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov contributed importantly to Kennan’s worldview. And did not the mature Kennan implicate, if only implicitly, the cautions of Edmund Burke and the insight of Calvinist divines on the ubiquity and subtleness of sin? In tones saturated in Augustinian clarity, classical Protestantism, and Niebuhr’s injunctions against pride, Kennan gave this testimony in 1964 on crusading anti-Communism:

I must reject it . . . and not just as a matter of critical logic, but rather out of a sense of Christian duty, because it implies a certain externalization of evil—a tendency to look for evil only outside ourselves—which is wholly incompati-

14. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 149.

15. *Ibid.*, 696.

ble with Christian teaching. Evil is an omnipresent substance of human life: around us and within us as well as without us. . . . When we struggle against it we must always regard that struggle as in part an overcoming of self. We cannot, for this reason, identify ourselves self-righteously with all that is good and clothe whatever opposes us in the colors of unmitigated evil.¹⁶

Gaddis, alas, offers few suggestions here on the lineage of Kennan's thought. He prefers instead to concentrate, and does so powerfully, on Kennan the cosmopolitan, the moody contemplative, the self-styled foe of philistinism and profligacy, and the man of artistic temperament who for much of his life labored in the flinty realm of public affairs.

Gaddis's study of Kennan is more than a biography of a fascinating twentieth-century American. It is a vehicle to investigate broad questions of diplomacy and international strategy within the context of great-power rivalries. The book can also provide a useful orientation for Americans as they pick their way through the early 21st century—littered with ethnic strife, religious fanaticism, failed states, audacious terrorists—and seek to overcome recent lapses of judgment: the suspension of prohibitions on torture and the abridging of civil liberties via the PATRIOT Act. Kennan's warning in the "Long Telegram" is still timely: "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 . . . is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping."¹⁷

16. George F. Kennan, "The Ethics of Anti-Communism," 28 October 1964, in Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, George Kennan Papers.

17. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 221.