

Analyzing and Assessing Gaddis's Kennan Biography

Questionable Interpretations and Unpursued Evidence and Issues

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A creative writer can do his best only with what lies within the range and character of his deepest sympathies.

*Willa Cather*¹

I've made no systematic effort to compare their [other writers on Kennan] conclusions—or even some of my previous ones—with what this book contains. I want it to be a fresh look at Kennan, not at the scholarship he inspired.

*John Lewis Gaddis*²

Congress is there for the exercise of that responsibility [of declaring war]. I think our Constitution and our tradition are quite sufficient here. [President George W. Bush] should not do what he's planning to do [going to war against Iraq] without a clear congressional mandate. This is against all American tradition.

*George F. Kennan*³

The eminent historian John Lewis Gaddis, laboring nearly 30 years on his authorized biography of the respected diplomat, foreign policy expert, and public intellectual George F. Kennan, has produced a lengthy, often eloquent volume. Predictably, it has won prizes, considerable accolades, and substantial respect for its apparent range, seeming depth, and shrewd intelligence.

The book is broadly researched, obviously based on substantial archival and interview work, and is presumably informed by knowledge of the relevant

1. See Andre Dubus III, "Points North," *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 June 2012, p. 1.

2. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. xi.

3. See Albert Eisele, "George Kennan Speaks Out against Iraq," *The Hill*, October 2002, used online.

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scholarship and the interpretive controversies involving Kennan. But it is not a volume that usually engages openly with other interpreters, or even generally notes rival views, and thus Gaddis has woven a tapestry of narrative and analysis that often sidesteps direct confrontation with alternative interpretations and possibly distressing evidence.

Gaddis himself, despite clearly liking and respecting Kennan and Kennan's long-time wife, Annelise, promised a biography of George but often avoids getting deeply into possibly unsettling personal issues involving the two Kennans. Moreover, Gaddis seems to have found himself progressively at odds with Kennan's own political views by about the 1980s, and sometimes before. Hence, the book often tilts quietly against Kennan's views in those later years and often fails adequately to explain Kennan's own thinking on such matters.

Gaddis greatly preferred, and still prefers, the foreign policy and nuclear weapons positions of President Ronald Reagan, whereas Kennan thought that the Reagan administration's military buildup and the president's rhetoric were a menace. In addition, in late 2002, Kennan, by then nearly 100 years old, strongly opposed President George W. Bush's move toward war against Iraq, whereas Gaddis strongly supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq and reportedly even helped craft a pro-war speech by Bush—positions that go unmentioned in the book.

While being at odds with Kennan in the 1980s and afterward and sometimes before, Gaddis is generally admiring and often protective of the Kennan of the 1940s and early 1950s. The result, in part, is that troubling evidence is overlooked or at least not discussed, and various pro-Cold War interpretations often dominate the treatment of Kennan in the 1941–1952 period, even as Gaddis fails to meet or sometimes even acknowledge the challenges posed by some *severe* pro-Cold War views held by Kennan during that period.

Kennan's brief willingness in 1947 to consider preventive nuclear war gets tucked away in a few lines, on page 374 of the 698 pages of text, and Kennan's advocacy of what seems to have been “atomic diplomacy” in 1946 is entirely ignored. The basic problem of whether Kennan fully understood Soviet objections to the Baruch Plan for international control of nuclear energy is simply sidestepped.

Surprisingly, Kennan's thinking about certain major issues and events—notably, Suez in 1956, the Berlin Wall, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Vietnam War—receives remarkably skimpy attention (indeed no attention at all in the case of Suez). Thus, major interpretive matters are ignored. For some reason, Gaddis does not even mention that Kennan publicly supported Eugene McCarthy over Lyndon Johnson in 1968.

Probably less surprisingly, issues involving Kennan's long-hidden relationship with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and his relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are treated gingerly, without any probing concern. Likewise, Gaddis ignores the sense of betrayal felt by many Cold War liberals in the late 1960s when the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its flagship journal, *Encounter*, were publicly revealed as CIA-subsidized—a secret relationship that Kennan had long known about, as Gaddis notes.⁴

The result of Gaddis's strategies of presentation and avoidance is a book that omits much, soft-pedals some themes and issues, and frequently ignores substantial evidence and important questions. Thus, in effect, Gaddis, perhaps unintentionally, has left a great deal of room for future interpreters. His volume, though it is the authorized biography, is really far less than authoritative. Much remains to be done, to be carefully examined, and to be interpreted by others—undoubtedly helped in part by Gaddis's book—in the quest to understand the very complicated Kennan.

Such a quest, in ways not made adequately clear by Gaddis, involves focusing on Kennan not primarily because of his roles as a foreign policy adviser or policymaker *within* the U.S. government. His roles in those linked activities generally were not greatly influential. He is important mostly for his *publicly* expressed thought, for his frequent contributions to the public dialogue over time, for his roles—variously as yea-sayer or naysayer—on major issues. Those public roles include his significant—and controversial—contributions in *American Diplomacy* to thinking about the nature of the United States, its past diplomacy, and the alleged need for “realism” and the minimization or even eschewal of moralist/legalist standards.⁵ Much of the task of understanding Kennan, in ways not properly appreciated by Gaddis, is to seek to explain how the Kennan of that 1951 set of statements seemed, in later years, to shift far from such intellectual moorings.

Surprisingly, although Kennan developed a considerable reputation as a historian, and *American Diplomacy* became a classic or near-classic, Gaddis shows little interest in analyzing that book as history or in assessing Kennan's other volumes of history. Kennan later called *American Diplomacy* “that old pot-boiler,” but it is impossible to determine from Gaddis's book whether Kennan was being sincere or falsely modest—or what Gaddis himself thinks.⁶

4. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 317–319, 354–355, 496–497, 607.

5. George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

6. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 606.

Uneasily Interpreting the Young Kennan

Because Gaddis in the book often seems to have difficulty with economic matters and seldom seems able to place Kennan's own relatively handsome income in the mid-1930s Foreign Service and afterward in the larger context of modern America, it is probably not surprising that Gaddis seemingly downplays the fact that Kennan, son of a published Milwaukee lawyer, was raised in a very well-to-do family. Young George spent his last high school years at a private preparatory school, not a public school, before going off to relatively plush Princeton University.

Unfortunately, Gaddis uncritically believes that George's sister, many decades later as an elderly adult, could recall fully verbatim a ten-line, approximately 88-word, back-and-forth conversation that she at age nine and George at age seven had in 1911 on the subject of suicide.⁷ Why not exercise reasonable judgment as a historian, give up the illusion of such accurate memory, and make clear that the substance of the claimed recollection *may* be accurate but that the precise wording is highly dubious, especially given that the cited source is an edited typescript from 1996—85 years later? Historians love good stories and greatly prefer to offer concrete dialogue, but when the evidence of this dialogue is so flimsy, it is unwise to be so naively trusting.

At Princeton, surprisingly, George did not do especially well academically, placing only slightly above the middle of his class. By the time of graduation, he reportedly ranked 83rd in a class of 219. How can that be explained, and what does it mean? Did Kennan have significant difficulty with some subjects? If so, which? He passed English literature in his first year, but for some unexplained reason had to take the course again in his sophomore year.⁸ Dismayingly, none of that seems to have significantly interested Gaddis, though he had a copy of Kennan's academic transcript and thus could have discussed what it reveals.

When discussing the struggles of the young Kennan, from the Midwest, to find his way at Princeton, Gaddis seems surprised that Kennan tried various social roles, rejected them, and moved on over time during his four years there. Kennan, being only a few months past age 21 when he graduated in 1925, was still young and in the process of self-definition. Gaddis's characterization of him as almost a "chameleon" seems rather harsh.⁹

7. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 38.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Kennan, Gaddis, and the Early Cold War: Military Meanings and Nuclear Issues

Much has been written about the February 1946 “Long Telegram” and about the July 1947 “X” article, and undoubtedly far more remains to be written, in probing fashion, about Kennan’s thinking in that approximately 16-month period. Some of the necessary analysis should involve using at least two important archival documents that Gaddis never mentions and possibly never found in his research.

The first document is Kennan’s response, of 16 September 1946, to presidential counsel Clark Clifford’s request three days earlier for Kennan’s judgment on the draft-report by Clifford and George Elsey, “American Relations with the Soviet Union.” That report has sometimes been treated as the general embodiment of Kennan’s own militant thinking in that period, and significantly Kennan said he liked the tone and content of the document. He proposed inserting a key paragraph, which Clifford and Elsey placed, with only minor rephrasing, in their final report. Kennan’s suggested wording included: “[I]t is important that this country be *prepared* [underlining in original] to use them [nuclear bombs and biological weaponry] if need be, for the mere fact of such preparedness may prove to be the only powerful deterrent to Russian aggressive action and in this sense the only sure guaranty of peace.”

Kennan’s key paragraph, from part of the full document located in the Elsey Papers at the Truman Library, invites analysis about Kennan’s thinking about nuclear and biological warfare, his ideas at that time about nuclear deterrence, his concern about Soviet military aggression, and his sense of how to guarantee the “peace.” Such thinking, one can reasonably argue, reveals that Kennan’s conception of containment at that juncture had an *important* military dimension.

Thus it seems fair, especially in view of other evidence, to dispute Kennan’s own rather self-serving later contentions that his idea of containment was not, significantly, a military conception. The evidence strongly suggests that containment had, for him, an important military component—to block possible Soviet military aggression.

It is also valuable to think critically, in analyzing and assessing Kennan’s 1946–1947 conception of containment, and to ask whether, at times, he did deem Soviet military aggression as rather likely—*unless* it was blocked by U.S. military power. Otherwise, if such aggression was improbable, why in his view was there any need for a nuclear deterrent, and why did he want to emphasize this deterrent?

It seems likely that Kennan oscillated from time to time in his thinking about the nature of the Soviet threat. If so, perhaps it is appropriate to go back

systematically into the 1945–1947 records to examine Kennan's shifting thought on this crucial issue and to acknowledge that he was sometimes unsure in his estimates of what was indeed unknowable to him. Yet, he was a man often unwilling to acknowledge such uncertainty, and he was often eager, it seems, to project a sense of certainty involving inherently difficult matters. That very form of self-presentation, as in the "Long Telegram" and the "X" essay, may help explain much about his influence.

The Baruch Plan for international control of atomic energy encountered stiff Soviet opposition. On 8 November 1946, roughly seven weeks after sending his mid-September reply to Clifford, Kennan advised two of Bernard Baruch's aides on how to try to push the Soviet Union to accept the plan. Kennan's advice was basically a form of what can be termed "atomic diplomacy" because it involved implicit nuclear threats: build bomb shelters in the United States for top officials; and hold military meetings with the British and Canadians, presumably betokening some prospect of war. (The document regarding that advice, a memorandum from Franklin Lindsay to Baruch's staff dated 12 November 1946, is located in the Baruch Papers at Princeton.) For some reason, Gaddis does not mention or use this important document.

Kennan's own inability to understand the Soviet objections to the deeply flawed Baruch Plan is not dealt with by Gaddis. But the extent of Kennan's problems is suggested, notably, by his report of 18 July 1946 to Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, which is in the State Department records at the National Archives and also published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series (1946, Vol. I, pp. 861–865).

Kennan, Gaddis, and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Ignored Events and Issues

Probably the most dangerous international crisis in the postwar period involving the United States and the USSR, and conceivably much or all of the earth's human population, was the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis. In a careless slip, Gaddis gives the wrong date for the day President John F. Kennedy learned of the Soviet missiles in Cuba (it was 16 October, not the 15th), but that is a minor error.¹⁰

Far more troubling, and severely inadequate, is Gaddis's remarkably sketchy treatment of Kennan during the missile crisis. The subject receives only around one-and-a-half paragraphs of narrative and discussion on p. 566. Gaddis entirely omits how Kennan learned about the crisis, how Kennan ex-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 566.

plained and assessed the crisis in October 1962, and how he later interpreted the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba and the nature of the actual settlement of the crisis.

As Nicholas Thompson notes in his book *The Hawk and the Dove*, Kennan was vacationing and doing research in Italy in mid-October and did not learn about the crisis until Kennedy appeared on television on 22 October.¹¹ Gaddis never mentions this and apparently did not ask Kennan about it in later interviews. Nor does Gaddis seem to wonder how Kennan, an acknowledged and self-declared expert on the Soviet Union, felt in October 1962 and later about not having been asked by the White House or the State Department for advice about U.S.-Soviet issues at any moment shortly before or during the crisis. Kennan, a proud and prickly man, was often exceedingly sensitive to slights from Washington officialdom.

Gaddis also does not say anything about the talk Kennan gave on 27 October to the U.S. embassy staff in Belgrade (Kennan was then the ambassador to Yugoslavia) to justify President Kennedy's handling of the crisis that week. Among other themes—according to Kennan's lecture notes, which are in his papers at Princeton but are never mentioned by Gaddis—Kennan placed the U.S. response to the Soviet missiles in the justifying context of the Monroe Doctrine.

In his October 1962 lecture, Kennan likened the missile crisis to the challenges from Nazi Germany in the late 1930s and regarded Kennedy's response as admirable. Kennan denied that the Soviet emplacement of missiles in Cuba could be compared to the U.S. emplacement of Jupiter missiles in Turkey, arguing that Turkey was not in the Soviet sphere of influence. Kennan apparently also justified aspects of the April 1961 Bay of Pigs venture by depicting it as a popular uprising, and he stressed his contempt for Fidel Castro.

Gaddis states, very briefly, that Kennan judged Kennedy's handling of the October crisis as "masterful."¹² But Gaddis leaves unclear in his text that this comment was made in 1965, in an interview for the Kennedy Library *after* the president's death. Gaddis never considers whether over the years, as Kennan became more anti-nuclear, he might have reconsidered his judgment of Kennedy's handling of the missile crisis. Nor does Gaddis note that, even after the October 1962 crisis, Kennan for a long while seemed puzzled by Nikita Khrushchev's motives for putting missiles in Cuba. Eventually, Kennan concluded that Khrushchev was propelled to act, at least partly, in an effort to

11. Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), p. 190.

12. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 566.

remove U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey and that the final settlement had eliminated those Jupiters.¹³

Because Gaddis, as the authorized biographer, had relatively privileged access to Kennan in the 1980s and 1990s, it would be interesting to know whether he closely interviewed Kennan about the Cuban missile crisis. If so, what did Kennan say? In view of Kennan's growing anti-nuclearism in the 1980s and 1990s, did he still think that Kennedy had been "masterful" in October 1962? If not, why? If so, why?

Did Kennan come to think that the private advice on 18 October 1962 from Charles Bohlen, a career diplomat and Soviet expert, who urged Kennedy to avoid a public U.S.-Soviet confrontation unless quiet negotiations with the Soviet Union failed, was wise? Even if Bohlen did not tell Kennan soon after the crisis about this secret advice, as is likely, Kennan would certainly have learned about it from Bohlen's 1973 memoir.¹⁴

Why Gaddis chose to do so little on Kennan and the Cuban missile crisis—maybe eighteen printed lines—remains a puzzle. The result is a dismaying lacuna.

Kennan, Gaddis, and the Vietnam War: Neglected Issues and Unmentioned Events

Far more surprising, and more dismaying, is Gaddis's very sketchy handling of the complicated subject of Kennan and Vietnam. Only three sets of Kennan's 1960s public statements—drawn from his 1963 *Look* interview, his 12 December 1965 op-ed article, and his February 1966 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chaired by J. William Fulbright—are mentioned, and in total they receive only about three paragraphs in the biography. A few private statements by Kennan on Vietnam in 1965 beef up the book's text by about another fifteen lines.¹⁵

For some reason, Gaddis chose not to go back to Kennan's analyses from 1946–1949—when he was initially on the staff of the National War College, and then head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff (PPS)—to examine and discuss Kennan's consideration of the problems in Indochina. There are useful materials on this subject in Kennan's own papers at Prince-

13. George Urban, "From Containment to . . . Self-Containment: A Conversation with George Kennan," *Encounter*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (September 1976), p. 38.

14. Charles Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929–1969* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 491–492.

15. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 591–592.

ton, in State Department files at the National Archives, and in records at the Truman Library. Kennan's published lectures and question-and-answer sessions at the War College (*Measures Short of War*) and the published PPS reports are also readily available.¹⁶

On 21 August 1950, as Kennan was preparing to take what was in effect a year-long sabbatical from the State Department, he crafted for Secretary of State Dean Acheson a remarkably astute six-page memorandum about problems in U.S. foreign policy, focusing mostly on issues in Asia. Kennan made numerous suggestions that he generally realized were likely to be impractical because of domestic political pressures. Among these was the suggestion, taking up nearly half a page, of urging the French to abandon their efforts to regain control of Indochina and defeat the Viet Minh.

Unwisely, Gaddis discusses Kennan's August 1950 suggestions on Vietnam in only about seven lines and omits some important parts of Kennan's analysis.¹⁷ Most notably, in August 1950, Kennan—in a judgment omitted by Gaddis—stated that the French could not win in Vietnam. The French position, Kennan wrote, is “basically hopeless,” and the U.S. government should convey this judgment to leaders in Paris. Kennan advised Acheson that the administration should persuade the French to relinquish their position and should promise that the United States would try to help them withdraw and thereby avoid embarrassment. Kennan suggested that some kind of Asian responsibility for Indochina might be devised so that “the French exodus could be conveniently obscured.”

Such thinking by Kennan in this memorandum (available with Kennan's 23 August cover letter in Acheson's papers at the Truman Library) was bold, imaginative, and clever. Kennan understood French pride and recognized the mire in Vietnam, and he was struggling to salvage French prestige while ending a costly, losing venture in Southeast Asia. Kennan was not motivated by an abhorrence of colonialism, but he did regret a failing colonialism that was draining resources from the Western European system.

Strangely, Gaddis generally skips over Kennan's thinking in the 1950s about Indochina and disregards Kennan's muted and somewhat ambivalent support for the U.S. intervention in the early 1960s.¹⁸ The result of avoiding so many relevant sources is that Gaddis's brief focus on Kennan's 1965 op-ed piece and his 1966 congressional testimony is without adequate interpretive context.

16. Anna Kasten Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers*, 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1983).

17. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 401.

18. George F. Kennan, “A Fresh Look at Our China Policy,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 22 November 1964, pp. 27, 140–147.

Without any additional knowledge, a reader of Gaddis's very brief segment on Kennan and Vietnam would never know that Kennan in 1966 was not a full-blown critic of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Like General James Gavin at the time, Kennan publicly proposed that the United States retreat to defensible enclaves in Vietnam, and he also warned against a precipitate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.¹⁹

In his February 1966 congressional appearance, Kennan, in testimony unmentioned by Gaddis, was brutally harsh about the Viet Cong. They were, he stated, "a band of ruthless fanatics . . . cruel in their methods, dictatorial, and oppressive in their aims. I am not conscious of having any sympathy for them."²⁰

Gaddis for some reason does not try to present a well-developed, carefully textured narrative and analysis of Kennan's thinking about Vietnam over time. Kennan's congressional testimony in 1967 about the Vietnam War and his public support for Eugene McCarthy in 1968 go entirely unmentioned in the biography.

On 29 February 1968, in a powerful speech endorsing McCarthy that was later printed in *The New York Review of Books*, Kennan stated that U.S. armed involvement in Vietnam was, in many ways, "grievously unsound." Kennan seemingly deplored the use of military tactics and strategy that had been "so destructive to civilian life, even in South Vietnam itself." The war, in his analysis, had injured U.S. prestige abroad and created great difficulties within American society. What the U.S. government had done in the war, Kennan asserted, was "an error for which it is hard to find many parallels in our history."²¹

Such words, though not singling out Lyndon B. Johnson by name, were strong condemnation. But, significantly, Kennan attributed the failure to errors of judgment, not to evil intentions on the part of the president or the wider government. Kennan stopped far short of the harsher charges advanced by the American political left and by a segment of potential Democratic voters in the United States who supported McCarthy in his efforts to stop the war. Unlike some of those supporters, Kennan never suggested that the United States in its Vietnam venture might be "imperialistic."

Kennan stayed far away from such conceptions and deplored such charges. By his own judgment, he was a man of intellectual depth, of acute

19. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966—Vietnam: Hearings*, 89th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1966, pp. 329–342.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

21. George F. Kennan, "Introducing Eugene McCarthy," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (11 April 1968), pp. 14–16.

sensibility, and of deep historical knowledge. He reviled those—mostly on the political left—who intimately linked the United States and “imperialism.”

To Kennan, that kind of talk and thinking was irresponsible and polemical. He remained, even in his laments about U.S. policy in Vietnam, a believer much of the time in U.S. “exceptionalism.” Part of the task of a probing study of Kennan is to examine, critically, that faith in “exceptionalism”—a faith that ebbed and flowed. That task was not one that Gaddis recognized, and thus it was an area of analysis he could eschew.

Kennan, Gaddis, and the Iraq War: Dissident Thinking

In autumn 2002, well into his 99th year, George Kennan, still articulate and intellectually attentive, was interviewed about contemporary U.S. foreign policy by reporters. Speaking at the home of his long-time associate, Eugene McCarthy, Kennan systematically deplored the move by President George W. Bush to go to war in Iraq.

Kennan’s spirited and pointed objections were reported by at least two journalists—Jane Mayer in the mid-October 2002 issue of *The New Yorker* and Albert Eisele in *The Hill*, now on line. Mayer’s article took up about two-thirds of a *New Yorker* page, and Eisele devoted roughly 28 short paragraphs to Kennan’s analysis. For some reason, however, Gaddis apparently regarded Kennan’s analysis, in possibly the aged man’s last public statement on a major issue, as so unimportant that the entire subject receives fewer than 25 words in the 698-page text.²²

In October 2002, Kennan condemned the Bush administration’s concept of preemptively taking military action, without Congressional authorization, against states or groups suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction. Kennan also said that he doubted the evidence for the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He contended, in the interview with Eisele, that the Constitution and U.S. tradition were “quite sufficient” to deal with true threats. Acting without a congressional mandate, Kennan asserted, arguably, “is against all American tradition.” He chose not to compare Bush’s push toward war with earlier notable U.S. military interventions that lacked any declarations of war, which is to say every U.S. military operation (large and small) after 1945. Kennan regretted in his October 2002 interview that Congress had not complained about the move toward war. He was deeply aggrieved

22. See Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 690; Jane Mayer, “The Big Idea: A Doctrine Passes,” *The New Yorker*, 14 & 21 October 2002, p. 70; and Eisele, “George Kennan Speaks Out against Iraq.”

that Democrats, aside from Al Gore, had been generally silent and had not opposed Bush's policy.

Kennan argued that even if Iraq already possessed or was developing weapons of mass destruction, the issue was not basically a U.S. problem. It was mostly, or entirely, a regional problem, and the United States should heavily engage Israel, he stated. He implied, but did not assert, that Israel's nuclear capacity might well be an adequate deterrent, and he seemed, despite his public declarations over the years about nuclear weapons, to have reasonable confidence in such a regionally-based nuclear deterrent.

Kennan in October 2002 warned, presciently, about the dangers of war in Iraq and the likelihood of unexpected outcomes. The history of military matters, and of the U.S. experience, he contended in his interview with Eisele, showed that "you might start in a war with certain things on your mind as a purpose of what you are doing, but in the end, you found yourself fighting for entirely different things that you had never thought of before." War, Kennan stated, "has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions." Among the dangers, he emphasized, is that "you never know where you are going to end."²³

Even this brief summary, running about ten times as long as Gaddis's entire treatment of Kennan's October 2002 statements, suggests the richness of Kennan's thought on that occasion. For an enterprising biographer, approaching the last pages of a very lengthy volume, one nearly thirty years in the making, Kennan's October 2002 commentary on war, on deterrence, on congressional authority, on presidential power, and, implicitly, on the American national interest could have been thoughtfully mined to address important interpretive issues. Among these would be the significant question—probably essential to understanding Kennan—of the extent of continuity and change in Kennan's thinking during his 55 years of public discussion of such themes.

The Challenging Task of Understanding George Kennan

Regardless of a biographer's conclusions on such issues, the subject of Iraq is important. Kennan certainly thought so. To dispatch the entirety of Kennan's thoughts on Iraq in fewer than 25 words, as Gaddis does, seems greatly unfair to Kennan. A biographer, and certainly an authorized biographer, one who has a privileged position, has a greater responsibility to himself, to Kennan, and to the task of understanding Kennan's thought.

23. Eisele, "George Kennan Speaks Out against Iraq."

The able historian, one can argue, has an obligation to the craft of history, to the quest for informed interpretation, and to the particular individual in the biography—in this case, George Frost Kennan. The historian should seek, as an author, to expand his or her own comfortable range and to deepen his or her own comfortable sympathies to present and discuss his or her subject in appropriate complexity. Lamentably, Gaddis, despite his many acknowledged talents, which have often earned him accolades and prizes, has too often fallen short of that set of intellectual obligations in dealing in print with a man he long admired and valued as a friend—George Kennan.

Kennan chose Gaddis as his authorized biographer in the early 1980s. Had Kennan lived longer (even beyond 2005) and chosen to read the book in near-final draft, would he have felt fulfilled, properly understood, or not adequately interpreted? Would he still have chosen Gaddis as his authorized biographer? Would Kennan have concluded that Gaddis had sought truly and adequately to understand him as a morally inspired nuclear critic, as a public foe of Reagan and Bush policies, and as a spirited opponent of the Iraq war?

That is an interesting, though unanswerable, set of questions. The questions suggest a significant, if only partial, perspective in assessing the published biography, its limitations and strengths. Such questions may also usefully indicate some of the research and various analytical paths that later scholars may wisely choose to pursue in their own quest to understand Kennan's complicated and sometimes convoluted life and thinking.

Kennan could sometimes seem mercurial and periodically seemed to have conflicted feelings and convictions. Enterprising analysts, reaching beyond Gaddis, will still have to seek to understand those feelings and convictions and their interconnections, as well as what continued to change significantly and what was nearly or minimally unchanging in Kennan's values, perceptions, and policy analyses. That involves, among other issues, studying Kennan's understanding of the United States and of his own life as an American, often an alienated one.

Kennan sought at times to be a prophet and teacher, and, like Henry Adams, he lamented his seeming failures and his limited influence. Like Adams, Kennan was a man who felt better suited to an earlier age, but Kennan, more than Adams, also left his mark—sometimes for good purposes, and sometimes not—on his own time. Kennan's legacy, like his life, remains a challenge to interpret and assess in the continuing quest to understand him.