

Gaddis's Achievement: Taking the Measure of Kennan

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John Gaddis has written a great book about a great man. That may sound like a cliché, but in this case it is really true. Gaddis's achievement is all the more remarkable because he has done it in a genre that is new to him. Historical biography requires some special skills that take time to develop, and only rarely does a first serious attempt prove so successful. When we were waiting for this book to come out, many colleagues who had great respect for Gaddis's talents in analyzing policy and strategy still harbored doubts about his ability to master the personal side of George F. Kennan—one of the most complicated and evasive characters in the American Century. Those doubts, it turns out, were sometimes shared even by the subject himself. But I am happy to say that all the doubts were unfounded: Gaddis, who was the first to give real due to Kennan the strategist, has now given us Kennan the man. No less important, Gaddis has managed to integrate the two into a single human whole by giving us a comprehensive, vivid portrait of Kennan and the long trajectory of his life.

Gaddis makes a convincing case that only a person of Kennan's many talents—a poet's intuition, sensitivity, and imagination; a historian's erudition; a philosopher's wisdom; and a writer's facility of expression—could have produced the strategy of containment. Yet the same qualities coupled with emotional fragility and constant personal anguish made him a lonely figure in the tough world of practical politics, one who was doomed to constant frustrations and withdrawals. Prophets do not make successful operators, and Kennan's life was a sobering illustration of this rule.

Confined mostly to diplomatic and academic pursuits, this life's story is devoid of high external drama and glamour. The real story of Kennan is his intellectual and psychological odyssey, which Gaddis explores with great skill and subtlety, assisted by Kennan's own introspection and self-analysis contained in his diaries and private correspondence. This exercise requires a great

Journal of Cold War Studies

Vol. 15, No. 4, Fall 2013, pp. 183–188, doi:10.1162/JCWS_a_00402

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deal of empathy, but also an ability to maintain some distance from one's subject in order to see him objectively from the outside. Combining empathy with distance is a tough balancing act for any biographer, but Gaddis handles the delicate balance exceedingly well. His deep respect and admiration for Kennan do not prevent him from seeing Kennan's flaws: vanity that "equaled his self-doubt," egocentrism, intellectual arrogance, and disparaging views of non-whites and Jews.¹ Only rarely does Gaddis succumb to the temptation to judge Kennan by Gaddis's own standards or to criticize him for failing to understand what became clear only in retrospect.

Gaddis gives us many new insights into Kennan's fascinating personality, enriching our understanding of its unique nature. Among other things the book helps to sort out one of Kennan's enduring antinomies—a cultural alienation from American life and a deep faith in the country that for Kennan, in Gaddis's words, "was a spiritual necessity."² Or as Kennan himself put it in 1936: "Increasingly, now, I would not be a part of my country, although what it had once been would remain a part of me." Allegiance would be "a loyalty *despite*, not a loyalty *because*, a loyalty of principle, not of identification." Yet Kennan's faith in U.S. basic decency and vitality was a keystone of containment based on the presumption of American moral and functional superiority over the Soviet rival. Hence, I now see that the subtitle of the book, which at first seemed too contrived, is justified after all.

Gaddis has produced a definitive, highly convincing portrait of the man in the context of his times, but his subject was so multifaceted and complicated that many historians have their own images of Kennan that may be somewhat different from Gaddis's. My own chief complaint about the book is that it does not have enough Russia in it. An outstanding observer of the entire Soviet experiment from almost its beginning to the end, Kennan had more deep thoughts about Soviet Russia's fate than is evident in Gaddis's book. Two issues will illustrate this point.

Kennan as a prophet of Soviet collapse is justly celebrated by many, including Gaddis, but some of Kennan's most original insights remain unexplored. One of them is his prediction of the nature and dynamics of the process that would stem from Soviet weaknesses. He saw the Soviet regime's Achilles' heel in a deep gap between the people and the ruling *nomenklatura*, whose power was based on iron discipline and unquestioning obedience rather than compromise and mutual adjustment. According to Kennan in one of his 1951 lectures before European allies the Soviet Union's ruling group

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 670.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 118; emphasis in original.

was so alienated from its own people that “if fortune were really to turn against them—if the belief in the firmness and certainty of their power were to be widely shaken in the minds of their subjects and their enemies—then there would be no extensive reserve of loyalties and interests to which they could make their final appeal.”³ When the system reached its critical hour it would no longer have any defenders, which is exactly what we witnessed happening in 1991. No effective political force was ready to take over because the Soviet people, having been suppressed by the long tradition of despotism, were not yet capable of democratic self-organization.

That is why, if the Communist Party was incapacitated, Soviet Russia “would almost overnight turn from one of the mightiest into one of the weakest and miserable nations of the world.”⁴ So, 40 years before the Soviet collapse Kennan foresaw its abrupt avalanche character—something that in 1990–1991 eluded Mikhail Gorbachev and others, including orthodox defenders of the system who should have known better.

Moreover, Kennan perceived a future chain reaction of this dissolution based on a close connection between the Soviet order in the USSR and its replicas in Eastern Europe. He had always considered Eastern Europe to be the most vulnerable part of the Soviet empire, doomed to erosion by local nationalisms. The loss of the “socialist camp,” he predicted, would be such a powerful blow to the legitimacy and self-confidence of the Soviet leadership that it might produce aftershocks within the Soviet Union itself. Once the Soviet empire would begin to crumble, it would “unleash an avalanche downfall of Soviet influence and prestige which would go beyond satellite countries to the heart of the Soviet Union itself.”⁵ This is indeed how it happened, though up to the late 1980s such a scenario seemed “a product of wishful thinking” even to highly sophisticated historians.⁶

My second illustration deals with Kennan as a prophet of post-Soviet Russia. This comes mostly from his PPS 38 (summarized in NSC 20/4) and

3. George F. Kennan, “The Foundations of Soviet Policy,” in National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Record Group 59, Policy Planning Staff Records, PPS Members—Chronological File.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Cited in Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 36. For an in-depth analysis of how this process unfolded, see Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 178–256; Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall 2004), pp. 3–67; and Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3),” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2005), pp. 3–96.

6. Hixson, *George F. Kennan*, p. 44.

his April 1951 *Foreign Affairs* article on “America and the Russian Future,” which is mentioned only briefly in Gaddis’s book. The fact that the first paper did not have much impact on U.S. policy and the second one “looked too far into the future to attract much attention” does not diminish their power of prediction.⁷ Just the opposite—Kennan’s effort to look into the distant future is the only forecast of Russia’s post-Communist trajectory to have stood the test of time. Kennan was probably the first American who during the early Cold War pondered the kind of Russia that would emerge from under Communism’s ruins and how the United States should deal with this new country.

His answer to the first question was very clear in its negative part: Russia with its genealogy and traditions would not become “a liberal-democratic Russia along American patterns.” A democratic transition would also be hampered by the Soviet legacy, which Kennan, despite his abhorrence of the Soviet system, did not see as entirely black:

Many features of the Soviet system will stick, if only for the reason that *everything has been destroyed which might seem to have constituted an alternative to them*. And some features will deserve to stick, for no system that lasts over decades is entirely without merits. Any program of government for a future Russia will have to adjust itself to the fact that there has been this Soviet interlude, and that it has left its positive marks as well as its negative ones. And no members of future Russian governments will be aided by doctrinaire and impatient well-wishers in the West who look to them, just because they are seeking a decent alternative to what we know today as Bolshevism, to produce in short order a replica of the American democratic dream.⁸

Hence his famous warning and advice to his fellow citizens:

[W]hen Soviet power has run its course, or when its personalities and spirit begin to change (for the ultimate outcome could be one or the other), let us not hover nervously over the people who come after, applying litmus papers daily to their political complexions to find out whether they answer to our concept of “democratic.” Give them time; let them be Russians; let them work out their internal problems in their own manner. The ways by which peoples advance toward dignity and enlightenment in government are things that constitute the deepest and most intimate processes of national life. There is nothing less understandable to foreigners, nothing in which foreign interference can do less good.⁹

Another insight from the same article is Kennan’s view of totalitarianism as a general human problem and a tragedy for the Russian people, who be-

7. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 434.

8. George F. Kennan, “America and the Russian Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1951), pp. 351–370.

9. *Ibid.*

came its victim for historical reasons and deserved not condemnation and repentance, but compassion and support. An eyewitness to both Adolf Hitler's and Iosif Stalin's regimes, Kennan fully understood the tragedy of human existence under those inhuman conditions:

If individual life is to go on at all within the totalitarian framework it must go on by arrangement with the regime, and to some extent in connivance with its purposes. Furthermore, there will always be areas in which the totalitarian government will succeed in identifying itself with popular feelings and aspirations. The relationship between citizen and political authority under totalitarianism is therefore inevitably complicated: it is never pat and simple. Who does not understand these things cannot understand what is at stake in our relations with the peoples of such countries. These realities leave no room for our favored conviction that the people of a totalitarian state can be neatly divided into collaborators and martyrs and that there will be none left over. People do not emerge from this relationship unscathed: when they do emerge they need help, guidance and understanding, not scoldings and sermons.

We will get nowhere with an attitude of emotional indignation directed toward an entire people. Let us rise above these easy and childish reactions and consent to view the tragedy of Russia as partly our own tragedy, and the people of Russia as our comrades in the long hard battle for a happier system of man's coexistence with himself and with nature on this troubled planet.¹⁰

One would have difficulty finding another example of such empathy, fairness, and magnanimity toward post-totalitarian Russia as this appeal by Kennan. More than sixty years later, it has lost none of its timeliness.

Considering a smooth liberal-democratic metamorphosis of Russia to be utopian, Kennan thought it quite possible that Russia would become an open, non-totalitarian, and non-imperial state living in peace with its neighbors and its own people. Such a Russia, in his view, would be quite acceptable for the United States, which should neither expect nor demand more from it. The best is the enemy of the good: This wise counsel from Kennan has all too often been absent from American political discourse since 1991.

Yet, despite Kennan's amazing foresight and realism, he had his own delusions about Russia that deserve more attention from his biographers. The most interesting (and closest to the Russian heart) was his deep belief in the strength of Russian national consciousness. This conviction led him to exaggerate Russia's political will and its ability to defend its interests. This was one of the main reasons for his opposition to the speedy reunification of Germany and expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He feared that these policies would provoke a Russian nationalist backlash that would under-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

cut Gorbachev and later Boris Yeltsin. Kennan said to me once in 1990: “Your people would say—‘What have we fought for?’”

Kennan is endlessly fascinating, and thus there will be many other books written about him in the future. Even so, John Gaddis’s monumental work will remain unsurpassed in its scale and depth—a definitive biography of a great American whose life proceeded with, changed, and outlasted the Cold War.