

Commentary on John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*

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An exaggeration is a truth that has lost its temper, and perhaps to some extent we are witnessing that effort at play in John Lewis Gaddis's otherwise formidable biography of George F. Kennan. Solid at points, well-crafted, tightly woven in narrative, heavy with detail, the book deserves serious consideration as one of the best studies of Kennan. It is arguably Gaddis's best work, and certainly better than such rough efforts as *We Now Know*, in which he decided to jump ship and become a post-post-revisionist on the origins of the Cold War. For Gaddis in *We Now Know*, the cause of the Cold War had only one answer: Iosif Stalin. Stalin had sought to emulate Ivan the Terrible and "conflated the requirements of national and personal security in a completely unprecedented way."¹ Gaddis's analysis in *George F. Kennan* is more subtle, more complex.

One might start with a quibble about the relationship between Gaddis and Kennan. A Boswell-Johnson effect is apparently being echoed, with its attendant humor, absurdity, and reflection. This is not helped by the preliminary reviews heaped on the book, not least the glowing blurb by Strobe Talbott. "Gaddis's Kennan is one of the great biographies of all time, on par with Boswell's Johnson." Such comparisons are fatuous, but the association between Gaddis and Kennan is nonetheless important. Kennan found Gaddis worthy as a historian, with all the appropriate credentials to undertake a study of his achievements. Moreover, as Kennan told Gaddis in a letter on 3 April 1984, he believed Gaddis would write a biography that would not be "weak and superficial." This proposition must surely be challenged, given that Gaddis is a historian of U.S. foreign policy and U.S. relations with the Soviet Union rather than of the Soviet Union itself, which was the central feature of

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Kennan's life. Such a bifurcation occurs at various places in the book but makes the biography even more interesting.

Gaddis has similarly found in Kennan the perfect medium, a depiction centered on containment. Gaddis here is an arch defender of the doctrine, going on the offensive against those who dare to challenge it. Indeed, he takes issue with Kennan himself when the latter wavers in his stance toward the Soviet Union.

Most of the reviews of this book depict it as comprehensive, and indeed it does cover a great deal of ground. Given the sheer scope of the book, I will focus here on Kennan as policy adviser and the way he used history in shaping his pronouncements. Gaddis's treatment of this theme is his finest achievement, revealing an imperfect individual who, through the dark prism of history, attempted to craft policy in the manner of a soothsayer. Soothsayers are rarely in demand in Washington, something Kennan soon discovered. But he was blessed with immense good fortune and timing, and occasionally with razor-sharp insight.

Cold War Architect

Wherever one turns in the book, the only thing that matters is the Soviet Union. Russia, or the Soviet Union as it should more accurately be termed, assumes every imaginable form—from brutal oppressor to a vestige of Kennan's romantic delusions. The U.S. reaction is secondary. Kennan's obsession with the Russian character is what matters. Prior to the "Long Telegram" and the end of World War II, Kennan speculated during a trip to Siberia that a "wise American" could only "make plain to Soviet acquaintances the minimum conditions on which he can envisage polite neighbourly relations with them, the character of his own aspirations and the limits of his own patience."²

That was not an injunction he always followed. He was appalled by the apologias of Ambassador Joseph Davies for Stalin's purges and terror, and he disapproved of W. Averell Harriman's view of the Soviet dictator during the late stages of World War II—a touch too accommodating, a touch too soft. But in this, Kennan was not entirely consistent. For a touted grand realist and strategist, he seemed to balk at suggestions, at least in early 1945, that a "sphere of influence" approach was warranted. "You must get home to the president what a terrible villain Stalin is, what awful thing he has done," he

2. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 200.

urged Harriman. But he wrote to Charles “Chip” Bohlen later that year, almost wistfully, that a deal might be done with the despot, carving Europe into “spheres of influence,” in which the Soviet Union and the United States would stick to their allocated areas of interest. Gaddis maintains that Kennan “distrusted philosophical systems,” but Kennan seems to have latched onto the notion of “spheres of influence” as a suitable policy regarding Europe and the Americas.³

Kennan then had a stroke of fortune—with his words. The Roman poet Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, examines the writer’s aims. “Of words, while the latest, like infants, are born and thrive.” Gaddis observes in his *Strategies of Containment* that Kennan’s “Long Telegram” of 1946, sent when he was chargé d’affaires in Moscow, became the tour de force that derailed previous analysis of the U.S. response to the Soviet Union. It uprooted the efforts of Bohlen and Geroid T. Robinson of Columbia University, both of whom had been cautious and hesitant about drawing a coherent picture of Soviet aims and ambitions.⁴ In Kennan’s depiction, Soviet leaders came across as obscurantist thugs, jittery, xenophobic, lacking in sophistication, seeing “centres of world significance”—one socialist, the other capitalist.⁵ Repression was their métier, and the outside world was seen as “evil, hostile.” Leaders in Moscow believed in no “permanent modus vivendi” with the United States. The “Long Telegram” is part psychological, part biological, combining internalized fear with a biological metaphor of inevitable decay—the Soviet system contains the “seeds of its own destruction.” Gaddis himself adds a medical dimension, seeing the telegram as an X-ray to clarify, comprehend, and resolve the situation with a program of treatment.⁶ Of greater interest, perhaps, is Gaddis’s contention that the telegram did not really state anything new. But it was the longest telegram in State Department history (albeit not 8,000 words but 5,000) and was perfectly timed.

The “Long Telegram” traveled far and wide, an unusual fate for a classified document that might, at the best of times, find a narrow readership. In time, it assumed a mystique. Other sources, interpretations, and suggested approaches to the Soviet Union were diminished and downplayed. Frank Roberts of the British Foreign Office, who was Kennan’s analytical counterpart, was eclipsed, and his messages to British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin were largely forgotten. Kennan is celebrated as the master interpreter of Soviet in-

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 684.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 227; and John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, rev. ed. (New York; Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 219.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

tentions, and Gaddis cites Roberts: “George was the great expert and I benefited enormously from this.” The Soviet ambassador in Washington, Nikolai Novikov, is treated as an intellectual buffoon of sorts. “Kennan enjoyed imagining how Molotov might have put it: ‘Why haven’t you produced anything like this?’” The “Long Telegram” is thus ensured its immortal gloss, and Novikov is mocked for assuming that the Anglo-American alliance would crumble, a misunderstanding that stems from his failure to grasp Britain’s willingness to yield to American power and take on a modern-day role as Greece’s adviser to the new Rome.⁷

Kennan followed the telegram with “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, presenting the rationale of “a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Containment would bring about a peaceful dissolution or “gradual mellowing” of the Soviet Union, he argued. Gaddis rightly points out that Kennan’s analyses of the Soviet Union for the most part are historical surveys. They are shot through with Gibbon-like overtones, most certainly with regard to overstretch and inevitable decline. The Soviet Union, Kennan suggests in his essay “Russia’s International Position at the Close of the War with Germany” might eventually suffer from its desire to hold “in submission distant peoples.”⁸

Gaddis, for all his praise of Kennan, still leaves room for the reader to wonder whether he truly approves of Kennan’s line toward Moscow. “His language did imply relinquishing the initiative to the Kremlin,” which is hardly the same thing as what Kennan actually says in the “X” article—“the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy.”⁹ Gaddis is right to say that Kennan might have revised his draft to take into account the Truman Doctrine, which had already taken shape a month beforehand, though the language of the X article is slippery. This point is often lost in the more popular conceptions of how the Truman Doctrine came about. Kennan’s advisory notes reached a degree of notoriety precisely because they adopted a less conciliatory pose, much to the indignation of such figures as Walter Lippmann. Kennan, critics said, had junked the prospects for diplomacy, but in fact he never actually agreed with Harry Truman’s declared position.

Kennan’s statements have a persistent tone of prophetic import that also goes beyond his two most famous documents. His time as director of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department was critical. His documents from

7. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 195, 614

9. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

that period are filled with historical analysis and pronouncements. Policy documents such as PPS/35, “The Attitude of This Government towards Events in Yugoslavia,” examining Moscow’s condemnation of the Yugoslav Communists in June 1948 for deviationist tendencies, is one key example. Josip Broz Tito’s reaction demonstrated how “the aura of mystical omnipotence and infallibility which has surrounded the Kremlin power has been broken.” Gaddis rightly emphasizes the importance of the document in setting out several propositions that shaped U.S. policy at early stages of the Cold War: that Communism was not necessarily a monolithic entity; that Washington’s cooperation with some Communist regimes to contain others was perfectly feasible, even warranted; that the domestic character of government mattered less than its international conduct. Kennan’s lectures such as the Chichele series at Oxford University repeat the historical analysis of the “Long Telegram” in discussing the observations made by Astolphe Louis Lénor, Marquis de Custine during his trip through Russia in *La Russe en 1839*. Custine may have been unduly harsh about Nicholas I, but he was accurate in anticipating the emergence of a regime such as Stalin’s. The ingredients were already there: absolute, concentrated power, a cult of personality, officially promoted xenophobia, appearance over reality, the use of falsehood, the rewriting of history.¹⁰

Other historical aspects of Kennan’s policy reports are worth noting. His interest in the character-forming influence of conditions such as climate and environment resonates with the approaches of Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu. Soviet leaders were, as Kennan writes in his essay “Russia—Seven Years Later,” accustomed to “extreme cold and extreme heat, prolonged sloth and sudden feats of energy, exaggerated cruelty and exaggerated kindness.”¹¹ For Montesquieu, as stated in his 1748 *Spirit of the Laws (De l’esprit des lois)*, his primary text on the origins of laws, climate and geography were indispensable to character formation. To understand a country’s government, one needs to examine environment. Pertinent here is Montesquieu’s impression of the Russians—“you must flay a Muscovite alive to make him feel.” Heat makes slavery understandable. Soil can also be read as a critical feature in the way governments are formed. Republics will arise where soil is barren; monarchies where the grounds are rich. The latter is justified on the basis that monarchy provides security, and a country with rich earth is a disincentive against change.

In this regard, Kennan, whether consciously or not, also owes a debt to his literary hero Anton Chekhov, whose play *Uncle Vanya* refers to countries

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 322–323, 619

11. *Ibid.*, p. 186

“with a mild climate.” In such places, “less effort is expended on the struggle with nature and man is kinder and gentler.”

Evolution of Thought

Gaddis highlights Kennan’s sense of regret, which was a major part of his personality. Kennan tried to disavow the golem he had created. Images of unity were needed, a universal strategy minted. For the Truman administration, soothsaying was less reliable than immediate action. This became all too evident when Truman convened the special National Security Council committee on the issue of pursuing the hydrogen bomb—the “super” option. Both Paul Nitze and Kennan wrote reports. Nitze argued that the United States could not afford to find itself in a position of “technological inferiority in this field.” Kennan, the modern-day Cassandra, warned that nuclear weapons had no feasible political purpose, though he did advocate a platform of “minimum deterrence.”¹² This did not earn him plaudits from Secretary of State Dean Acheson. On 14 April 1950, the NSC 68 document, “United States Objectives and Programs for Nuclear Security,” drafted under Nitze’s leadership, laid out a more aggressive posture for the administration, positing that “a defeat of free institutions anywhere” was a “defeat everywhere.” Although NSC 68 did not gain official standing until after the shock of North Korea’s attack on South Korea, the agenda it laid out was clearly meant to be a break with the past, playing up the Soviet threat and eliminating distinctions about which interests were vital and which peripheral. For Kennan, the document assumed “a static world”; it was, as Acheson subsequently admitted, suitably alarmist to get attention and spur action.¹³

In later decades, Kennan disputed the way containment was interpreted and made hostage to various designs. Gaddis lacks sympathy with that element of Kennan’s project and ends up struggling with the subject he so admires. Late in the book, Gaddis evaluates Kennan’s response to the ultraconservative Committee on Present Danger and his assortment of views in which he is deemed “an impressionist, a poet, not an earthling.”¹⁴

One gets the sense that Gaddis would have preferred it if Kennan had kept away from analyzing the United States altogether. After all, it was a country he disliked. In a moment of dissatisfaction in 1935, he scribbled to his sister, Jeanette, that, “I hate democracy; I hate the press. . . . I hate the

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 378, 380.

13. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 391.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 638.

‘peepul’; I have become clearly un-American.” For Kennan at this stage, the United States was corrupt, boring, leaderless, polluted, “and pervaded by such loneliness that the entire country seemed populated by refugees from Edward Hopper paintings. It was as if the New Deal had never happened.”¹⁵ This is Gaddis scolding his subject.

Gaddis is certainly right here in one respect. Kennan had not evaluated the strands of thinking evident in U.S. foreign policy to appreciate how the country might have responded. Despite his ruminations about Soviet ideology and its Russian impress, he never seriously considered how the various schools of American thinking might react to “Sources of Soviet Conduct.” For him, the United States had been become “childish and naïve” and had ignored the lessons of the historians Brooks Adams and Henry Adams on the decline of British hegemony and increased industrialization. Kennan had been born into the Booth Tarkington “innocence of America” prior to World War I, suggesting how much he actually misread, or ignored, the imperial politics of the United States during that same period. Would the United States be self-consciously messianic, meddlesome, intrusive? No empire can claim to be otherwise. For Odd Arne Westad, the cast of American ideas created a lexical mold that gave us a “Cold War.” For Anders Stephanson, the strong binary image of “freedom” and “slavery” prevail with force, an inescapable leitmotif for U.S. policymakers. What we have here is a classic reversal of positions—Kennan feeling less sharp on the United States; Gaddis showing a jaundiced view of the Soviet Union.

Kennan’s Flaws

Kennan had great strengths but also severe flaws. Although his legacy is undeniable, his imperfections were immense. Gaddis feels that “greatness” is a creature of many forms, but greatness is often a cruel distortion, a needless addition that distorts the interpretation of history. Historians too often have inflated Kennan, pumping him up with a certain degree of undeserved air. Henry Kissinger notes in a lengthy review of Gaddis’s book that Kennan “never rose above director of policy planning at the State Department,” was ambassador to Moscow for only five months in 1952, and served as ambassador in Yugoslavia for only two years in the 1960s.¹⁶

If Kennan was accepted as an analyst of some weight, he was light when it

15. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

16. Henry Kissinger, “The Age of Kennan,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 10 November 2011, pp. 1, 14–15.

came to the practice of diplomacy. He was hardly diplomatic, a serious drawback in the profession, accounting for his early recall from the Soviet Union in 1952. Nor was Kennan able to stomach the slippery, cunning Tito, whose neutralist posturing baffled him. Gaddis convincingly shows these sides, revealing that Kennan never found work in the Foreign Service particularly rewarding.¹⁷

Kennan was also hopelessly romantic, seeking through his diplomatic and cultural interests to capture a country that no longer existed—a Russia untouched by the Bolsheviks, a Russia confined to classical print in which the sovereigns and aristocrats were Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy. If Kennan disliked the United States, he fantasized, indulged, and obsessed over a non-existent order in Russia. Such impressions make one wonder how much Kennan did, in fact, miss about his subject. The infatuated rarely see much (or perhaps too much), and precisely because he was, as Søren Kierkegaard might have said, jealous of the past, he seemed to be in a state of permanent mourning. (One thinks of the lines from the opening act of Chekhov's *The Seagull*: "I'm in mourning for my life.")

Gaddis also notes Kennan's psychological fragility, a feature that might well have impaired his assessments. Having assumed the mantle of "Delphic oracle" in 1948, he became, by the end of that year, a bypassed figure. To the students of the National War College, he spoke about the "rich man" who is "rarely loved and never pitied." The United States at war's end possessed 50 percent of the world's wealth but just 6 percent of the world's population. Being a victim was dangerous. From April to December 1948, the "objective" position of the United States could hardly have changed. To Gaddis, Kennan was doing a bit of his own projecting—"because Washington was no longer going his way, the world was no longer going Washington's way." When the U.S. student movement was radicalized in the 1960s, Kennan again did his bit of projection, though this time sounding like a Soviet apparatchik in suggesting the creation of special prisons for "political offenders."¹⁸

Kennan also made a few howlers. His suggestion that the Chinese Nationalists be ejected from Taiwan was politely seen as having been born of madness. He also got the German issue wrong, reversing his position on a divided Germany from approval to disapproval because of his belief that a state of division would uphold a power balance in Europe. Earlier he had failed to see the moves and rationale that led to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. He saw, in fact, a more probable alignment by Germany with France or Britain. For that reason, smugness about Novikov's prediction about the eventual

17. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 203.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 336, 611.

collapse of the British and U.S. alliance is unwarranted. As the journalist Claude Cockburn noted in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the pact, a British official in the Foreign Office had proclaimed, “All the Isms are Wasms.” Kennan was merely mortal, attempting to shape policy more as prophet than as decision-maker.¹⁹

Kennan’s Parting Words

Containment as a doctrine is what it is: imprecise and the product of intense anxiety and uncertainty. For Kennan it was merely a stage in moving toward a better relationship with the Soviet Union, a means to “end the Cold War; not to freeze it in place.”²⁰ Containment, as a policy species, is a fence-sitting creature. Under the logic of containment, one is perching oneself in a halfway house—on the one hand, refusing to abstain from conflict, yet undertaking no direct action against the object of concern. Nitze’s NSC 68 and “rollback” were understandable outcomes, suggesting a policy of action rather than mere reflection.

The Cold War posture that Kennan helped set into place rested on the impression of permanent Soviet hostility and the possible future emergence of a military imbalance. Gaddis’s point that Stalin himself was first an ideologue before becoming a realist is equally applicable to U.S. policymakers. To his last days, Kennan realized the limits of U.S. foreign policy, something many of his critics never did. His failings in seeing the future were not as important as his interest in the relationship between policy and international structures. “If you think that our life here at home has meritorious aspects worthy of emulation by peoples elsewhere, the best way to recommend them is, as John Quincy Adams maintained, not by preaching at others but by the force of example.”²¹

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 330, 357.

20. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 312.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 403