

## Gaddis's Kennan: A Different Kennan?

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Some anxiety attached, one imagines, to John Gaddis's drawn-out enterprise of authorized biography. George F. Kennan was a public intellectual of extraordinary intricacy, both personal and political, and he wrote incessantly and often in impressive prose about himself, publishing two volumes of memoirs, of which the first is nothing short of an American classic. So Gaddis faced considerable competition from Kennan himself. There is the further problem that Gaddis, a highly political historian, is not given to intricacy. His strength (and weakness) has always been his capacity to simplify, to impose some (his) kind of sense and order on the vast and multifarious, transparency on the opaque, ideology on the diffuse—none of which can easily or properly be done to and on Kennan. There is also the troublesome fact that Kennan and Gaddis, during the unexpectedly many years this remained an official project in the making, diverged radically in their political views, the former becoming an ever more trenchant critic of U.S. globalism, which the latter heartily endorsed (with suitable “grand-strategic” provisos). Gaddis, not to put too fine a point on it, is an unreconstructed Cold Warrior, a position whose most eloquent critic within the establishment was none other than Kennan himself. Finally, Gaddis would have known all along that, no matter how much the foreign policy elite believes him to be the diplomatic historian par excellence, his ultimate reputation in the profession would rest on how well he executed the present task. Never really given to writing monographs, he was now charged with writing one on a topic of uncommon difficulty.

Gaddis, realizing all this, has written an eminently useful account of Kennan's long life but has eschewed any extensive attempt to come to terms with his unwieldy subject. By this I mean that Gaddis sticks mostly to “what happened” and avoids strong, analytical takes, as well as any ambition to psychological insight beyond the perfunctory observation that Kennan's mother died when he was an infant. As Gaddis himself put it recently, “there is no theory of Kennan” in the book. The exception, not surprisingly, concerns the Cold War and attendant issues of “grand strategy,” which is Gaddis's hobby-

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horse; and here the argument is as predictable as it is simple. Kennan was essentially right about the Soviet Union in the “Long Telegram”; Kennan was essentially wrong throughout about the United States; Kennan, as he turned critical of the U.S. Cold War position, became alienated, emotional, poetic, prophetic, ethereally mistaken; Kennan was therefore tragically incapable of grasping that Ronald Reagan was the true fulfillment of himself when Kennan was prophetically right as opposed to prophetically wrong. This is the core “argument” in all its essentials, and its historical development covers about a third of the 700 pages of text. The rest, a little on the flat side, is a necessarily brisk but stimulating narration of a long life.

One might think that the absence of a powerful perspective on the non-Cold War aspects is a huge drawback in a biography of this scope, and that the whole point of biography is precisely to give the reader an interesting angle and assessment. I, however, think Gaddis was wise to take the approach he did, because the alternative might well have produced a disaster. The book, as it is, does tell us a good deal about Kennan (and some things about Gaddis). Kennan’s practical command of diplomatic procedure, his organizational qualities, and his sense for negotiating tactics, qualities often overlooked in summaries of his “career,” are properly emphasized, as is his capacity to write powerful history (though not until late in his life did Kennan acquire the confidence to transcend the empiricism of his early monographs and write the masterpiece of diplomatic history that is *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order*). One wonders nonetheless why Gaddis did not do more, within his own frame, to explore the personal aspects such as the nature of Kennan’s relation with Charles Bohlen. Gaddis also writes surprisingly little about the historical settings of Kennan’s life. Kennan lived in Berlin during the later stages of the Weimar period and then again in the frenzied Nazi years 1938–1941. Gaddis had a golden opportunity to write something truly interesting and comparative about Kennan and Berlin or about Berlin and Kennan, but evidently he does not dare to go there. It may be that Kennan failed to provide any sparkling stuff on the topic at the time, but Gaddis had years of unlimited access to his subject’s retroactive thinking.

Much more could be said about this and about the genre of biography, a genre Gaddis has studied and prepared himself for extensively even though his propensities lie elsewhere. For the purposes of this forum, however, I will center my attention on the cluster of problems relating to foreign relations and the Cold War.

First, a word about the “diaries,” to which Gaddis had exclusive access during the writing (along with other papers not included in Kennan’s public collection at Princeton). As indicated by the excerpts Kennan published in his *Memoirs* and other reminiscences, they are not on the whole diaries in the

conventional sense; that is, in the way the diaries of, say, Harold Nicolson (to take an example from roughly the same world—a diplomat, historian, public figure) are diaries: jottings as to what happened today, notes about curious incidents, impressions of notable people I chatted with, musings about current events, and so on. Kennan's diaries are symptomatically heterogeneous. Often (and increasingly over time) they take the form of essays or memoranda. When more "personal," they concern chiefly his own inner state of mind (not least his dreams) as opposed to the character of other people or his interactions with them. "People" rarely appear as individual subjects of analysis. His diary essays may contain peasants, but they are figures in a tableau, part of a unified landscape seen from a vantage point some considerable distance away. The diaries exhibit a curious polarity: either Kennan is immersed in endless explorations of his own state of mind or he observes from afar, always as a distancing operation of nigh-on modernist implications. Rarely, if ever, does one get an interesting account of actual people in his vicinity. Kennan goes to Norway in the early 1930s to see his forthcoming in-laws for the first time and writes extensively about the setting but not a word (as I recall) about the character of the individuals. The lack of any such discussion is deeply disappointing insofar as Kennan met and dealt with some extraordinarily important historical figures. It is deeply disappointing, too, that when we come to the crucial years of his ascendancy, the diaries suddenly stop. There is nothing, not a word, from 1947.

Accordingly, one learns nothing about Kennan's private reaction to Walter Lippmann's critique of the "X" article in September 1947, a subject I suspect was Kennan's epiphany on the road to Damascus: a tremendous ego boost to have the pundit of pundits devote no less than fourteen columns to this one effort in *Foreign Affairs* but also an equally tremendous body blow. Gaddis reduces Lippmann's critique to the strategic problem of putting the United States in the position of an ill-defined response to Soviet initiative. Yet Kennan's monumental shift in 1948 corresponded to a prior and more fundamental thesis Lippmann had advanced: that the Soviet Union was not abnormal but essentially just acting in recognizable and traditional ways to assert a series of geopolitical claims in Europe—claims to which the United States and other Western countries should respond in recognizable and traditional ways. In a word, contrary to the "X" article, the Soviet Union and the West were not separated by some yawning abyss of Wittgensteinian incommensurability by way of discourse, culture, and feeling. Geopolitics, as Lippmann rightly insisted, does not require "intimacy" for its conduct. To think otherwise is to fall into typical U.S. universalism, the kind of excess encapsulated in the Truman Doctrine. Kennan, whatever his immediate reaction and inevitable agony, came during the ensuing year to articulate a Lippmannesque policy, out-

standingly on Germany, and over the next half century his own critique of the Cold War echoed and extended Lippmann's critique of September 1947.

Here lies the crux of the matter, and so of Gaddis's edifice as well. Everything turns on two issues. The first is "the Soviet issue" itself. The divergence between Kennan and Lippmann on this matter in September 1947 hinges on the notion of "normality." Difference is inscribed in the world, but in Kennan's depiction as opposed to Lippmann's the Soviet regime is and has always been abnormal, alien, and hostile, and now because of World War II was also dangerously placed: an abnormality piled on an abnormality, as it were. From the moment Kennan began seriously pondering the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and into the summer of 1948, he ultimately declined to recognize Moscow's legitimacy as an international actor (he did not consider the Nazi regime, unpleasant and aggressive though it might be, equally beyond the pale until the war). The "Long Telegram" and the "X" article express this posture. Their specific accounts of the Soviet Union and its foreign relations are empirically wrong and strangely structured: wrong in denying that Moscow had ever made "deals" and compromises when in fact it had made a whole string of them, as Kennan well knew; strange in rooting Soviet policy wholly in domestic sources as though the outside world had no meaning except as a construction set forth to legitimate the regime at home. Astonishingly, the massive, near-death experience of the Soviet Union in World War II is almost entirely absent from the article. Suppose the United States had gone through a similar experience, the area between the Rockies and the industrial northeast had been essentially leveled by the Wehrmacht, 25 million had been killed, New York had been under siege for 900 days, and New Yorkers, the lucky ones, had been forced to eat rats while Washington was being bombarded. Can one imagine a persuasive postwar analysis of U.S. foreign policy that largely ignored such a sequence of events? I think not (and one can visualize the kind of security claims the U.S. government would have insisted on afterward). Yet, despite the antinomies and palpable errors of the "Long Telegram" and subsequent "X" article, they were received with a stupefied sense of discovery, a discovery of "truth revealed." Lippmann never fell into that trap, and Kennan himself, once confronted with the effects of the truth revealed, which is to say the Cold War, began to look for alternatives and ways to reconstitute some kind of diplomacy proper.

The "normality" argument did not go away. It was famously resurrected in 1967 by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in *Foreign Affairs*; and Gaddis reiterates it now again in celebrating the virtues of the Long Telegram. In fact, the Soviet Union proved remarkably orthodox in its devotion to power politics and classical European notions of international relations. What was really "wrong" with Iosif Stalin was, one might say, his abnormal "normality"—his hyper-

realist reduction of all meaning to pure and ruthless interest. This was a man who had had *The Prince* translated for himself and then marked it up with care.

Thus one might have chosen another basis for rejecting dealings with Moscow; for example, on ethical grounds: “this regime is a horrible dictatorship and, regardless of what we said and did during our wartime alliance, one must not accept such a regime *qua* regime.” This is a coherent position but notoriously difficult to maintain insofar as, typically, one has to distinguish this particular dictatorship by degree from others that are worth dealing with. Right-wing dictatorships aside, the ethical aspect as regards “Communism” was soon effectively discarded because of the need to support Josip Broz Tito’s regime in Yugoslavia. In treating this issue, Gaddis seems to favor the idea that “domestic” Communism was of no real (i.e., strategic) concern to the United States as long as it did not support Moscow and expansionism in foreign affairs. The effortless oscillation between quasi-realist pragmatism and Cold War ideology is in itself characteristic of the Cold War *as actual geopolitics*: “freedom, indivisible and sacred, will everywhere be defended by the Leader of the Free World, but it may be that we are not really capable of doing that so China (1948–49) will have to be written off, though we will not put it exactly like that and certainly not in public.”

With regard to China, “normality” is a peculiar index of propriety if one recalls that the United States happily formed a *de facto* alliance at a later stage with Maoist China, which was then still in one of its most radical phases—more radical, arguably, than the Soviet counterpart had ever been. The response, visible by implication in Gaddis, is again some version of strategic pragmatism, sharply at variance with the basic precepts of Cold War ideology proper. So we end up in the safe lawyerly hands of Dean Acheson: “there might be all manner of conceptual problems in all this but when push comes to shove, the amalgam works for the best of all possible worlds and certainly for my client.” Acheson, not surprisingly, is Gaddis’s alternative in the wings, hauled forth when need be to demonstrate the essential rationality of the real. *Things could not have been otherwise.*

Acheson’s “amalgam” brings us to the second issue, which is the abnormality not of the Soviet Union but of the United States. As Kennan soon discovered (and had somehow long suspected), it was in fact the United States that deviated from the standards of the traditional (Eurocentric) order of things. For Lippmann and Kennan the world was not unitary, nor should it necessarily be so. “Universalism” in the form of an asymmetric counter-concept as exemplified in the Truman Doctrine was thus artificial superimposition, an abstraction that had nothing to do with the Real. Kennan did not at this stage (spring 1947) see fit to challenge the error head-on because he was

on his way up, and in essence the actual policy turned out to be the particularist Marshall Aid (offered, absurdly, to the very same world-conquering totalitarian regime that the Truman Doctrine had identified as a mortal enemy only three months earlier). The question then becomes whether one can combine political universalism (the natural, free world versus the parasitic, totalitarian netherworld with which no traditional relations are possible) with *strategic* particularism (balancing means and ends in terms of a certain force field of power and priorities). The answer of the Truman Doctrine seems to be no. The answer of NSC 68, which is an elaboration of the doctrine, is unequivocally no. The answer of John Lewis Gaddis is yes, and that answer, concretely, is called Grand Strategy as quasi-realist adjustment. The answer of Lippmann, and eventually Kennan (in PPS 23), is that the question is wrongly posed and indeed meaningless. The identitarian notion of “the world” is mistaken insofar as the world is heterogeneous. Kennan’s rejection of universalism in the name of “particularism” is thus both ontological and strategic. (He was not even entirely sure, come to that, about the value of the United States on the world scene.) Hence his “minimalism”—the less the United States was called on to do in the world, the better. For Kennan, nothing could be worse than the massive globalism that followed.

This much is well known. A more interesting pursuit in the present circumstances is to ask what, precisely, Kennan “did” for the American amalgam, what kind of function he performed. To put it a bit more polemically in Lenin’s probably apocryphal term, how did Kennan become a “useful idiot”?

The immediate and simple answer is of course that he provided the grounds on which one could forever bracket real (meaning traditional) foreign relations with the Soviet Union, technically making the demand that the regime voluntarily and fundamentally change itself the precondition for the conduct of negotiations on matters of mutual concern. In 1952, Kennan himself captured the essence of this position as “comparable to the policy of unconditional surrender in the recent war.”<sup>1</sup>

Just so. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s formula for dealing with the fascist forces in wartime had been transposed successfully into the Cold War frame of (non-)dealing with the Communist world in would-be peacetime: unconditional surrender. One might even fit Roosevelt’s simile of the “rattlesnake” into the “Long Telegram.” There can be no compromise with a rattlesnake. You either kill it or contain it in a safe spot, far out in the desert. (The analogy then falters because rattlesnakes are not like Kennan’s parasites or cancerous tumors that will die when contained.) Roosevelt maintained the qualitative difference within “totalitarianism” between Nazi Germany and the Stalinist

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 443.

Soviet Union, seeing the ultimately conservative imperatives of the latter. What was useful about Kennan's analyses, by contrast, was the erasure of that difference, even though he himself qualified matters at the level of tactics and was really more interested in the Soviet Union *sui generis* than in any extensive identity/comparison. The upshot of his dictated sermon of February 1946, then, was precisely what the doctor ordered, an eloquent recital of all the conceivable reasons diplomacy with the Soviet regime was not only hopeless but downright counterproductive. Feat accomplished, any further analyses of the Soviet Union, in particular attempts to figure out realistic compromises with it, were profoundly unwelcome because they could only dissolve the amalgam.

Kennan never grasped this, or, more accurately, he grasped it only after the "disengagement controversy" in 1957–1958. Bracketing the Soviet Union was essential if one wanted to address Acheson's problem, which was the abnormality of the United States. Kennan's analyses are thus the answer to the Collingwoodian question about what was needed to make indisputable the legitimacy of the global expansion of the United States in peacetime and the conclusion of numerous entangling alliances as the centerpiece of that expansion, not to mention an unlimited arms race and risks of nuclear war on several occasions. The Republicans, with some partial exceptions such as Robert Taft, signed up as indeed they had to, which was the point. They could complain that it was too expensive and would perpetuate the un-American, "socialistic" state, the Rooseveltian legacy. Conversely, they could complain that the Democrats were not doing enough to combat the enemy. Yet complain was all they could do. Once the notion was accepted that Stalin was essentially just Adolf Hitler in another form and that the story about "isolationism" in the 1930s culminating in Pearl Harbor was self-evident, the larger argument was over. The price for the winning side, then, was overcommitment by way of universal principle, the problem of never quite being able to do enough in view of the fantastic threat, as well as the political embarrassment of leaving "the satellites" to their fate. For if the real objective had been to "liberate" Eastern Europe and ultimately change the Soviet Union, a much better alternative could have been found in Kennan's realism after 1948. That, alas, was not the real objective. A strong thaw would in fact have been deeply worrisome.

Gaddis, on reflection, might well have agreed with this and gone on to take the other side of the argument. What he does is less interesting and indeed a bit tiresome. Having said that Kennan was essentially right in 1946–1947, he faced the task of figuring out what to do with half a century's worth of withering Cold War critique, which in effect repudiated his erstwhile position. The predictable solution is a bracketing operation of another order:

Kennan the Early Prophet eventually proved right in the Age of Reagan when containment finally brought to maturity the Soviet regime's "seeds of its own destruction," a regime that had been so alien to Mother Russia. Meanwhile, Kennan the Late Prophet lost his way amid his emotions, his often charming eccentricities, and his fixations on cultural degeneration in the West, all of which prevented him, tragically, from reconciling himself to the Truth of Reagan. Kennan's half-century of critique, then, can be safely quarantined within a realm of egocentric peculiarity. The truth of the Cold War is duly preserved.

I myself happen to think that Kennan was quite right in castigating Reagan as an egregiously irresponsible figure, a figure who, like Gaddis himself, seems to have been surprised that Soviet leaders actually believed there was danger afoot when the United States moved massively to resurrect the Cold War in the name of erasing the "Evil Empire" and so brought the world yet again, unnecessarily, to the brink of nuclear liquidation.