

Reply to the Commentaries

❖ John Lewis Gaddis

This is the second set of commissioned Kennan biography reviews to which I have responded. Not wanting to repeat what I said earlier on the H-Diplo website, I will confine these comments to one general observation, a few clarifications, and a concluding remark.¹

The observation is that, despite the book's 800 pages of text and notes, several of the *Journal of Cold War Studies* reviewers wanted it to be longer. Barton J. Bernstein finds the biography's treatment of Kennan's assessment of the Cuban missile crisis a "dismaying lacuna" and also wants more about Kennan's views on the nuclear bomb, the Berlin crises, the Suez crisis, the Vietnam and Iraq wars, American exceptionalism, and the 2003 Iraq War. David Mayers asks for more on Kennan the political philosopher, despite having himself written extensively about this topic.² James Wallace sees in the biography's insufficient attention to religion an absence of "theological aptitude" on my part—I am sure he is right—and corrects the deficiency with his own article-length essay. Vít Smetana wishes I had said more about Eastern Europe. Finally, Anders Stephanson regrets the biography's lack of "intricacy," a quality to which, he perceptively adds, its author is "not given."

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but not, apparently, these *JCWS* reviewers. Having specified what I should have added to the book, they say nothing about what I should have cut from it. I could, I suppose, have tried to include everything, as Robert Caro appears to be doing for Lyndon Johnson; but neither Kennan nor my publisher nor I ever considered multiple volumes. Nor did I want a single volume of such heft that, as with the old *Columbia Encyclopedia*, one would risk injury carrying it about. That limited me pretty much, therefore, to the size of the book I wrote. Whether my reviewers should have embraced the principle of zero-based commentary—

1. See *H-DIPLO Roundtable Reviews*, Vol. 13, No. 24 (26 April 2012), <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIII-24.pdf>.

2. David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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showing what should go to make room for whatever should come—is a question only they can answer. I did have to wrestle with it, though, and it would have been helpful to see them also do so.

All biographies encompass, in one form or another, the literary equivalent of architectural design. Caro's is sprawl, which is why, when I read him, I am reminded of the Dallas/Fort Worth airport. Wallace, I assume, favors Frank Gehry, with bulbous protuberances—in this case, much more on Kennan and religion—looming asymmetrically. Stephanson's fondness for intricacy reflects the baroque style, in which no surface is unornamented, and no conclusion unqualified. Curlicues are all you see.

My own preference is for a Palladian approach to biography, in which symmetry is prized, as is simplicity. Palladian buildings have their tallest points at the center—a dome, perhaps, or a gently peaked roof—while tapering off proportionately at the sides. Ornamentation is kept to a minimum, and there is a reasonably clear relationship between form and function.

The reason this is right for biography is that great lives share distinctive and universal dimensions. The distinctive ones make the biography worth writing. The universal ones are where we all come from—childhood and adolescence—and where we are all going—toward old age and death. Distinctive lives would seem artificial without these universals as brackets. But to give equal space to the universals—to turn a life into a desk calendar—would defeat the purpose of the biography in the first place.³

That is why I devoted only 38 pages to the first 21 years of Kennan's life, and 17 pages to his last 14 years. But the seven years of Kennan's greatest influence within the government—1945 through 1952—get 276 pages, 40 percent of the book. The center, in the Palladian manner, stands taller than the two sides. That is obviously inappropriate for an unfinished life, like that of John F. Kennedy, but it is so common a pattern for most biographies that readers rarely even notice it. Biographers, however, surely do.

No two of them will balance compression and dilation in exactly the same way, even if they are writing about the same person. That is why there is no single right way to compose a biography, any more than there is to design a building or to paint a picture.⁴ But biographies, buildings, and pictures all do exist within *frames*—a page limit, a construction site, the size of a canvas—and these determine relationships between the parts and the whole. It is with respect to these that criticism can proceed most usefully.

Now a few specific responses to the commentaries.

3. Virginia Woolf experiments briefly with this method in her novel *Orlando* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956, first published in 1928), p. 266.

4. See Winston S. Churchill, *Painting as a Pastime* (London: Unicorn Press, 2013, first published in 1921–1922).

James Hershberg and Smetana are puzzled by my subtitle, *An American Life*, and they are hardly alone. What I had in mind was both a literal meaning—Kennan *was* an American—and a more subtle one. Vladimir Pechatnov gets it when he writes that Kennan’s “cultural alienation from American life” coexisted alongside “a deep faith in the country.” Wilson D. Miscamble expands on this in the H-Diplo roundtable by pointing out that Old Testament prophets loved and hated their countries at the same time.⁵ Kennan held his country (and himself) to impossibly high standards, then hated it (and himself) for failing to live up to them. He was, in this harsh sense, an American patriot. I only wish I had explained this in the book as clearly as Pechatnov and Miscamble have.

Mayers suggests a more complex explanation than I provided for Kennan’s expulsion from the Soviet Union while serving as ambassador in 1952. He may be right. But Soviet diplomats, who had reason to know, later accounted for the event much as I do.⁶ I preferred to rely on them, not on what—with presently available evidence—can only be speculation.

Ivan Kurilla questions the level of American expertise on the Soviet Union in the 1930s (despite the evidence for it that I provide on p. 302) and then challenges my claim that Kennan was explaining the country better than its own citizens were doing. Perhaps I should have said, “than its own citizens were able to do, given the intimidating effects of Stalin’s terror.”

Wallace writes that I retain possession of the Kennan dream diary. Not so. Kennan encouraged me to take it, as I explain in the preface, but after copying it I returned it the next time I was able to do so personally.

Binoy Kampmark leaves the impression that I called Kennan “a poet, not an earthling.” That famous characterization, as is made clear in the biography, is from Eugene V. Rostow.⁷

Finally, several comments on Bernstein. He writes of my apparent surprise “that Kennan tried various social roles [at Princeton], rejected them, and moved on over time during his four years there.” But my surprise was not apparent to me. I do, after all, teach Yale undergraduates, and I am aware that they do move on over time. I doubt that Princeton undergraduates in the 1920s were all that different. Bernstein also finds me “harsh” in calling the young Kennan, upon his graduation, a “chameleon.”⁸ If Bernstein had checked my note, however, he would have found that the image comes from

5. Wilson D. Miscamble, “Review by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., Notre Dame University,” *H-DIPLO Roundtable Reviews*, Vol. 13, No. 24 (26 April 2012), pp. 41–45, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIII-24.pdf>.

6. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), pp. 473–474.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 638.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

James Axtell, who in his history of Princeton describes all undergraduates as having the changeability of such creatures. Neither he, nor I, am literally calling them lizards.

Citing as his evidence only my own “difficulty with economics,” Bernstein assures us that Kennan in fact came from a “very well to do family” in Milwaukee, and that he had a “relatively handsome income” as a young Foreign Service officer. That would surely have surprised Kennan, who contracted a near-fatal case of scarlet fever while trying to earn train fare home for Christmas during his freshman year at Princeton, who lost what little money he had inherited in the Great Depression, and who as late as 1950 could not afford the \$75 registration fee for his 25th-year Princeton class reunion.⁹

Bernstein is similarly cavalier about sources when he says that I “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.” They go unmentioned because they did not happen. I expressed doubts about the invasion before it took place, and afterward criticized it.¹⁰ My only involvement with presidential speechwriting was to suggest, for President George W. Bush’s second inaugural address, an emphasis on “ending tyranny” rather than on “promoting democracy.” I stand by that recommendation, the relevance of which to the Kennan biography remains to me unclear.¹¹

Finally, a word about an argument that shows up in several of these reviews, as well as others published elsewhere. It simply cannot be, these reviewers insist, that there was any kind of Kennan-Reagan convergence, as I argue in chapter 24 of the biography. So let me be clear about what I claim. It is not that Kennan approved of Reagan while he was in office. He strongly disapproved, and he did not begin to moderate his views until the mid-1990s.¹² Nor am I claiming that Reagan, at any point, was *directly* influenced by Kennan: I know of no evidence to support that proposition.

Convergences, however, bring viewpoints into alignment from different starting points, and that is what I am saying happened here: first, that Reagan’s national security strategy was closer than that of any previous U.S. president to what Kennan’s had been in 1946–1948; and second, that only Reagan, among U.S. presidents, shared Kennan’s conviction that nuclear weapons

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 64–65, 394.

10. See John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy of Transformation,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 133 (November–December 2002), pp. 50–57; John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 95–107; and John Lewis Gaddis, “Bush and the World: Grand Strategy in the Second Term,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (January/February 2005), pp. 2–15.

11. For more on this, see John Lewis Gaddis, “Ending Tyranny: The History of an Idea,” *The American Interest*, Vol. 4 (September/October 2008), pp. 6–15.

12. Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 671.

were a moral abomination and should be abolished. Both claims are thoroughly documented in the biography.

To brush them aside with the insistence that this could never have happened is to say that sources do not matter. That may be political science, where saving the theory is usually more important than consulting the archives. It may also be political correctness, to which even historians can at times succumb. But it is not real history.

My thanks to all who contributed to this roundtable, and to Mark Kramer and the *Journal of Cold War Studies* for having arranged it.