

Kennan and Containment: A Comment¹

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George Kennan has both made history as a State Department Soviet expert and shaped our vision of it with his engaging memoirs. John L. Gaddis is an accomplished historian, widely praised for his work on the early cold war. An essay by Gaddis on Kennan ["Containment: A Reassessment"], prepared for the thirtieth anniversary of the appearance of the "X" article in *Foreign Affairs* [vol. 55, no. 4 (July, 1977), pp. 873-887], naturally commands attention.

The central point which that essay makes is that Kennan endowed the doctrine of containment with "a degree of foresight and consistency of strategic vision for which it would be difficult to find a contemporary parallel" (p. 886). This claim, had it been made several years ago, would have elicited an assent from us as well as most other students of U. S. foreign relations. But now, following publication of the State Department series *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS) for 1947 through 1949, we cannot agree. Our reading of the documents (supported in detail in the 1977 Yale senior essays by Margaret Ann Yates and John F. McAlister [Jef McAllister]) indicates that Kennan's policy of containment, far from consistent and foresighted, was often vague and sometimes self-contradictory.

Gaddis maintains that Kennan consistently advocated both limited American involvement in East Asia (outside Japan) and the encouragement of China's independence from the USSR. What then is one to make of his July 1949 memo on Taiwan ([FRUS, 1949, IX, 356-59](#)), recommending the establishment of a virtual military protectorate over the island? Kennan alone among Truman administration advisers was willing to involve American troops there. He argued that if his project to save "a dependent people" from the "oppressive alien rule" of the Communists were "carried through [p. 24] with sufficient resolution, speed, ruthlessness and self-assurance, the way Theodore Roosevelt might have done it, it would be not only successful but would have an electrifying effect in this country and throughout the Far East." While

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conceding that his proposal involved "unquestionably great risks," Kennan could offer no more to support it than "my own instinct." No wonder that Secretary of State Dean Acheson remained committed to his own more modest China policy. Today we search in vain for some explanation by Kennan or Gaddis of how direct military intervention in Taiwan was to keep the U. S. out of the China morass, to limit American military commitments in East Asia, or to drive a wedge between China and the USSR.

Kennan's outbursts of militancy were not limited to East Asia. The 1948 FRUS volume on Europe ([III, 848-49](#)) reveals him advocating a no less adventuristic policy of military intervention in Italy. In March, 1948, scenting a possible victory by the Italian Communist Party in the upcoming general elections, Kennan called for pressure on Rome "to outlaw [the] Communist Party and take [unspecified] strong actions against it before elections." He realized that the most likely result would be the outbreak of a civil war that would in turn "give us grounds" for the reoccupation of strategic areas. "This would admittedly result in much violence and probably a military division of Italy." Once again it fell to cooler and better informed heads in the State Department to set aside Kennan's proposal as "drastic" and "unwise." They must have wondered, as we do now, how to square this episode with Kennan's supposed definition of containment as a limited, non-interventionist policy pursued essentially through political and economic means.

Kennan's general policy statements were as imprecise as his reactions to particular crises were inconsistent. Gaddis views the vague language of the "X" article as merely an aberration. But what of his influential Long Telegram of February 1946 ([FRUS, 1946, VI, 696-709](#)), from which Kennan drew some of the language and most of the ideas for his *Foreign Affairs* essay of the next year? To take only one example, is not Kennan's use of the key concept "force" in the March telegram (p. 701) just as vague as his use of the idea of "counterforce" in the 1947 essay (p. 581)?

The same vagueness recurs in later pivotal policy documents on containment which Kennan contributed as head of the Policy Planning Staff. Consider NSC 20/1 of August 1948 ([FRUS, 1948, I, Pt. 2, 609-611](#)), which Gaddis treats as an example of Kennan's sophistication, specificity and consistency.

In general, it should be our objective in time of peace as well as in time of war,
(a) to reduce the power and influence of Moscow to limits where they will no longer constitute a threat to the peace and stability of international society; and
(b) to bring about a basic change in the theory and practice of international relations observed by the government in power in Russia.

Are such statements truly examples of the sort of limited, clearly defined objectives Gaddis attributes to Kennan's view of containment? Kennan fares no better in this document when he attempts to lay down more specific goals, such as "to encourage *by every means possible* [emphasis ours] the development in the Soviet Union of institutions of federalism which would permit a [p. 25] revival of the national life of the Baltic peoples." Does this too not have a vagueness and openendedness reminiscent of the Truman Doctrine, NSC-68, or the speeches of John F. Dulles? Our reading would indicate that the fuzziness of the "X" article was not an aberration, but rather typical of Kennan's major policy statements on containment during his tenure in the State Department.

George Kennan is a distinguished American whose reputation will not be enhanced by claims to extraordinary "consistency and foresight." Clearly Kennan, like other mortals, possessed the normal capacity to lose sight of general principles under the daily buffeting of international crises, policy debates, and looming deadlines. Perhaps more than most he was susceptible to capture by his own compelling rhetoric. While Kennan's handling of policy may offer no enduring model, the issues raised here do suggest two modest and practical conclusions. The first is that our differences with Gaddis highlight the need for a better understanding of Kennan's role in the formulation of the containment policy. With the government documents now in large measure available, scholars have only to await the opening of Kennan's personal papers on an unrestricted and equitable basis to tackle the problem in earnest. The second conclusion relates to the frequently reiterated call for earlier declassification of government documents than is now either accepted in principle (after the elapse of twenty years) or followed in practice (currently after twenty-eight years, with many documents produced outside the State Department closed even longer). The case of the Kennan *Memoirs* puts the issue in a new light by illustrating the peculiar power that former policymakers, especially those who write felicitously, retain in

shaping our view of the immediate past. Put differently, without government documents to confirm or refute insider accounts of past policy, historians and the public are placed to an unfortunate degree in thrall to those with a stake in past policy--at the very time that a full understanding of that policy would most contribute to an intelligent and informed consideration of pending issues. The case of George Kennan, himself an outspoken critic of the defects of a democratic foreign policy, thus ironically serves to remind us of the importance of open inquiry to a free public debate and ultimately to an enlightened foreign policy.