

# Introduction

*John J. Mearsheimer*

GEORGE KENNAN WILL be remembered forever as the “father of containment,” the strategy the United States employed throughout the Cold War to deal with the Soviet threat. He was a key policy maker in the early days of the Cold War. In April 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall asked him to set up the Policy Planning Staff, which was to be the State Department’s long-range think tank. Marshall relied heavily on Kennan’s advice in formulating American foreign policy. Indeed, Kennan played a central role in the making of the Marshall Plan, as well as the creation of Radio Free Europe and the CIA’s covert operations directorate.

Kennan began his career as a Foreign Service officer in 1926, a year after graduating from Princeton. He was posted to various European countries over the next two decades, including three tours in Germany as well as the Soviet Union. He saw Hitler’s rise and Stalin’s rule up close. As a result, he knew a great deal about the two most powerful and influential European countries during the twentieth century. Those countries, of course, mattered more than any others for shaping American diplomacy in those years.

But Kennan was more than a diplomat and a policy maker. He was also a first-class strategic thinker, with a talent for asking big and important questions about US foreign policy. For example, when he started up the Policy Planning Staff, where he was tasked “with looking at problems from the standpoint of the totality of American national interest,” he wanted to determine “the basic concepts” that underpin American foreign policy (xlix).<sup>1</sup> He was especially interested in discerning how the United States, as a democracy, interacted with the world around it. Most famously, he thought long and hard about what would be the best strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union after it emerged from World War II as the most powerful country in Europe.

Furthermore, Kennan was a creative and systematic thinker who provided clear and bold answers to the questions that concerned him. This was due in part to his fearlessness in challenging conventional wisdoms and making arguments that might be considered politically incorrect. He almost always told the truth as he saw it. But he also was naturally inclined to make generalizations about international politics and above all about America’s relationship to the outside world. He was, to use his own words, looking for a “theoretical foundation” to explain past US foreign policy and hopefully figure out how American leaders might do a better job in the future (xlix). In short, Kennan had a first-class analytical mind and a predilection for seeing the big picture.

Kennan left the government in 1950 and went to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. He remained there for the rest of his life, save for brief tours as ambassador to the Soviet Union (1952) and Yugoslavia (1961–63). There he established himself as a first-rate scholar and distin-

1. George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: Sixtieth-Anniversary Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Text references are to this edition.

guished public intellectual. He wrote numerous articles and books, two of which won both Pulitzer Prizes and National Book Awards. He remained involved in public affairs until the end of his life, arguing for example in the 1980s that the United States should adopt a “no first use” policy toward its nuclear weapons, and then opposing the 2003 Iraq war when he was almost one hundred years old.

*American Diplomacy* is the most important of Kennan’s books, which is why it continues to receive, in his words, “enduring attention” (xlv). The first five selections are the Walgreen Foundation lectures he gave at the University of Chicago in 1951. The sixth selection is his famous July 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article where he laid out the case for containing the Soviet Union, while the seventh selection is another *Foreign Affairs* article (1951), this one dealing with how the United States should think about change inside the Soviet Union. The final two selections are talks that Kennan gave at Grinnell College in 1984, where he looked back on the Walgreen lectures and drew new lessons for his listeners.

The central puzzle that informs *American Diplomacy* was laid out at the start of his first Chicago lecture. Kennan believed that the United States was remarkably secure in 1900, but was remarkably insecure fifty years later. “A half-century ago,” he wrote, “people in this country had a sense of security vis-à-vis their world environment such as I suppose no people had ever had since the days of the Roman Empire. Today that pattern is almost reversed. . . . We have before us a situation which, I am frank to admit, seems to me dangerous and problematical in the extreme” (3–4). His aim was to determine “what has caused this metamorphosis? How did a country so secure become a country so insecure? How much of this deterioration can be said to be ‘our fault’? How much of it is attributable to our failure to see clearly, or take into account, the realities of the world around us?” (4).

In wrestling with this question, Kennan has said many smart things about how America's security is directly influenced by the balance of power in Asia and Europe. In particular, he has shown how US foreign policy during the first half of the twentieth century was affected by changes in the European balance of power. Naturally, his story included the adoption of containment after World War II. Moreover, *American Diplomacy* has offered smart insights about the limits of both military force and international law, as well as the dangers of trying to do social engineering in other countries. Kennan has made a powerful case for pursuing a foreign policy that privileges humility over hubris. These subjects are all relevant in contemporary America.

Finally, *American Diplomacy* has had much to say about the clash between liberalism and realism, which has long been the key intellectual divide among students and practitioners of American foreign policy. Kennan was a realist, and like the other famous realists of his day—the journalist Walter Lippmann, the scholar Hans Morgenthau, and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—he believed that American foreign policy was motivated largely by liberal ideals, which frequently landed the United States in trouble. In fact, he claimed that liberalism, which he identified with legalism and moralism, was largely responsible for the foreign policy problems facing America in 1950.

Although every serious student of international politics should engage with Kennan's ideas, one does not have to agree with all of them. I actually think that some of his arguments are mistaken. Most importantly, I disagree with his claim that the United States ignored power politics and instead pursued a liberal foreign policy during the first half of the twentieth century. Kennan thought that liberal democracies like the United States behave differently than other types of states and are at a disadvantage in the harsh world of international politics. I believe he was wrong, and

I think *American Diplomacy* provides substantial evidence to support my claim. These problems, however, are far outweighed by the rich insights in this seminal book.

*Geopolitics and American Security*

Kennan believed that power is the currency of international politics and, although most Americans do not realize it, their country's security is largely dependent on the European balance of power. The ideal situation for the United States is for there to be "equilibrium" in Europe, or what I would call a balanced multipolar system.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, there should be a handful of great powers on the Continent, none of which has the military capability to dominate the others, and Britain, which is located in Europe but not on the Continent, should act as an offshore balancer. In other words, Britain should employ its military on the Continent when it is needed to help check a country that gets overly ambitious and tries to cause disequilibrium. Kennan maintained that balanced multipolarity facilitates peace in Europe and makes the United States safe, because no European great power would be able to threaten European stability and American security (69–70).

The great danger to peace in Europe and US security is a regional hegemon, an especially powerful Continental state that dominates all of Europe. Kennan wrote that "it was essential to us, as it was to Britain, that no single Continental land power should come to dominate the entire Eurasian land mass." His reasoning is straightforward: a European hegemon would be "a great sea power as well as land power, shatter the position of England, and enter—as in these circumstances it certainly would—on an over-

2. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 45.

seas expansion hostile to ourselves and supported by the immense resources of the interior of Europe and Asia” (5). In contrast, if there was equilibrium in Europe, it would be much more difficult for any great power there to roam freely around the world—especially into the Western Hemisphere—because it would be too busy worrying about its neighbors to cause trouble in America’s backyard.

Kennan understood that the United States depended on Britain to maintain the balance of power in Europe, which it had done successfully for centuries. The result was that America could operate safely and easily from a “sheltered position behind the British fleet and British Continental diplomacy” (5). In effect, both London and Washington had a profound interest in making sure that no Continental power dominated Europe; but because of Britain’s geographical proximity to the Continent, the United States could sit back and let Britain do whatever was necessary to check aspiring European hegemons. Simply put, America could pass the buck to Britain, which was effectively America’s first line of defense.

However, should Britain get into trouble and not be able to get the job done, the United States would have to move in and help check the potential hegemon. This logic, said Kennan, explains why the Wilson administration provided aid to Britain in World War I, even before the United States entered the war in April 1917. Kennan wrote: “As time went on, there grew up . . . a realization of the danger of defeat that confronted the Entente powers and an awareness of the damage that would be done to our world position by the elimination of England as a strong force in the world. . . . The result was a gradual growth of pro-Allied sentiment.” Although the United States entered the war “over an issue of neutrality,” it quickly realized once it was in the fight that “averting the danger of a British defeat” and checking imperial Germany was of paramount importance (69).

This same geopolitical logic also explains America's actions before and after it entered World War II. After the fall of France in June 1940, the Roosevelt administration was deeply concerned that Nazi Germany might knock Britain out of the war and eventually dominate all of Europe if it could conquer the Soviet Union. Consequently, the United States sided with Britain well before it entered the war in December 1941; indeed, President Roosevelt went to great lengths to get America into the war to insure Britain's survival and Nazi Germany's defeat.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for the United States, there was a new disequilibrium in Europe after World War II, which helps explain why Kennan was so despondent about America's position in the world in 1950 and also why he developed the containment strategy. The Soviet Union emerged from that titanic conflict as the most powerful state in Europe, so strong in fact that no group of European countries was capable of forming a balancing coalition to contain it. Germany was devastated and divided into two parts, one of which was occupied by the Soviet army. Britain and France were seriously weakened by the war and had empires they felt compelled to defend, which diverted attention and resources away from Europe. Only the United States had the capability to check the Soviet Union, although it would eventually enlist Britain, France, Italy, and West Germany in that endeavor.

*American Diplomacy* includes an incisive discussion about how the Soviet Union ended up in such a dominant position at the end of World War II. The two most powerful states in Europe by the late 1930s were Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, who were bitter rivals and had expansionist goals. Although Hitler, who was bent on es-

3. Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 4.

tablishing German hegemony in Europe, was clearly more aggressive than Stalin, the Soviet leader was determined to expand into Eastern Europe. The Western democracies—Britain and France—had bad relations with both dictators and thus were not in a good position to work with Moscow to help contain Germany, or the reverse if necessary. Thus Europe was a tinderbox by 1939.

In the event of war, however, the democracies could not defeat either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union if those “totalitarian powers” were allies. That was true even if the United States was in the fight. The only way that the democracies could defeat Germany or the Soviet Union was if they formed an alliance with the other one. In that case, however, “the collaborating totalitarian power” would end up dominating the eastern half of the Continent, in which case it would be much more powerful than any other European country. There would be no equilibrium in Europe. In essence, the Western democracies faced a classic Hobson’s choice. Of course, they sided with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, and “by virtue of the sweep of military operations,” the Red Army ended up in the heart of Europe at the end of World War II (81). At that point, the United States had no choice but to act as the balancer of last resort and stay in Europe to confront the Soviet Union. It was in this context that Kennan wrote his famed *Foreign Affairs* article on containment.

Not surprisingly, Kennan thought about the balance of power in Asia much the way he thought about the European balance, although the Asia-Pacific region was of less strategic importance to the United States during his lifetime. There were two great powers in Asia during the first half of the twentieth century: Japan and Russia, which became the Soviet Union in 1917. Kennan approvingly noted that President Theodore Roosevelt recognized that it was in America’s interest to preserve a balance of power in Asia



between Japan and Russia so that, in Roosevelt's words, "each may have a moderating action on the other" (47). Kennan believed that Russia, which was a continental power in Asia, was the greater threat, while insular Japan, much like Britain, acted as an offshore balancer to keep Moscow in check. Thus, he tended to treat Japan with considerable sympathy in *American Diplomacy* (47–52).

With Japan's defeat in World War II, there was no great power that the United States could count on to check the Soviet Union in Asia, which meant that America would have to assume the mantle of containment there as well as in Europe. As Kennan told his Chicago audience in 1951, "Today we have fallen heir to the problems and responsibilities the Japanese had faced and borne in the Korean-Manchurian area for nearly half a century" (56).

One might think that Kennan's geopolitical template has little relevance for American security in the post-Cold War world. But that would be wrong. It remains an essential guide for understanding America's position in the world today and in the future. Specifically, the United States has been in an ideal strategic situation since 1989, because there is no great power in either Asia or Europe that is strong enough to dominate one or both of those regions. Equilibrium has been the order of the day, and as Kennan pointed out, this state of affairs works to America's advantage. Plus, Washington has kept military forces in both of those regions to help keep the peace.

There is little reason to think that Europe's equilibrium will disappear in the foreseeable future. Germany, which is potentially the most powerful state in Europe today, will lose power in the years ahead because it is depopulating, and there is no other country on the Continent that is likely to be substantially more powerful than its neighbors. For that reason, it is likely that the United States, which has traditionally acted as an offshore balancer in Europe, will

draw down its forces there and not be any less secure for doing so.

Asia is a different matter, however, because of China's rise. Should China continue growing economically in the decades ahead the way it has grown in recent decades, it would become the most powerful state in Asia by far, and it would surely seek to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Were Kennan still alive, he would expect Japan to play a central role in containing China, just as he expected Tokyo to check Moscow's ambitions in Asia. Unfortunately, Japan will not be strong enough to handle that task, even in combination with China's Asian neighbors. Thus, the United States will have to increase its presence in the Asia-Pacific region and take the lead in assembling a balancing coalition to contain China, much as it did with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Kennan would be deeply concerned by this prospect, just as he was troubled by America's strategic situation in 1950.

Given that Kennan's reputation is so thoroughly bound up with his ideas about containment, and given that the United States is likely to make a serious effort to contain a rising China, it makes sense to look more carefully at what he said about that strategy in his 1947 article.

### *The "X" Article*

Kennan's *Foreign Affairs* piece on containment is probably the most famous article ever written about American foreign policy. When it appeared, the author was identified as "X," because Kennan was an influential government official and did not want readers to think it represented official policy. Nevertheless, he was identified as the author soon after "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" appeared in print. The article was actually a distilled version of the "Long

Telegram,” a more comprehensive piece on containment that Kennan wrote in February 1946 for official Washington when he was serving in Moscow. The “Long Telegram” won him instant prominence inside the US government, while the “X” article won him instant public fame.

Kennan wrote and said many other things about containment in the late 1940s and indeed over the rest of his life. Not surprisingly, there is much debate about exactly what he was thinking about containment in those early days of the Cold War, when the strategy was beginning to gel inside the Truman administration. However, I am going to focus on what Kennan said in the “X” article, not try to divine what he might have meant to say. Nor will I attempt to parse the somewhat different things that he said in other contexts.

There are several good reasons to focus on the “X” article alone. First, it was widely read and had a profound influence on how many people in the West thought about the Soviet threat and containment. Remember, this widely read article appeared at a highly fluid moment in history, a time when most Americans were not sure how to think about the Soviet Union, which had just been an important US ally during World War II. Second, American policy toward the Soviet Union over the course of the Cold War followed many of Kennan’s prescriptions in the *Foreign Affairs* piece. Third, he maintained in that celebrated article that the Soviet Union had profound weaknesses that would eventually lead to its demise. In essence, he predicted how the Cold War would end.

Kennan’s thinking about containment was based on the assumption that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power and a dangerous threat to the United States. In his estimation, Washington “must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner” (132). He compared dealing with the Soviets to dealing with “aggres-

sive leaders like Napoleon and Hitler” and concluded that it was “at once easier and more difficult” to deal with the Soviets (125). The good news was that the Soviets were more cautious and flexible and would have “no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force” (124). The bad news was that they were more relentless in their aggressive pursuits and thus would be especially difficult for the United States to contain (119). Leaving aside whether Kennan’s assessment was correct, he was saying that the Soviet Union ranked alongside Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany, two of the most aggressive states in modern history.

There is no evidence in the “X” article that Kennan thought the Soviet Union was an imminent military threat to Western Europe. He knew it had just been devastated by Nazi Germany and was in no position to fight a major war with the United States and its allies. World War II, he wrote, “has added its tremendous toll of destruction, death and human exhaustion. In consequence of this, we have in Russia today a population which is physically and spiritually tired. The mass of the people are disillusioned, skeptical and no longer as accessible as they once were to the magical attraction which Soviet power still radiates to its followers abroad” (127). He also recognized that the Soviet economy was in bad shape in those early postwar years. Given all of these problems, he surmised, “Russia, as opposed to the Western world in general, is still by far the weaker party” (132).

Kennan maintained in the *Foreign Affairs* article that the Soviet Union’s expansionist tendencies were based in large part on communist ideology. Soviet leaders were taught that there was an “innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism” and that capitalism was an evil force that was out to get them (121). In essence, this meant “the outside world was hostile and that it was their duty eventu-

ally to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders” (118). Of course, the Soviets were not just determined to overthrow capitalism in other countries; they were also committed to spreading communism around the world.

But Kennan did not believe that ideology alone explained why the Soviets were hostile toward most other countries. He also thought that Moscow was engaged in social imperialism, where ruling elites confronted with domestic turmoil purposely cause foreign policy crises to unify the public and infuse it with patriotism, thus keeping themselves in power. Specifically, he argued that Soviet leaders emphasized “the menace confronting Soviet society from the outside world,” because it was a good way of justifying “the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home” (119).

Very importantly, Kennan also believed that geopolitical considerations drove the Soviet Union to enlarge its borders, in the same way they had driven an expansive Russian foreign policy for centuries before the October Revolution. This theme was actually more prominent in the “Long Telegram,” where he wrote, “At bottom of Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.”<sup>4</sup> Still, this strategic perspective is present in the “X” article as well.<sup>5</sup> In short, Kennan emphasized that communist ideology and social imperialism, coupled with “the powerful hands of Russian history and

4. Kenneth M. Jensen, ed., *Origins of the Cold War: The Novikov, Kennan, and Roberts ‘Long Telegrams’ of 1946*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1993), 20.

5. Soviet foreign policy from 1917 to 1989 was in fact driven mainly by calculations about relative power, not by communist ideology. This is most clearly reflected in Stalin’s decision to form a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939—the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. See Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 47–48, 190–202.

tradition,” pushed Soviet leaders to adopt an aggressive stance toward the outside world (118).

Despite his fears about the Soviet Union, Kennan was confident that its communist system was deeply flawed and contained the seeds of its own destruction. Indeed, he believed that “the sprouting of these seeds [was] well advanced,” and that the key to success for the United States was to be patient and persistent with its containment policy (132). In the meantime, however, he felt that Washington had it “in its power to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate . . . and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power” (134). These comments make clear that when it came to dealing with the Soviet Union, the Kennan of the “X” article was a hawk, not a dove.

One finds further evidence of Kennan’s hawkishness in his views on what containment should look like. He maintained that the United States should contest the Soviet Union all over the globe and bring formidable military forces to bear whenever Kremlin leaders threatened to act aggressively. Containment, he argued, should be “designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world” (132). The Soviets, he felt, would cause trouble “at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” which meant that the United States and its allies would have to be “adroit and vigilant” in their “application of counter-force” (126).

Shortly after “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” appeared, Walter Lippmann wrote a series of newspaper articles that challenged Kennan’s views on containment. Lippmann’s main criticism was that responding to Soviet threats all across the globe—as Kennan called for—gave

Moscow the initiative and would “present us with an unending series of insoluble dilemmas,” which we did not have the resources or patience to deal with.<sup>6</sup> Lippmann preferred to concentrate on vital strategic interests and not worry about minor ones. John Lewis Gaddis called these alternative approaches to containment “perimeter defense” and “strongpoint defense.”<sup>7</sup> Although Kennan came to agree with Lippmann about the advantages of strongpoint defense, that was not the policy he prescribed in the “X” article. There he made the case for perimeter defense, which was the policy that the United States followed during the Cold War.

In at least two other ways, Kennan’s later thinking about containment was at odds with what he wrote in the *Foreign Affairs* article. He said in his 1984 Grinnell lectures that he felt American leaders made a mistake “attributing to the Soviet leadership aims and intentions it did not really have: in jumping to the conclusion that the Soviet leaders were just like Hitler and his associates” (182). Although this retrospective assessment may be correct, it remains the case that the “X” article played a key role in convincing America’s elites that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power that was just as dangerous as Nazi Germany.

Kennan also lamented the militarization of the Cold War in his Grinnell lectures. Although his *Foreign Affairs* article did not claim that the Soviet Union was about to attack Western Europe, it still portrayed the Soviet Union as a potential military threat, which is why Kennan called for a containment strategy based on “unalterable counter-force”

6. Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 23.

7. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 57–58.

wherever Moscow tried to expand. Such rhetoric could not help but contribute to the militarization of the US-Soviet competition. Thus, Kennan bears at least some responsibility for containment's martial form.

The debates about how to deal with the Soviet Union during the late 1940s, and indeed throughout the Cold War, did not simply revolve around questions regarding how to make containment work. There were two main alternatives to the strategy of containment—"engagement" and "rollback"—which reminds us that the adoption of containment was not a foregone conclusion. Thus, in making the case for containment, Kennan was also arguing against these other strategies.

The engagement option posited that the Soviet Union was not a major threat to the United States. It recommended that the Truman administration interact with Moscow in friendly ways and avoid the costs and risks of seeking to contain it. This strategy, which was closely identified with the political left, was attractive to lots of Americans in the aftermath of World War II, since they remembered the Soviet Union as an important ally in that conflict. Kennan's harsh portrait of Soviet intentions in the "Long Telegram" and the "X" article was directly aimed at undermining the case for treating Moscow as a partner, not an adversary. In short, this is why that famous article is so hawkish.

The second alternative was rollback, which called for the United States to go beyond containment and look for opportunities to take the offensive against Moscow and its allies. This strategy, which was closely identified with the political right, never gained much traction inside the US government, although it was tried once in a serious way in October 1950, when American troops crossed the 38th parallel and entered communist North Korea. But that attempt led to disaster, because China then entered the war, which dragged on until July 1953, when the two sides returned to



the status quo ante—facing each other across the 38th parallel. Not surprisingly, Kennan opposed going into North Korea in 1950, and rollback more generally, although in the late 1940s he helped organize the CIA's covert operations to undermine Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. However, he later said that initiative was “the greatest mistake I ever made.”<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, he remained a staunch proponent of containment, which the United States pursued until the Cold War ended in 1989.

All of these issues relating to containment are not just important for understanding Cold War history. They also matter because they are likely to reemerge in the years ahead if China continues its remarkable rise. Indeed, American strategists and policy makers are already debating whether the United States should contain or engage China, and there will eventually be talk about rollback from the political right. Proponents of containment surely will debate how best to implement that strategy; it would hardly be surprising if there is a debate about the virtues of perimeter defense versus strongpoint defense, as well as whether China is primarily a military or political threat. And because China is at least nominally a communist country, we should expect to hear the argument that it is a serious threat because it remains wedded to that ideology. All of this is to say that there is a timeless quality to the debates about containment that were central to Kennan's life.

### *The Virtues of Humility*

*American Diplomacy* is also an important book, because it has much to say about the need for greater humility in US foreign policy. Americans have always had a strong ten-

8. Tim Weiner and Barbara Crossette, “George F. Kennan Dies at 101; Leading Strategist of Cold War,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2005.

dency to view their country as exceptional—as the city on the hill—and therefore well qualified to lead the world and make it a safer and better place. This self-congratulatory hubris reached its peak in the decade after the Cold War ended. Probably the best example of this arrogance is former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's comment in February 1998 that "if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."<sup>9</sup>

Kennan recoiled at this patronizing way of dealing with other countries and called for "greater humility in our national outlook" (192). His perspective was based in good part on the simple fact that he did not think the United States was superior to other countries. It might be more powerful than the rest, but it was not more virtuous in any meaningful way. Americans were suffering, he argued, from "delusions of superiority" (109). Thus, "our inveterate tendency to judge others by the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves" made no sense to him (142).

Kennan also championed humility, because he recognized that there are significant limits on what the United States can do to change the world for the better. For starters, he was well aware of the limits of military force. Like most realists, he recognized that war is a legitimate instrument of statecraft, but also that it is a destructive and brutal enterprise that sometimes does more harm than good and occasionally leads to national disaster. For Kennan, even when you think your cause is just and you win the war, the benefits are limited, "since victory or defeat can signify

9. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Interview on NBC-TV *The Today Show* with Matt Lauer, Columbus, Ohio, February 19, 1998, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

only relative degrees of misfortune.” He went on to say that “even the most glorious military victory would give us no right to face the future in any spirit other than one of sorrow and humbleness” (151).

Furthermore, Kennan believed that doing social engineering in other countries was an especially difficult task and that the United States should avoid occupying other countries to do nation building. In his first Chicago lecture, which dealt in part with America’s imperial misadventure in the Philippines, he wrote, “There are many things we Americans should beware of, and among them is the acceptance of any sort of a paternalistic responsibility to anyone, be it even in the form of military occupation, if we can possibly avoid it, or for any period longer than is absolutely necessary” (20).

There were two reasons Kennan opposed interfering in the politics of other countries. First, he believed that it is difficult to know what is going on inside another country and therefore hard to know how to influence events one way or the other. For him, “our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding” (109). His thinking on this matter is reflected in “America and the Russian Future,” which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in April 1951. Talking about where the Soviet Union was headed, he foresaw important changes coming but emphasized, “how those changes are to come about is something which cannot be foreseen” (157). Regarding future government in Russia, he wrote, “We must admit . . . we see ‘as through a glass, darkly.’ . . . We admittedly cannot really know” (157–58). Given this profound ignorance, Kennan thought that the United States should not get involved in Soviet domestic politics and instead “let them work out their internal problems in their own manner” (142).

Second, Kennan thought that internal factors ultimately drive change in any society and that outside actors—even

in the unlikely event they know what they are doing—can only influence events on the margins. “Forms of government,” he wrote, “are forged mainly in the fire of practice, not in the vacuum of theory. They respond to national character and to national realities” (142). He naturally thought this logic applied to Russia: “Of one thing we may be sure: no great and enduring change in the spirit and practice of government in Russia will ever come about primarily through foreign inspiration or advice” (158). Given the limits of our influence, coupled with the limits of our knowledge, Kennan held out little hope for any American scheme that tried to make the world over in its own image.

In the wake of 9/11, President George W. Bush and his lieutenants became convinced that the United States could use its formidable military forces to do social engineering across the entire Middle East. There was no shortage of hubris in Washington at the time, especially after the American military appeared to have won a decisive victory in Afghanistan in the late fall of 2001. The Bush Doctrine, which took shape in 2002 and laid the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, was antithetical to Kennan’s thinking about the limits of what the United States could do to reorder the world, especially with the sword. Thus, it is no surprise that Kennan opposed the Iraq war.

The conquest of Iraq went south soon after Saddam was toppled, of course, and Afghanistan turned into a debacle a few years later. The Bush Doctrine was relegated to the scrap heap of history, and the United States has no plans to invade countries and do social engineering anytime soon. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made that point clearly at West Point in February 2011 when he said, “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’

as General MacArthur so delicately put it.”<sup>10</sup> The bottom line: Kennan was right; Bush and his advisors were wrong.

Although the United States is likely to pursue a more humble foreign policy for a decade or two, the imperial temptation is almost sure to come back in a serious way somewhere down the road. The national interest would be well served if, in the meantime, large numbers of Americans read Kennan’s book and learn that their country’s foreign policy should emphasize humility over hubris.

Still, many American liberals believe that there is no need for the United States to pursue a more humble foreign policy, because they think that the indispensable nation can run the world by placing much greater reliance on international institutions, especially international law. They fault the Bush administration and its supporters for placing too much emphasis on big-stick diplomacy and not paying enough attention to global rules and conventions. Kennan, however, did not think that international law held much promise for American diplomacy. In fact, he felt that the United States was guilty of “excessive legalism” and that this inclination was a source of endless trouble for its foreign policy (xlvii).

Nevertheless, Kennan did not think international law was irrelevant or useless. He felt that it was a helpful but limited diplomatic tool that could function as the “gentle civilizer of national self-interest” (57, 109). In other words, it could help smooth the rough edges off American foreign policy and help on the margins to make international poli-

10. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Speech delivered at United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, Friday, February 25, 2011, U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1539>.

tics a less brutal business. Thus, it is not surprising that he remarked in 1985, "There are times in these recent years when I have found myself wishing that there were a bit more of morality in our concepts of what is legal, and more attention to legality in our concepts of what is moral, than I see around me at this time" (xlvii).

*America's Achilles' Heel: Liberal Democracy?*

Let us return to the central question that informed Kennan's Chicago lectures: Why was the United States having so much more trouble with the outside world in 1950 than it had in 1900? Specifically, why was it consumed with trying to contain the Soviet Union all around the globe, when it hardly had to worry about great power politics fifty years earlier?

Of course, Kennan thought that this regretful situation was due in good part to a fundamental change that took place in the European balance of power over that half century. Europe was multipolar in 1900, and no Continental power had the capability to become a regional hegemon. In 1950, by contrast, the Soviet Union was the most powerful state on the Continent by far, and Britain and the other European countries were incapable of coming together to contain it, which meant the United States had to do the job.

Kennan, however, wanted to dig deeper and figure out what caused this troublesome transformation in the European balance of power. The answer he came up with was democracy, especially American democracy.

When it came to making and executing foreign policy, Kennan had little respect for democracies. "I sometimes wonder," he told his Chicago audience, "whether . . . a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin" (70). The problem with liberal de-

mocracies, he maintained, is that they operate according to principles which are at odds with basic realist logic, and that leads them to adopt foolish foreign policies. In particular, he believed that democracies are gripped with concerns about international law and justice.

Kennan thought Americans were “slaves of the concepts of international law and morality” (57). In his view, they were obsessed with a “legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems. This approach runs like a red skein through our foreign policy of the last fifty years” (101). Very importantly, he believed that this fixation on law and morality causes democracies to favor unconditional surrender when they fight wars, which invariably turns their conflicts into total or absolute wars. That means they have to defeat their opponents decisively and employ every means available to achieve that goal. Therefore, according to this logic, democracies are rarely capable of waging limited wars.

The pursuit of unconditional surrender is the cardinal sin of international politics for Kennan, and it is liberal democracies like the United States that demand it. “There is no more dangerous delusion, none that has done us a greater disservice in the past or that threatens to do us a greater disservice in the future, than the concept of total victory. And I fear that it springs in large measure from the basic faults in the [American] approach to international affairs” (108–9). The taproot of the problem, he maintained, is that when a state bases its foreign policy on liberal ideals, it invariably finds itself thinking that “state behavior is a fit subject for moral judgment” (107). Once that happens it is virtually impossible to think about “employing force for rational and restricted purposes rather than for purposes which are emotional and to which it is hard to find a rational limit” (89).

Readers are probably wondering how Kennan tied his thinking about democracy and total victory into the shift

that took place in the European balance of power between 1900 and 1950. He actually told a straightforward story that revolves around World War I, which is the central event of modern times for him: "Much of the cause for the decline in our security in the West lay with the course and the outcome of the first World War" (61). Britain, France, and especially the United States, "were fighting to make the world safe for democracy," and naturally they "came to be interested only in a total victory over Germany: a victory of national humiliation, of annexations, of crushing reparations" (67, 71). They achieved their goal in 1918, but that shattered the European equilibrium, which in turn led to World War II and then the Cold War.

The problem for Kennan, however, was not so much what happened to Germany after World War I but what happened to Europe's other great powers. Germany was unquestionably humiliated and "smarting from the sting of defeat," but it "was left nevertheless as the only great united state in Central Europe." Russia, on the other hand, had been weakened to the point where it was no longer a "possible reliable ally," while France and England were "wounded far more deeply than they themselves realized, the plume of their manhood gone, their world position shaken." Plus "Austria-Hungary was gone," only to be replaced by "the pathetic and new states of eastern and Central Europe" (73). All of this meant that when Germany eventually threw off the shackles of the Versailles treaty, it would be powerful and angry and hard for its weakened neighbors to contain. That certainly proved to be the case after Hitler came to power in January 1933.

Kennan believed that if the Allies had pursued a limited victory over Germany, it would have been possible to maintain balanced multipolarity in Europe, and thus World War II and the Cold War would have never happened. This outcome would have not only facilitated peace in Europe,



but also would have been good for American security. The United States, however, undermined its own security by pushing for total victory over Germany in World War I. “We were then as strong as anybody else in our determination that the war should be fought to the finish of a total victory” (71).

For Kennan, the United States could not help but act this way, because legalistic-moralistic thinking is wired into its DNA. Liberal Americans, he felt, take it for granted that there are no deep antagonisms among different peoples and that almost everyone desires “an orderly world, untroubled by international violence.” They also have trouble understanding “why other peoples should not join us in accepting the rules of the game in international politics, just as we accept such rules in the competition of sport” (102–3). And if there is a serious crisis, solving it usually involves finding the right “institutional framework” to deal with it (103). Those deviants who do not see the world this way and instead favor aggressive policies are obviously morally bankrupt and must be eliminated—not just punished—so that a just and peaceful international order can be established.

There is another dimension to the problem, however, and that is public opinion. Kennan had a deep-seated contempt for the American people when it came to understanding foreign policy. He felt that most of his fellow citizens were unsophisticated and easy to manipulate, especially when the elites used liberal rhetoric to sway them. He warned that the public “can easily be led astray into areas of emotionalism and subjectivity which make it a poor and inadequate guide for national action” (100). As one would expect, he believed that the American people will invariably demand unconditional surrender whenever the United States goes to war, which will wreck the balance of power and undermine their own security, as happened in World War I.

To make matters worse, the public is also fickle, said Kennan. "It is surely a curious characteristic of democracy," he wrote, "this amazing ability to shift gears overnight in one's ideological attitudes, depending on whether one considers one's self at war or at peace" (69). Leaders are then stuck trying to respond to the public's whims. "A good deal of our trouble," he claimed, "seems to have stemmed from the extent to which the executive has felt itself beholden to short-term trends of public opinion in the country and from what we might call the erratic and subjective nature of public reaction to foreign-policy questions" (99).

It follows that Kennan thought that professional diplomats like him should make American foreign policy. "I firmly believe that we could make much more effective use of the principle of professionalism in the conduct of foreign policy; that we could, if we wished, develop a corps of professional officers superior to anything that exists or ever has existed in this field; and that, by treating these men with respect . . . we could help ourselves considerably" (100). These skilled diplomats, acting like good realists, would only pursue limited victories, which would help maintain the balance of power in Europe and Asia and keep America safe.

Kennan's wishes notwithstanding, he recognized that American democracy is here to stay and that the United States is not going to change the way it does business. There are too many "strong prejudices and preconceptions in sections of our public mind" and "for this reason we are probably condemned to continue relying almost exclusively on what we might call 'diplomacy by dilettantism'" (100). And in the end, anyway, he said in *American Diplomacy* that he preferred living in a democracy with all its flaws rather than an alternative political system. "The system under which we are going to have to continue to conduct foreign

policy is, I hope and pray, the system of democracy” (78). In Kennan’s story, the United States is condemned to pursuing misguided policies toward the outside world for many years to come, and possibly forever.

*The Triumph of Realism over Liberal Democracy*

Kennan’s story about the making of US foreign policy between 1900 and 1950 is flawed. Not only are there logical flaws in his argument but also the evidence he provided in *American Diplomacy* contradicts his main claims about how the United States has acted around the world. Although there is no question that its leaders often employed liberal rhetoric to describe particular policies, it was essentially a cover for realist behavior. Contrary to what Kennan believed, American policy makers cared greatly about the balance of power in Europe and Asia and were rarely motivated by a strong sense of moralism or legalism.

This is not to deny that American foreign policy was sometimes in harmony with a liberal approach to international politics, such as when the United States fought against Nazi Germany in World War II and then helped rebuild Western Europe after that devastating conflict. But in these cases and others like them, Washington’s behavior was driven largely by calculations related to the balance of power, and it just happened that both liberal and realist logic pointed toward the same policy. In these situations, it was easy for the United States to follow the dictates of power politics yet dress up its behavior with liberal rhetoric. When the two logics clashed, however, American leaders invariably privileged realism over liberalism. During World War II, for example, President Roosevelt was willing to work closely with Josef Stalin—one of the greatest mass murderers of all time—to defeat Nazi Germany.

There are two logical flaws in Kennan’s argument about

the adverse influence of democracy on US foreign policy. First, democracy is a constant in American life; the United States was obviously democratic in 1900 as well as 1950. But if democracy always produces misguided foreign policy, as Kennan claimed, then the United States should have been in as much trouble in 1900 as it was in 1950. However, that is not the story he told; instead, he emphasized that there was a marked change in America's position in the world over those fifty years. This does not make sense though because a factor that is constantly present—democracy in this case—cannot explain variation in any form of behavior, including foreign policy making.

One might argue that Kennan's argument about the limits of democracy only applies when the United States fights great power wars; thus its troubles did not begin until it entered World War I in April 1917. He did not explicitly make that argument, but even if he did, that conflict had become a total war well before the United States joined the fight. One might counter this point with the claim that Britain and France, the two democracies that were in the conflict from the start, were responsible for turning the war into a fight to the death. But that counterargument fails too, because there was no meaningful difference between the war aims of the democracies and the nondemocracies, Germany and Russia. For reasons discussed below, all of the major powers were determined to win a decisive victory. In short, democracy cannot explain why World War I became a total war.

Second, Kennan believed that wise diplomacy in Washington is almost impossible because of public opinion, which effectively ties the hands of policy makers. But remember, the public is easy to manipulate in his story, so it should not be much of a problem for American leaders to convince their fellow citizens to accept particular policies. That the public is not an independent political force is clear from Kennan's discussion of its fickleness. "Our public

opinion,” he wrote, “can be easily led astray into areas of emotionalism and subjectivity,” which means it can be encouraged to embrace liberal policies without much difficulty (99–100). But someone must be manipulating the public, and that has to be America’s elites, although he never says so. In a nutshell, public opinion cannot be a serious obstacle to wise decision making if it is capricious and easily influenced by a country’s leaders.

Kennan’s own evidence also undermines his claim that American foreign policy was guided by liberal ideals in the first half of the twentieth century. Consider his discussion of the Open Door policy and how the United States related to the Asian balance of power during that period.

Secretary of State John Hay promulgated the Open Door notes in 1899 and 1900, “when the European powers were setting about to partition China and to appropriate parts of it to their exclusive use” (23). The United States said loudly and clearly that it was determined to maintain the territorial and administrative integrity of China and prevent the establishment of spheres of influence in that country and elsewhere in Asia.

Hay, of course, sold the policy as a case of America striking a blow for international justice, as “the European powers, who had been on the verge of getting away with something improper in China, had been checked and frustrated by the timely intervention of the United States government and that a resounding diplomatic triumph had been achieved” (35). Nothing of the sort had happened, however, as Kennan made clear, because neither the Europeans nor indeed the United States adhered to the principles of the Open Door in Asia (36, 39).

But these brute facts had little effect on how most Americans thought about that noble-sounding policy. As Kennan noted, “None of these things succeeded in shaking in any way the established opinion of the American public that . . .

a tremendous blow had been struck for the triumph of American principles in international society—an American blow for an American idea” (40).

Above all else, the United States worked to make sure that no great power dominated the Asia-Pacific region. This point was not lost on Kennan, who noted that President Theodore Roosevelt came to the conclusion “as early as 1905” that it was in America’s national interest to maintain a balance of power between Japan and Russia (47). Given that Russia was considered the greater threat to dominate the region at the time, “our government found little difficulty in reconciling itself to the establishment of Japanese predominance in Korea” (47). However, the United States moved to check Japan whenever Tokyo threatened to upset the Asian balance of power. For example, Washington stepped in after World War I “to deprive Japan of what she conceived to be the fruits . . . of her participation in the war against Germany” (62). And of course the Roosevelt administration took action in the early 1940s to prevent imperial Japan from dominating Asia.

The United States naturally dressed up its realist behavior in Asia with liberal rhetoric, prompting Kennan to write that the “tendency to achieve our foreign policy objectives by inducing other governments to sign up to professions of high moral and legal principle appears to have a great and enduring vitality in our diplomatic practice” (49). He went on to say “time and again people were given the impression of a community of outlook among nations which did not really exist” (50). In fact, Kennan speculated that this obvious disconnect between practice and rhetoric must have caused “bewilderment, suspicion, and concern . . . in the foreign mind” (50). But surely the leaders of other countries recognized that American leaders are skilled at clothing their hard-nosed behavior with idealistic rhetoric. In short, the “red skein” that runs through US policy in

Asia from 1900 to 1950 is realism, not a legalistic-moralistic approach to international politics.

One could point to other examples where the evidence does not support Kennan's claims that American foreign policy was clouded by democratic opinion. For example, he railed against the Roosevelt administration's conduct of World War II, suggesting that its "greatest mistakes" were "the deeper mistakes of understanding and attitude on the part of our society in general with respect to a military venture in which we were engaged." He then said, "This failure stemmed from our general ignorance of the historical process of our age and particularly from our lack of attention to the power realities involved in given situations" (94).

Although Roosevelt was not a perfect commander in chief, he made hardly any major mistakes in his conduct of World War II. It is hard to imagine anyone doing a better job; in fact, Kennan did not lay a glove on him. He recognized, for example, that the "the establishment of Soviet military power in eastern Europe" was not the result of Roosevelt's actions at Yalta or any other conference with Stalin. "It was the result of the military operations during the concluding phases of the war. There was nothing the Western democracies could have done to prevent the Russians from entering these areas except to get there first, and this they were not in a position to do" (90).

Kennan seemed to think that Roosevelt should have been tougher with Stalin after midsummer of 1944, when it was clear Hitler was finished. He proposed that the president should have cut off lend-lease to the Soviets. However, he subsequently acknowledged that "there is no reason to suppose that, had we behaved differently either with respect to lend-lease or with respect to the wartime conferences, the outcome of military events in Europe would have been different" (92–93). Kennan's assessment is correct.

What about the effects of public opinion on how Roose-

velt waged World War II? Kennan cannot argue that pursuing unconditional surrender against a monster like Hitler was due to American democracy. He said that he would have preferred less talk about the subject, but admitted, "In reality there was no promising alternative but to pursue this unhappy struggle to its bitter end" (93).

Public opinion did matter in one instance during World War II, but Kennan paid it little attention. There was an abundance of isolationist sentiment in the United States in the years before Pearl Harbor, which tied Roosevelt's hands in dealing with Nazi Germany. The president was desperate to bring America into the war but simply could not rally enough of his people to support intervention in the absence of a major attack against the United States. However, public sentiment was not motivated by legalism or moralism in this case, as Kennan's logic would imply. If anything, the American public's unwillingness to join the war against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan before December 1941 reflected a cold and selfish perspective on how to deal with the outside world.

In sum, Kennan provided little evidence that democracy hindered America's performance in World War II, or for that matter at any point between 1900 and 1950. This is not to deny that the United States occasionally made mistakes during those years. Thus, it is not surprising that Kennan remarked in his second Grinnell lecture in 1984, "Our record is far from being only one of failures. On balance, we have little to be ashamed about" (180).

America was operating in a much more difficult strategic environment in 1950 compared to 1900 simply because of changes in the European balance of power over which the United States had hardly any control.<sup>11</sup> The rise

11. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), chaps. 5–7.



of Germany between 1870 and 1945 was the principal reason that the equilibrium on the Continent disappeared after 1900, and it was the underlying cause of both world wars. Germany's ascendancy was largely due to its increasing population and wealth. The rise of the Soviet Union in the 1930s—which was mainly the result of Stalin's economic policies—and the fact that the Red Army played the crucial role in defeating the Nazi war machine between 1941 and 1945 explain why there was no equilibrium after World War II and the Cold War.

Kennan was right when he argued that the presence of a potential hegemon in either Asia or Europe is bad for American security. However, neither public opinion—his *bête noire*—nor smart US diplomacy has ever been capable of influencing the structure of power in Europe in any meaningful way. Thus, even if Kennan had been in charge of American foreign policy for the entire first half of the twentieth century, the United States would have ended up in roughly the same strategic situation in 1950. Diplomacy matters, but it has far less influence on international politics than Kennan thought.

One might think that I am missing Kennan's key point: it was the fact that both world wars were total wars that accounts for the profound change that took place in the European balance of power, and it was democracy, especially American democracy, that is responsible for pushing World War I—the critically important conflict for him—to its extreme limits.

While there is no question that both world wars profoundly altered the balance of power in Europe, the fact that they were total wars had little to do with democracy and much to do with nationalism, which has been the most powerful ideology on the planet for the past two centuries. However, Kennan rarely mentioned nationalism in *American Diplomacy*.

Before nationalism arrived on the scene in late

eighteenth-century Europe, great power wars were limited in both scope and means. These conflicts, which involved the dynastic states of the day, were the kind of wars that Kennan liked. But that all changed with the coming of the nation-state, where there are tight bonds between the people and their state, and where many citizens are willing to serve in the military and even make the supreme sacrifice in times of extreme emergency. This willingness to serve one's country means that national armies will tend to be large and have substantial staying power, which means they will be well suited for waging total war. Furthermore, when mass armies clash with each other, the result, as Carl von Clausewitz put it, is "primordial violence, hatred and enmity."<sup>12</sup> This kind of hostility almost guarantees that each side will be so enraged with the other that it will demand decisive victory and refuse a compromise settlement.

This state of affairs is compounded by the fact that governments usually have to motivate their publics to make enormous sacrifices to win a great power war. Most importantly, some substantial number of citizens has to be convinced to serve in the military and possibly die for their country. One way that leaders inspire their people to fight modern wars is to portray the adversary as the epitome of evil and a mortal threat to boot. This behavior, it should be noted, is not limited to democracies as Kennan thought. Doing so, however, makes it almost impossible to negotiate an end to a war short of total victory. After all, how can one negotiate with an adversary that is thought to be the devil incarnate? It makes much more sense to pull out every punch to decisively defeat that opponent and get it to surrender unconditionally. Of course, both sides are invariably drawn to this conclusion, which rules out any hope of a negotiated compromise.

12. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

Kennan believed that World War I was the first total war in modern history, but he is wrong. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) own that distinction, and the United States had hardly any influence on the course of that momentous conflict. Clausewitz, who fought against Napoleon's armies, wrote, "One might wonder whether there is any truth at all in our concept of the absolute character of war were it not for the fact that with our own eyes we have seen warfare achieve this state of absolute perfection." His classic work, *On War*, is actually an attempt "to grasp the concept of modern, absolute war in all its devastating power."<sup>13</sup> In fact, the main purpose of Clausewitz's famous dictum "war is an extension of politics by other means" is to convince civilian leaders that they should go to great lengths to limit wars when it makes good political sense, while recognizing that war's natural tendency in the age of nationalism is to escalate to its absolute or total form.<sup>14</sup>

These same forces were at play again in World War I, which is why all of the great powers involved in that conflict—democracies as well as nondemocracies—were committed to fighting until they collapsed or hopefully the other side collapsed first. In short, nationalism, not democracy, fuels the modern state's desire for decisive victories and unconditional surrender, aspirations that make it difficult to limit wars between rival great powers.

### *Conclusion*

One final matter remains: Kennan said hardly anything about nuclear weapons in either the Walgreen lectures or his two *Foreign Affairs* articles from the early days of the Cold War. This is quite remarkable given what a profound

13. Clausewitz, *On War*, 580, 584.

14. Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

impact those weapons of mass destruction have had on American diplomacy since 1945. What explains this striking omission?

Kennan loathed nuclear weapons and thought they had no redeeming value. Although he did not explicitly say so, it seems likely that his pessimism about America's strategic circumstances in 1950 was due in good part to the fact that the United States had a nuclear arsenal and the Soviet Union was about to get one. Thus, one would expect Kennan to have addressed the nuclear issue in his public commentary at the time. However, he did not "because I still continued at that time to hope, naively if you will, that we would pause before entering the chamber of horrors that I saw looming before us in any decision to base our defenses on weapons of this nature and to encourage others to do likewise." He went on to say, "I would have liked to see the 'atomic bomb' . . . rejected, as a device too terrible and too indiscriminate to constitute a useful weapon" (xlvi). Such a sentiment, it seems fair to say, was not realistic.

The fact that Kennan ignored both nationalism and nuclear weapons—two of the most powerful influences on contemporary international politics—illustrates the extent to which he was disenchanted with the modern world. He would have much preferred to return to eighteenth-century Europe, where the great powers fought limited wars with each other and where diplomats had more room to maneuver and greater influence on the course of events than they do in the world of nation-states. Kennan longed for "diplomacy, in the most old-fashioned sense of the term" (104).

That old order, however, is gone forever. For better or for worse, nationalism and nuclear weapons are here to stay. There is no reason to think either of them is going to disappear in the foreseeable future.

Even though Kennan failed to capture the importance of these two potent forces, he has offered some brilliant in-

sights about America's strategic position in the world and the nature of international politics more generally. He also has had wise things to say about the limits of what Washington can do to influence events around the world. For anyone who thinks seriously about the present state of US foreign policy and what it should look like in the decades ahead, *American Diplomacy* remains a work of lasting relevance. One suspects that it has not been widely read in recent years—and certainly not by any of the architects of our recent foreign policy disasters. But one hopes that this new edition will rectify this situation and allow Kennan's enduring insights to again inform debates on American foreign policy.