

FULL-SPECTRUM DIPLOMACY: OF KENNAN, RACISM AND REALISM

HEATHER HURLBURT

Seven hundred pages of George Kennan's diaries have just been published, and they reveal something that historians knew, but which the public might not: Kennan was a bigot. One is tempted to see this as reason enough to downgrade or dismiss Kennan from the foreign policy pantheon. Yet the analytic and human failings on view in Kennan's diaries are reason not to dismiss his thinking but to reconsider its impact.

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By Heather Hurlburt
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Seven hundred pages of George Kennan’s diaries have just been published, and though I have not read them, [David Greenberg’s review in the New Republic](#) gives us dilettantes some of the highlights—and at times the lowlights—of the entries that cover the years from 1916 to 2004. Greenberg focuses on a fact that historians knew, but which the public by and large does not: Kennan was, by the standards of our age and, more importantly, by the standard of his own, a bigot.

“As a 28-year-old Foreign Service officer,” writes Greenberg, “[Kennan] remains convinced that the world’s problems are ‘essentially biological.’” Or as Kennan himself put it, “We have a group of more or less inferior races. . . . No amount of education and discipline can effectively improve conditions as long as we allow the unfit to breed copiously and to preserve their young.”

Kennan continued to confide such views to his diaries five decades later; women, gays, Catholics, Chinese, blacks and Jews each receive individual and repeated scorn.

One is tempted to see these embarrassing quotes as reason enough to downgrade or dismiss Kennan from the foreign policy pantheon. Yet as a woman at an age where Kennan thought I should “become more sociable, and should seek her compensation in service to others, without asking too much from them,” I’ll suggest that we give the man a bit of a break. His views either mellowed or were susceptible enough to flattery that he writes happily of having “a good serious conversation” with then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at a dinner in his honor.

Today, when Kennan-inspired realist currents are popular on both the left and the right, the analytic and human failings on view in Kennan’s diaries are reason not to dismiss his thinking but to reconsider its impact. His weakness as a policymaker emerges less as an irrational hatred for any particular group, but as a seeming inability to embrace any group of humanity complete with all its flaws, and thereby to join in struggles that must inevitably fall far short of their potential. His most influential writings roused themselves from this cynicism, but he himself seems to have languished in it much of his life, to his—and probably our—detriment.

Greenberg notes that, throughout his life, Kennan had critical views of just about everyone, including—perhaps especially—his fellow Americans. In 1953, when his analyses of Soviet Russia informed American conceptions of an epic struggle at every level of life, he wrote of America: “For me this country presents no interest whatsoever. . . . This is an infinitely boring country, which, though it has not the slightest idea about this, is condemned to a sad and pitiful fate.”

Truth be told, this attitude is not so unusual among diplomats, neither is it rare among international business people, aid workers and other professionals who are drawn to exploring “exotic” cultures to escape the perceived shortcomings of their own.

What is unusual is someone who finds other societies just as meritless as his own, as Kennan seems to have done.

Something else Kennan had a low regard for throughout his life was democracy. On the eve of World War II he wrote in favor of taking the vote away from immigrants, women and blacks. By the end of his life, he proposed in his public writings a council that would oversee—and, when necessary, override—the workings of democratic government.

It seems likely that Kennan's lack of romantic embrace both of his own country and of others gave him the clarity of vision that informed the “[Long Telegram](#)” of 1946 and his X article of 1947, “[The Sources of Soviet Conduct](#).” These two documents became central to American understanding of the Soviet Union and the foundations of U.S. foreign policy for the 40 years that followed.

What is often forgotten or glossed over, 60 years later, is that much of what became the policy of containment Kennan did not propose at all, and that central to his analysis was the insight that open war with the Soviet Union was not necessary, even as real peace with the Soviet regime was not possible.

Rather than the military buildup and “domino theory” that came to be associated with containment, Kennan proposed studying the Soviet regime with courage and detachment, educating the American public to avoid “hysterical anti-Sovietism,” maintaining the health of American society and holding fast to American ideals. Most important, he wrote, was to “create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problem of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a World Power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.”

None of these tasks were taken up by the State Department, the Defense Department or the intelligence community, all of which set about interpreting Kennan's analyses and developing the policies that became containment. And Kennan, who later suffered from ulcers brought on by the response to the X article and said repeatedly that he had been misconstrued, saw his influence wane and his government career end. Like many other intellectuals since, he brought to the State Department's policy planning staff a sensibility that didn't encompass daily decision-making and short- to medium-term strategy. Even by State's standards, his tenure was notable for its rockiness.

Now that we have a view of how he saw his fellow human beings, perhaps we better understand why.

Kennan is a unique figure, and the religious and societal forces that shaped him have altered greatly since his time. His personal failings don't dent his analytic achievement, but they do explain why he was unable to get beyond analysis and lead, whether at State or later in private life, a more moderate and less ideological movement in American foreign policy.

He was uniquely ill-suited for his own prescription: to show the rest of the world a vital America coping with its problems. Yet in the postwar economic and consumer boom, in the civil rights movement and in all the other individual liberations that Kennan so disliked, that is exactly what his country ended up doing.

If the Cold War had a winner, it was that vitality—a vitality expressed by ordinary Americans, but that flowed just as strongly in the ordinary Russians and Poles who liberated themselves from Soviet regimes, as well as in the ordinary South Africans and Zambians who Kennan found lazy, smelly and just plain inferior.

Where American realism goes astray, then and now, is when it denies or downgrades that human drive to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, not because that drive is always expressed wisely or justly, but because when it is suppressed, justice and wisdom are scarcely possible.

We shouldn't let Kennan's flaws take away from the importance of seeing the world with detach-

ment, as he did. But detachment that pretends to have no biases is ultimately no foundation for policy, which always does. □

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Photo: George Kennan (photo from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow).

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