

The Kennan century

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Debating the lessons of America's greatest living diplomat

By David C. Engerman | February 29, 2004

TWO FRIDAYS ago, scholars, diplomats, and hordes of orange-and-black-clad Princeton alums gathered at the university's New Jersey campus to celebrate the 100th birthday of George F. Kennan ('25), the most influential American diplomat of the 20th century.

Since World War II, just about every diplomat and policy maker has read or heard Kennan's lessons on subjects ranging from "containing" the Soviet threat to the primacy of national interests in making foreign policy. But if he had been healthy enough to attend the gala, Kennan might have wondered just how well they had truly absorbed his teachings.

Secretary of State Colin Powell led off the day's events, paying homage to the former diplomat and wrapping himself in the mantle of America's oldest and arguably wisest wise man in foreign affairs. Powell extolled Kennan's ability to prophesy the demise of the Soviet Union even at the peak of its power, calling his prediction "no lucky guess, but a manifestation of genuine wisdom."

Praising the diplomat as both an optimist and an idealist, Powell also wanted to claim him for those in favor of the war in Iraq. "It is a matter of sad necessity that both proliferation and terrorism hold a share of the definition of our age," he declared. "But we must not let these dangers dominate that definition, and here our best tutor, our inspiration, is, once again, George Kennan."

But Kennan, never an optimist, may not have recognized himself in Powell's speech. From his Wisconsin high school yearbook -- where his entry lists his pet peeve as "The Universe" -- to his elegant if sometimes morose memoirs, Kennan has never shied from describing his alienation from and unhappiness with the modern world. On various occasions, he has called himself "an expatriate in time" and even "an 18th-century person" stranded in a very different age.

This self-consciously old-fashioned man met privately with Powell after the celebration. After watching the secretary's speech on television, Kennan hailed it, according to State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, as a "very comprehensive and definitive statement of the administration's foreign policies" -- though one he did not entirely agree with.

Kennan's most significant policy pronouncements adhered to the foreign policy doctrine known as realism, founded on the idea that nations should act in their own self-interest rather than any desire to improve the world. His famous documents of the early Cold War -- the secret Long Telegram of 1946, written while Kennan was posted in Moscow; and the famous article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," published in 1947 in the journal Foreign Affairs under the pseudonym "X" -- show his dismay at naive hopes that the Soviet-American wartime alliance against Germany would last. Josef Stalin, he argued, was a cruel dictator atop a brutal system, not a fit or faithful ally for the United States.

But Kennan also feared that "hysterical anti-Sovietism" would lead to precipitate American actions detrimental to its long-term interests. Through the 1940s and '50s, he spoke out against the policy of "rollback," the notion that Americans should capitalize on their immense military advantage to challenge Stalin directly. The answer, Kennan famously proposed, was the "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies." Americans should work with their allies to limit the Soviet Union's further expansion -- even if it meant accepting Soviet control in Eastern Europe. Containment would increase the "strains" inherent in Soviet society and eventually "promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power" -- a scenario he had anticipated, in a more speculative vein, as early as 1932.

Kennan's realism and pessimism were of a piece. Only diplomats sufficiently sheltered from the fickle winds of public opinion -- Kennan later proposed a "Council of State" selected from a nationwide panel of worthies -- could remain sufficiently above the fray to keep America's long-term interests in mind. This pessimistic view of popular opinion, ironically, led Kennan to voice antidemocratic sentiments but to support Democratic foreign policies and presidential candidates, including Adlai Stevenson in 1956 and anti-establishment candidate Eugene McCarthy early in the '68 presidential primary season.

The "realities of American foreign policy" (a term Kennan used frequently) dictated cutting American losses in Vietnam, seeking nuclear disarmament, and working to reverse environmental degradation -- policies he defended strictly in terms of national interests. Within a decade after devising containment, Kennan denied paternity for it, saying it relied too heavily on armaments (especially nuclear ones) and not enough on diplomacy. Kennan was a more of a Cold Warrior than a warrior.

At the conference, Powell was not alone in trying to link Kennan's ideas to today's foreign policy dilemmas. Colonel Dallas Brown, a Princeton alumnus and career Army officer who had first met Kennan because (in the words of his superior officer) he could "speak Ivy League," enumerated Kennan's lessons for the Bush administration. Brown emphasized the diplomat's belief in "the power of personal and professional diplomacy" and his "mistrust of military hierarchies and military instruments."

These lessons, one might add, are not universally embraced in the office of Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, for whom Brown works. Indeed, John Mearsheimer, a political scientist at the University of Chicago and leading realist commentator, cited Kennan's ideas against the "Bush Doctrine" of preemptive war, which he denounced as "not viable" -- to hearty applause from the audience.

Historically, Mearsheimer said, only two rulers were aggressive enough to warrant preemptive war: Napoleon and Hitler. "We could have contained Iraq," he said. And as for the possibility of blackmail with weapons of mass destruction, he asked, "If Soviet leaders with thousands of nuclear missiles couldn't blackmail us, how could Saddam," even if he'd had a handful?

Journalist Chris Hedges, author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning," shared Mearsheimer's praise for Kennan's "wisdom of containment," if not what he saw as the realists' overly narrow definition of national interest. "Stopping genocide is in our self-interest," he said, reeling off a list of recent tragedies that should have generated a strong American response.

Kennan hardly needs Mearsheimer or Hedges to oppose the current administration's foreign policy in his name. Jack Matlock, former ambassador to the Soviet Union and a friend and colleague of Kennan's, told a questioner that Kennan was "very much against" the war in Iraq, both because Hussein "posed no threat to us directly" and also because of his skepticism about "American ability to change other cultures and societies." Indeed, in a little-noticed 2002 interview in *The Hill*, a nonpartisan weekly for Congressional insiders, Kennan blasted the Bush Doctrine (which he called a "great mistake"), along with the administration's failure to exhaust nonmilitary options for Iraq and the "timidity" of congressional Democrats' opposition to Bush.

Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, Kennan's official biographer (and author of a recent book defending the doctrine of preemption), ended his talk on a more personal note. In a moving close to the day's events, Gaddis played

a 1995 recorded interview, in which he asked Kennan to compose his own obituary. After admitting that "no one fully understands himself," Kennan claimed credit for having "certain insights, from time to time, which are good and which are philosophically useful." These insights, the nonagenarian reflected with a combination of modesty and self-certainty, "could have been more useful to people . . . than they have been."

Brandeis historian David C. Engerman is the author of "Modernization from the Other Shore" (Harvard, 2003)