

Candle in the Wind:

George F. Kennan and Arms Control, 1945-1990

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Acknowledgments

Two years ago, toward the end of my final interview in the Harry S Truman Scholarship competition, I was asked if I had any heroes in the area of public service. Somewhat relieved at finally being asked an “easy” question, I replied that there were two. One was George F. Kennan, because he always based his opinions on a thorough study of the question at hand and because he was never afraid to express those opinions, even though he knew they would not always be well received. The other was Dr. Betty Miller Unterberger—my advisor for this project—because in all the countless hours, both in the classroom and out, that we had spent discussing history, politics, and life in general, she never once told me what I should believe. She provided a framework, a point of reference, and then let me decide for myself. And that, in my opinion, is what teaching is all about.

What can a flame remember? If it remembers a little less than is necessary, it goes out; if it remembers a little more than is necessary, it goes out. If only it could teach us, while it burns, to remember correctly.

—George Seferis

Introduction

George Frost Kennan, like the Russian history and culture to which he has dedicated over sixty years of study, is often viewed as an enigma of sorts. Once described as “impossibly learned yet commonsensical, stern in his judgments yet gentle, drawn to the spotlight yet private and shy, a shaper of this century who increasingly feels himself a visitor from another,” Kennan possessed a unique duality of nature which eminently qualified him to develop a postwar American foreign policy designed to contain the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet government he detested, while minimizing the harm done to the Russian people he loved.¹ In order to achieve such a delicate balance, Kennan—one of the

1. “The Last Wise Man,” *Atlantic Monthly* 263 (April 1989): 41.

State Department's first Russian experts, head of the Policy Planning Staff from 1947 through 1949, and Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1952—consistently recommended the use of political and economic means, as opposed to military force.

Although Kennan recognized the need to maintain adequate armed forces, he always envisioned a distinct lack of military emphasis in American efforts to curb Soviet expansionism.² Based on the belief that the Soviet threat was primarily a political one and should therefore be countered politically, Kennan's postwar doctrine of "containment" advocated strengthening Western society to combat the perceived onslaught of Communism. The most successful implementation of this approach was "the Marshall Plan for European economic recovery," which, beginning in 1948, provided billions of dollars in aid to many of the decimated countries of Europe.³ Early in his tenure with the Policy Planning Staff, Kennan "forged the intellectual framework" for this program, which Secretary of State Dean Acheson "later described as 'one of the greatest and most honorable adventures in history'."⁴

2. See, for instance, George Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (Boston, 1967), 335; "Review of Current Trends U.S. Foreign Policy," 24 February 1948, PPS 23, Anna Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers, 1947-1949*, (New York, 1983), 2:115 (hereafter cited as *PPS Papers*, with volume and page); and "Considerations Affecting the Conclusion of a North Atlantic Security Pact," 24 November 1948, PPS 43, *PPS Papers*, 2:490-496.

3. David Aikman, "Those Who Thought Ahead," *Time* 129 (25 May 1987): 41.

4. *Ibid.*, 41.

Regrettably, the great adventure was destined to last for only a short time. The Marshall Plan was inexorably replaced by the militaristic orientation which has marked American relations with Europe ever since and which has been a continual source of concern for Kennan. For it was this emphasis on military force which led almost inevitably to the development of weapons of immense destructive capacity, as well as more accurate ways to deliver them, and finally, to a reliance on those weapons in the areas of both national security and foreign policy. While Kennan has written on a multitude of subjects over the last forty-five years, including environmental and societal issues and diplomatic history, a significant portion of his work has concentrated on armaments and their effect on East-West relations.⁵ Although his most eloquent and impassioned prose deals with nuclear weaponry, Kennan also has extensively analyzed several related issues, including conventional forces, the philosophy of war, arms negotiations, Soviet behavior and intentions, and the role of nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

Kennan is not, of course, the only person ever to write on these topics. He does, however, possess the advantage of having served as a

5. Of Kennan's eighteen books, seven are diplomatic histories, five are collections of lectures, three deal with current events, and three are autobiographical in nature. His articles also deal with a wide range of issues. See, for example, George Kennan, "To Prevent a World Wasteland," *Foreign Affairs* 48 (April 1970): 401-413 and George Kennan, "Communism in Russian History," *Foreign Affairs* 69 (Winter 1990-91): 168-186.

major participant in many of the great events which he has so brilliantly chronicled. The varying perspectives which he is therefore able to present offer a glimpse of the patterns in which armaments and politics, among other things, have interacted to produce the international climate which exists today.

Importuning the Skies,

1945-1952

During the years from 1945 to 1952, Kennan's life underwent several radical changes. He served as charge d'affaires at the embassy in Moscow until mid-1946, then came home to teach at the National War College for a year. In 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall asked Kennan to serve as the first head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, a post he held until the end of 1949. Kennan then took an extended leave of absence from the State Department and accepted a position at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. Finally, he was appointed Ambassador to the Soviet Union in late 1951 and served in that capacity through most of 1952, after which he retired and returned, more or less permanently, to Princeton.

* * *

The predominant theme in Kennan's writings on arms control during this period seems to be deterrence, the cultivation of a military posture sufficient to discourage hostile action by others. Having both thoroughly studied Russian history and witnessed firsthand the policies of Josef Stalin, Kennan understood that the "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" meant, at least under Stalin, a Soviet government

that was inherently expansionist and distrustful of the West.¹ The combination of those two characteristics led Kennan to conclude, in what is probably his first written analysis of the nuclear question, that "it would be highly dangerous to our security if the Russians were to develop the use of atomic energy, or any other radical and far-reaching means of destruction."² Based on his extensive experience with Russian culture and history, though, Kennan felt that there were certain aspects of the Soviet mindset which made deterrence an attractive foreign policy option.

As Kennan noted in his now-famous 'X' article, there was no ideological fixation in the Soviet Union's goals.³ If something blocked Russian expansion, the Kremlin generally would feel no need to attempt to overpower the obstruction. Instead, he wrote, when Soviet power "finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them."⁴ While he intended that these

1. Telegram from Kennan to Department of State, 22 February 1946, "Telegram 861.00/2-2246," U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945* (hereafter cited as *FRUS*, with year, volume, and page), 6:699. This became known as Kennan's 'long telegram'.

2. Telegram from Kennan to Department of State, 30 September 1945, "Telegram 811.2423/9-3045," *FRUS, 1946*, 5:885.

3. George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25 (July 1947): 569. Published under the nom de plume 'X'.

4. *Ibid.*, 575. See also George Kennan, "Excerpt from 'The United States and Russia, Winter 1946'," Annex D to *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (Boston, 1967), 563.

barriers be primarily economic and political ones, Kennan also recognized a need for sufficient armed strength to meet military needs.⁵ Although the terminology was not yet in vogue, Kennan was very much more an advocate of flexible response as opposed to massive retaliation. As he stated in his memoirs, however, "Until there was a workable international agreement on their [atomic weapons] removal from national arsenals, with safeguards against their production and use by others, we had, I thought, 'the sad duty' of retaining our preeminence in this field."⁶

The concept of a nuclear arms race, of course, flows logically from such a statement. Kennan himself recognized this fact, writing to Secretary of State Dean Acheson that continued development of atomic weapons would "encourage the belief that somehow or other results decisive for the purposes of democracy can be expected to flow from the question of who obtains the ultimate superiority in the atomic weapons race."⁷ In an earlier Policy Planning Staff paper, however, Kennan cautioned that "intensive rearmament constitutes an uneconomic and

5. See, for example, "Factors Affecting the Nature of the U.S. Defense Arrangements in the Light of Soviet Policies," 23 June 1948, PPS 33, *PPS Papers*, 2:281-292; George Kennan, "The International Situation," *The Department of State Bulletin* (5 September 1949): 324; and George Kennan, "Let Peace Not Die of Neglect," *The New York Times Magazine* (25 February 1951): 39.

6. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, 311.

7. Memorandum from Kennan to Dean Acheson, 20 January 1950, "Memorandum on International Control of Atomic Energy, 20 January 1950," *FRUS, 1950*, 1:38.

regrettable diversion of effort.”⁸ Still, such rearmament, at least in part, was certainly implied in the concept of deterrence which Kennan espoused during this period. It was this contradiction in Kennan’s thought which, over the next several decades, slowly wrought a fundamental alteration in his view of the deterrent value of atomic weapons.

Despite Kennan’s perception at the time that a nuclear capacity was a necessity, he adamantly rejected the notion that nuclear weapons could serve any useful purpose outside the context of deterrence. He warned in 1949 that “we are in danger of finding our whole policy tied to the atom bomb,” an unfortunate situation which he decried a few months later with, “Atomic weapons are already an infirm and questionable element in our military posture, and likely to become more so as time passes.”⁹ This attitude toward the atomic bomb stemmed from Kennan’s belief that its indiscriminate destructive capacity, revealed in brutal clarity at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, rendered it profoundly unsuited for achieving coherent political aims.¹⁰ As he noted in a 1951 article,

8. PPS 43, *PPS Papers*, 2:492.

9. “Minutes of Policy Planning Staff Meeting, 3 November 1949,” *FRUS, 1949*, 1:573; Memorandum from Kennan to Department of State, 17 February 1950, “Memorandum, 17 February 1950,” *FRUS, 1950*, 1:164.

10. “Memorandum on International Control of Atomic Energy, 20 January 1950,” 39.

“Since victory or defeat [in a nuclear war] can signify only relative degrees of misfortune, 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 for what has happened.”¹¹ In such a situation, he believed, the most that the West could accomplish “would be to pull down the temple over its own head.”¹²

* * *

Implicit in all of Kennan’s analyses of the nuclear question is his intellectual attitude concerning war and its likelihood vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. He succinctly expressed his general philosophy of war in the following passage from his first book, published in 1951: “It is essential to recognize that the maiming and killing of men and the destruction of human shelters and other installations . . . cannot in itself make a positive contribution to any democratic purpose.”¹³ In Kennan’s opinion, war, especially in an age of weapons of mass destruction, simply was not a realistic and acceptable means to be used in the

11. George Kennan, “America and the Russian Future,” *Foreign Affairs* 29 (April 1951): 363.

12. George Kennan, *Sketches from a Life* (New York, 1989), 122.

13. George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago, 1951), 89. That same year, Kennan made note of the ‘American bad habit of assuming that there is something final and positive about a military decision—that it is the ending of something, and the happy ending, rather than a beginning.’ See Kennan, “America and the Russian Future,” 351.

conduct of foreign policy. In other words, an end, no matter how noble, inevitably would become something contemptible if it required the denial of a basic concern for the well-being of one's fellow humans. "For such positive purposes as we wish to pursue," he noted in the personal memo to Acheson, "we must look to other things than war: above all, to bearing, to example, to persuasion, and to the judicious exploitation of our strength as a deterrent to world conflict."¹⁴

With specific regard to the Soviet Union, Kennan did not see all-out war as a likely prospect. In an early Policy Planning Staff paper, he noted that "there is no reason to expect that we will be forced suddenly and violently into a major military clash with Soviet forces."¹⁵ As Kennan saw it, the Kremlin would do all it could to destroy the political institutions of the West, but only in a manner which would not "endanger in any major way the security of the world citadel of Communism, the USSR."¹⁶ Kennan felt it highly unlikely that Soviet leaders, having witnessed America's awesome industrial capacity during World War II, would be in any hurry to challenge overtly that industrial might.

Of the various methods used to insulate the West from those

14. "Memorandum on International Control of Atomic Energy, 20 January 1950," 37.

15. "Resume of World Situation," 6 November 1947, PPS 13, *PPS Papers*, 1:136.

16. *Ibid.*, 3.

attempts at inroads which the Soviets did make, Kennan probably put the least amount of confidence in negotiated pacts, whether with allies or adversaries. As he stated in a speech delivered in 1948, "Security is not something which can be suddenly bestowed upon the international community by any set of contractual relationships between its individual members."¹⁷ Nor did Kennan put much faith in the Russian leaders' desire to carry out the terms of any such agreements. In a letter sent from Moscow, he said, "Even if they can be brought to sign such documents at all, they have little respect for them and no serious intention of executing them."¹⁸ Furthermore, with regard to pacts on arms control, Kennan opined that "armaments are a function and not a cause of political tensions and . . . no limitation of armaments on a multilateral scale can be effected as long as the political problems are not tackled and regulated in some realistic way."¹⁹

Kennan's view toward NATO developed along similar lines. While he distrusted the concept of an alliance, especially a military one, he also recognized its ability to provide Western Europe with a much-needed

17. George Kennan, "The United States and the United Nations," address delivered at the Herald Tribune Forum, New York, 20 October 1948, *Vital Speeches* (15 November 1948): 69.

18. Letter from Kennan to John Hazard, 13 March 1946, "Letter 611.6131/3-1346," *FRUS, 1946*, 6:730-731.

19. George Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963* (New York, 1983), 109.

dose of confidence. But, he noted, "Military union should not be the starting point. It should flow from the political, economic, and spiritual union—not vice versa."²⁰ A military alliance, he thought, could be misinterpreted by the Soviet Union as offensive in nature, rather than defensive as it was designed to be.²¹ And yet, if Western Europe and the United States truly desired a military union, Kennan felt that it should *be* a military union. As he stated categorically in 1950, "I feel that there was something unsound from the beginning about asking demilitarized, or substantially demilitarized, countries such as Iceland, Italy, and Denmark to enter into arrangements with us which implied mutuality of military obligation."²²

* * *

During his final years in government service, Kennan's views on arms control tended to concentrate on the concept of deterrence through "preeminence in the field" of nuclear armaments. He rejected the development of atomic weapons for any other purpose because of their tremendous destructive capacity. The approach to deterrence which

20. Memorandum from Kennan to Department of State, 20 January 1948, "Memorandum 840.00/1-2048," *FRUS, 1948*, 3:7.

21. George Kennan, "The Soviet Union and the Atlantic Pact, 8 September 1952," Annex to *Memoirs: 1950-1963* (New York, 1983): 354. This is, of course, exactly what happened.

22. Memorandum from Kennan to Department of State, 24 April 1950, "Memorandum 762A.00/4-2450," *FRUS, 1950*, 4:682.

Kennan advocated at this time, however, inherently held the danger of continual escalation, a point to which he devoted a great deal of thought in an attempt to resolve. Kennan's attitude toward arms control in general, though, was underpinned by his beliefs that war was a poor foreign policy tool and that the Soviet Union had no intention of launching an invasion of Western Europe. Finally, Kennan, during this period, displayed a marked distrust of alliances and pacts, whether military or otherwise.

**Between Essence and Descent,
1953-1967**

Although officially retired from the State Department, Kennan was far from inactive in the period from 1953 to 1967. He carried on research at Princeton until 1957 (a work published in 1956 brought Kennan his first Pulitzer Prize), when he left to serve as Eastman Visiting Professor at Oxford for a year. While in England in the fall of 1957, Kennan delivered the British Broadcasting Corporation's Reith Lectures, a set of six talks in which he discussed Soviet relations with the West. He returned to the Institute for Advanced Study in 1958 and remained there for three years, until he agreed to serve as Ambassador to Yugoslavia during the Kennedy Administration. In 1963, Kennan once again found a home at Princeton and began work on his memoirs, the first volume of which (his second Pulitzer winner) was published in 1967.

* * *

Kennan's views on arms control and related issues during this period began to shy away from a fixation on deterrence. The death of Stalin in 1953 and an ever-increasing upward spiral in nuclear development forced Kennan to reconsider his concept of deterrence; what emerged was something quite different from "preeminence in the field."

Now, Kennan advised only that “we retain a prudent measure of the capacity to retaliate and a reasonable dispersal of the facilities requisite thereto.”¹ As he noted more specifically in one of the Reith Lectures:

Now that the capacity to inflict this fearful destruction *is* mutual, and now that this premium *has* been placed on the element of surprise, I am prepared to concede that the atomic deterrent has its value as a stabilizing factor until we can evolve some better means of protection.²

Thus, Kennan now saw deterrence as more of a stop-gap measure than a goal which should endlessly be pursued.

This new attitude toward deterrence, while very complex in its roots, was perhaps most profoundly affected by Kennan’s increasing abhorrence of the weapons of mass destruction. In writings and talks from this period, he referred to such armaments as “suicidal,” “one of the great and sorry realities of our day,” and “a power . . . out of all proportion to their [human beings] moral strength.”³ As destructive

1. George Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, 1954), 82-83. See also George Kennan, “Overdue Changes in Our Foreign Policy,” *Harper’s* 213 (August 1956): 32.

2. George Kennan, *Russia, the Atom, and the West* (New York, 1958), 52. For a further discussion of the temporary nature of deterrence, see George Kennan, “Disengagement Revisited,” *Foreign Affairs* 37 (January 1959): 194.

3. George Kennan, testimony before Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 4 February 1959, *Disarmament and Foreign Policy*, 203; Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy*, 84; and George Kennan, “Oppenheimer,” *Encounter* 28 (April 1967): 55.

capacities and accuracy continued to increase, Kennan grew increasingly concerned over the fact that these weapons provided the ability to render meaningless the thousands of years of endeavor which had produced modern civilization.⁴ Underlying this passion, of course, was still the notion that nuclear weapons "cannot in any way serve the purposes of a constructive and hopeful foreign policy."⁵

Kennan thus found the continued development of such weapons, and the arms race which then ensued, to be particularly distressing. In his opinion, an arms race would inevitably gain an inertia of its own and therefore would be "inconsistent with any satisfactory form of coexistence."⁶ In the same vein, Kennan did not believe that defensive measures could contribute to greater stability, calling them "foolish, . . . regretful, and unnecessary."⁷ As he eloquently stated in a Reith Lecture:

Are we to flee like haunted creatures from one defensive device to another, each more costly and humiliating than the one before, cowering underground one day, breaking up our

4. George Kennan, "That Candles May Be Brought . . .," *Encounter* 16 (February 1961): 72-74; Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963*, 247.

5. Kennan, *Russia, the Atom, and the West*, 55.

6. George Kennan, "A Conversation with Kennan," interview with Melvin Lasky, *Encounter* 14 (March 1960): 55; George Kennan, "Peaceful Co-Existence: A Western View," *Foreign Affairs* 38 (January 1960): 184.

7. George Kennan, testimony before Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 30 January 1967, *The Communist World in 1967*, 24.

cities the next, attempting to surround ourselves with elaborate electronic shields on the third, concerned only to prolong the length of our lives while sacrificing all the values for which it might be worth while to live at all?⁸

Yet another aspect of the weapons of mass destruction over which Kennan exhibited a great deal of concern was the proliferation of this class of armaments. From one point of view, Kennan opposed sharing nuclear technology among the NATO allies because that would only exacerbate the political problems of Central Europe with regard to the Soviet Union.⁹ From another point of view, Kennan opposed proliferation because it would greatly complicate any arms control negotiations which might eventually take place. "Once this [the nuclear weapon] gets into the hands of an unknown number of further governments," he noted during a 1959 Congressional hearing, "the difficulty of negotiating any international agreement is going to grow in geometric ratio with every government that is added to the group."¹⁰ Furthermore, as Kennan went on to state during that hearing, continued proliferation would only

8. Kennan, *Russia, the Atom, and the West*, 54.

9. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963*, 239-240; Kennan, "Disengagement Revisited," 203; Kennan, *Disarmament and Foreign Policy*, 204-205.

10. George Kennan, testimony before Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 12 May 1959, *Informal Meeting with George F. Kennan*, 5.

increase the “danger of these things being used by accident,” a danger which he already considered substantial.¹¹

Because of such perils, Kennan greatly preferred to see the West present a military posture based on conventional armaments, as opposed to their nuclear counterparts. He suggested in a Reith Lecture that, “A first step away from the horrors of the atom must be the adequate development of agencies of force more flexible, more discriminate, and less suicidal in their effects. . . . As a general rule, these forces might better be paramilitary ones, of a territorial-militia type, rather than regular military units.”¹² Although Kennan certainly supported a strengthening of American ground forces, he also felt that they should be kept a bit closer to home. He considered the face-off of American and Soviet troops in Germany to be destabilizing and quite worrisome, and even suggested that a unilateral withdrawal might be necessary to ameliorate the situation.¹³ As with nuclear weapons, so also with the conventional variety, it seemed; neither made political problems any

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. Kennan, *Russia, the Atom, and the West*, 56-63. As Kennan saw it, such weapons presented much less a danger than did nuclear weapons. His concern over conventional proliferation, for instance, dealt not with the fact that it might occur, but rather with the possibility that the Soviet Union might develop better third-party relations than the United States. See George Kennan, “Kennan Backs Sales to Tito,” letter to the editor, *The New York Times* (16 October 1963): 44.

13. George Kennan, testimony before Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 9 January 1957, *Control and Reduction of Armaments*, 1003. See also Kennan, *Disarmament and Foreign Policy*, 203, 226.

easier to solve.

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These views on deterrence and armaments were, of course, influenced by Kennan's opinion of war, which underwent further refinement during this period. He noted that "modern war is a catastrophe in its own right, for all concerned" and that only in a "very narrow and limited degree . . . [can force] ever be the main solution for problems that involve the states of mind—the outlooks and convictions—of great masses of people on this planet."¹⁴ It was a pity, Kennan thought, that the United States had overmilitarized its foreign policy toward Europe and the Third World because of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Even worse was the fact that most of this militarization was in the nuclear arena. Kennan declared quite adamantly that modern war, especially nuclear war, could not serve any "coherent political purpose"; as he noted in a classroom lecture, "You cannot logically inflict on another people the horrors of nuclear destruction in the name of what you believe to be its salvation, and expect it to share your enthusiasm for the

14. George Kennan, "Soviet-American Relations," address delivered to Pennsylvania State Bar Association, 16 January 1953, *Vital Speeches* (15 February 1953): 269; George Kennan, *On Dealing with the Communist World* (New York, 1964), 18. See also George Kennan, "Can We Deal with Moscow?" *The Saturday Evening Post* (5 October 1963): 40.

15. George Kennan, draft report and testimony before House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 11 October 1956, *Foreign Policy and Mutual Security*, 175.

exercise.”¹⁶

Kennan also still thought that the Soviet Union saw little to gain from a war with the West. Although he recognized that the Soviets were constantly adding to their military strength, he did not think they had any intention of using it against the West. For example, in 1957, he stated that the West faced a “combined political and military threat, but more political than military—a threat intimately associated with the weaknesses of our Western civilization itself—looking to these weaknesses, in fact, . . . to constitute the main instruments of our undoing.”¹⁷ Kennan felt that these weaknesses and their attendant lack of self-confidence were the real source of the West’s troubles vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. As he cogently remarked, “The image of a Stalinist Russia poised and yearning to attack the West, and deterred only by our possession of atomic weapons, was largely a creation of the Western imagination.”¹⁸

Considering this obvious overreliance on nuclear armaments, then, Kennan began to rethink somewhat his opinion of negotiations with the

16. George Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston, 1961), 390-391.

17. Kennan, *Russia, the Atom, and the West*, 17-18. See also Kennan, *Control and Reduction of Armaments*, 1000 and Kennan, *Disarmament and Foreign Policy*, 205.

18. Kennan, “Overdue Changes in Our Foreign Policy,” 28. For a rather cynical look at American attempts to build European confidence, see George Kennan, “The Soviet Will Never Recover,” interview by Joseph Alsop, *The Saturday Evening Post* (24 November 1956): 120.

Soviet Union. "I would not," he wrote in 1957, "recommend concluding any agreement with the Soviet Government which left us dependent on their good faith for the observance of it."¹⁹ Ten years later, though, he said, with regard to signed agreements, that "if we say specifically what they are to do in a specific situation, and what we are to do, and if we then hold them to it rigidly, and insist on every bit of it, then the Soviet Government will deliver."²⁰

While Kennan still firmly believed in the necessity of settling political differences before attempting to reach lasting arms control agreements, he now saw nuclear weapons as enough of a danger, in and of themselves, to warrant serious negotiations for their reduction.²¹ It is interesting to note that Kennan considered it vitally important to conduct all such negotiations from a position of strength, although he did place a caveat on that opinion. "The military dispositions," he stated, "must be such that Western Germany and the Western powers can negotiate from strength, . . . but not such as to hamper these negotiations

19. Kennan, *Control and Reduction of Armaments*, 1008.

20. Kennan, *The Communist World in 1967*, 54.

21. Kennan, "Can We Deal with Moscow?" 40; Kennan, *On Dealing with the Communist World*, 14.

or limit flexibility in the position of the Western negotiators.”²² A quite rational concept, actually, but one which was almost impossible to follow within the context of an American approach to diplomacy that tended toward all or nothing.

* * *

During the years from 1953 to 1967, Kennan began slowly to move toward a concept of deterrence that stressed only a “prudent measure” of retaliatory capacity, rather than “preeminence in the field.” This was joined by a growing abhorrence of nuclear weapons and the tremendous destruction of which they were capable. The escalating arms race and continued proliferation of such weapons only added to his feelings of unease; a military posture based on conventional forces, he felt, would be infinitely preferable. Kennan’s views on war in general, and specifically, war with the Soviet Union remained fairly constant. He still saw neither as serving any “coherent political purpose.” He did, however, begin to see such purpose for negotiated agreements, although he was still somewhat leery of Soviet efforts at compliance.

22. George Kennan, “For the Defense of Europe: A New Approach,” *The New York Times Magazine* (12 September 1954): 71. Speaking on the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Kennan stated, ‘Whatever else may be said of the Russian Communists, history affords no substantiation for the suggestion that they are cowards. If every gesture of prudence or moderation on their part is to be hailed as proof of their faintheartedness, and cited as an argument for bolder military pressures from our side, I shudder to contemplate the implications for the future course of Soviet-American relations.’ See Kennan, *On Dealing with the Communist World*, 14.

**The Sword Unsheathed,
1968-1980**

In the mid-1960s, Kennan began to settle down into “the normal life of what might be called a semi-public figure in and outside the United States”; a “letter-writing, visitor-receiving, speech-giving, and conference-attending existence,” as he put it.¹ Kennan was named Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1974, and continued his literary efforts there, publishing six books during this period. He also continued to travel widely, visiting, among other places, India, China, and southern Africa.

* * *

Kennan further distanced himself from the concept of nuclear deterrence during the 1970s, mentioning it in his writings only a few times, and always in a negative manner. In general, he deplored the fact that nuclear weapons were often given credit for saving Western Europe from the Russian hordes. “We should never have allowed the thesis to become established that, if it were not for the so-called deterrent quality of our nuclear weapons, the Russians would immediately have

1. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963*, 319.

attacked Western Europe and overrun it," he stated in a 1975 interview.²

Two years later, he wrote that the vision

of the Soviet Union confronting Western Europe with overwhelming and wholly unchallengeable force, . . . and being deterred only by the American nuclear capability from employing this force either for an attack on Western Europe or for its political intimidation—this is one of those dreadful stereotypes, built of over-simplification and exaggerated apprehension, which so easily come to command the outlooks of large bodies of people.³

At last, it seemed, Kennan fully recognized that deterrence, as it had been implemented, failed to give proper consideration to the unlikelihood of a Soviet attack, a point which he had stressed for years.

This move away from deterrence was accompanied by further development of the opinion that nuclear weapons were useless within the context of a rational foreign policy and that continued proliferation of such weapons could only make matters worse. As he noted in 1972, "With relation to our leading adversary it is politically useless to us,

2. George Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age* (New York, 1982), 60.

3. George Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Boston, 1977), 124.

because it is checkmated by his reciprocal capability. With relation to the non-nuclear powers it is useless because it is not a weapon with which one achieves, actually, any specific purpose."⁴ Nor could such purposes be achieved by anyone subject to human frailties and ambitions. The nuclear weapon, he wrote, "is steadily proliferating into the arsenals of other powers, not all of which can be depended upon to observe even that measure of restraint which the great powers have heretofore been able to muster."⁵

By this time, Kennan thought, the nuclear arms race had grown almost beyond the control of the governments which had started it, a fact clearer perhaps to the Soviet Union than it was to the United States.⁶ For the USSR simply could not long afford such a competition; even the United States would eventually find the cost a strain on its national economy. Even worse, according to Kennan, "The fears and other reactions engendered by this nuclear rivalry have now become a factor in our relations with Russia of far greater actual importance than the

4. George Kennan, "After the Cold War: American Foreign Policy in the 1970s," *Foreign Affairs* 51 (October 1972): 212. See also George Kennan, "X Plus 25," interview, *Foreign Policy* 7 (Summer 1972): 15 and George Kennan, "A Last Warning: Reply to My Critics," *Encounter* 51 (July 1978): 16.

5. Kennan, "After the Cold War," 211.

6. George Kennan, "The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1976," *Foreign Affairs* 54 (July 1976): 689. See also Kennan, "X Plus 25," 7-8 and George Kennan, "Are All Russians 8 Feet Tall . . . and Is the West Blind to the Threat From Within?" *Military Review* 5 (May 1977): 45.

underlying ideological and political differences.”⁷ Kennan saw here only an endless cycle of fear, irrationality, and militarization. “For the love of God, of your children, and of the civilization to which you belong, cease this madness,” he implored.⁸ In his eyes, the great powers were embarked on a course “devoid of any visible hopeful end, devoid of any imaginable end at all other than a wholly disastrous and apocalyptic one.”⁹ It was a race which simply could not be won.

A final point on nuclear weapons which Kennan began to make more often concerns first use, a principle to which he had been opposed for many years.¹⁰ The fact that the United States had never denied that it might, under certain conditions, inaugurate the use of atomic armaments was, he felt, a serious impediment to slowing down the arms race. As he stated in 1977:

Our concern should be, of course, to achieve the eventual elimination of the nuclear weapon and all other weapons of mass destruction from national arsenals at the earliest

7. George Kennan, “Is Detente Worth Saving?” *Saturday Review* (6 March 1976): 16.

8. George Kennan, “The Moment a Crucial One—A Plea to Replace Arms with Reason,” address delivered in West Germany, *Congressional Record*, 97th Congress, 1st session, vol. 127 (6 January 1981): 231.

9. George Kennan, “Mr. X Reconsiders: A Current Assessment of Soviet American Relations,” *Encounter* 50 (March 1978): 11.

10. See, for example, “Memorandum on International Control of Atomic Energy, 20 January 1950,” 22-44.

possible moment. But it is clear that this will never be done so long as we ourselves are committed to the principle of first use.¹¹

Kennan therefore saw denial of first use as the initial step in bringing a modicum of rationality to the nuclear situation.

Logically, Kennan's continued rejection of the use of nuclear weapons as a foreign policy tool meant an American defensive posture based on conventional forces, preferably ones which were highly mobile, alert, and kept close to home.¹² He envisioned such forces as fully capable of providing the West with all the protection it might need. "I see no reason," he wrote, "why NATO could not, if it wanted, assure its own defense in an environment composed exclusively of conventional weapons."¹³ All that was lacking for such a scheme, in Kennan's opinion, was the strength of will to implement it.¹⁴

11. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger*, 205. See also George Kennan, "A Conversation with George F. Kennan," interview by George Urban, *Encounter* 47 (September 1976): 37.

12. George Kennan, "George F. Kennan Replies," *Slavic Review* 35 (March 1976): 33. See also George Kennan, testimony before House Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 11 March 1970, *United States Relations with Europe in the Decade of the 1970s*, 165.

13. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger*, 206. See also Kennan, "X Plus 25," 14-15.

14. George Kennan, "Europe's Problems, Europe's Choices," *Foreign Policy* 14 (Spring 1974): 13.

* * *

Kennan's thoughts on war and its likelihood with regard to the Soviet Union again remained fairly constant throughout this period. He still believed that "war, as a method for resolving conflicts among industrially advanced great powers, had become inordinately costly, dangerous, and self-destructive."¹⁵ The American experience in Vietnam, "the most disastrous of all America's undertakings over the whole 200 years of its history," served, he felt, as evidence that war could not provide a suitable means for conducting foreign policy.¹⁶ Along the same lines, Kennan saw nothing which indicated that Soviet intentions in Europe had changed. "They have troubles enough at home," he told an interviewer. "They have troubles with the area which they already control in Eastern Europe; I don't think they want more. I don't think this is a rational action for them."¹⁷

These attitudes toward nuclear weapons and war meant, of course, a greater reliance on negotiations for arms control. And, by the early 1970s, Kennan had almost completely overcome his earlier mistrust of

15. Kennan, "After the Cold War," 210. See also Kennan, "The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1976," 685.

16. Kennan, "After the Cold War," 219.

17. George Kennan, "A Different Approach to the World: An Interview," interview by Martin Agronsky, *New York Review of Books* (20 January 1977): 16. See also George Kennan, "A Note on Russian Foreign Policy," *Encounter* 36 (February 1971): 54.

such agreements. As he told a Congressional committee in 1970, "I think that the SALT talks may prove to be the greatest opportunity, not only that we have had, but that we may ever have, to bring this dreadful and expensive and dangerous weapons race to an end, or at least to prevent its further development."¹⁸ This rosy outlook soon darkened, however. "Experience shows that there are limits to what can be achieved in the field of disarmament by formal contractual agreements," he said in 1972.¹⁹ Five years later, he had reverted to, "I have no confidence in the continuation of the SALT talks of the sort that we've had in the past."²⁰

This change was the result of Kennan's new perception that such arms control talks would inevitably degenerate into contests to see which side could "get the other party at a maximum disadvantage."²¹ The only course left, therefore, was something a bit more radical. Any real progress, he now felt, would have to be "accompanied by at least *some* measures of unilateral restraint in weapons development on the part of both parties."²² In 1977, he proposed that the United States, "as

18. Kennan, *United States Relations with Europe*, 177.

19. Kennan, "After the Cold War," 212. See also Kennan, "X Plus 25," 11.

20. Kennan, "A Different Approach to the World," 14. Kennan also considered the Helsinki Accords 'a sterile two-year exercise in semantics.' See Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion*, 70.

21. Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger*, 203.

22. *Ibid.*, 203.

an initial pledge of goodwill," unilaterally dismantle ten percent of its nuclear arsenal.²³ Kennan believed that such an act, although it appeared extreme, could not possibly be more dangerous than the continued development of the weapons of mass destruction.

* * *

As Kennan watched the nuclear arms race spiral out of control, due largely to a misapplication of the deterrence concept he had formerly supported, he became more vociferous in his protestations against atomic armaments. This was accompanied by a desire to see NATO base its defensive posture purely on conventional weapons. Kennan's continued distress over the militarization of foreign policy led him initially to develop high hopes for arms control negotiations. He soon realized, however, that such talks would never make adequate progress in an extremely volatile situation. He therefore began to advocate more radical measures, the most controversial of which was partial unilateral disarmament.

23. Kennan, "A Different Approach to the World," 14. See also Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger*, 204.

The Memory of a Flame,

1981-1990

In the decade of the 1980s, Kennan finally began to slow down, as he drew near the end of a long and illustrious career (he celebrated his eightieth birthday in 1984).¹ He steadily reduced his workload from its former gigantic proportions, accepting few speaking engagements or interviews, but still managing to publish three books. Currently, he is working on the final book of his three-volume series detailing the origins of World War I. Although he still publishes the occasional article or essay, one often senses a note of finality about them, as if each is an attempt to sum up a lifetime of thought on a particular subject. And so the world rushes on into darkness, yet the teacher persists, lest the inhabitants of that world ever forget that there is also light.

* * *

Kennan made his final break with the concept of deterrence during this decade. "I am not sure," he wrote in 1981, ". . . that the stationing of these weapons on one's territory is not more of a provocation of their use by others than a means of dissuading others from using them."² In

1. The title of this section is drawn from Guy Kay, *Tigana* (New York, 1990), 529.

2. George Kennan, "Reflections: Two Views of the Soviet Problem," *The New Yorker* (2 November 1981): 62.

his opinion, a fixation on deterrence had done more harm than good to NATO in the years since that organization's inception. As a 1986 article which he co-authored noted, "A reliance on nuclear weapons to deter conventional aggression has diverted money and manpower from other areas, hampered the effectiveness of conventional forces, contributed to East-West antagonism, and weakened the unity of the alliance."³ The doctrine of deterrence, as it had been implemented, had simply failed. "After the passage of some thirty years, the security of this country has not been improved; never, in fact, was it more endangered than it is now."⁴

Along with Kennan's denial of deterrence came even more impassioned arguments against the nuclear weapon itself. He saw it as unable to serve any rational purpose, immoral in the threat it presented to civilization, and hopeless in its effect on East-West relations.⁵ The only escape from the clutches of such weapons, he thought, meant accepting the validity of two very fundamental appreciations:

3. McGeorge Bundy, et al, "Back from the Brink," *Atlantic Monthly* 258 (August 1986): 41. See also George Kennan, "A New Philosophy of Defense," *New York Review of Books* 33 (13 February 1986): 3.

4. George Kennan, Foreword, *The Pathology of Power*, by Norman Cousins (New York, 1987), 10.

5. George Kennan, "Address—Einstein Peace Prize," *Congressional Record*, 97th Congress, 1st session, vol. 127 (11 June 1981): 12162; George Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 65 (Winter 1985-86): 217; and George Kennan, "America's Unstable Soviet Policy," *Atlantic Monthly* 250 (November 1982): 80.

The first is that there is no issue at stake in our political relations with the Soviet Union—no hope, no fear, nothing to which we aspire, nothing we would like to avoid—which could conceivably be worth a nuclear war, which could conceivably justify the resort to nuclear weaponry. And the second is that there is no way in which nuclear weapons could conceivably be employed in combat that would not involve the possibility—and indeed the prohibitively high probability—of escalation into a general nuclear disaster.⁶

Rationality and hope had to replace fear and despair, Kennan believed, if the world was ever to move “beyond the shadow of the atom and its horrors.”⁷

Furthermore, such action had to occur soon if it were to accomplish anything, because of the ever-increasing risk of an accident involving nuclear armaments. Kennan saw the nuclear arms race as “a serious threat in its own right, . . . because of the very serious dangers it carries with it of unintended complications—by error, by computer failure, by misread signals, or by mischief deliberately perpetrated by third

6. George Kennan, “Beyond the Shadow of the Atom,” Grenville Clark Prize Address, *Congressional Record*, 97th Congress, 1st session, vol.127 (7 December 1981): 29799.

7. *Ibid.*, 29800. See also George Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York, 1984), 258.

parties.”⁸ Because of such dangers, Kennan increasingly felt that radical measures were called for, and justifiably so. “I see no solution to the problem,” he wrote, “other than the complete elimination of these and all other weapons of mass destruction.”⁹

The dangers of which Kennan spoke were, in his opinion, only exacerbated by NATO’s continued commitment to the principle of first use. In 1981, he noted that “after thirty-five years of trying to base our security on this kind of weaponry, and this sort of policy [first use] with relation to it, we have succeeded only in creating, and in stimulating our adversaries to join us in creating, an utterly grotesque amount of nuclear overkill.”¹⁰ As he cogently asked, “If our only purpose in deploying the weapons is to ‘deter’ others from using them, . . . why then cling to the option of ‘first use’? Could not the others say, with even greater logic, that we are the ones who have to be deterred?”¹¹ The principle of first use was bankrupt, both realistically and morally, in Kennan’s eyes.

The only really rational means, then, of providing an appropriate defensive posture for Europe meant concentrating on conventional forces.

8. George Kennan, “Containment Then and Now,” *Foreign Affairs* 65 (Spring 1987): 889.

9. Kennan, “Reflections: Two Views of the Soviet Problem,” 62. See also Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion*, xxviii.

10. Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion*, 185.

11. *Ibid.*, 185. See also Bundy, et al, “Back from the Brink,” 36-37.

NATO need not be adversely affected by such a scheme, either. "Relying on conventional forces to meet conventional threats means a redefinition, not an abandonment, of shared commitment and shared risk," Kennan wrote.¹² Part of that shared commitment and risk entailed strengthening NATO's conventional forces—and by this he meant "an improvement of morale, of discipline, of training and alertness, and not just a heaping up of fancy and expensive new equipment"—but also involved reducing their numbers in Central Europe.¹³ Not only would such mutual reductions provide significant financial savings for both sides, but the lessening of tensions also would allow everyone concerned to concentrate on domestic problems, rather than on external threats.¹⁴

* * *

In the 1980s, Kennan's discussions of war seemed especially to tend toward summarization, perhaps because his opinions on the subject had not really changed since World War II. As he noted in 1985, "It is entirely clear to me that Soviet leaders do not want a war with us and are not planning to initiate one. In particular, I have never believed that

12. Bundy, et al, "Back from the Brink," 39.

13. Kennan, "Reflections: Two Views of the Soviet Problem," 61. Kennan had, of course, drawn a great deal of criticism for similar suggestions made in the Reith Lectures of 1957.

14. George Kennan, "On the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," *New York Review of Books* 37 (1 March 1990): 7. See also George Kennan, "Obituary for the Cold War," interview by Nathan Gardels, *New Perspectives Quarterly* 5 (Summer 1988): 49.

they have seen it as in their interests to overrun Western Europe militarily.”¹⁵ As Kennan had said over and over again, a modern war simply could not serve any rational purpose well enough to justify the destruction it must inevitably cause, a fact of which the Kremlin was very much aware. A war “among great industrial powers,” he stated, “[is] an exercise which modern technology has now made suicidal all around.”¹⁶ Kennan perhaps best summed up his views on war in his introduction to *The Nuclear Delusion*:

War itself, as a means of settling differences at least between the great industrial powers, will have to be in some way ruled out; and with it there will have to be dismantled (for without this the whole outlawing of war would be futile) the greater part of the vast military establishments now maintained with a view to the possibility that war might take place.¹⁷

All of this would require, of course, some sort of negotiations. Yet Kennan maintained his post-SALT attitude toward such talks. Although he decried the fact that SALT II was not ratified, he still viewed these

15. Kennan, “Containment Then and Now,” 888. See also Evan Thomas, “An Icon of the Cold War,” *Newsweek* 113 (17 April 1989): 34.

16. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” 216.

17. Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion*, xxviii.

arrangements as simply not "adequate to get us out of this hole."¹⁸

Kennan therefore proposed a scheme that would make a difference, not in the balance of power, but in the stability of that balance. In 1981, he advised that the United States and the Soviet Union immediately dismantle half of their nuclear arsenals; soon afterward, another cut would reduce what was left to a third of its size.¹⁹ As Kennan saw it, whatever danger such a reduction might hold could not possibly match the danger that the world faced without it.

* * *

In the 1980s, Kennan came to the conclusion that civilization's only hope lay in a complete elimination of nuclear arms. No purpose, not even defense, could ever justify the use of such immensely destructive and indiscriminate weapons. Until such time as the world realized that war, especially a nuclear war, would always be a more tragic undertaking than whatever was its alternative, Kennan felt that conventional forces were more than sufficient to provide a defense against aggression. Finally, since Kennan put little faith in negotiations along the lines of the SALT talks, he began to advocate an immediate

18. Kennan, "Address—Einstein Peace Prize," 12163. For a discussion of his views on SALT II, see Kennan, "America's Unstable Soviet Policy," 79.

19. Kennan, "Address—Einstein Peace Prize," 12163.

fifty percent reduction in the nuclear arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States, a proposal adopted in 1985 as the stated goal of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks.²⁰

20. Bernard Weinraub, "Reagan Receptive to a 50% Arms Cut," *The New York Times* (3 November 1985): 1, 16.

Conclusion

Summing up forty-five years of intellectual pursuit is no easy task, especially when the pursuer has been as prolific an author as George Kennan. The conclusion of the address which he delivered upon accepting the 1981 Albert Einstein International Peace Prize, however, reveals the crux of the thought and conviction which has led Kennan to hold high a candle for so many years. His words read:

In the final week of his life, Albert Einstein signed the last of the collective appeals against the development of nuclear weapons that he was ever to sign. He was dead before it appeared. It was an appeal drafted, I gather, by Bertrand Russell. I had my differences with Russell at the time as I do now in retrospect; but I would like to quote one sentence from the final paragraph of that statement, not only because it was the last one Einstein ever signed, but because it sums up, I think, all that I have to say on the subject. It reads as follows:

We appeal, as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest.¹

At the most fundamental level, perhaps, that really is all that

1. Kennan, "Address—Einstein Peace Prize," 12163.

Kennan has ever tried to express in his works on international affairs and especially in those dealing with arms control. It is simply a belief that the human race, despite its numerous shortcomings, has managed to create something worth preserving, a tiny point of light in what otherwise is a very dark place. And while that single flame has grown brighter and brighter, it now finds itself in danger of going out, by attempting to remember too much in the name of security. How impossibly sad it would be if that candle which had burned so well were to be accidentally snuffed by the very means which supposedly were being used to shield it from the wind. It is for that reason that the world must consider, with all the care it is able to muster, the words of George F. Kennan. For it is he who reminds us, perhaps more eloquently than anyone else ever has, that the flame will burn for so long a time, if only we let it.

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