

New Look or Containment?  
*GEORGE F. KENNAN AND THE MAKING OF  
REPUBLICAN NATIONAL SECURITY  
STRATEGY*

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ON October 28, 1992, just a few days before the presidential election in which Bill Clinton defeated George Herbert Walker Bush, the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece by George F. Kennan. Responding to a Bush campaign claim that the Republicans had won the cold war, he wrote, “The suggestion that any American administration had the power to influence decisively the course of a tremendous domestic-political upheaval in another great country on another side of the globe is intrinsically silly and childish.” The Republican policy of relying on military force was, if anything, counterproductive, according to Kennan: “The more American political leadership was seen in Moscow as committed to an ultimate military, rather than political, resolution of Soviet-American tensions,” “the greater was the tendency in Moscow to tighten the controls by both party and police, and the greater the braking effect on all liberalizing tendencies within the regime.”<sup>1</sup> The United States, he implied, had unnecessarily prolonged the cold war.

In retrospect, it is possible to understand Kennan’s obvious frustration. As the nation’s foremost expert on Soviet Russia in the 1940s and 1950s, and as the individual who, more than any other, had provided the intellectual underpinnings of America’s postwar strategy, known as the Truman Doctrine, he was aware of key groups on both sides of the Iron Curtain who, either from fear or from vested interest in maintaining a cold war posture, had been unwilling to seek a less costly and dangerous policy of engagement. The Republican appropriation of the mantle of victory was apparently just too much.

Moreover, Kennan had earned the right to be aggravated. Just four years earlier, at the 1988 Dulles Centennial Conference at

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<sup>1</sup> “Republicans Won the Cold War?” *New York Times*, October 28, 1992, reprinted in George F. Kennan, *At a Century’s Ending: Reflections 1982–1995* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 185–87, quotations at 185, 186. See also George F. Kennan, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, *1950–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 138–44.

Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, he had commented publicly for the first time on newly released documents at the Eisenhower Library. These records of a secret exercise, code-named Solarium, revealed the role that Kennan personally had played—although briefly and to a modest extent—in shaping national security policy for the administration of Harry S. Truman's successor, the Republican Dwight David Eisenhower.<sup>2</sup>

Kennan's discomfiture in 1992 stemmed in part from the fact that American national security affairs had drifted from the course he had envisioned in 1946. In his famous Long Telegram from the U.S. embassy in Moscow to top foreign policy and defense officials in Washington, he characterized the Soviet Union as intransigent and militant, and in 1947 he advised Truman—in his "X" article in *Foreign Affairs*—that American policy should aim not to prevent but rather to contain Soviet expansion. It is now clear that, even as American national security policy strayed and at times took side trips, as Kennan saw, it did not lose focus on the real nature of the threat and thus on the appropriate response. So long as the West remained unified and strong, Kennan had believed, the United States should counter Soviet expansion with a program that was long-term, economic, and political. And it was this kind of containment, as implemented first by Truman and then by Eisenhower, that provided, in the words of Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, "the indispensable external context" for the "Soviet collapse and the peaceful resolution of the cold war."<sup>3</sup>

My contact with Kennan began in required readings for my graduate courses in Russian and American diplomatic history at Indiana University in the mid-1960s. For the former, I read his *Decision to Intervene*, about President Woodrow Wilson's dispatch of American troops to Siberia and northern Russia in 1918 following the Bolshevik Revolution, troops whose activities had the effect, if not purpose, of aiding the opponents of Lenin's new

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<sup>2</sup> See William B. Pickett, ed., *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Eisenhower's New Look: An Oral History of Project Solarium* (Princeton: Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 256.

Bolshevik government.<sup>4</sup> For the latter course, I read his classic, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*, which described a United States that was isolationist in the 1920s and 1930s. In Kennan the historian I found a scholar-diplomat *par excellence*, an individual for whom history was a repository of lessons for the conduct of public affairs. One lesson was the extreme cost—World War II and some 55 million dead—of American refusal to participate in global political and diplomatic affairs. During the 1930s fascist imperialism had advanced unchallenged. The Munich conference of 1938, where the democracies bowed to Hitler’s military pressure on Czechoslovakia, became for Kennan and his generation a symbol of infamy.

Containment, the policy Kennan helped to formulate in 1946 and 1947 as a State Department official and head of the department’s Policy Planning Staff, would be the best response, he believed, to a new totalitarian threat, this time from the Kremlin. It would bring not isolationism but engagement in world affairs—economically, politically, diplomatically, and, if necessary though less likely, militarily.<sup>5</sup> Kennan’s analysis and prescription were sophisticated, requiring both mastery of history’s lessons and purposeful, consistent action by the nation’s leaders.

By the spring of 1950, however, Kennan was no longer a member of the Policy Planning Staff, and he detected problems with American policy formulation. As the Truman administration responded to crises, its national security policy increasingly reflected a fear of Soviet military power. Czechoslovakia fell to the Communists, and the Soviet Union blockaded land routes to Berlin in the first half of 1948. In 1949, the Soviets built and tested an atomic bomb, and Chinese Communists took over the mainland. Then in early 1950 Paul Nitze, Truman’s new adviser and Kennan’s successor as head of the Policy Planning Staff, wrote in National Security Council memorandum 68 (NSC 68) that the Soviets envisioned “the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure

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<sup>4</sup> George F. Kennan, *Soviet-American Relations, 1917–1920*, vol. 2, *The Decision to Intervene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) ; Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman : A Life* (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 1994), 248–49.



George F. Kennan with members of the Policy Planning Staff, June 1948. George F. Kennan Papers, box 38, folder : 1948, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world.”<sup>6</sup> The memorandum recommended a stockpile of atomic bombs and a program to build a weapon one hundred times more powerful: the hydrogen bomb. It also urged a crash program of rebuilding American conventional forces with the purpose of seeking some kind of resolution—perhaps rolling back Soviet power in Eastern Europe—before 1954, considered to be “a critical date” or, in the words of *Newsweek* columnist Ernest K. Lindley, “the year of maximum danger” because the Soviet Union by then would probably have sufficient nuclear weapons to counter the American arsenal.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> NSC 68, as printed in Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993), 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> For a recounting and analysis of the implications of these decisions, see Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (New York : Touchstone, 1995), 22.

Kennan saw the need for some military build-up, but was critical<sup>8</sup> of the concept of “a peak of maximum danger.” “I had a very strong feeling,” he recalled in 1988, “that the Russians were not going to attack us but that, on the other hand, the strength of their armed forces, the disparity between theirs and ours, was a reality and would not go away.” He believed that “America’s plans” should not focus on a presumed imminent threat, but “ought to be laid, in the military sense, in such a way as to endure for many, many years into the future. . . .”<sup>9</sup> In this analysis, he saw eye to eye with other Soviet experts, especially the future ambassador to the Soviet Union, Charles E. Bohlen, who also spoke out.

The disagreement between advocates of rollback (NSC 68) and advocates of containment, and Truman’s apparent agreement with the former, revealed an uncertainty in Truman’s cold war strategy that caused one potential Republican candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to believe the nation needed a firmer hand at the tiller.<sup>10</sup> Truman had been unwilling in the spring of 1950 to seek congressional approval for appropriations to implement NSC 68. In the summer, however, following North Korea’s invasion of South Korea, he asked Congress for the funds, and the measure passed. The cold war had become both militarized and global.

Kennan served a brief stint as U.S. ambassador to Moscow, from May to October 1952. When the Eisenhower administration assumed leadership the following spring, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles almost immediately, on March 14, 1953, fired him from government service.<sup>11</sup> Kennan retreated to the hallowed halls and grounds of Princeton University and the Institute for Advanced Study. A few months later came an invitation for Kennan’s final, little known opportunity for personal influence on American foreign policy.

President Eisenhower had long admired Kennan’s thinking. In 1948, while serving as president of Columbia University, he had asked Kennan, unsuccessfully, to serve with him on a committee sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations to study the effects of European Recovery Program.<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower found much to agree

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<sup>8</sup> For the “critical date” and “year of maximum danger,” see May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*, 40, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Pickett, ed., *Kennan and Eisenhower’s New Look*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> William B. Pickett, *Eisenhower Decides to Run: Presidential Politics and Cold War Strategy* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 65–66.

<sup>11</sup> Kennan, *Memoirs*, 119, 160–67, 180–81.

<sup>12</sup> Pickett, *Eisenhower Decides*, 19, 29, 31, 60, 65–66, 187.

with in Kennan's NSC memorandum 20/4 (November 23, 1948), in which he argued that American nuclear monopoly and economic power and Soviet domestic weakness would prevent the Soviet Union from launching an attack even after it obtained nuclear weapons.<sup>13</sup> Military pressure on a Soviet regime that gave priority to its own survival in power and abhorred war would bring neither a weakening nor a softening of its position. Rather, Kennan believed, Soviet leaders would not launch an unprovoked attack, but they would use fear of a militant United States to justify their continued totalitarian rule at home. "What was needed," Kennan later summarized, "was a reasonable and sensible compromise" between the political and military approaches.<sup>13</sup>

Eisenhower found this view compatible with his own determination to avoid if at all possible the coercive use of American military force—a conviction that would only strengthen during his two terms in the Oval Office. Thus, it is not surprising that in the late spring of 1953 the new president asked Kennan to be chairman of one of three ad hoc task forces in a top-secret, three-week-long policy planning exercise code-named Solarium. The project's purpose was to examine the nation's security policy thoroughly in the light of the Korean war, the creation of a NATO defense force, and the recent death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. The process also provided a way for Eisenhower to take control of national security policy. When the exercise was finished, Eisenhower ordered that the recommendations from Kennan's task force be combined with those from the others (and from the NSC planning board) in yet another memorandum, NSC 162/2 (approved October 30, 1953).<sup>14</sup> This new policy, often referred to as the "New Look," superseded NSC 68. Discarding the concept of a year of maximum danger and abandoning any possibility of rolling back Soviet power by military force, it embraced nuclear deterrence and patient but persistent political and economic containment of a Soviet threat that was likely to endure over a long term.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 60–61.

<sup>13</sup> Kennan, *Memoirs*, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 154–55.

Through the Eisenhower years, Kennan came to view the Soviet Union as less of a threat. But by the end of Eisenhower's term in office in 1961, American national security preparations were in high gear. Eisenhower's efforts to maintain deterrence coincided with a series of foreign policy crises—beginning with the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1955 and including the Soviet launch of sputnik in 1957 and Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum in 1958—leading many Americans to fear that the United States had allowed the Soviets to get ahead, first in bombers and then in missiles. The danger, pundits and presidential advisers warned, was a surprise attack—a nuclear Pearl Harbor. Although Eisenhower understood the danger, perhaps better than anyone else, his aerial intelligence-gathering operations had given him reason to suspect that the United States surpassed the Soviet Union in military capability. He also knew that, beyond a certain point, relative advantage in nuclear weapons was meaningless. Nevertheless, to appease his critics, he increased defense spending and accelerated the testing of nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the American people and their congressional representatives—concerned about apparent Soviet missile developments and persuaded by the claims of Democratic presidential contenders during Eisenhower's lame-duck second term that the United States had fallen tragically behind in the arms race—came increasingly to feel that security depended upon possession of more and better weapons.<sup>16</sup> What Derek Leebaert has called a “spending constituency for national security and everything that might accompany it” became the dominant Washington lobby. Eisenhower, in early drafts of his farewell address, called it “a military-industrial-congressional complex” and a “scientific-technological elite.”<sup>17</sup> By the end of his presidency, the United

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<sup>15</sup> William B. Pickett, *Dwight David Eisenhower and American Power* (Wheeling, Ill : Harlan Davidson, 1995), 116.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Leebaert, *The Fifty Year Wound: The True Price of America's Cold War Victory* (Boston : Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 250–51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 249. For an account of the U.S. nuclear build-up, which by 1968 had reached more than 32,000 nuclear weapons, see Stansfield Turner, *Caging the Genies: A Workable Solution for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Weapons* (Boulder, Colo : Westview Press, 1999).

States had established a ring of American military and air bases around Soviet territory, sent American reconnaissance flights over Soviet territory, and built thousands of nuclear weapons on a variety of launch vehicles. As early as 1959, the United States had 2,000 strategic bombers, 14 aircraft carriers, 114 Polaris missiles on 9 submarines, and 200 intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>18</sup>

In retrospect, Kennan's work on Project Solarium in 1953, although it accomplished less than he had hoped, did nudge American policy away from both NSC 68 and the 1952 Republican national convention's militant advocacy of an American effort to roll back communism and "liberate" the countries of Eastern Europe. The Solarium report, like Kennan's earlier formulations of containment strategy, recommended that the United States, with its allies, develop areas of economic and political strength and stability as a basis for negotiations that, along with a steady internal weakening of the Soviet system, would bring a peaceful resolution of conflicts.<sup>19</sup> The guidelines written into NSC 162 expressed Eisenhower's belief in American military superiority, both conventional and nuclear, and his resolve not to force a rollback of Soviet power but to negotiate—beginning with a test ban treaty—an end to the nuclear arms race.

At the Dulles Centennial Conference in 1988 I had the opportunity both to meet Kennan and to hear him speak at a session devoted to the newly released Solarium documents. He recalled the Solarium exercise with satisfaction but also with some regrets. The Eisenhower administration, Kennan said, generally accepted the proposals of his group, task force A, for the financing of national defense, the size of the military, and the tenor of relations with the allies; but the political parts "were not taken too seriously." The State Department, for example, refused to accept the recommendation that the United States should offer a "more plausible" negotiating stance on Germany's future, such as withdrawal from West Germany in exchange for Soviet withdrawal

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<sup>18</sup> Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 135. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council's estimate (<http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/fig9.gif>), the United States by 1960 had 7,000 strategic nuclear warheads and 15,000 tactical nuclear warheads.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 69.

from East Germany, which would have put the burden of action on the Russians.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, in retrospect, such a bold proposal ran against Eisenhower's need, given Soviet in-

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<sup>20</sup> Pickett, ed., *Kennan and Eisenhower's New Look*, 19–20.

transigence and the Korean war, for a separate West Germany as the keystone of a new NATO defense force, one of Eisenhower's primary considerations upon entering the presidency.<sup>21</sup> On the whole, however, despite some misgivings, Kennan believed that what the new president set out to accomplish was sound. Indeed, he recalled that on July 16, 1953, at the final meeting on the various Solarium task force recommendations, Eisenhower summarized the proceedings with "a thoughtfulness and a penetration that were quite remarkable."<sup>22</sup>

<para>Kennan believed that, despite periodic crises and hysterias, containment remained American policy after 1953.<sup>23</sup> A review of events generally confirms this observation. Eisenhower avoided the possibility of armed conflict over crises in Hungary and Suez in 1956, in the Formosa Straits in 1955 and 1958, in Berlin in 1958,

1959, and 1961, and after the downing of an American spy plane over Soviet territory in 1960. The Communist North signed an armistice in Korea in 1953; and Eisenhower met face-to-face with his Soviet counterpart, Nikita Khrushchev, in Geneva in 1955, at Camp David in 1959, and in Paris in 1960. Deviations from the policy of restraint occurred with the landing of U.S. troops in Lebanon during unrest in 1958 and during the presidencies of Eisenhower's successors, with the military ultimatum during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the intervention with combat troops in Vietnam in 1965, and the enormous Carter-Reagan arms build-up in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1989. As the Solarium report had predicted, the Soviet Union retained control over its satellites for many years, using Warsaw Pact troops to rein in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The People's

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Bowie, telephone conversation with the author, February 18, 2004 ; Pickett, *Eisenhower Decides*, 214.

<sup>22</sup> Pickett, ed., *Kennan and Eisenhower's New Look*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> "What he [Eisenhower] said on that occasion [the final Solarium meeting on July 16, 1953] gave me the impression that in general he was prepared to accept the thesis we [task force A] had put forward, that our approach to the problem of the Soviet Union, as it had been followed in the immediately preceding years, was basically sound." Pickett, ed., *Kennan and Eisenhower's New Look*, 20.

Republic of China held firm to its anti-Western policies, but its relations with the Soviet Union had fallen apart by 1960. Alliances in Western Europe, the Middle East, and Far East, along with negotiated treaties for a limited nuclear test ban, strategic arms control, and détente during the Nixon years, and, finally, arms reductions, allowed for changes within the Soviet system to play out, although over a much longer period than Kennan had hoped. Technological, economic, social, and cultural advances combined with the forces of nationalism to favor individual freedoms and national autonomy, if not independence.<sup>24</sup>

These forces began to work against the Soviet Union even in the 1950s, when, in the words of John Lewis Gaddis, internal “reforms intended to restore competitiveness shattered authority, both internally and within the international communist movement.”<sup>25</sup> The breakdown became unstoppable and, as it turned out, irreversible in the 1980s, after the Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost* allowed new kinds of freedom.<sup>26</sup> The gulfs between the ruling party and the Soviet people, and between the center and the Soviet periphery, began to widen.<sup>27</sup> The intermediate nuclear forces treaty negotiated in 1987 by Gorbachev and the Republican president, Ronald Reagan, was the first to eliminate an entire class of nuclear missiles. When the Soviet leader then announced a unilateral withdrawal of 500,000 Red Army troops from Eastern Europe, having already withdrawn Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the disintegration of the Soviet empire began.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, Kennan was correct in 1992, when he declared that the Republican Party—and the United States for that matter—did not deserve sole credit for the end of the Soviet system. And history has

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<sup>24</sup> Kennan, *At a Century's Ending*, 185.

<sup>25</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know : Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press, 1997), 191.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Kort, *The Soviet Colossus : History and Aftermath* (Armonk, N.Y. : M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 249–56.

<sup>27</sup> David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb : The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York : Vintage, 1994), 162–79.

<sup>28</sup> Kort, *Soviet Colossus*, 356–80.

shown that he was correct in his assertions of 1947 and 1953: just as diplomacy without strength is fruitless, strength without diplomatic restraint is counterproductive.