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LOOKING BACK

Correspondence with Kennan: An Afterword

George Kennan was an inescapable presence in post-war American foreign relations, intellectually as well as politically. Having been identified early on, invariably, as the father (alternatively 'architect') of 'containment', master signifier of what the US was supposedly about in the Cold War, he became in the last half of the twentieth century a sharp critic of this very same Cold War, a public intellectual, a communitarian conservative, opponent of nuclear weapons and the arms race, critic of the US war in Vietnam, and advocate of better relations with the Soviet Union. Every undergraduate with even a superficial grounding in the field would know 'containment', as would of course any halfway serious policymaker. Kennan as the erstwhile promulgator and Kennan as the later dissenter: the historical and discursive potential here for any discussion of 'the US in the world', whether in the academy or the realm of public affairs, was obvious. The immediate background of my initiating correspondence with him in 1981 had indeed to do with a PhD project devoted precisely to the analysis of this peculiar trajectory and its 'breaks', seen perhaps in a more conceptual manner than was customary in the historical field.

I had hesitated for some time before writing to him to get his permission to work in his papers at Princeton and, most crucially, to quote his unpublished letters and writings. In April 1981, I ventured to do so.[1] It was, as he hinted in his generally favourable response, altogether too long an epistle from an unknown person. I was apt to agree. The unusual format, however, was a result of my having put off again and again the necessary task of settling the issue of permissions, which in turn raised the question of the right tone and approach. My dithering

ended when I resolved the matter counterintuitively by writing in a single sitting, as it turned out, a very personal account of the why and the wherefore, the politics and the history, of my dissertation project on him. I figured he might respond to the quirky pitch, even though it was a breach of etiquette and he was particular about etiquette, especially if it assumed a non-existing intimacy—and 'intimacy' was a key concept in his outlook, pertaining to power relations between states as well as social and personal relations.[2]

My hunch, luckily, proved right. Kennan, overlooking etiquette, gave me the requisite sanction—which was a relief, as by then I had in fact already done quite a lot of research and the project was built on very precise textual analysis. There was a proviso: 'Kindly regard me, for purposes of your study, as largely dead.' I could see the sense in that. On the one hand, an injunction not to bother him with endless queries and requests for comments; on the other, conveying a sense that his was a done deal historically, that he was a series of documents from the past, a finished archive in effect. He was seventy-seven, after all. As it turned out, the 'largely dead' proved remarkably alive and active, speaking and writing pretty much through to his centenary. He was born, one should recall, in the first administration of Theodore Roosevelt (1904) and died (2005) in the second administration of George W. Bush, a life spanning the twentieth century. In 2002, I was not surprised to see him, at 98, offering a blistering criticism of weak-kneed congressional Democratic support for what would become the invasion of Iraq the following year. It was hard to keep up with him.

The reason for my erstwhile trepidation, probably misplaced, had to do with Kennan's incensed reaction to an earlier article by C. Ben Wright,

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[1] See above, in this number, Anders Stephanson and George Kennan, 'Correspondence, 1981–97', NLR 156, Nov–Dec 2025.

[2] Why I thought it was a good idea to subject GFK to a longwinded account of Western Marxism, alerting him to Louis Althusser and what not, I cannot now fathom. Nor can I figure out why I thought it necessary to declare myself a non-revisionist, outside the William Appleman Williams camp. Clearly, by any standards, that's exactly what I was, albeit not directly in the mould of Williams himself (I had been influenced, for instance, by the work of Lloyd Gardner and Martin Sklar, both of whom came out of that Wisconsin School approach to American history). Beyond the selection presented here, the correspondence between Kennan and myself was spotty and, except for a brief encounter at a formal gathering, we never met in person.

coming out of a dissertation, which showed Kennan's claim to have been misunderstood on the nature of 'containment' to be dubious.[3] Containment was always portrayed in Kennan's standard retrospective account as a *political* strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, rather than a military one. In practice it was largely the latter, with America's post-war expansion underpinned by US-led military alliances (Kennan was never keen on NATO). Wright, however, pointed out instances, admittedly few, where Kennan had actually advocated military containment. Kennan responded by questioning the author's empirical credentials. That criticism was then reinforced by John Lewis Gaddis (action which in turn, down the line, led to Gaddis, though an ardent NATO man, becoming Kennan's authorized biographer). In fact, each side was both right and wrong: containment, depending on the circumstances, could be either political or military; but if executed judiciously, it was supposed to keep general war at bay. The distinction, then, was fluid. Meanwhile, the 'political' here also featured, to Kennan's later regret, the institution of 'political warfare'—dirty tricks, not to put too fine a point on it, under the auspices of the newly created CIA and coordinated with espionage and counterespionage.

Like many others in the field, I was interested in the logic of the early, epochal decisions of what would become the Cold War—and no one in officialdom articulated that logic more incisively than Kennan: the rationale for refusing to recognize the diplomatic legitimacy of the Soviet Union and so also any realistic negotiations. Moreover, he provided a convenient twist by 'turning' against himself from 1948, when he was still chief of Policy Planning in the State Department. The success of the Christian Democrats in that year's elections in Italy, Tito's break with Stalin, the popularity of the Berlin airlift and likewise the Marshall Plan—all these developments convinced him that the time had come to make some kind of deal with Moscow for, possibly, a neutral, demilitarized Germany, putting an end to the 'unnatural' division of Europe and, after 1949, the terrifying prospect of nuclear annihilation. Kennan seems not to have understood why these views were anathema to the American establishment. When he gave them powerful expression from the international pulpit of the BBC's Reith Lectures in late

[3] C. Ben Wright, 'Mr "X" and Containment', *Slavic Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1976; George Kennan, 'George Kennan Replies', *Slavic Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1976; C. Ben Wright, 'A Reply to George F. Kennan', *Slavic Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1976. See also John Lewis Gaddis, 'Containment: A Reassessment', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1977.

1957, he caused an uproar, his argument for disengagement assailed in the *New York Times* as hoary 'isolationism'. It was only then that he began to see that—as Walter Lippmann had pointed out—the US was profiting immensely from the existence of the drab, defensive Soviet bloc, which served as licence for the unprecedented expansion of American power overseas. From that point of view, the division of Europe and the Cold War were rather in the Western interest.[4]

Popular support for Kennan's deep hostility to nuclear weapons—the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was launched in the month that he gave his first Reith Lecture—was matched by lack of influence in Washington. There, the real—the existing cold-war balance—was rational. That real was, however, to be severely tested, first in the horribly close call of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and then in the US debacle in Vietnam. The former underscored in no uncertain terms Kennan's conviction that US–USSR relations had to improve and the massive arsenals of nuclear weapons, preposterous overkill in his view, be downsized and controlled. The latter he saw in classical geopolitical terms: nothing fundamental was at stake in Vietnam itself and the US action only served to force the USSR and China into mutual support at a moment when they were diverging into radical conflict. Détente in the 1970s was obviously more to his liking. But 1979–81 saw Carter's move to massive rearmament, the ill-judged Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the resurgence of cold-war orthodoxy and Reagan's deployment of new nuclear weapons. Once again, Kennan's instincts moved in sync with oppositional forces in the West.

This, then, was the originating, political moment of my thesis project. From an academic viewpoint, there seemed to be no recent monograph on Kennan. In fact, as it turned out, I was not alone; several overlapping studies were in the works, issuing in a handful of serious, critical books by the end of the 1980s. None of them, however, entailed any investigations into the kind of conceptual and theoretical baggage that marked my effort. The 1980s, even more than the preceding decade, featured a near-obsessive concern with cultural theory, or perhaps better 'Theory'. Living in New York, I saw this at first hand in the art world, which was expanding rapidly along with the world of money. It became *de rigueur*

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[4] See George Kennan, *Memoirs, 1950–1963*, Boston 1972, pp. 252–5.

for artists to have a theoretical account, an articulated frame, for their practice; this was the moment of the photographic, the simulacrum, the Picture. What did this have to do with Kennan? Not much, directly; but, besides his professional concern with the US in the world, he was much exercised throughout his life, especially after he became a public intellectual (say, after 1953), by the ills of American mass culture: urbanization, environmental destruction, cars, television, advertising, social atomization, the dissolution of morals. Adorno and Horkheimer came to mind, perhaps also Marcuse. Above all, however, Jameson came to mind. No one was more important for my work on Kennan than Fredric Jameson.[5]

Following a suggestion from Jameson sometime in late 1979 or early 1980, I joined the emerging editorial collective of *Social Text*, a new journal founded by Stanley Aronowitz, John Brenkman and Jameson. I had been greatly impressed with its first issue in 1979 which featured, aside from major articles by the trio themselves, a powerful leading essay by Edward Said on 'Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims'. It was an eclectic journal, whose name implied that the time had come to recognize that the vaunted (by poststructuralism) text was, indeed *had to be*, social. I was to spend a great deal of time and energy on this journal throughout the 1980s, to the considerable detriment of work on my dissertation. (I left the journal in 1992–93 because of a disagreement over procedure and direction, but that's another story.)

Jameson was then reaching what one might call Peak Jameson: *Fables of Aggression* (1979), *The Political Unconscious* (1981), 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' in NLR in 1984; a little later (1990), his formidable book on Adorno. I had read his early duo of theory works, *Marxism and Form* and *The Prison-House of Language*; but

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[5] The oddity here, theory and politics aside, was that the conservative Kennan's compact hostility to US mass—in effect, capitalist—culture was mirrored inversely in Jameson's often astonishing capacity to deal with it, to 'go through it', to sort out if possible 'its moment of truth', figuring out what made it work and offering the result as homeopathic medicine. Then again, Kennan was not a dialectical thinker. His abiding antipathy here, however, put a damper on any idea of resurrecting the Cold War. The occupation of the US Embassy in Tehran in the same epoch was a different matter. It incensed him. As an old diplomat, he saw it as an egregious breach of the standard rules of international conduct: an act of war.

the 1979 Wyndham Lewis book and *The Political Unconscious* had more immediate bearing on my work on Kennan: how to think 'dialectically' the place and character of such contradictory figures—or, to put it differently, how to read the reactionary for its moment of truth. There was also Jameson's keen interest in periodization, which had to do with his fundamental concern with narrative. Periodization is, however, arguably constitutive of the very task of doing history. Jameson's own political and theoretical attachments were ecumenical, an impossible (seemingly) combination of post-Althusser, Mandel, Hegel, Lukács (above all Lukács), Adorno, Greimasian semiotics, science fiction, utopian desire, plus of course allegory. And much more.

Jameson was supportive of my attempt on Kennan, a cultural and political conservative who didn't fit the bill; but he criticized my take on the religious aspect. He thought it was a cop-out. When it came to aesthetics and politics, I had charted a series of Kennan's binaries—for example, 'hierarchy versus egalitarianism'—and then, taking a stab at Jameson's model of Greimas's semiotic rectangle, laid out with some misgivings the symbolic transcendence, the ideological 'solution' to an impossible initial opposition.[6] Whatever its shortcomings, it was nevertheless a serious move to problematize Kennan as ideology. What Jameson objected to (I think) was that I didn't do anything similar with his Calvinism. I had noted the strong correlation between Kennan as a model Presbyterian and the 'intramundane ascetism' of standard Calvinist tradition but not really done much with it. What follows—if anything? I agreed with Jameson's critique but couldn't resolve the conundrum. In the 1990s I came back to this because it nagged me. In 'solving' it, I actually sidestepped (another cop-out perhaps) the obvious Calvinism and reimagined him as a proto-Catholic from the angle of conservative, organicist Europeanism (as the *Abendland*).[7] This was not a bad idea and Kennan himself sort of liked it, as his letters show, though of course he baulked at the basic proposition—that somehow he could have mentally migrated into non-American territory pure and simple. (He did however become an Episcopalian at the end of his life while still claiming to hang on to his Calvinist persuasion).

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[6] Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, Cambridge MA 1989, pp. 230–55.

[7] See 'Kennan's Abendland: On Nationalism, Europe and the West', now collected in Anders Stephanson, *American Imperatives: The Cold War and Other Matters*, London and New York 2025.

Kennan, Gaddis's best efforts notwithstanding, never reconciled himself to the character of Ronald Reagan or his epigones. I've wondered, off and on since 2017, what he would have made of the present occupant of the White House. Appalled, of course, by the lies, vulgarity, arbitrariness, the attack on the civil service, the storming of Capitol Hill, the serried array of money and corruption, about as far as one can come from his idealized, quasi-Platonic rule by super-competent experts for the common good. However, on the burning issue of 'Europe' (meaning the EU), while disapproving of the brazen contempt emanating from Trump's Administration, he would no doubt agree that 'the continent' has enjoyed a very cheap ride on matters of security. Having been sceptical about NATO in 1948–49, he might well think it useful to amend its structure now and lessen the US role. From the 1990s onwards, he warned against the policy pursued by Clinton and G. W. Bush of expanding the alliance all the way to the Russian border—it would, he claimed, very likely cause a recoil when a more vigorous regime appeared in Moscow and put into question what the US would actually do by way of defence of its new territory. The prediction is well taken.

Otherwise, his strategic impulse was always to limit the US scope of action: doing less is doing better with the national interest. Keep track of potential military-industrial centres elsewhere in the world that could become dangerous enemies, but don't go beyond that, as he argued in the late 1940s while still at the State Department. Indeed, rather than gobbling up Greenland and tasty parts of Canada and why not the very attractive oil reserves of Venezuela, all in the name of some fantasy version (well, it would not be the first) of the Monroe Doctrine, the US itself might profitably be broken up into suitable regions. Meanwhile, the idea of some neo-Schmittian order of *Grossräume,* great spheres of dominance for select powers of note, now a vision not too far removed from the MAGA project, would deeply unsettle him.