

A Roundtable on Frank Costigliola *Kennan: A Life Between Worlds*

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Christopher McKnight Nichols, and Frank Costigliola*

Introduction

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On May 11, 1987, the Department of State hosted a special session of the Secretary of State's Open Forum to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Policy Planning Staff (S/P). "Future Foreign Policy Challenges for the United States" served as that afternoon's theme. Director of the Policy Planning Staff Richard Solomon, in his introduction, explained that S/P had invited all the past S/P Directors to attend (and, with the exception of two, all were in the audience) and indicated that they had been "asked. . . to think not about the past but about the future." With that, Solomon introduced the first S/P Director George Kennan, who stated: "The Policy Planning Staff. . . has come to be connected, as a great many of you know, with the principle, the question of containment and I am often asked where we stand today with all of this. The answer is, of course, that containment as conceived in 1946 has very little to do with the problems that we face today." After expressing his doubts that the Soviet Union was poised to "attack" Western Europe, engage in "supposed adventurism in the Third World," or undermine stability in its relations, Kennan asserted: "This is why I think that we must be careful in thinking that we can just go on as we have been doing over these recent years." He also expressed his disappointment that over the last 40 years policymakers and others had failed to grasp that containment, as Kennan conceived it, intended to "prepare the ground" for eventual "negotiation and compromise and accommodation with the Soviet Union over the negotiating table."²

I quote the 1987 Kennan here to demonstrate that yes, individuals can and do moderate their thinking over time. They can and do express regret that others fail to grasp complexities, often resulting in unintended consequences. And going beyond Kennan's Open Forum lamentations, trauma and past experiences can and do impact how we view the world and how we act within it; however, they don't have to circumscribe or completely define one's life, rather their lessons can compel us to take different paths. Frank Costigliola's tour de force *Kennan: A Life Between Worlds* amplifies these truths. Family structures or dysfunction, money or lack thereof, professional setbacks and successes, cultural upheaval, and isolation all impacted Kennan's mindset and influenced his actions and thoughts within his personal and professional lives. Understanding and interpreting Kennan requires us to be aware of how both emotion and reason influence perceptions and shape decisions. For, as Costigliola writes, Kennan "aimed for both freedom and restraint, creativity as well as order, and wanderlust along with responsibility."³

Christopher Dietrich articulates this and other points in his review. He praises Costigliola's narrative for integrating Kennan's emotional, personal life into the rational, professional one. To separate the two, Costigliola

concludes, "would gravely limit our understanding of the Cold War." Rather, the more historians can take the full measure of a subject's life, asserts Dietrich, the better we can "supplement our understanding of how policy is made and legitimized." Kennan's "anxiety" about modern industrial life is linked to his appreciation for the Russian author Anton Chekhov and his societal criticisms. Costigliola's use of "emotive sources," such as Kennan's personal diary and his interviews with John Lewis Gaddis, allows us to inhabit Kennan's frames of reference.⁴ These and other primary sources, and Costigliola's deft use of them, reveal not only Kennan's difficulties in managing emotions, made manifest in the drafting of the Long Telegram but also how these emotions "helped shape dynamic changes in his views." These sources collectively suggest that Kennan "was so much more than the policy" that he rued had become dogma.

Christopher McKnight Nichols and Thomas Schwartz reach similar conclusions. Both appreciate Costigliola's significant achievement and his years-long effort to "understand" Kennan. The biography goes beyond a recapitulation of grand strategy, policy formulation, or foreign policy advising, and, in so doing, results in what Nichols considers a "measured approach" to its subject. However, both Nichols and Schwartz concede that in painting with this broad brush, Costigliola does not "pull punches." Kennan's own writings, wherein he discusses his views of foreign policy, the environment, excess military spending, and modern industrial society, combined with Kennan's chronicle of some behaviors, both reveal the extent of Kennan's homophobia, misogyny, and racism, as well as unprofessionalism. It leads Schwartz to concede that he lost admiration for Kennan, whom he describes as "a cantankerous and narcissistic crank" and "a profoundly unpleasant man." Yet, as Schwartz writes, Costigliola's portrait of Kennan allows us greater insight into "the way in which he approached international politics." That Costigliola does not gloss over Kennan's views, no matter how repugnant or ill-informed they might be, might require historians, in Nichols' words, to take a more "broadened, more inclusive approach to strategy and strategists" to develop "more enlightened, effective and long-range policies."

Nichols muses as to the reason for our continued fascination with Kennan. Longevity and Kennan's "intensive, self-conscious, self-fashioning efforts," certainly played a role, and the fact that Kennan "went out on a limb" helped make him more "appealing" to scholars. Jeremi Suri goes somewhat further in describing Kennan as a specter haunting the history of the Cold War. After detailing John Lewis Gaddis' efforts in writing Kennan's official biography, he suggests that Costigliola elides over Kennan as a "prescient Cold War strategist."⁵ Instead, the Kennan that Suri detects within these pages allowed his personal trauma to influence his world view and ultimately his drafting of the Long Telegram and the "Sources of Soviet Conduct" article. That others found Kennan's assertions

compelling meant that Kennan “spent the rest of his long career struggling to revise what he had inadvertently done.”

Costigliola, in his responses, acknowledges the incisive questions posed and comments offered by these four eminent historians. He makes a compelling case for historians and biographers to consider the interplay between emotion and reason in “yield[ing] a final decision or action.” More importantly, Costigliola advances his personal view for why “[w]e can’t seem to quit” Kennan: there simply is no one like him.

Notes:

1. The views expressed in this introduction are my own and not necessarily those of either the United States Government or the U.S. Department of State. All sources are publicly available.
2. “Minutes of a Meeting of the Secretary of State’s Open Forum,” May 11, 1987; Kristin L. Ahlberg, ed., *Foreign Relations, 1981-1988*, volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, Document 299.
3. Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life Between Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 59.
4. George F. Kennan, *The Kennan Diaries*, ed. By Frank Costigliola (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).
5. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

Sweet and Sour Emotion

Christopher Dietrich

Containment was never meant to be grand strategy, much less dogma, Frank Costigliola tells us. In *Kennan: A Life between Worlds*, Costigliola covers the most important and passionate moments in George Kennan’s professional life. Those include the early development of his expertise in Russian history and culture; his rise through the diplomatic ranks in the 1930s and 1940s; his authorship of the containment strategy; the part he played in the negotiations to end the Korean War; his vocal calls for disengagement in the 1950s; his development of a backchannel to Moscow during the Berlin Crisis; his attack on the nuclear arms race in the 1970s and 1980s; and his warning about NATO expansion in the 1990s.

Costigliola emphasizes that separating the man’s professional life from his personal feelings would gravely limit our historical understanding of the Cold War. In the above-mentioned moments and others, he explains how Kennan’s deeply felt emotions sharpened his analysis, for better or worse. In the case of the arms race, for example, Kennan believed that the U.S. economy lay in thrall to defense spending by the 1980s. In a way not so different from Stalin’s dual emphasis on world revolution and state-led industrialization five decades earlier, nuclear militarism in the late Cold War diverted massive resources from worthier causes (117).

The voracious military spending of the arms race—Kennan called it a “viper which we have seized to our breast” that threatened “the final apocalyptic self-destruction of this marvelous Western civilization”—was part of a longer list of societal problems that plagued the United States (468–69). The era was marked by environmental destruction, dependence on Middle Eastern oil, the decay of American cities, and for Kennan a vulgar hyper-sexualization in advertising and the media. Those problems also reflected a deeper vulnerability in America’s Cold War. As Kennan warned in the oft-forgotten book *Cloud of Danger*, the “very phenomena” of industrialization and urbanization had upset “the proper relationship between Man and Nature” in the United States (453–57).

Kennan’s keen anxiety about modern industrial life is among the book’s most interesting insights. Costigliola believes that it began with the statesman’s life-long love

for the work of Russian writer Anton Chekhov. We learn that a performance of *The Cherry Orchard* (Kennan named his own country home after the estate in the play) left him “blubbering” because it spoke to the “Russian self” inside of him that was “much more genuine than the American one” (1, 350). Kennan felt an affinity for Chekhov because they both believed that modern industrial and urban society alienated humans from nature and from each other. Kennan preferred the collective experience of train travel to the individual ethos of automobiles, personal conversations to telephone calls, and ships to airplanes. He disliked modern advertising and commercialized consumption and refused to use a computer.

For Costigliola, an unpublished essay Kennan wrote on Chekhov in 1932 holds a key to a broader understanding of the man and his times. Chekhov never became a Bolshevik, even though his “ideas rang with the spirit of bolshevism,” Kennan wrote. This was for two reasons. First, Marxism-Leninism was fundamentally ideological in denying “the supremacy of art or science over political dogma.” Second—and Costigliola tells us that this belief “plumbed Kennan’s deepest core values”—Bolsheviks did not reject what Kennan called the “incurable disease of industrialism” (120).

These ways of thinking and the insights associated with them resonate throughout *A Life between Worlds*. Costigliola is an expert at using evidence to excavate the character of the past and conveying it through Kennan’s eyes. Foregrounding his critique of the blind faith in progress through industrialism shared by both Western capitalism and Russian communism neatly foreshadows Kennan’s criticism of both forms of thinking as ideologies that are sometimes shortsighted. The theme of modernist alienation and intellectual and political dissent is a compelling way to tell the history of the second half of the twentieth century, and it is especially poignant in Costigliola’s hands because it focuses on the author of the most influential justification for the expansion of American power in the Cold War. That point aligns with another theme that may at first seem at odds with Costigliola’s psychological emphasis: that Kennan consistently sought to rein in “runaway emotions” when it came to international relations (xx).

Ironically, that desire emerged from his inability to control his emotions when under pressure. It was at such a moment that Kennan committed what Costigliola says he believed was his greatest mistake: helping to “kill the last gasp of Rooseveltian diplomacy” with the “shock strategy” of the Long Telegram. Kennan wrote the famous cable number 511 while cloistered in his bedroom in the midst of an “intertwined political, psychic, and physical crisis”—a crisis caused not just by the reappearance of the Stalinist police state but by a penchant for “glorious martyrdom” that Kennan identified in a less distraught moment as a lifelong malady (283–85). “Kennan wanted Washington to contain the Kremlin, which had so cruelly contained him,” Costigliola writes. “He acceded to old habit by sharpening a painful situation.” In this case, his “emotion-infused reasoning” leaped from the personal affront of the Kremlin’s cutting off Western diplomats’ access to Russian people to arguing that Washington should isolate Moscow in global affairs (285, 286).

For historians, as for any scholar, the challenge in taking on such well-trodden landscapes as containment lies in telling a familiar story in a way that isn’t boring. Even when writing about the Long Telegram and the “X” article, Costigliola guides us through what may be overworked territory in a way that is accomplished and interesting. He tells us from the start that Kennan knew that his argument about a Soviet monolith impervious to negotiation was wrong. Kennan understood that the Soviet Union represented an ideological and political challenge to the United States and Western Europe, Costigliola says.

But he also knew that neither Stalin nor the Red Army were as implacable as he depicted. “Kennan simplified to the point of distortion the challenges presented by the Soviet Union... [H]e allowed his frustration and ambition to conjure up a Soviet menace so existentially frightening that his manifestos would assume a life of their own.” The result was a tragedy, “the monster of a militarized Cold War” that Kennan would combat for decades (290).

Costigliola profoundly evokes the isolation Kennan soon felt from his crowning diplomatic achievement. Kennan believed that negotiation with the Soviet Union wouldn’t work in 1946, but by 1948 he recommended it. In this case, as in others in the book, the emphasis on emotive sources works well as intellectual history. Building on his longtime interpretations of Chekhov and Edward Gibbon and his ongoing reading of John Quincy Adams and the United States’s “historic policy of neutrality and isolation,” Kennan began to tell anyone who would listen that the most potent danger the Kremlin faced was the Soviet leadership’s own “emotional overreaction to trouble in Eastern Europe.”

Kennan believed that the United States was close to achieving the purpose of containment by then. Adherence to Communist ideology was collapsing in Western and Central Europe, and Stalin hoped to avoid confrontation. The problem was that few people in Dean Acheson’s State Department were listening. It was at just this time that the Truman administration sought to expand the Cold War, and Kennan’s criticism of that policy made him “a misfit of the Truman administration” (315–17).

Kennan felt his way toward what Costigliola imagines is a radical critique of Cold War containment in the early Cold War years, and he was frustrated at almost every turn. Acheson and Truman’s preference for rearming West Germany subsumed his “patient diplomacy” in negotiations with the Soviet ambassador to the UN in the summer of 1951 (326). His brief ambassadorship to Moscow ended in failure after his September 1952 outburst at Tempelhof airport and the State Department’s repudiation of his analysis of NATO (365–66). Even his well-accepted Reith Lectures on the BBC in 1957 calling for disengagement ended with Dean Acheson’s aggressive deployment of the “Cold War catechism” getting the best of him (397). His problems persisted as time passed. A tirade at Swarthmore College against “the stony-hearted youth” of the anti-war movement overshadowed his cool Senate testimony against the Vietnam War in 1966 (428). He argued with “personal friend and frequent nemesis” Paul Nitze, but it did little to affect Ronald Reagan’s early nuclear policies (464).

Costigliola’s section on the Reith Lectures is reflective of his broader style and analysis. The lectures, which garnered more public attention than the concurrent NATO summit in Paris, called for changes in U.S. policy on Germany and Central Europe and on the development of the hydrogen bomb. In the case of Europe, Kennan called for a negotiated military disengagement from Germany in return for a Soviet withdrawal from its Eastern European empire. As part of the movement away from confrontation, the superpowers could pressure West and East Germany towards reunification as a “neutral, lightly armed state” (397). The father of containment thus argued that a divided Germany and Europe was not the most stable arrangement for the future.

Kennan linked the question of atomic power to the problem of a divided Europe. If part of the Cold War catechism was that the Soviet Union was “hellbent on conquering Western Europe (and then the world),” most reasoned that the Kremlin was “held back only by the threat of nuclear retaliation.” Kennan disagreed and called for “moving away from reliance on those terrible weapons” because of the risk that miscalculation or brinkmanship could lead to war. A better option for Western European countries would be the arming of local militias that would

make any Soviet occupation so costly that it would be doomed to fail (397–98).

Opponents of disengagement fiercely attacked Kennan and his ideas. West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer even complained to Eisenhower that the “lectures by George Kennan unfortunately had made quite an impression.” Costigliola writes that no one was more “frightened and infuriated” by Kennan’s potential influence than Dean Acheson, who regarded the tenets of the Cold War “as nearly sacred” (401–2). Acheson not only attacked the idea of disengagement, but he also took care to disparage “his opponent’s credibility as a sound rationale thinker.” He ridiculed Kennan’s idea that local militia forces could be as useful against invasion, calling it a “divine revelation” (404). Costigliola quotes Acheson’s “visible fury” in detail and theorizes that his anger enhanced the credibility of his argument. Kennan, on the other hand, “leashed” his feelings. The result was a win for Acheson and Cold War escalation:

Given prevailing assumptions about foreign policy, gender, and thought, advocating compromise or peace could easily be delegitimized as unrealistic, soft, and emotional. By contrast, pushing for weaponry and rigidity in negotiations had the presumptive claim to masculinist realism, strength and reason. Acheson and his supporters instinctively grasped that for them as powerful men, a tough stance freed them to let loose, to express their anger, and to lash out with little risk of being criticized as emotional (404–5).

The journalist James Reston wrote that “next to the Lincoln Memorial in moonlight, the sight of Mr. Dean Acheson blowing his top is without doubt the most impressive sight in the capital.” More to the point, Acheson’s position met with mainstream acceptance while Kennan’s was dismissed. Richard Nixon and John Foster Dulles wrote to Acheson in support. So did Kennan’s one-time future father-in-law, William Hard, an editor at *Reader’s Digest*. “Send me George Kennan’s skin to hang up as a trophy on my office wall,” he said. “You took it off him completely.” The whole affair left Kennan suffering from “intellectual brokenheartedness,” his wife Annelise told his sister Jeannette (405–7).

“Outmoded” Cold Warriors consistently criticized Kennan for his views. Eugene Rostow called him “an impressionist, a poet, not an earthling.” His “chosen profession should have been that of a poet,” Paul Nitze complained (467, 464). Maybe, but probably not, even given his elegant prose and oft-celebrated mind. Whether or not Kennan deserves a place in history as anything more than a strategist and historian, Costigliola compellingly reminds us that we can no longer think of Kennan simply or even primarily as what Dorothy Fosdick once called “Containment George.” He deploys a wide range of primary sources—including Kennan’s diary and his recorded interviews with the Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian John Lewis Gaddis—that help him argue convincingly that the man was so much more than the policy.

One can imagine assigning parts of *A Life between Worlds* as a beautifully written Greek chorus that analyzes the limitations of more dogmatic Cold War mindsets like those of Acheson or Dulles, to whose battles with Kennan Costigliola devotes full sections. As he describes it, Kennan saw a massive gap between containment as a “limited, political effort” and a long-term, global, militarized one (315). Costigliola’s laser focus on using Kennan’s intellectual, personal, and emotional life is a reminder of how taking emotion and psychology seriously can supplement our understanding of how policy is made and legitimized.

Using Kennan’s conflicting emotions to capture

the directions his nimble mind took and to see how his emotions helped shape dynamic changes in his views contributes greatly to our knowledge and opens up important questions. First, Kennan seems perpetually unhappy. But gloom and fragility sit in just one corner of a much greater psychological repertoire. What does it mean for our interpretation of the Cold War to focus on those emotions? Relatedly, is it important that Kennan was at his most influential when he was angriest? Or could it be that his intense “revulsion at Soviet domination” and the Kremlin’s brutality (268–69) gave him the clarity to elucidate a policy that was in the cards regardless of how he felt over a few weeks in 1946? Asking these questions reminds us that an appreciation for emotion can help us understand not only how specific iterations of policy or ways of understanding the world came to be, but why they became influential.

That raises a bigger question about methodology. As a biographer, Costigliola is intent on exploring Kennan’s uniqueness, which more often than not resulted in personal and professional isolation. But emotion is a good entry point for historians not just to understand our subjects’ singularity, but also because it can help explain why other people shared the same assumptions, whether they felt bitter or isolated or not. What if we understand Kennan as a member of different groups or movements after he turned away from containment in 1948, not just a disaffected voice in the policymaking establishment from which he yearned for validation?

To understand Kennan within a larger critical context is as important today as ever, for, as Costigliola writes, we live in a time in which many fear that American grand strategy may suffer from the intellectual indolence of binary thinking that he identifies as plaguing “outmoded Cold Warriors.” It is all the more crucial, then, that we understand how the stories we tell about the Cold War were first created and why they were criticized. The emotional strategist thus offers a final lesson: now as then, diplomats should not see the world as a relentless chain of inexorable confrontations. Like George Frost Kennan at his best, they should instead be alive to the possibilities for dialogue.

Review of Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life between Worlds*

Thomas A. Schwartz

In December 1950, in the wake of the Chinese intervention in the Korean War and the disastrous retreat of American forces, George Kennan wrote a brief note to his friend, Secretary of State Dean Acheson. It began formally with “Dear Mr. Secretary” but moved quickly toward a more personal yet fundamental point about life and the dilemma America faced. “In international, as in private, life, what counts most is not really what happens to someone but how he bears what happens to him. For this reason, almost everything depends from here on out on the manner in which we Americans bear what is unquestionably a major failure and disaster to our national fortunes.” Kennan went on to put the choice clearly and deliberately:

If we accept it with candor, with dignity, with a resolve to absorb its lessons and to make it good by redoubled and determined effort—starting all over again, if necessary, along the pattern of Pearl Harbor—we need lose neither our self confidence nor our allies nor our power for bargaining, eventually with the Russians. But if we try to conceal from our own people or from our allies the full measure of our misfortune or permit ourselves to seek relief in any reactions of bluster or petulance or hysteria, we can easily find this crisis resolving itself into an irreparable deterioration of our world position—and of our confidence in ourselves.¹

Acheson was deeply moved by Kennan’s note, which he read aloud at a meeting the following day. Both men reproduced it in their memoirs. When I read it in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas’s book, *The Wise Men, it* heightened the admiration that I felt for Kennan when I first read his famous “Long Telegram” and subsequent “X article.” However, by the time I finished *Kennan: A Life between Worlds*, I had lost that admiration, and the qualities of character and conviction I saw in the letter were subsumed in the portrait of a cantankerous and narcissistic crank, whose prejudices and bizarre beliefs made it hard to understand how he had become so beloved by intellectuals and so influential in policy circles, if only for a short period. I realize this is “way harsh,” as my niece used to say, but Frank Costigliola’s superbly researched and written biography made me really dislike George Kennan.

Although Costigliola is one of the most preeminent diplomatic historians, this biography is not really focused on Kennan’s policy choices or foreign policy advising. Chapter 7, which deals with Kennan’s time at the Moscow embassy and in Washington, when he directed the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, is only a 59-page excursion in a 539-page biography. Crucial aspects of Kennan’s role during this period, such as his involvement in setting up covert operations and helping to reverse U.S. policies on Japan, get almost no real discussion.

Although John Gaddis comes under criticism in Costigliola’s book for the role he played as Kennan’s official biographer, any historian interested in Kennan’s public role and influence over American foreign policy must still rely primarily on the Gaddis book.² Costigliola, who had edited a compelling edition of Kennan’s diaries, spends the lion’s share of his time on the issues that the diaries explore.³ He has produced a work that is much more in the genre of literary biographies, biographies that explore the psyche, the emotions, and the motivations of their protagonists. Boswell’s biography of Samuel Johnson comes to mind.⁴

This is not to say that one cannot gain insight into Kennan’s foreign policy ideas through this deep dive into Kennan’s innermost secrets. The “Long Telegram,” a brilliant and insightful analysis of the driving elements of Soviet policy, needs to be juxtaposed with Kennan’s affection for and even identification with the Russian people and his passionate love for their language and their land. Similarly, Costigliola’s depiction of Kennan’s alienation from the United States, the country he represented abroad, and his distaste for American politics, society, and culture, also helps the reader understand the way in which he approached international politics.

In his recent book on Cold War thought, the essayist Louis Menard describes Kennan as possessing “a patrician temperament” and having “little love for the country whose fortunes he devoted his life to safeguarding.” He thought Americans were “shallow, materialistic, and self-centered.”⁵ It is no wonder that he wanted the United States to retreat from Europe; he believed Americans unworthy of the global role they had taken on. As Costigliola quotes Kennan in 1949, “America’s domestic failings meant that ‘we are not really ready to lead the world to salvation. We have got to save ourselves first’” (317).

Fundamentally, the Costigliola biography is a largely successful attempt at arguing that the man who christened the American policy of containment toward the Soviet Union became the leading proponent of Cold War revisionism. Outside of the brief period of his wartime Moscow service and his Policy Planning Staff role, Costigliola’s Kennan is the ultimate Cold War critic, reacting negatively to almost every U.S. policy from the founding of NATO to Reagan’s Star Wars. Most of his time as a critic was spent outside of government in the comfortable academic setting of his Princeton office. However, even when he reentered government and served as Kennedy’s ambassador to

Yugoslavia in the early 1960s, he was criticizing official policy, arguing for the recognition of East Germany and proposing himself as a mediator in the Berlin Crisis. If you share most of the assumptions and beliefs of Cold War revisionism, you will regard this George Kennan quite sympathetically. If you don't, you might regard him much less favorably.

Referring specifically to my own research, I would say that Kennan's views on Germany were particularly hard to swallow. Indeed, they reminded me of the oft-quoted observation of former Defense Secretary Robert Gates that Joe Biden has been wrong on almost every major national security issue during his career. It strikes me that Kennan was consistently wrong in his assessments of Germany and Germany's development during the Cold War. His argument for negotiating a reunified neutral Germany in 1948 underestimated the fears of democratic German politicians in the West and West European leaders that they would face strong Soviet pressures without an American military presence.

Costigliola praises Kennan's Reith lectures in 1957 as "Kennan at his most effective: point-by point, relentless analysis expressed with elegance and conviction, that rationality reinforced by momentary shifts in loudness and pitch that invited listeners to share his leashed outrage" (400). However, these lectures called for an American disengagement from Germany that would have been profoundly destabilizing. They also contained what even Costigliola admits was Kennan's bizarre belief that European nations could build up local militia forces against the Red Army. Thankfully, policymakers did not listen to Kennan on these issues. As late as 1989, in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Kennan opposed German reunification and rather patronizingly complained that East Germans were only "seizing the opportunity of getting better jobs, making more money, and bathing in the fleshpots of the West" (485).

While Kennan's critique of the Cold War, the dangers of nuclear weapons, and the hubris of American foreign policy is often eloquent and occasionally persuasive, I had a much harder time accepting Costigliola's determination to portray Kennan as "a radical environmentalist at heart" (534). Indeed, Kennan, in his romanticizing of the past and the glories of eighteenth-century civilization, strikes me as the worst type of environmental hypocrite, enjoying the privileges of wealth and position while lamenting the technological progress and industrial civilization that made his life so comfortable.

Coupled with his ethnic and racial prejudices, which Costigliola faithfully if regretfully calls out, Kennan's environmentalism becomes insufferable.⁶ His attacks on industry and progress come across as simple elitism, a regret that the "great unwashed" can now share in some of the benefits of civilization previously reserved for the aristocracy that Kennan assumed he belonged to. To his credit, Costigliola frequently quotes Kennan lamenting the "evil effects of industrialism" and "the perils of relying on machine mass production," but his sympathy for Kennan's views keeps him from calling out the hypocrisy of Kennan "the nature lover" (471).

Costigliola's biography of George Kennan was often fascinating to read and certainly kept my interest from start to finish. I can't say that about most books. However, if his intention was for readers to accept his conclusion that "Kennan was great because he never gave up on the three causes (America and Russia, environmentalism, and questioning the reliance on machines) that he championed, sometimes almost alone for decades" (539), I think he will be disappointed. Kennan played an important role in American foreign policy, but he made the mistake of leaving behind a personal record that shows him to have been a profoundly unpleasant man as well as a flawed

analyst of American foreign policy.

Notes:

1. Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men* (New York, 1986), 543.
2. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York, 2011).
3. George F. Kennan, *The Kennan Diaries*, ed. Frank Costigliola (New York, 2014).
4. Actually, very little comes to mind for me in this regard. However, I have a vague sense of the difference between biographical studies of public figures and the literary biography tradition. But I did do a Google search. <https://www.flavorwire.com/500732/50-essential-literary-biographies#:~:text=Boswell's%20study%20of%20Samuel%20Johnson,best%2Dwritten%20of%20Woolf%20biographies>.
5. Louis Menard, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York, 2021), 9.
6. I have Italian ancestry on my mother's side, and I admire Costigliola for his willingness to include this gem of Kennan's ethnic stereotyping: "A visit to Italy prompted him to observe, 'When I see the mess the modern Italians make of their own country, I am less surprised by what Italian contractors do in New Jersey'" (473).

Kennan's Ghost

Jeremi Suri

Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, George F. Kennan haunts the history of the Cold War. He was the most eloquent and ubiquitous promoter of American efforts to contain Soviet expansion at the end of the Second World War. He was also one of the sharpest critics of American militarization in many corners of the globe. He never renounced containment, but he never accepted it in practice either. Kennan's unavoidable Cold War presence offers mixed clues about the meaning of his long career and its legacies. We still hear his howls, but to what purpose?

Historians can't resist holding a mirror to this brooding ghost. They began combing his papers and publishing biographies in the 1980s, and a stream of Kennan-centered studies has followed ever since.¹ John Lewis Gaddis, Kennan's chosen chronicler, published the most complete and authoritative biography to wide acclaim in 2011. Gaddis drew on a detailed reading of the archives, decades of research on the Cold War, and hundreds of original interviews to make the ghost more visible to us all.²

Gaddis reveals that Kennan was a troubled but prescient strategic visionary. From his years witnessing the show trials, purges, and forced starvation of Josef Stalin's Soviet Union, Kennan understood the violence of the regime and its threat to neighboring states. He also recognized that communist rule stood on feet of clay, with latent opposition from the Russian people, a dysfunctional economic system, and an isolated party leadership. Although Kennan bitterly criticized President Franklin Roosevelt for allegedly discounting the Soviet danger to the West, he resisted the horrific prospect of a war between Russia and the United States.

Containment, as first formulated by Kennan in 1946 and 1947, was the way out of this dilemma. It offered, Gaddis explains, "a path between the appeasement that had failed to prevent World War II and the alternative of a third world war, the devastation from which would have been unimaginable."³ The United States would patiently hold the line in Europe, pushing back against Soviet covert and overt advances. It would help rebuild sustainable non-communist states in the areas destroyed during the prior conflict. And it would offer an alternative to communism or fascism, anchored in what Kennan viewed as the promise of a civilized, open, and prosperous community of nations.

Kennan often doubted that the United States could live up to this ambitious strategic agenda, but he always

believed that the Soviet Union would eventually crumble, largely peacefully and from within. The working-class industrialism of Marxism-Leninism was alien to Russian feudal-aristocratic culture, as Kennan understood it, and the communist party could never deliver on its utopian promises. Without foreign expansion the regime could not bribe its citizens; without foreign wars it could not justify terror against its people.

More a historian than a political theorist, Kennan anticipated that the circumstances around the Soviet Union would encourage slow, transformative change within. The United States could shape but not control that process as it also insured its own security. This was the path that Kennan illuminated in his most famous writings. Gaddis identifies containment as the “grand strategy” that eventually brought the Cold War to an end, without nuclear war, on terms very favorable to the United States. In this compelling account, Kennan was very much like King Hamlet’s ghost, reminding those who would listen of uncomfortable truths obscured by the daily posturing in government palaces. Gaddis compares Kennan favorably to Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and other strategic prophets.⁴

Frank Costigliola does not see the same ghost, nor does he compare Kennan to the same pantheon of prophets. Drawing on identical records, Costigliola rejects the heroic rendering of Kennan as a prescient Cold War strategist. His impressive biography describes a very different figure—less policymaker than critic, more moral Cassandra than diplomatic sage. In place of Gaddis’ references to Machiavelli and others, he turns to Sigmund Freud and early twentieth-century psychology, particularly the struggle between Eros (emotion) and civilization (rationality).⁵

Kennan lost his mother soon after his birth, and he sought affection elsewhere throughout his life, Costigliola argues. Although Kennan worked through government institutions, especially the U.S. Foreign Service, he was never comfortable in them. He craved personal meaning in relationships with others, and Russia provided a space for this possibility. Kennan developed a deep love for the land of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and his favorite author, Anton Chekhov. Russia was a country that Kennan viewed as sophisticated and cultured, but not corrupted by the same conspicuous materialism as modern America.

The lonely boy from Milwaukee never really wanted to subject Russia to the isolation and combat that came with containment, Costigliola explains. And he always doubted the righteousness of a selfish American society, especially in the later decades of the Cold War. According to Costigliola, Kennan craved more connections, more cooperation, and more compromise between United States and the Soviet Union. He wanted intimate love, not frosty separation.

Kennan’s identification with containment is tragic, in Costigliola’s rendering. He describes Kennan’s isolation in Russia at the end of the Second World War, his frustration with the brutality of Stalin’s government, and his anger that his advice was frequently ignored by Washington. In these trying circumstances, which included frequent moments of illness, Kennan lashed out. He dictated an abnormally long message to his superiors (more than five thousand words) that was, in Costigliola’s description, “emotion-infused” rather than careful and analytical. Responding to his own personal suffering, Kennan painted what Costigliola calls a “fantastic scenario in which the Soviet Union loomed as an inhuman force without morality, unable to appreciate objective fact or truth, and pathologically compelled to destroy almost every decent aspect of life in the West.”⁶

Kennan overstated his case, as writers often do when they are trying too hard. Kennan wanted to be heard, but he did not intend to be taken literally, according to Costigliola. Hawks in the U.S. government circulated Kennan’s words to justify a rejection of Soviet security

demands and renewed investment in American military capabilities, especially atomic, and soon, nuclear weapons. When Kennan published a public version of his message—the “X” article of 1947—his words offered an easy answer for the citizens fearful of postwar disorder: more American force.

As Kennan’s influence grew, belligerent voices in Washington hijacked his desire for improved U.S.-Soviet relations to justify permanent hostilities. Costigliola depicts Kennan as a mad sorcerer and stunned victim at the same time. “He allowed his frustration and ambition to conjure up a Soviet menace so existentially frightening that his manifestos would assume a life of their own.” Kennan created the “monster of a militarized Cold War” that he wished to avoid. He spent the rest of his long career struggling to revise what he had inadvertently done.⁷

Gaddis and Costigliola both treat the early postwar years as turning points in their biographies. For Gaddis these years are the take-off period for a rocky half-century, when Kennan served as the conscience of American foreign policy—advocating containment, formulating the Marshall Plan, and conceptualizing an East Asian security structure even as he also warned, often in vain, against overstretch in the Middle East, Vietnam, and other regions where American security interests were limited. Kennan is a consistent, if also cranky, Cold War statesman in this account. That is how most foreign policy specialists still view him.

Costigliola departs from Gaddis most severely in seeing the early postwar years as the moment of Kennan’s reversal, when he began a journey to “combat this beast” of militarized containment that he had unleashed. At the height of his influence in Washington, between 1947 and 1949, Kennan felt typecast and “trapped” into defending hard-line positions that he opposed. His advocacy for negotiation and compromise with Soviet leaders fell on deaf ears as his superiors created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and deployed a thermonuclear arsenal, two strategic decisions he tried to stop. Costigliola highlights how Kennan rejected the militarized programs the United States pursued—ironically, with justification from his earlier words.⁸

By 1950 Kennan had left government. Costigliola claims he spent the rest of his long life trying to replace Cold War containment with more open, cooperative, and modest American policies. He gives extensive attention to Kennan’s 1957 Reith lectures in Britain, where he advocated, to the astonishment of many, American military withdrawal from Western Europe and the neutralization of Germany. In later years, Kennan opposed the Vietnam War, supported a nuclear freeze, and backed early efforts to protect the global environment. He bitterly opposed the foreign policy figures most closely associated with aggressive efforts to contain communism: Paul Nitze, John Foster Dulles, Barry Goldwater, and especially Ronald Reagan.

Costigliola clearly identifies with Kennan’s criticisms of the Cold War. They fill many more pages in his biography than the account of Kennan’s policymaking. Costigliola’s critical tone toward his subject turns sympathetic when Kennan dissents from powerful figures: “Unlike virtually every other leader present and active in the creation of the Cold War,” Costigliola explains, “Kennan worked hard to reverse course. While he spent the four years from 1944 to 1948 promoting the Cold War, he devoted the subsequent forty to undoing what he and others had wrought. That’s not a bad record.”⁹

Costigliola makes this case over the course of 539 tightly argued pages, but is it accurate? Is it fair to view Kennan as a critic of the strategy that Gaddis and others attribute to him? Is it compelling that Kennan’s criticisms of Cold War policies had more influence on the end of that long struggle than his defenses of American power?

Costigliola's own account raises doubts. One particularly interesting and unique part of his book is his reconstruction of Kennan's dialogue with historians Walter LaFeber and Lloyd Gardner, both of whom articulated cogent criticisms of American Cold War expansion. From Costigliola's description of Kennan's discomfort with U.S. policies, the reader would expect the former diplomat to agree with LaFeber and Gardner, or at least show them some respect. The opposite was the case.

In February 1968, after Kennan's controversial Senate testimony against the Vietnam War, Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study invited LaFeber and Gardner to share their research on the origins of the Cold War. At a seminar that Kennan attended (along with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and other luminaries), he expressed dismay at the historians' work. Kennan defended American containment efforts after the Second World War, blamed Soviet leaders for early hostilities, and condemned Soviet subversion in Europe. He refused to accept American militarism as the cause of the Cold War, even at the height of the Vietnam War, which he (and LaFeber and Gardner) angrily opposed. Kennan's flagrant rudeness toward these distinguished historians was part of what Costigliola describes as a wider effort to discredit scholars with "revisionist" views, including William Appleman Williams, Gar Alperovitz, and C. Ben Wright.¹⁰

Kennan continued to embrace an "orthodox" interpretation of the Cold War's origins, despite his criticisms of subsequent policy decisions. He defended the use of American power to contain Soviet communism. As he condemned revisionists, he associated with mainstream Cold War institutions, including the Council on Foreign Relations, and he endeavored to increase his influence with contemporary policymakers. His favorite president, both Costigliola and Gaddis tell us, was John F. Kennedy, hardly a critic of containment. And he never let up on his disdain for Franklin Roosevelt, the one contemporary president who, Costigliola has shown in a prior book, rejected the premises of containment.¹¹

If one is judged by the company one keeps, Kennan remained attached to his original conception of containment. That is why he was drawn to the historian who did more than anyone to elucidate Kennan's early thinking: John Lewis Gaddis.¹² To the end of his life, Kennan's criticisms of American foreign policy were never as fundamental as his criticisms (sometimes unfair) of revisionists. Kennan believed in containment, especially as he described it; he criticized those above and after him in government for not doing it with the same discipline and intelligence that he hoped to exercise. He was not reversing himself but affirming his own superiority—a common posture for Kennan on many issues.

Does that mean that Costigliola is wrong to criticize containment, as he does throughout his book? Of course not. Just because Kennan continued to defend containment does not mean it was a prescient grand strategy, as Gaddis maintains. Costigliola describes how containment often encouraged militarization, as it discouraged diplomacy and compromise. Those are vital lessons for current U.S. relations with China.

Costigliola does push a little too far in turning Kennan into a foreign policy dissenter, which he never really was. Even in his angriest writings, Kennan did not renounce the flawed but consistent U.S. strategy that over the course of five decades promoted American security and prosperity. Perhaps the costs in blood and treasure, especially for non-Americans, were too high. Cold War policies also rationalized terrible, historic injustices at home. But would the postwar world have been better without containment? There is no reason to believe that George Kennan thought so.

Kennan's ghost, like King Hamlet's, haunts those who

crave easy answers and clear alternatives. We are left, as Kennan was after a long life, with doubts and uncertainties. In a world of small-minded ideological extremes, we desperately need that shaking of our stubborn positions. Kennan's biographers, Gaddis and Costigliola, have done us a great service.

Notes:

1. See, among others, John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, and Dean Acheson* (New York and Cambridge, UK, 1994); Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York, 1989); John Lukacs, *George Kennan: A Study of Character* (New Haven, 2007); David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy* (New York and Oxford, UK, 1988); Wilson D. Miscamble, *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947–1950* (Princeton, 1992); Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York, 2009).
2. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York, 2011).
3. *Ibid.*, 694.
4. *Ibid.*, 693.
5. Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life between Worlds* (Princeton, 2023).
6. *Ibid.*, 286–87.
7. *Ibid.*, 290.
8. *Ibid.*, 290, 321.
9. *Ibid.*, 425.
10. See *ibid.*, 431–39.
11. Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton, 2012).
12. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, rev.ed. (New York and Oxford, UK, 2005).

Culture, Containment, and Ideology: George Kennan, the Man, the Myth, the Legend

Christopher McKnight Nichols

At a recent 2023 SHAFR panel on George Kennan's relevance today, one scholar provocatively argued that Kennan should not rank nearly as highly as he appears to with foreign relations experts in terms of his foreign policy thought and his contributions to U.S. foreign relations. What does it mean that Kennan looms so large for historians of American foreign relations, for international relations scholars, and for diplomacy practitioners? This question framed much of our discussion, although the remark about having too much regard for Kennan came toward the end of the panel, which largely pivoted around Frank Costigliola's magisterial *Kennan: A Life between Worlds*.

The book is nothing less than a masterpiece. It culminates Costigliola's prolonged commitment to understanding Kennan, which has included editing and publishing his diaries (2014), within the context of Kennan's long life (1904–2005). No one knows Kennan more intimately, I would venture to say, and it shows in this capacious and fascinating book.

Costigliola focuses on the man and the context of his times. He takes a measured approach, but does not pull punches on some of the more repugnant elements of Kennan's life and thought (and what a list it is: racism, antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia, elitism, anti-democratic values—including a loathing of a wide variety of reform movements). Central to the book is the aim to:

liberate Kennan from containment by exploring the full range of his political ideas as well as the

connections between those beliefs and his feelings. Kennan's love for the people and culture of Russia intensified his fury at the Stalinist repression that, in the 1930s–1950s, prohibited contact between Soviet citizens and foreigners such as himself. He opposed Soviet expansion after World War II in part because it extended the domain of such secret police–dominated regimes. And yet his love for what he regarded as the essence of Russia also bled into a measure of sympathy for the dilemmas of Soviet leaders. He understood their point of view in struggles with Washington. He even felt on occasion more Russian than American" (Costigliola, xvi).

When Costigliola's book is set next to John Gaddis's *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, the contrasts in approach and analytical frameworks are clear. Gaddis (who, as his official biographer, had exclusive access to Kennan and some of his papers) seeks to situate Kennan in a tradition and focuses less on the man and his times and more on his developing ideas and policy positions. Indeed, for Gaddis, the core focus in the life and work of Kennan, and the marker of his "greatness," must be strategy and containment, because his deeply nuanced approach was "not to achieve perfection but to distinguish lesser from greater evils" with "components that complemented the whole" (Gaddis, 695).

In short, for Gaddis, Kennan really was the Wise Man and archetypal grand strategist. This is the consensus view in grand strategy circles, where Kennan's own 1940s arguments are often cited approvingly. For example, in his reference to Kennan's core commitment to grand strategy, Hal Brands notes that in 1946–47, Kennan believed that if American foreign policy was to be effective, Washington diplomats and leaders would need "a pattern of grand strategy no less concrete and no less consistent than that which governs our actions during war."¹

According to Gaddis, when Kennan's life and writings are considered together, it becomes clear that he should be understood as a philosopher, uniting the "objectives and capabilities that gave rise to a grand strategy at the level of geopolitics . . . [with] a personal strategy for survival" (Gaddis, 697). By contrast, Costigliola wants to move beyond containment and strategy. He focuses on Kennan as a contrarian with "a penchant for thinking otherwise, that renders his voice important" today as well as in his day (Costigliola, xxii). "Thinking otherwise" included championing the environment, being skeptical of virtually all wars, and questioning the role of machines and the values of industrial society. Costigliola's focus lies with elements of Kennan's character that Gaddis simply isn't interested in or as eager to emphasize. Gaddis, in short, prefers "the standard narrative." At a 2004 Kennan conference, Costigliola remarked that Gaddis "highlighted the Kennan of the long telegram while obscuring Kennan the would-be peacemaker" (Costigliola, 527).

Both authors, like other biographers, conclude that Kennan was "always an outsider in his own time" (Gaddis, 697), or "a man outside his time" (Costigliola, 539). Drawing on Ronald Steel's depiction of Kennan, Costigliola goes further, aptly casting Kennan "as an organic conservative in a society bent on assumed progress" (Costigliola, 539). The two books, by two of the most eminent scholars in the field, ensure that there will be no need for another Kennan biography in our lifetimes. To my mind these works simultaneously cement why Kennan should rank so highly as a foreign policy thinker and yet also why he should be assessed lower and more skeptically in terms of policy relevance, and far lower still as a cultural critic, much less as a human being.

One of my favorite aspects of Costigliola's book

is his graceful definition and exploration of Kennan's original perspective on containment and its various permutations—a task he accomplishes without having to center the book on the concept. "Kennan," writes Costigliola, "viewed containment as a postulate: first limit Soviet political expansion in Western Europe by deploying economic and political measures, such as the Marshall Plan, then negotiate a deal with Moscow. To Kennan's frustration, containment developed instead into an axiom: an ongoing state of tension that brought a kind of stability to international relations, enabled continued military spending, and enhanced Washington's influence with its allies." And, as Costigliola notes, as Kennan approached death, "he admitted his responsibility in the militarizing of containment" (Costigliola, 524).

In turning to why Kennan looms so large in history, political science, policy, and diplomacy circles, Costigliola makes his assessment clear. The fascination with Kennan and his perhaps outsized position as a diplomatic strategy colossus is in large part a product of his intensive, self-conscious, self-fashioning efforts throughout a remarkably long lifetime. It is particularly the product of his long sojourn "in the [academic] woods" at Princeton. There he met with seemingly everyone, kept copious notes, and wrote and talked constantly. He also had a deeply literary bent (he wanted to be a novelist, and Anton Chekov was his "most beloved Russian writer") (Costigliola, 472). He thus built up his reputation as a "Wise Man" at every chance, despite his own misgivings about his ultimate lack of influence.

Kennan also went out on a limb on a number of important issues, making him appealing to a wide(r) range of scholars over time. Most notably, he critiqued Cold War militarism and came out against the Vietnam War early on; he opposed NATO expansion in the 1990s; and at the end of his life he rejected the Iraq War. He also presciently argued for environmentalism and the reality of climate change, and he sought "disengagement" policies to limit the arms race and maximize opportunities to bring the United States and Russia together.

Some of those "limbs," however, did not hold up well at all. Kennan was an atavistic thinker, shaped by and continuing to adhere largely to nineteenth century values and ideas, which ranged from his elitism to various forms and manifestations of misogyny, that seemed to propel his extra-marital affairs and how he treated women and female professionals across fields, to homophobia and anti-Semitism. It is hard to see his life through a contemporary lens and not be repulsed by his profound prejudices. Given those biases, David Greenberg suggests that perhaps the United States was fortunate not to have had Kennan in more powerful positions during the Cold War. Perhaps we were "spared the consequences" of some of his ideas because he "always played a subordinate role to men like Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy."²

Greenberg, who draws on the diaries that Costigliola edited, sees myriad blind spots arising from Kennan's idiosyncratic as well as most reprehensible qualities. A close look at Kennan the man in his time affirms why a broadened, more inclusive approach to strategy and strategists is so important to conceiving and constructing more enlightened and effective long-range policies. As Adriane Lentz-Smith persuasively explains, "there is an "unthinking whiteness [to] grand strategy itself"—racialized, gendered, elite, exclusive, Christian. George Kennan was very comfortable and seemingly deeply unreflective about all of that."³

In the spirit of this excellent book, which has opened up numerous avenues for (re)considering U.S. foreign relations, domestic politics, and geopolitics from the dawn of the twentieth century to the present, what do we do with the many sides of Kennan the man, the strategist, the myth,

the legend? The stakes of such questions revolve around considerations of what it means to have influence at the level of ideas and of policy—and how historians analyze, evaluate, and ultimately judge the shaping effects and outcomes of that influence. It also prompts comparisons, such as those discussed at the SHAFR panel, regarding people who could plausibly be ranked higher than Kennan for actual policy impact. And it drives me to contemplate change over time and cultural values about strategy and strategizing and to wonder: why have there seemingly been no Kennans since Kennan? Is it too early (he died in 2005)? Does that matter? Is that a good, bad, or unremarkable observation? Who comes closest in, say, the last generation or so?

We live in an era in which strategies, grand and otherwise, are virtually omnipresent. From brand marketers to influencers, self-help books and websites, strategy is everywhere. And yet, in foreign policy, we have had no recent Kennans and despite some efforts, nothing comparable to containment. To be sure, the historian's classic retort is to shout "Context!", to observe that Kennan was "singular" as a particularly influential figure at a time of global struggle the likes of which the world had never seen was part and parcel of generational containment and the larger-than-life strategist figure known as George Kennan. Fair enough. Still, no one really comes close. Kennan and Henry Kissinger share a great deal and yet also are divided by a tremendous amount, not least the large amount of time Kissinger actually shaped policy and the modest amount that Kennan had the opportunity to do so. On my list of candidates several names stand out: George Mitchell, Richard Holbrooke, Madeleine Albright, perhaps Colin Powell or Samantha Power. In intellectual circles, from a long list of "big ideas" people I would suggest that Michael Walzer, also at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, like Kennan, might be a candidate (he is still at it at age 88), and fellow conservative realist thinker Andrew Bacevich.⁴

However, none of these people fit the Kennan mold or reputation. Kissinger might come closest but even he fails the Kennan "test": to generate a concept and set of foreign policy ideas that has been a touchpoint for multiple administrations as well as for thinkers and wider publics. None of my prospective candidates did so or consistently for as long as "containment" has operated as a U.S. foreign policy Watch Word (however vacuous the term always was and certainly later became). None of them are likely to live on in foreign relations and political historical scholarship fifty or eighty years after their signature achievements, as Kennan did (recall that the long telegram was sent seventy-seven years ago, in February 1946). And virtually all of them were or are products of—and are largely locked into—central elements of a Cold War framework, as diagnosed by Kennan. Finally, even in the early Cold War era that "made" him, Kennan somehow overpowered the reputations of other influential figures such as Hans Morgenthau (his *Politics Among Nations* was published in 1948 and became the bible for Cold War realists).

The militarized containment strategies of the Cold War remained an overpowering presence in the strategic thought of those who tried to shape what came after. A longing for a new doctrine, a new grand strategy, and perhaps a next "Wise Man" led the Clinton administration to launch the "Kennan sweepstakes," a term coined by Anthony Lake for a process led by Lake, Warren Christopher, and a coterie of foreign policy thinkers and writers. They aimed to develop a new grand strategy to alter, adapt, or preferably entirely replace containment as the North Star for U.S. foreign policy in a post-Cold War world. But even their critiques of Cold War containment were muted by the triumphalism surrounding the demise of the Soviet Union and the often-inflated regard that they had for the role played by the

United States and the West in that result.

What resulted was not a new grand strategy, precisely, though it did encapsulate Clinton administration security strategy and diplomatic thinking, and it was nothing as elegant or long-lasting as containment. Jeremy Rosner, a speechwriter for Lake, came up with the phrase that Bill Clinton then invoked at a speech at the United Nations in September 1993: "democratic enlargement." Elements of that concept remain amorphously at work in Joe Biden's and Jake Sullivan's "foreign policy for the middle class," mixing, as it does, the domestic and the international, adversaries and partners in the pursuit of a more democratic, globally interconnected (capitalist) world order. Or, as Biden put it in 2021, "diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity."⁵

The "New World Order" moment of the George H. W. Bush administration and the first Gulf War, which immediately preceded Clinton's "Kennan sweepstakes," can be understood as being in line with "democratic enlargement" and the rhetoric and approaches that continue to the present. George H.W. Bush promised a golden age to come, a peaceful post-Cold War system in which freedoms advanced and the United Nations would not just keep peace, but balance large and small states, minimize aggression, and propel worldwide development.

Who and what was left out of those Bush- and Clinton-era discussions and aspirations, terms and concepts, is illuminated by the undergirding core assumptions that linked democracy and capitalism, universal values, and positive world-shaping technologies, and ignored or minimized religious, ethnic, and national differences in favor of the sort of teleological thinking Thomas Friedman later termed the "flattened world." In that world, nation states and parochial nationalisms were supposedly slipping away.

In large part, critiques of U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War (and particularly after the post-9/11 efforts to frame strategy around what became the Bush Doctrine of preemption and a Global War on Terror, which Kennan opposed) turned into the forever wars that reshaped US policy and have revolved around rejecting rash interventionism and hegemony and solving the myriad problems of finding broad, long-term strategies that move beyond paradigms of us-versus-them. They have also involved a search for ways to homogenize and universalize values and aims while finding areas of unity to match necessarily limited means to long-term ends. In short, since the end of the Cold War and especially since the backlash to U.S. foreign and domestic policy following 9/11, there has been a rejection of overt ideology and (grand) strategy as being either overly broad or too reductive. This is why, in part, when Barack Obama ran for the presidency in 2008, his foreign policy team eschewed ideology and elevated "pragmatism."⁶ In other words, we disregard or reject grand strategy at our peril.

This brings me back to Kennan's reputation, to ideology, and to culture. Focusing on Kennan's emergence as "intellectual icon of the Cold War," H.W. Brands writes that "Kennan has been a darling in historians and other students of the early Cold War, partly because he was peculiarly literate and partly because he disavowed his early hard line." Robert Schulzinger further explains that "by the time Kennan became fair game for historians, most of them had grown squishy on the Cold War."⁷ (Although Gaddis had not.)

Kennan's post-politics life was both a rejection and a reification of his earlier ideas. Costigliola shows that for Kennan, particularly after his experience with policy planning from 1947 to 1950 and his brief 1952 ambassadorship to the Soviet Union (and with the notable

exception of his time as ambassador to Yugoslavia, from 1961 to 1963), the era amounted to fifty years of pushing back on how his ideas about containment, Soviet conduct, and world order were used and defined. He was at odds with the majority of the Washington foreign policy establishment, even as they continued to invoke and celebrate him and his contributions.

As I pull ideas from Costigliola and cross-reference them with Kennan's writing, I can see a clear ideological through-line in Kennan's thought and policy positions. It led to some of his best and worst analyses and was essentially historical and historicist. We see it most clearly in his writings as an historian. He rejected Wilsonian idealism and moralism and pinned that to his rejection of Rooseveltian imperialism, interventionism, and what he saw as an essential humanitarianism. I would distill these thoughts to the following historical lesson for policymakers and citizens alike, a lesson that Kennan came to after assessing the results of war with Spain in 1898: "There are many things Americans should beware of, and among them is the acceptance of any sort of paternalistic responsibility to anyone, be it even in the form of military occupation, if we can possibly avoid it, or for any period longer than is absolutely necessary."⁸

Michael Hunt writes along similar lines about the ideological cast of Kennan's writing and thinking and his pursuit of power and influence as well as his trepidation about being a cog in the policy machine, even at the highest levels. For Hunt, Kennan's signature works—such as the "X" article—were "suffused with the moral formulations long familiar to the audience of influential that Kennan wished to reach."⁹ These were underlined by an exceptionalist rendering of the United States's providential mission in the Cold War as a moral test for the nation and for free institutions and by a "realist" Anglo-Saxon sense of mission, which undergirded the projection of racial, hierarchical thinking and anti-radicalism in warnings about possible ideological, political, moral, and demographic corruption by foreign peoples and ideas.

So many of the prejudices and un- or under-examined assumptions about social order can be found across the public and private statements of policymakers during the early Cold War. They stand out vividly in the Kennan we find in Frank Costigliola's brilliant book, and they were essential to the construction and implementation of containment. "Why Kennan the Cold Warrior was lauded as the all-wise Grand Strategist and why Kennan the critic of that conflict was often dismissed as a sentimental poet says much about the political culture and emotional sensibility of America," writes Costigliola (Costigliola, 3–4).

Despite the many misgivings we might have about Kennan as a "great man," Kennan the American symbol, Kennan the archetype, myth, legend, and lightning rod remain remarkably salient for the kinds of conversations that we must have about U.S. foreign policy in a world in which the U.S. wields tremendous power and continues to have enormous commitments. Pivoting from Kennan to present concerns, we can ask what it says about U.S. political culture and emotional and intellectual sensibilities that there have been few recent Kennan-esque figures. What does it say that projects of grand strategy comparable to containment seem dead in the water?

Notes:

1. Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* (Ithaca, NY, 2014), 24–25.
2. David Greenberg, "The Misanthropy Diaries: Containment, Democracy, and the Prejudices of George Frost Kennan," in *Rethinking American Grand Strategy*, ed. Elizabeth Borgwardt, Christopher Nichols, and Andrew Preston (New York & Oxford, UK, 2021), 268.
3. Adriane Lentz-Smith, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Grand

Strategy," in *Rethinking American Grand Strategy*, 329–345, esp. 331.

4. This brings to mind Perry Anderson's argument in *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (New York, 2015), that Kennan was neither a Wise Man nor particularly impressive, and certainly not the moderate he is often made out to be; yet, despite evidence to suggest he is or can be argued to be undeserving of his ranking and accolades, Anderson notes that Kennan remains a/the main measure for American foreign policy thinkers in the historical record. See also, Jeet Heer on Anderson with an emphasis on Kennan, "Wising Up to the Wise Men of American Foreign Policy," *The New Republic*, May 29, 2015. URL: <https://newrepublic.com/article/121921/perry-andersons-american-foreign-policy-and-its-thinkers> Accessed July 31, 2023.

5. "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world>.

6. David Milne and I discuss the Obama team's strategy in the introduction to Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds., *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories* (New York, 2022).

7. H.W. Brands, "Ideas and Foreign Affairs," in *A Companion to American Foreign Relations*, ed. Robert D. Schulzinger (Malden, MA, 2006), 5.

8. George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago, 1951), 22.

9. Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT, 1987), 154.

Responses to Reviewers

Frank Costigliola

I appreciate the time and effort devoted by Chris Dietrich, Christopher McKnight Nichols, Thomas A. Schwartz, and Jeremi Suri in reading and in offering such thoughtful comments on my book. I am likewise grateful to Andy Johns and the editorial staff of *Passport* for selecting my book for a roundtable discussion. I thank also Kristin Ahlberg for introducing this roundtable. In keeping with how the four reviews group themselves in terms of focus and purpose, my response comes in two separate essays, the first directed to Suri's review and the second dealing with the reviews of Dietrich, Nichols, and Schwartz.

Response to Jeremi Suri

Jeremi Suri's essay "Kennan's Ghost" depicts George F. Kennan as an elusive, literally spectral figure. He stresses the challenge in understanding this "brooding ghost" who "haunts the history of the Cold War." As I see it, however, Kennan was not so much obscure or contradictory in his thinking as he was complex, unconventional, and alert to change, particularly in Russia. Nevertheless, Suri presses this image of Kennan as mystery, asking, "We still hear his howls, but to what purpose?" Posing the question sets up the answer.

It took John Lewis Gaddis's authorized biography to "make the ghost more visible to us all." Following this introduction, Suri devotes a quarter of his total essay to establishing the Gaddis biography as the normative standard. He marshals a staccato of affirmations: "Gaddis revealed"; "Gaddis explains"; "Gaddis identifies." This culminates with "Gaddis compares Kennan favorably to Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli and other strategic prophets." These five paragraphs focused on Gaddis's book are actually the strongest in the essay. Suri is thoroughly familiar with the strengths of the authorized biography, and he presents them with a sure touch. Then, with the orthodox view of Kennan firmly ensconced, Suri turns to the heresies of the book actually under review.

Suri argues that "Frank Costigliola does not see the same ghost, nor does he compare Kennan to the same pantheon

of prophets. Drawing on identical records, Costigliola rejects the heroic rendering of Kennan as a prescient Cold War strategist." Costigliola's Kennan is "less policy-maker than critic, more moral Cassandra than diplomatic sage. In place of Gaddis's references to Machiavelli and others, Costigliola turns to Sigmund Freud, and early twentieth century psychology, particularly the struggle between what Freud called the tension of Eros (emotion) and Civilization (rationality)."

There is lots to unpack here. Rather than rejecting "the heroic rendering of Kennan as a Cold War strategist," I sympathize with Kennan's dilemmas as a Cold War strategist. I also applaud Kennan's far more challenging heroic role, later, as a Cold War critic. Then there is the matter of Machiavelli vs Freud. "In place of Gaddis'" normative, sensible "references to Machiavelli," Costigliola "turns to Sigmund Freud." Why turn to Freud?, many might ask. Given the resurgence of cut-throat nationalist rivalries in recent decades juxtaposed with the collapse of scientific credence accorded to Freud, which thinker, Machiavelli or Freud, should the reader trust to better inform an understanding of Kennan, or of most anything else? Suri's championing of Gaddis- Machiavelli-political theory as against Costigliola-Freud- psychological theory seems like a slam dunk for common sense.

The only problem here is that Kennan explained himself not in terms of Machiavelli, but rather of Freud. All four citations of "Machiavelli" in Gaddis's biography refer to Gaddis's own interpretations, not to Kennan's self-description or reference. By contrast, as I show in great detail, Kennan read Freud. Kennan regarded Freudian theory as settled science, and he repeatedly framed the dilemmas in his life in terms of Freudian categories. In particular, Kennan saw himself as snared by the inherent conflict between Eros—meaning not just emotion, as Suri has reduced it, but also art, creativity, and escape, and freedom; and Civilization, again meaning not just rationality, but also science, obligation, responsibility, and bureaucratic restraint. As a student at Princeton, years before Kennan had ever read Freud, he came up with a similar framework of conflicting impulses, which he labeled conventionality vs. unconventionality. Kennan even asked Gaddis if he could employ a Freudian framework for the authorized biographer, much as Leon Edel had done with his study of Henry James.

The point here is *not* that the historian should simply adopt without question Kennan's Freudian framework. In fact I do not believe in Freud, and I have not attempted a Freudian analysis. Nevertheless, the biographer, in seeking to understand her or his subject, should take into account the subject's own frame of reference.

Suri wades into parody as he attempts to sink *Kennan: A Life between Worlds* as a serious biography. He exaggerates some of my arguments to the point where they seem inane. He makes other points that are puzzling distortions. He ignores vast swaths of the book.

In terms of exaggeration to the point of ridicule, note how Suri depicts my discussion of Kennan and Russia: "The lonely boy from Milwaukee never really wanted to subject Russia to the isolation and combat that came with containment, Costigliola explains." Moreover, "according to Costigliola, Kennan craved more connections, more cooperation, and more compromise between the United States and the Soviet Union. He wanted intimate love, not frosty separation."

In the actual book, however, I argue that Kennan certainly did want to subject Russia to the discipline of containment, especially during the immediate postwar years of 1945-47, when the victorious Soviet Union appeared overly confident and dangerously brash. Kennan regarded containment as a postulate. Once the Kremlin seemed contained, then Washington should carefully and quietly

seek negotiations to ease tensions. Over time, and especially after the death of Stalin in 1953, Kennan advocated that the United States try diplomacy with the Soviet Union to ameliorate a range of issues, from the nuclear arms race, to the future of Germany, to safeguards for the environment. He favored cultural exchanges. He regarded preventing war with Russia as a prime challenge for US policy and for whatever role he had to play in influencing that policy. After the Cold War, he opposed expanding NATO into former Soviet domains.

That sums up Kennan's view on nation-to-nation ties between America and Russia. With regard to his own private life, Kennan delighted in mixing with ordinary Russians on the streets of Moscow. During the Stalinist era, he was frustrated that he could not mingle with admired intellectuals and artists. In the 1970s and beyond, he did cultivate such cultural ties on his research trips to Moscow. He remained a lifelong fan of 19th century Russian literature and music. On occasion, he fantasized about immersing himself, somehow, in the essence of eternal Russia.

Bottom line: Relations between powerful nations are of a different order from relations among individuals. Suri's review elides that basic distinction. His claim that I argue that Kennan craved "intimate love not frosty separation" between the United States and the Soviet Union exaggerates to the point of distortion. Suri's assertion collapses a complex argument into a reductive bumper sticker. If nations have interests but not friends, what are we to make of a historian, or his subject, daft enough to think such nations as the United States and the Soviet Union might approach "intimate love"? Indeed, those very words in Suri's review taint this book with a musty odor, redolent of other foolish Americans who went astray loving Russians too much.

Some further points of discussion:

First, Suri mangles my account of how Kennan came to dictate his long telegram. I referred, in a broader context, to Kennan's "emotion-infused reasoning," to, literally, thinking that was both emotional and reasoned. Suri deleted the word "reasoning" and then, with the balance gone, twisted my words into a polarity. According to Suri, I was depicting Kennan's thinking as "emotion-infused," rather than careful and analytical." (italics added by me.) Aside from misunderstanding the general pattern by which human thought routinely blends emotional and analytical elements, Suri's phraseology misses the overall tenor of my description of how Kennan crafted the powerhouse manifesto that was the long telegram. It was not emotion rather than reason, but emotion integrated with and empowered with reason.

Second, Suri sees the early postwar years as the "turning point" in my biography. That perspective glides without any comment over the first 263 pages of this 539-page book. Nor does Suri discuss in detail any of the last 216 pages of the book, aside from pp. 434-35 (about which below). Equally puzzling, Suri states that my book drew on the "identical records" of Gaddis' work. Suri somehow missed the newly discovered archival sources utilized in the first half of my book. The biography offers not only a fresh take on Kennan's fractured childhood and a revisionist view of his time at Princeton, but also an analysis of the great variety of reports that the young diplomat sent back from Berlin, Riga, Moscow, and Prague in the 1920s and 1930s. We get from Suri nary a comment on how Kennan came to master Russia so flawlessly, about his early experience with covert actions, his friendship with aristocratic Baltic Germans, and the consequence of his approaching Russia from Germany. When Kennan became founding director of the Policy Planning Staff (PPS) in 1947 at age forty-four, he was not a neophyte in terms of a global perspective. He had under his belt experience not only with regard to Russia, but also with China, Japan, Latin America, and US

domestic affairs.

Third, Suri somehow has me depicting Kennan “at the height of his influence in Washington between 1947 and 1949” as “type-cast and ‘trapped’ into defending hard-line positions that he opposed. His advocacy for negotiation and compromise with Soviet leaders fell on deaf ears as his bosses created NATO and deployed a thermonuclear arsenal.” Really? As I make clear in my book, Kennan loved his position and authority as director of the PPS, his office next door to Secretary of State George C. Marshall’s, and the sage status he enjoyed through much of the government and in the public sphere. Though he thought the pace of America’s military buildup was too brisk, he went along in order to get along. He helped devise secret operations in Albania and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. He was so pleased with his status and position that his diary for 1947 amounts to only single, rather innocuous page. Well into 1949, he still expected to win the bureaucratic and diplomatic struggle over his cherished “Plan A” for defeated Germany. That would allow both the United States and Russia to withdraw from a reunited, neutral Germany. And that triumph would clinch a win for both containment and follow-through diplomacy. Only when Dean Acheson replaced Marshall as secretary of state in January 1949 and Kennan lost key policy debates, such as the defeat of his “Plan A” and the 1950 decision to build the hydrogen bomb, did the strategist feel trapped - and then he promptly took a leave from the State Department.

Kennan landed at the Institute for Advanced Study, where he found a job and a sympathetic ear in J. Robert Oppenheimer. Bottom line: Kennan’s experiences and reactions in 1947-49 differed sharply from late 1949-1950.

Fourth, Suri poses a question based on a puzzling assumption. He asks, “Is it compelling that Kennan’s criticisms of Cold War policies had more influence on the end of that long struggle than his defenses of American power?” Huh? The premises here are confused. It is hard to see how Suri missed a theme repeated again and again in the last third of my book: Kennan had almost no influence on US policy at end of Cold War, nor had he had for decades earlier. As for Kennan’s “defenses of American power,” does that refer to the 1940s? Certainly in later decades, Kennan most often advised a circumspect use of U.S. power, a focus on diplomacy, and a priority for arms reduction and compromise settlements. For instance, at his talk to the Council on Foreign Relations in December 1989, he declared NATO an anachronism like the Warsaw Pact. He urged “a new, all-European security structure” that might finally erase the division between East and West and integrate the Soviet Union into Europe. The United States could participate in the new organization, but it would have to, like Russia, abandon its reliance on massive nuclear forces. (480-81)

Fifth, another snarl of half-truths, pulled from pages 434-35, posits that if Kennan had indeed moved away from containment, by 1968 he would have endorsed the arguments advanced by Walter LaFeber and by Lloyd Gardner at a pivotal seminar on Cold War revisionism held at the Institute for Advanced Study in February of that year. Instead, Suri tells us, Kennan “expressed dismay at the historians’ work and went out of his way to demonstrate his disrespect for them.” True enough so far as it goes.

What Suri leaves out or fails to realize, however, are several crucial factors. Kennan throughout his life retained a fierce loyalty to the Truman Team of 1946-49, in which he himself had played a leading role. He rallied around that flag, especially if he perceived it as under assault by barbarians from the Wisconsin School or wherever. It was in defense of that Team that Kennan came to know and to appreciate Gaddis. (Nevertheless, by the end of his life, Kennan would come to worry that Gaddis did not appreciate Kennan’s own efforts to ease the Cold War.)

Moreover, LaFeber and Gardner were not criticizing U.S. policy primarily because they saw it as militaristic, as Suri would have it, but rather because they saw Washington’s policies as relentlessly expansionist in terms of Open Door economic penetration of the entire world, including the Soviet domain of Eastern Europe. As I discuss in the book, Kennan was not buying that sacrilege about his Team. Nor would the crusty veteran countenance for a moment the Gar Alperovitz thesis, also associated with the Cold War revisionists, holding that U.S. officials had intended the atomic bombs to send an intimidating warning to Moscow as well as to Tokyo.

One could go on and on. Overall, it remains puzzling why such a leading scholar of our field, someone for whom I retain great respect and affection, has devoted his talents to conjuring up such a hobgoblin-interpretation of this book.

Why Kennan?

Response to Chris Dietrich, Christopher McKnight Nichols, and Thomas A. Schwartz

We can’t seem to quit him. Even when appalled by George F. Kennan’s egregious prejudices and blinders, many of us SHAFR-types remain unable to avert our gaze.

Thomas A. Schwartz tells us that by the time he had finished *Kennan A Life between Worlds*, his onetime admiration for Kennan’s upright character had added into contempt for this “cantankerous and narcissistic crank.” And yet, Schwartz acknowledges, the “biography kept my interest and fascination from start to finish, and it is rare that I can say that about most books.”

Christopher McKnight Nichols starts off his review by recalling that at a 2023 SHAFR panel on Kennan’s legacy, a prominent SHAFR-ite “provocatively argued that Kennan should not rank nearly as highly as he appears to in terms of his foreign policy thought and contributions.” Nichols returns repeatedly to the puzzle of why Kennan has kept his preeminent perch. He notes Kennan’s nearly unshakable standing among the Grand Strategists. He cites Kennan’s decades-long practice of commenting on controversial contemporary issues. The strategist-turned-historian went “out on a limb” by taking a stand against the Vietnam War, the atomic arms race, environmental destruction, and then, while in his nineties, NATO expansion. In 2003, the ninety-nine year-old spoke out against the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, this record, no matter how impressive, ended with Kennan’s life in 2005.

Why, Nichols then asks, have there “been no Kennans since Kennan?” He lists such potential candidates as George Mitchell, Richard Holbrooke, Madeline Albright, Colin Powell, Samantha Power, and Michael Walzer - only to conclude “but none of them fits the Kennan mold or reputation.” None is likely to retain a reputation decades past his prime, as Kennan has already done. Perhaps the saddest effort to get out from under the shadow of the supposed giant and his containment doctrine was the “Kennan sweepstakes,” launched by Anthony Lake, Bill Clinton’s National Security Adviser. The effort by Lake and his team to swap out “containment” for some trendier alternative yielded only the forgettable “democratic enlargement.”

Ironically, a bit of serendipity linked Kennan’s becoming a Russian expert and subsequently authoring the containment doctrine with Lake’s own origins. In 1928, Lake’s mother, then Eleanor Hard, broke off her two-year engagement with Kennan in the belief that he would never amount to much. Stung, George shelved plans to resign from the State Department and make more money in the private sector. He threw himself instead into the Department’s rigorous program training Russian language experts in Berlin. Kennan’s subsequent almost non-stop,

24/7/365 effort to immerse himself in Russian language and culture, even before the formal start of his instruction in Berlin, marked the first time that he really applied himself.

He would continue to push himself and to excel, rising in the State Department more rapidly than anyone else in his cohort. His success and his becoming thoroughly at home in the Russian language did not prevent him from distinguishing himself as the only U.S. ambassador ever expelled from Russia. After Kennan left the State Department to become a historian at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, he again quickly attained top rank. His first major book, *Russia Leaves the War* (1956), snared the Bancroft Prize, the National Book Award, the Francis Parkman Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize. About these many achievements, and his equally spectacular failures, Kennan in his memoirs and in his diaries remained self-aware, largely honest, and exquisitely articulate.

Part of the lure of Kennan, then, is that he endures, with all his reasoned arguments and all his Sturm und Drang, sui generis. Through Kennan's flood of writings we get to see the dynamo at work. Dean Acheson, not always a fan of Kennan's, responded to a colleague's observation that "a man like Kennan would be excellent" to head the Policy Planning Staff, by snapping back, "A man like Kennan? There's nobody like Kennan."¹ Nor is there yet.

As Chris Dietrich observes, *Kennan: A Life between Worlds* tries to explain Kennan as a whole person, as someone whose reason and emotions were integral to each other and to his being as a whole. That of course is how human thinking actually works. As neuroscientists tell us, the conception of a clear-cut division between reason and emotion, between mind and body, does not accord with the integrated operations of a human being. In our commonsensical notions about thinking and feeling, most of us, as heirs to the ancient Greeks, are misled by our assumption of a fundamental mind-body duality. Human thinking does not entail either pure reason or pure emotion. Historians can most profitably focus not on supposedly isolated emotions, but rather on understanding how more emotional and more rational impulses intersected and shaped each other to yield a final decision or action.

Kennan offers a fascinating template for such analysis. Although a private person in some ways, Kennan on occasion was quite articulate about his thinking, his feeling, and his efforts to integrate it all. For instance, as the book lays out, the long telegram arose in a creative synthesis of Kennan's various modes of expression: "Kennan fused personal and political preferences." "Kennan's aggravation, ailments, and aspirations – his personal and political aspirations – came together in cable number 511." His friends back in the State Department were prodding him to write a cable that would be "a real deep one, one of his better efforts." They expected "some kind of a 'think piece.' He did not disappoint." (pp. 286-87) The long telegram had such wide appeal because it offered both a scary warning about a Kremlin "impervious to the logic of reason" and the reassurance that Russia could be contained without a war. My point here was not that the long telegram arose solely from Kennan's personal frustrations with Moscow and with Washington, but rather that he mobilized his fury to infuse the telegram with emotional as well as with rational force. The whole ended up over-charged with such emotional and rational potency that Kennan would come to regret what he had wrought.

Kennan's post-1949 challenge to Cold War shibboleths, including containment, arguments made most eloquently in his Reith lectures broadcast over the BBC in December 1957, remain controversial even today. The fault line between those scholars who praise and those who fault Kennan in this regard tracks the division between those scholars who remain appalled by, and those who remain largely undisturbed by, the risks mandated by Washington's Cold

War policies. As Dietrich observes, Acheson's full-throated fury at Kennan's Reith proposals effectively mobilized masculine-coded emotion in defense of the Cold War status quo.

Acheson's arguments still carry weight. Consider, for instance, Schwartz's protest that a late 1950s "American disengagement from Germany . . . would have been profoundly destabilizing." We should reflect on the various dangers entailed in "destabilizing." Schwartz makes Kennan appear to be urging a unilateral American pullback. Instead, Kennan specified a negotiated, mutual withdrawal of US and Soviet forces from the German-German frontier. Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev publicly praised such an idea. Kennan expected that the pullback would heighten pressures from Eastern Europe for the Russians to pull all or most of their military back to the borders of the Soviet Union. Such a withdrawal three decades before it actually occurred would have alleviated the quite "destabilizing" danger that we actually faced, of U.S. and Soviet forces facing each other along the German-German frontier. That pullback would also have ended plans to deploy short range, nuclear-tipped missiles in this tinderbox. Third, reunifying Germany would have reunited divided Berlin, thereby ending the hemorrhaging of population that was creating a crisis in East Germany. The increasingly untenable situation in East Germany pushed Khrushchev to instigate the Berlin crises of 1958-59 and 1961-62. The vulnerability of divided Berlin also heightened the stakes of the Cuban missile crisis. Any of these hot points could have exploded into a war that would have been even more "profoundly destabilizing," not to mention deadly.

The question arises, then, whether Kennan's proposed mutual disengagement would have "destabilized" Berlin and Germany or, rather, would have eased or ended one of the most "destabilizing" confrontations of the Cold War. Because the Cold War ended without a hot war between the United States and the Soviet Union does not justify historians' regarding this lucky turn of events as a given and as nearly-inevitable.

Schwartz finds "bizarre" Kennan's notion that "European nations could build up local militia forces against the Red Army." But that of course is what the Afghan mujahaddin did do to defeat the Soviet occupation. That is also how the Iraqi and Afghani insurgents managed to thwart the US occupations of their nations.

Kennan, with his outrageous prejudices and brilliant insights, his formidable talents and even more formidable ego, still elicits emotional reactions. That is apparent in Schwartz's understandable, but to my mind unfair, criticism of him as "the worst type of environmental hypocrite, enjoying the privileges of wealth and position while lamenting the technological progress and industrial civilization that made his life so comfortable." In terms of wealth, Kennan never had that much. He lost his inheritance in the Great Depression and thereafter fretted about having enough money until almost the end of his life. Though he maintained a comfortable life style, he had to scramble to do so.

With regard to the outdoors, Kennan's inclinations since childhood were, as Dietrich recognizes, deepened by Anton Chekhov's critique of industrialism and of humanity's alienation from Nature. Regardless of whether George was idling away spring afternoons at Princeton sitting in a tree instead of studying, snow-shoeing in Russia far off the beaten path in quest of ancient churches, or navigating stormy waters between Norway and Denmark in his sailboat, he cultivated a connection with Nature. He grubbed in the dirt of his 252-acre farm in Pennsylvania. Whether it was icy waves lashing the oil rigs off the coast of Norway, or icy roads shutting down auto traffic in New Jersey, Kennan sympathized, indeed he empathized, with the forces striking back against human dominion. In musing

about the terrible destruction wrought by the nuclear war that he dreaded, he took some comfort that, in the fulness of time, evolution would heal the human damage and restore the primacy of the big trees and the wild animals. Such sentiments may strike some as weird, but they were certainly sincere and free of anthropomorphic bias.

That Kennan's hold on us is not going away soon is evidenced most recently by the just-published second edition of the canon-shaping course reader, *America in the World*, edited by Jeffrey A. Engel, Mark Atwood Lawrence, and Andrew Preston. The editors allocated to Kennan some choice real estate. The first entry in their final chapter, focused on the most recent past, includes a selection from a 1985 article by Kennan.

Eerily prescient, he warned of "two unprecedented and supreme dangers," war among the great powers and destruction of the natural environment. He appealed not just to the good sense of rational thinking, but also to an emotion-inflected "moral component." In stressing the "natural beauty and healthfulness and magnificence" of the Earth, Kennan invoked the "element of sacrilege," relevant regardless of one's relationship to god, in sacrificing the environment for the narrow gratification of the current generation.²

Probably the most substantive reason why Kennan remains relevant is his faith in the efficacy of diplomacy. It is here – in Kennan's unshakable faith in the potential of diplomacy as a process that can yield agreements where initially none seem possible – that we find his most significant legacy and relevance for the troubled world of today.

Kennan believed that patient, secret talks between professional diplomats who understood and respected the culture and history of their opponents could prove surprisingly effective. As he put it, what seems like unbridgeable differences between opponents amounts to only the asking price at the start of a long bargaining process. Rather than seeking elusive trust as the basis for agreements, diplomats should focus on areas of mutual self-interest. Self-interest, he argued, was far more solid than trust. Kennan's faith in diplomacy did not mean that he thought military force was unimportant. Rather he believed that diplomacy was most effective when military force, like political and economic pressure, were kept in the background - as parts of the context of negotiations, but not brandished in the face of the opposing side. Bluster and threats he thought were most often counter productive in terms of gaining concessions from an adversary. For Kennan, diplomacy was not an admission of weakness or lack of resolve, but rather a smart strategy for winning. The world needs more such thinking.

Notes:

1. Loy W. Henderson interview with John Lewis Gaddis, September 25, 1982, p. 7, box 1, John Lewis Gaddis papers, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

2. Jeffrey A. Engel, Mark Atwood Lawrence, and Andrew Preston (ed.), *America in the World*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 414-15.