George Kennan: A Study of Character
by John Lukacs
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With fighting in the European theater still raging in mid-1944, George Kennan was forced to follow a rather complicated itinerary in order to take up his position as deputy chief of mission at the United States Embassy in Moscow where, almost two years later, his 8,000-word “Long Telegram” outlining what one could expect from the Soviet Union and consequently how America should best respond, a document that—together with his “X” article in Foreign Affairs a year later introducing the idea of containment to the public and his prominent role in putting together the Marshall Plan—would assure his everlasting fame as the principal architect of the winning strategy in the cold war. Kennan’s path from Foggy Bottom to Spaso House, the ambassador’s residence in Moscow that he shared with Averell Harriman until his family was able to join him some time later, had the diplomat tracing a circuitous arc through Lisbon, Caserta, Benghazi, Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran, Baku, and finally Stalingrad. More than half a century later, his diary entries for the three days he spent at the American legation in the Iraqi capital are eerily prescient.

Observing that some members of the Arab elite “would be glad to use us as foil for the British,” then the dominant power in the Middle East, Kennan cautioned that while Americans “can perhaps enjoy a momentary favor” in the region, they would end up responsible for the actions of the native politicians who drew them in and if these “then begin to do things which are not in our interests, which affect the world situation in ways unfavorable to our security,” then we would “have ourselves at least in part to blame and it is up to us to take the appropriate measure.” However, this was precisely what worried the diplomat.

Are we willing to bear this responsibility? I know—and every realistic American knows—that we are not. Our government is technically incapable of conceiving and promulgating a long-term consistent policy toward areas remote from its own territory. Our actions in the field of foreign affairs are the convulsive reactions of politicians to an internal political life dominated by vocal minorities.

And yet Kennan recognized that there was something about Iraq, “a country in which man’s selfishness and stupidity have ruined almost all natural productivity,” that would inexorably exercise a certain, almost tragic, attraction for his fellow Americans:

Those few Americans who remember something of the pioneer life of their own country will find it hard to view these deserts without a pang of interest and excitement at the possibilities for reclamation and economic development. If trees once grew here, could they not grow again? If rains once fell, could they not be attracted from the inexhaustible resources of nature? Could not climate be altered, disease eradicated? If they are seeking an escape from reality, such Americans
may even pursue these dreams. But if they are willing to recall the sad state of soil conservation in their own country, the vast amount of social improvement to be accomplished at home, and the inevitable limitations on the efficacy of our type of democracy in the field of foreign affairs—then they will restrain their excitement at the silent, expectant possibilities in the Middle Eastern deserts, and will return, like disappointed but dutiful children, to the sad deficiencies and problems of their native land.

Unfortunately, the fact that his countrymen have not needed his counsels over the years and now reap the consequences of their folly accounts once more for Kennan’s being accorded an almost canonical status in foreign policy discussions invoked by scholars across the political spectrum from Peter Beinart to Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman. By and large, however, most of these fashionable appeals to Kennan as exemplar of “realist” thought tend to focus on the period between February 22, 1946, when the “Long Telegram” was received at the State Department in Washington, and July 31, 1950, when, with the Policy Planning Staff that he had helped to create but saw largely disbanded and finding that John Foster Dulles had leaked the contents of a high-level discussion in order to tell a reporter that the diplomat of whom “he used to think highly” was “a very dangerous man,” he took a leave to accept a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Although those four years were pivotal in U.S. and world history, they represented only a brief portion of a rich and active life that continued for more than a half century after the high point of his career in public service—Kennan passed away on March 17, 2005, one year, one month, and one day after his hundredth birthday—during which he wrote 17 books and scores of articles, winning a Pulitzer Prize for *Russia Leaves the War: Soviet–American Relations, 1917–1920*, and another one for the first volume of his *Memoirs*. To arrive at a more balanced appreciation of the man, a broader—and more profound—perspective is needed. And this is what Kennan’s longtime friend, the distinguished historian of the twentieth century John Lukacs, sets out to deliver in *George Kennan: A Study of Character*.

The author’s conviction is that “Kennan the writer and thinker is, or should be, even more important than Kennan the political advocate; that Kennan about America is even more important and enduring than Kennan about Russia; that Kennan the actual historian and essayist has left us even more valuable things than Kennan the potential statesman.” Kennan would have concurred with this assessment. In his *Memoirs*, he modestly attributes the sensational success of the “Long Telegram” to fortunate timing: “It was one of those moments when official Washington, whose states of receptivity or the opposite are determined by subjective emotional currents, was ready to receive a given message.... Six month earlier this message would have been received by the Department of State with raised eyebrows and lips pursed in disapproval. Six months later, it would probably have sounded redundant, a sort of preaching to the convinced.”

The now once again popular political realism that Kennan championed throughout his life—after a brief fling, around the time of his graduation from Princeton in 1925, with “the promptings of a vague Wilsonian liberalism”—emerges clearly throughout the narrative. Foreshadowing the underlying thesis of the “Long Telegram” and “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” that the forces of history, geography, and culture would ultimately prevail over any momentum that ideology might enjoy, Kennan, who was then in Washington after his first four-year stint in Moscow, told students at the Foreign Service School in 1938: “We will get nearer to the truth if we abandon for a time
the hackneyed question of how far Bolshevism has changed Russia and turn our attention to how far Russia has changed Bolshevism.”

On the other hand, unlike President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and some of his closest advisers on Soviet matters, including his second ambassador to Moscow, Joseph E. Davies, whom Lukacs scorns as “a man who was and remained willfully ignorant of Russia and of the nature of Stalin’s government, whose official explanations, including the absurdities of the purge trials, he accepted as proper and reasonable throughout,” Kennan early on had dark forebodings of America’s coming clash with the Soviet Union. Lukacs notes that Kennan “foresaw, accurately, that fateful American concessions would be made in order to assure the Soviet Union’s entry into the United Nations” would lead to “the simultaneous neglect of dealing with problems that seemed less attractive but were, in reality, more important” in relations between the two superpowers that emerged from World War II.

Lukacs underscores the subtitle, *A Study of Character*, by noting that Kennan rejected the obvious temptation to advance a political career on the strength of the wide acclaim with which his containment strategy was met: “Here was a handsome and impressive man, still young, a superb speaker who awoke his nation about the dangers of communism, not a liberal internationalist, not one of the New Deal crowd: what a prospect of a public career stood before him in and after 1946!” Instead Kennan took a stand against hysterical anticommunism, accumulating enemies among those whose misconceptions and misstatements he critiqued as being just as dangerous, if not more so, to the Republic. In his famous May 1953 address at the University of Notre Dame one month before his definitive departure from the professional Foreign Service (a text Lukacs reproduces in its entirety in an appendix), Kennan warned: “There are forces at large in our society...[that] impel us—in the name of our salvation from the dangers of communism—to many of the habits of thought and action which our Soviet adversaries...would most like to see us adopt and which they have tried unsuccessfully over a period of some 35 years to graft upon us through the operations of their communist party.”

Such clarity of thought and courage of conviction did little to endear Kennan to his contemporaries: that he was even available to speak at Notre Dame was the result of Stalin’s having declared him, then the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, *persona non grata* the previous fall and Dulles’s, having found “no niche” for him in the ensuring months, parking him at a desk somewhere in the lower levels of the State Department building. Lukacs returns repeatedly to the theme of Kennan’s great loneliness, noting that “his solitary estrangement from American politics went wider and deeper than the matter of how to deal with the Soviet Union.” However, for Kennan loneliness was not to be an excuse for abandoning what he described as “a loyalty *despite*, but a loyalty *because*, a loyalty of principle, not of identification” to his country. He took to writing, according to Lukacs, not only to “subdue his mental preoccupations by expressing them,” but also “to remind people, to instruct them, in his way to teach them.”

Of course, this vocation to instruct and enlighten was always present—his diaries describe the “Long Telegram” as an “elaborate pedagogical effort”—but whereas up to his 44th year all his writing, with two very brief exceptions that Lukacs has identified, had been for internal governmental consumption, after leaving the Foreign Service, Kennan began to write to and for the American public. Lukacs admiringly summarizes in a rather long paragraph that nonetheless reports the range of Kennan’s concerns through the end of the cold war about as concisely as they can be.

What did he write about? What did he wish to admonish, to remind, to warn against? The Cold War, of course: but...
that is an inadequate summary; about what his country, its government, and its people ought to do or not to do; what and how they ought to see and to think. His themes and subjects were never repetitious, because the world was changing and the Cold War itself was changing, and because of the clarity and the independence of his mind.... He opposed the American war in Vietnam: because he was convinced that there was no need for an American military presence in that portion of Asia; because he saw that what had risen there was not anything like international communism but yet another Asian kind of nationalism; because the Soviet Union was not at all involved in Indochina. And behind that stood a larger and greater issue: Russia and China. Earlier than perhaps anyone else Kennan saw and spoke about the apparent differences and potential conflicts between Russia and China, whether communist or not; and that America’s relations with Russia were more important than America’s relations with China. Now he could witness, especially after 1971, the American preference for China; he was, again, alone in thinking and, on occasion, saying that the opposite of that should have been and should be the American choice. When in the 1970s relations with Russia were somewhat improving and the word “ détente” had become current, he warned that this was not enough; that the Soviet Union had begun to change and crack and creak; that, among other matters, the American insistence that the Soviet Union facilitate emigration of its citizens in accord with some American preferences was entirely wrong. Then came the American support for and shipment of weapons to Afghan tribesmen fighting Russians; the chief foreign policy advisor of a president photographed on the Afghan border sporting a submachine gun; Ronald Reagan and his “Evil Empire,” and so on.

Kennan did not always get it right. For example, from the pioneering work of recent historians like Mark Moyar—as well as the ex post facto exposure of Soviet operations by defectors like Vasili Mitrokhin, senior archivist of the KGB’s foreign intelligence branch—we now know of how invested both the Soviet Union and China were in Vietnam. Lukacs would have done himself some good by acknowledging this and other instances where, being only human, Kennan’s predisposition to restraint met its limits. I would imagine that his friend, like the two other figures who loom large in the pantheon of political realists, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau, who was imbued with a great humility, would have approved.

Nonetheless, by and large, Kennan’s almost instinctive “hermeneutic of suspicion” concerning the transformative power of American foreign policy represented a prudent modesty born out by both his diplomatic experience and his later historical scholarship. As Lukacs points out, it was Kennan who, during another speech he gave during the period when John Foster Dulles left him cooling his heels before terminating him, rediscovered the words of John Quincy Adams: “We are friends of liberty all over the world; but we do not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Over the years, especially in the final decade of his life, Kennan would cite that line over and over. It was not that he was a pacifist, much less an isolationist. Far from being either, he both respected the role of “hard power” in the affairs of men and nations and readily embraced other peoples and cultures (his wife of more than seventy years, Annelise, was Norwegian), believing, as Lukacs observes, “that there is something
unique in the history of every nation, including his own.” The consequence of that broad-minded respect, however, was Kennan’s recognition that each nation has its own concrete interests that it seeks to advance and that in such a world “no people is great enough to establish world hegemony.”

In his ninth decade Kennan finally set down the philosophical principles that guided him through the course of his prodigious life. In the epilogue to the resulting volume, *Around a Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy*, he wrote that “if humanity is to have a hopeful future, there is no escape from the preeminent involvement and responsibility of the single human soul, in all its loneliness and frailty.” Lukacs’s *George Kennan* is a definitive biography—in fact, given the sheer magnitude of the subject’s life and voluminous literary corpus (the author was the recipient of some 200 letters over a 51-year period), Lukacs questions whether such an undertaking is even in the realm of the practical. Be that as it may, this slender volume succeeds brilliantly as an eloquent and useful introduction to as well as a call for a further exploration of the pilgrimage of one such soul: a man who despite the loneliness and frailty that beset him helped to forge the world in which we live and whose penetrating strategic insight would serve us well now that we are deep into an enterprise the pitfalls of which he had cautioned us about more than six decades ago.

—J. Peter Pham  
Member, Board of Advisers,  
National Committee on American Foreign Policy,  
Director, Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs,  
James Madison University

**Ethical Realism: A Vision for America’s Role in the World**

by Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman  
New York: Parthenon Books, 2006, 223 pages, $22.00

The phrase “ethical realism” echoes old philosophic controversies over the relation of “fact” to “value.” Social scientists who swear by the distinction are likely to treat the phrase as oxymoronic. Careful students of ethics are less sure, and in this they have something in common with practicing politicians. Whether for making up a budget or forming an argument for going to war, facts are important; but who can marshall them into a policy without some ordering purposes and principles that serve one or more human interests? Wise political decision makers cannot afford to insulate facts from values.

But from time to time they try to do so. This book is a brilliant critique of what can happen; for example, when an official of the current Bush administration dismisses the objection “It’s unrealistic!” with the reply, “No matter, we create realities.” Political work does change things, but it cannot change everything. If it had no other lesson to offer candidates for office in the 2008 election, this book would qualify as required reading for them. Let them begin with Lieven and Hulsman’s opening definition.

Ethical realism points toward an international strategy based on prudence; a concentration on possible results rather than good intentions; a close study of the nature, views,