

# The United States' (Mis)interpretation of Containment Theory

By Adam C. Starr

In 1945, the defeat of Germany in World War II resulted in a power vacuum in Europe. To fill this void, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), headed by Joseph Stalin, expanded its sphere of influence – the area in which it expressed substantial military, economic, cultural, and/or political influence. The U.S.S.R. also capitalized on disruptions to the *status quo* that resulted from the war to promote its Marxist-Leninist ideology (Gaddis, *The Origins of the Cold War* 298). Throughout the world, people wanted to know who were the Soviets and what were their motives. An erudite man and expert on Russia ultimately answered these pressing questions. That man was George Frost Kennan, an American political adviser and diplomat. In 1946, while stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, he sent his famous “Long Telegram” to the State Department in Washington. This 8,000-word secret cable outlined his views of the U.S.S.R. and proposed his strategy to protect the United States (U.S.) from them. A year and a half later, Kennan, under the pseudonym “X,” published an essay in *Foreign Affairs* entitled, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” based on the still classified telegram. This piece has come to be widely known as the “X” article. In these writings, Kennan did not perceive the U.S.S.R. as a military threat but rather as an “ideological-political threat” (Kennan, “Containment: 40 Years Later”). The “X” article explained that Moscow, to legitimize its own régime, needed to create an external enemy. As a result of the war, Kennan viewed Europe as economically maladjusted and vulnerable to dictatorships, and he feared that the Soviets would exploit this weakness (Kennan Qtd. in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 267). Perceiving Soviet economics as incompatible with those of the U.S., he believed the U.S. must act to prevent the Soviet takeover of Europe. With the acceptance of this goal to prevent Soviet seizure of Europe, the Cold War began. The U.S. plans incorporated 1) many of Kennan’s ideas, such as the Marshall Plan, 2) some alterations of his theory, including the Truman Doctrine, and 3) many actions that ran counter to Kennan’s strategy all together, for instance the wars in Korea and Vietnam. In the end, the discrepancy between his theory and the U.S.’s praxis led Kennan to see containment as a failure.

Kennan explains, in the “Long Telegram” that at the “bottom of [the] Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs is [a] traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity,” and the U.S.S.R. would crumble should a “strong resistance [be] encountered at any point” (Kennan, “Long Telegram”). Kennan proposes that U.S.S.R. can be “contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy” (Kennan, “Sources of Soviet Conduct”). Despite confusion caused by some ambiguity in his writing, Kennan’s view of Soviet containment was based on the use of soft power, or non-military influence, rather than hard power, or the use of military power to

coerce. The definitions herein follow: “Hard power seeks to kill, capture, or defeat an enemy. Soft power seeks to influence through understanding and the identification of common ground” (Copeland). Kennan publicly stated his support of non-military pressure, yet, many U.S. presidents implemented policies centered on the use of hard power.

The only concrete policy proposal included in the “X” article is the section regarding the “application of counterforce,” a term whose meaning can vary and that continues to be misunderstood (Kennan, “Sources of Soviet Conduct”; Thompson, “Ideas Man”). Many people famously took counterforce to indicate military action; however, Kennan’s papers propose a more peaceful approach. A draft of the “X” article from Kennan’s personal documents reads:

[T]he Kremlin ... must be firmly contained at all times by counter-pressure which makes it constantly evident that attempts to break through this containment would be detrimental to Soviet interests. The irritating by-products of an ideology indispensable to the Soviet regime for internal reasons must not be allowed to become the cause of hysterical alarm or of tragic despair among those abroad who are working towards a happier association of the Russian people with the world community of nations. The United States ... must demonstrate by its own self-confidence and patience, but particularly by the integrity and dignity of its example, that the true glory of the Russian national effort can find its expression only in peaceful association with other peoples and not in attempts to subjugate and dominate those peoples. Such an attitude ... could not fail to carry conviction and to find reflection in the development of Russia’s internal political life and, accordingly, in the Soviet concept of Russia’s place in international affairs. (qtd. in Gaddis, “Reconsiderations: Containment”)

In other words, Kennan wanted the U.S. to be patient and outlast the U.S.S.R. He believed that the Communists were territorially overstretched, and that America only needed to wait and continue to interrupt the spread of Soviet influence. He viewed any disruption to the “efficacy of the Party as a political instrument” as capable of changing the U.S.S.R. “overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies” (Thompson, “Ideas Man”; Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”). America just needed to maintain its use of liberal democracy and capitalist economics and disrupt Moscow’s plans for expansion without the use of coercion to bring about the collapse of the U.S.S.R. In an interesting twist, the Soviets also felt that they too could wait out the enemy. The U.S.S.R. believed that capitalism would inevitably destroy itself, and it also perceived that hastily implemented Soviet “‘adventuristic’ revolutionary projects” could retard the proletarian revolution. So the Kremlin was in no rush, either (Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”).

The best example of Kennan’s promotion of soft power was the Marshall Plan. Kennan, as the head of the newly formed Policy Planning Staff, drafted PPS/1: “Policy with Respect to American Aid to Western Europe,” which was the impetus for the Marshall Plan. According to Kennan, the point of the Marshall Plan was “to put [the U.S.] on the offensive instead of the defensive, to convince the European peoples that we mean business, to serve as a catalyst for their hope and confidence, and to

dramatize for [the American] people the nature of Europe's problems and the importance of American assistance" (qtd. in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 267). U.S. policy experts pondered whether to extend aid to Russia and its protectorates. Kennan, again, offered a brilliant solution: America ought to include the Soviets in a way that they either must reject the proposal due to the conditions attached to the aid (thus America looks good in the international sphere, and Stalin takes the blame for dividing Europe) or the Soviets must fundamentally change their economics and ideology (268). The Communists ultimately rejected the plan. The plan was a success: "the psychological impact of the Marshall Plan had restored a substantial degree of self-confidence in Europe, and had provided 'the greatest shock to Soviet foreign policy since the invasion of Russia by the Germans in 1941'" (Gaddis, "Reconsiderations: Containment"). Additionally, Kennan explained that the plan forced the communists in Western Europe "to show their hand" and dealt the "greatest blow to European communism since [the] termination of hostilities" (qtd. in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 269). From the beginning, strategic financial aid showed promise as a way to prevent the spread of communism to Western European nations.

Although Washington implemented the Marshall Plan according to Kennan's specifications, the Truman Doctrine lacked Kennan's approval. This doctrine was Truman's slightly earlier plan to give monetary aid to Greece and Turkey and which was implemented in conjunction with the Marshall Plan. Kennan found in it two main flaws. First, as a defensive act that suggested America would not act without the Soviet threat, it made America look passive and weak. Secondly, he saw that the American public viewed the doctrine as "a blank check to give economic and military aid to any area in the world where the communists show[ed] signs of being successful" (qtd. in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 268). Kennan thought that the U.S. should only offer support if the benefits outweighed the costs and efforts (268). From the beginning, Kennan supported strict criterion to determine a nation's eligibility to receive aid based on the following three conditions: 1) America was capable of solving the problem, 2) inaction would aid the Soviets, and 3) the aid would spillover to other nations and advance American goals (263). Kennan believed that placing troops globally would likely lead to disaster and that America ought not "support free peoples" everywhere as Truman suggested in his speech to Congress in 1947 (Truman). Although neither Kennan nor Truman proposed aid to China, Kennan used the country to illustrate the need for conditions. America could not feed, clothe, and stabilize China, so why waste the efforts (Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 257). Furthermore, Kennan supported aiding Greece because of its instability, but he did not support aiding the more stable Turkish government. The risk of angering the U.S.S.R. by aiding Turkey, situated near the U.S.S.R. border, offset the greatly overdramatized benefits of aiding Turkey (255; 270). In the end, Washington did extend aid to both nations. Although the Truman Doctrine was not in direct opposition to Kennan's ideal strategy, it lacked many of his strategic stipulations for U.S. involvement, which might have prevented quagmires such as Vietnam.

"Every new administration would strut into office" and take Kennan's vision for peaceful containment and turn it militaristic, "with ambitions to reshape the world" (Thompson, "Ideas Man"). Nearly all post-World War II presidential foreign policy doctrines, up to and including Reagan's, were promoted under the auspices of containing communist threat (Menand). This

militarism resulted from misinterpretation of Kennan's writings, which were perceived as primarily calling for the threat of military force (Thompson, "Ideas Man"). The Truman Doctrine offered aid to Turkey and Greece. In 1957, the Eisenhower Doctrine ordered U.S. troops "to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of [Middle Eastern] nations, requesting such aid against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism" (Eisenhower). Kennedy addressed Communism in the Western Hemisphere. Carter, during his 1980 State of the Union address, admonished the Soviets against attempts "to gain control of the Persian Gulf region" and promised that an attempt would "be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (Carter). Reagan, in the 1980's, armed and supported anti-Communist insurgents. Many of these doctrines relied, at least partly, on the threat of military attack, an approach that did not agree with Kennan's theory.

The two most infamous examples of militarism in the name of containment are the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Prior to 1950, America did not see itself as the police force of the world, nor did it desire that burden. It took on the "commitment to contain communism everywhere" just before the Korean War (Gaddis, "Reconsiderations: The Cold War"). For the North Koreans, U.S.'s hardline, militaristic containment triggered conflict (Park 250). Truman claimed that conflict resulted from North Korean threats. The truth is still disputed. Kennan saw the fatal flaws of the U.S. involvement in Korea. First, the "police action" marked a shift from the peaceful Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine towards an aggressive policy. Kennan "meant containment to be a policy of selective [diplomatic and economic] confrontation" not one of military adventurism (Menand). This aggressive form of containment resulted in part when Paul Nitze took over Kennan's office as Director of Policy Planning in 1950. Nitze increased military expenditures drastically: the military budget grew from \$12.8 billion in 1947 to \$46.1 billion in 1952 (Menand). Nitze claimed that he derived the National Council Report 68 (NSC-68), the top secret, 58-page document that provided the actual outline for US containment policy, from Kennan's earlier paper, NSC-20/4. NSC-68 differed from Kennan's theory in three major ways. First, Kennan's strategy confined America to "a few strategic regions," but NSC-68 called for the U.S. to counter communism globally (Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove* 113). Additionally, because a year earlier in 1949 the Soviets developed a nuclear weapon, Kennan suggested that the U.S. "adopt a policy of never using nuclear weapons before the Soviets did" (113). This policy of no first use would lower the risk of nuclear conflict, but Nitze rejected it. Finally and most importantly, the two papers differed on the question of political or military containment. NSC-68 claimed that the U.S. "could afford a massive arms buildup" (113). Kennan's paper did address the need for a larger military and "strong action against the Kremlin," but its primary focus was soft power, for the U.S.S.R still sought "to achieve its aims primarily by political means" (Kennan qtd. in 113). Kennan was outraged by NSC-68 and claimed that he had nothing to do with its development, saying, "I was disgusted about the assumptions concerning Soviet intentions" (Kennan qtd. in 113; McCoy 214-16). The weapons buildup signaled the hardline victory and the start of an arms race. Kennan saw hazard in this weapons race "not because of aggressive intentions on either side but because of the compulsions, the suspicions, the anxieties such a competition engenders, and because of the very serious dangers it carries with it of unintended complications—by error, by computer failure, by misread signals, or by mischief

deliberately perpetrated by third parties” (Kennan, “Containment: 40 Years Later”). Second, Kennan saw the limitations of American influence in Asia. In 1948, he urged the U.S. to “recognize [its] own limitations as a moral and ideological force among the Asiatic peoples” (qtd. in Gaddis, “Reconsiderations: Containment”). He accepted the logic of America attempting to influence Asian affairs, but he warned against the belief that Asia was integral to U.S. security. Washington did not heed Kennan’s warning, ignored Korea’s lack of “geopolitical significance,” and was drawn into years of conflict (Kissinger, *Diplomacy* 475). Thus, Truman applied “to East Asia a containment policy that had originally been applied in Europe” (Herring). This error was continued by later administrations in other Asian nations. For instance, Eisenhower, in his 1952 inaugural address, linked the French conflict in Vietnam to the American effort to stifle Communism in Korea, for “Communists in Korea and Vietnam were regarded as part of the greater war” (Wiest 13-14). When America entered Vietnam, Kennan was even more enraged than he was after the U.S. entry into Korea, foreseeing the unwinnable nature of the conflict. He testified to this in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where he warned against “violent objection to what exists, unaccompanied by any constructive concept of what, ideally ought to exist in its place” (qtd. in Kissinger, “The Age of Kennan”). In other words, he did not want the U.S. to create a problem that it could not solve. Many historians and political scientists now see that using containment theory in Vietnam was wrong. As it happens, the application of that theory caused Americans to misread “the internal dynamics of the conflict there” (Herring). Successive administrations ignored the advice of Kennan, the father of containment, and the result was catastrophe.

Furthermore, China’s fall to communism did not justify Washington’s switch to hardline containment. Kennan knew that “a victory for Mao Zedong would not necessarily be one for the Kremlin,” for Mao was infected with what Kennan called “the Tito virus,” a reference to the Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito’s defiance of the Kremlin, which caused Stalin to lose control of Yugoslavia (Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 351-52). Ambassador Walter Smith, who understood Kennan’s stance, advised the Policy Planning Staff that “the Russians fear Titoism above everything else.... [T]he United States does not fear communism if it is not controlled by Moscow and not committed to aggression” (qtd. in 353). Kennan’s view proved to be correct. In 1972, he remarked that a “great part of the energy of Soviet foreign policy is today devoted to the effort to ‘contain,’ politically, another Socialist state – China” (Kennan, Gati and Ullman 9). Rather, the switch to hardline containment can be explained in a couple of ways. A “realist” would say that the cold war “was about the balance of power, or about spheres of influence: it was not much different from the other great power rivalries of modern history” (Gaddis, *How Relevant Was U.S. Strategy* 3). Whereas a “revisionist” would claim that “the cold war was about the self-serving aggressiveness of an American military-industrial complex that had set out to impose its “hegemony” over the rest of the earth in pursuit of power and profits” (3). However, the truth, most likely, lies somewhere in the middle. American politicians play a unique game in which they seek reelection, and opposing politicians use any means to counter the other party, so politicians cannot take the risk of looking weak to the major enemy of the time. This unfortunate fact became even truer with the rise of McCarthyism. In the U.S., politics occur ultimately at a local level, regardless of how scholars interpret international political actions.

In sum, Kennan promoted a theory of containment primarily focused on containing the Soviets through the strategic use of diplomacy and economics. However, for decades American presidents restyled Kennan's theory of containment to justify military interventions in Asia. This strategy tragically backfired in Vietnam. Kennan forever lamented his fame as "the father of containment" and, at his ninetieth birthday party in 1994, deemed containment "one of the great disappointments of [his] life" (qtd. in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* 249). At this party meant to honor and celebrate his life, Kennan took the opportunity to explain why containment failed, saying that it took too long to get results and the costs were too high. He was particularly upset that the U.S. and its allies demanded Russia's "unconditional surrender" (qtd. in 249). The world has come to know containment as Kennan's brainchild, yet Washington changed it in such a way that he did not recognize his own offspring. No one will know what the world would be like if the U.S. had followed Kennan's path, but perhaps it would be a more peaceful place.

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