

CHAPTER
T W O

George F. Kennan and the Strategy of Containment

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Kennan's abrupt transition from career diplomat to Cold War strategist grew out of more than just an "outrageous encumberment of the telegraphic process."¹ By the time the "long telegram" had won him the reputation of being the government's foremost Soviet expert, there was already in his writing and thinking a depth of strategic vision—a knack for seeing relationships between objectives and capabilities, aspirations and interests, long-term and short-term priorities—rarely found in harried bureaucracies. It was this quality that commended him to Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, a man of similar concerns, as the ideal "deputy for foreign affairs" at the newly established National War College in Washington, the nation's first institution devoted to the study of political-military affairs at the highest level. Kennan's success there in turn attracted the attention of George C. Marshall, who, upon becoming Secretary of State early in 1947, resolved to impart greater coherence to American diplomacy by organizing a "Policy Planning Staff," charged with "formulating and developing . . . long-term programs for the achievement of U.S. foreign policy objectives." In May of that year, Kennan left the war college to become the staff's first director.² His place in Washington was by that time unique: he alone among top officials combined knowledge of and experience in Soviet affairs, exposure to what would be called "national security" studies, and a position of responsibility from which to make recommendations for action.

In the summer of 1947, Kennan inadvertently added fame or notoriety to this list, depending on one's point of view, with the publication in *Foreign Affairs* of "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," the article that intro-

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duced the term "containment" to the world.³ Attributed only to a "Mr. X" to preserve Kennan's anonymity, the essay nonetheless quickly fell victim to the reportorial enterprise of Arthur Krock, who revealed its authorship and thereby imparted to it something of the character of an official policy pronouncement. This revelation in turn provoked the critical zeal of Walter Lippmann, who dissected the piece in a series of articles far exceeding the length of the original.⁴ The result was confusion that has persisted ever since. Because Kennan never intended the "X" article as a comprehensive statement of national strategy in the first place, it reflected only imperfectly his thinking on that subject. Careless drafting moreover produced passages that appeared to contradict positions Kennan had been advocating within the government, so much so that he found himself in places agreeing more with Lippmann's critique than with his own article. And Kennan's official status precluded public clarification of his views, which had to wait until his memoirs were published twenty years later.⁵

As a consequence, there has developed a kind of cottage industry among Cold War scholars, devoted to elucidating "what Kennan really meant to say."⁶ All of this attention suggests Kennan's importance as well as his elusiveness, for although his role was by no means decisive in shaping the Truman administration's approach to the world, his ideas, more than those of anyone else, did provide the intellectual rationale upon which it was based. As Henry Kissinger would later put it, "George Kennan came as close to authoring the diplomatic doctrine of his era as any diplomat in our history."⁷ What follows is an attempt to reconstruct that doctrine, based not simply on the "X" article or Kennan's other rare published pronouncements from the late 1940's, but also on the Policy Planning Staff studies produced under his direction, the off-the-record and at times classified lectures he continued to deliver at the National War College and elsewhere within the government after assuming his State Department responsibilities, and his own surviving notes, memoranda, and recorded extemporaneous comments. Subsequent chapters will examine the extent to which the Truman administration actually implemented that strategy, and to which succeeding administrations modified it in the years to come.

I

Definitions of national interest in international affairs tend toward the bland and unexceptionable: they all seem to boil down, in one form or

another, to the need to create an international environment conducive to the survival and prospering of the nation's domestic institutions. Certainly the definition Kennan wrote down in the summer of 1948 did not depart from this pattern. "The fundamental objectives of our foreign policy," he asserted, "must always be":

1. to protect the security of the nation, by which is meant the continued ability of this country to pursue the development of its internal life without serious interference, or threat of interference, from foreign powers; and
2. to advance the welfare of its people, by promoting a world order in which this nation can make the maximum contribution to the peaceful and orderly development of other nations and derive maximum benefit from their experiences and abilities.

Kennan cautioned that "complete security or perfection of international environment will never be achieved." Any such statement of objectives could be at best "an indication of direction, not of final destination."⁸ Still, this was as close as Kennan came to identifying the nation's irreducible interest in world affairs; few people, one suspects, would have questioned his formulation. The more difficult task was to specify precisely what was required to enhance the security of the nation and the congeniality of the international environment.

Americans traditionally had answered this question, Kennan argued, in two ways. One was what he called the "universalistic" approach, which assumed "that if all countries could be induced to subscribe to certain standard rules of behavior, the ugly realities—the power of aspirations, the national prejudices, the irrational hatreds and jealousies—would be forced to recede behind the protecting curtain of accepted legal restraint, and . . . the problems of our foreign policy could thus be reduced to the familiar terms of parliamentary procedures and majority decision." Universalism assumed the possibility of harmony in international affairs, sought to achieve it through the creation of artificial structures like the League of Nations or the United Nations, and depended for its success on the willingness of nations to subordinate their own security requirements to those of the international community.

The alternative Kennan described as the "particularized" approach. It was "skeptical of any scheme for compressing international affairs into legalist concepts. It holds that the content is more important than the form, and will force its way through any formal structure which is placed upon it. It considers that the thirst for power is still dominant among so many

peoples that it cannot be assuaged or controlled by anything but counterforce." Particularism would not reject the idea of joining with other governments to preserve world order, but to be effective such alliances would have to be based "upon real community of interest and outlook, which is to be found only among limited groups of governments, and not upon the abstract formalism of universal international law or international organization."⁹

Kennan considered universalism an inappropriate framework for American interests because it assumed "that men everywhere are basically like ourselves, that they are animated by substantially the same hopes and inspirations, that they all react in substantially the same way in given circumstances." For him the most notable characteristic of the international environment was its diversity, not its uniformity. To make national security contingent upon the worldwide diffusion of American institutions would be to exceed national capabilities, thereby endangering those institutions. "We are great and strong; but we are not great enough or strong enough to conquer or to change or to hold in subjugation by ourselves all . . . hostile or irresponsible forces. To attempt to do so would mean to call upon our own people for sacrifices which would in themselves completely alter our way of life and our political institutions, and would lose the real objectives of our policy in trying to defend them."¹⁰

Universalism would also involve committing the United States to a goal Kennan thought neither possible nor desirable: the elimination of armed conflict from international life. It could only be done, he thought, by freezing the status quo—"people don't depart from the status quo peacefully when it is in their interest to maintain it"—that in turn meant ensnaring the nation "in such bewildering and confining commitments as to prevent us from employing our influence in world affairs in ways which would be beneficial to world security and world stability." The fact was that war might not always be evil; peace might not always be good: "There is 'peace' behind the walls of a prison, if you like that. There is 'peace' in present-day Czechoslovakia."

Unpleasant as this may be, we may have to face up to the fact that there may be instances where violence somewhere in the world on a limited scale is more desirable than the alternatives, because those alternatives would be global wars in which we ourselves would be involved, in which no one would win, and in which all civilization would be dragged down. I think we have to face the fact [that] there may be arrangements of peace less acceptable to the security of this country than isolated recurrences of violence.

“Perhaps the whole idea of world peace has been a premature, unworkable, grandiose form of day-dreaming,” Kennan argued in June 1947, “and that we should have held up as our goal: ‘Peace if possible, and insofar as it effects our interest.’”¹¹

Finally, universalism risked bogging the country down “in the meshes of a sterile and cumbersome international parliamentarianism” that might inhibit action necessary in defense of the national interest. Kennan attached little significance to the United Nations; it was an illusion, he insisted, to assume that positions taken there had much actual influence on world affairs. Rather, they resembled “a contest of *tableaux morts*: there is a long period of preparation in relative obscurity; then the curtain is lifted; the lights go on for a brief moment; the posture of the group is recorded for posterity by the photography of voting; and whoever appears in the most graceful and impressive position has won.” If somehow this “parliamentary shadow-boxing” could be given practical recognition, “this would indeed be a refined and superior manner of settling international differences.” But since that was not likely, the only effect was to distract the American people from the real issues, and to render the international organization itself, in the long run, ridiculous.¹²

It followed, then, that the national interest would best be served not by trying to restructure the international order—the “universalistic” solution—but through the “particularist” approach of trying to maintain equilibrium within it, so that no one country, or group of countries, could dominate it. “Our safety depends,” Kennan told a National War College audience in December 1948,

on our ability to establish a balance among the hostile or undependable forces of the world: To put them where necessary one against the other; to see that they spend in conflict with each other, if they must spend it at all, the intolerance and violence and fanaticism which might otherwise be directed against us, that they are thus compelled to cancel each other out and exhaust themselves in internecine conflict in order that the constructive forces, working for world stability, may continue to have the possibility of life.¹³

Harmony might be unlikely—hardly a surprising conclusion given Kennan’s pessimistic view of human nature—but security could be attained nonetheless through a careful balancing of power, interests, and antagonisms.

Several corollaries proceeded logically from this argument. One was that not all parts of the world were equally vital to American security. “We

should select first," Kennan wrote in August 1948, "those areas of the world which . . . we cannot permit . . . to fall into hands hostile to us, and . . . we [should] put forward, as the first specific objective of our policy and as an irreducible minimum of national security, the maintenance of political regimes in those areas at least favorable to the continued power and independence of our nation." Kennan's list of such areas included:

- A. The nations and territories of the Atlantic community, which include Canada, Greenland and Iceland, Scandinavia, the British Isles, western Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, Morocco and the west coast of Africa down to the bulge, and the countries of South America from the bulge north;
- B. The countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East as far east as, and including, Iran; and
- C. Japan and the Philippines.

The creation in these regions of "political attitudes favorable to our concepts of international life . . . will tax the full power and ingenuity of our diplomacy for some time to come. To create such conditions and attitudes in the world as a whole is clearly beyond our power at this time, and for many decades to come."¹⁴

Kennan further refined this concept the following month. In what he acknowledged was an oversimplification—"what I am trying to get at is the heart of the problem here, and I will concede to you that you can argue about the details of it"—Kennan told students at the National War College that there were "only five centers of industrial and military power in the world which are important to us from the standpoint of national security." These were the United States, Great Britain, Germany and central Europe, the Soviet Union, and Japan. Only in these locations "would [you] get the requisite conditions of climate, of industrial strength, of population and of tradition which would enable people there to develop and launch the type of amphibious power which would have to be launched if our national security were seriously affected." Only one of these power centers was in hostile hands; the primary interest of the United States in world affairs, therefore, was to see to it that no others fell under such control."¹⁵

This concept of five vital power centers was not intended to represent the only interests the United States had in the world. As his earlier list had indicated, Kennan recognized the need for a secure sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere, as well as access to centers of industrial power, sources of raw materials, and defensive strongpoints elsewhere in the world. What he was saying was that of the varieties of power that existed

on the international scene, industrial-military power was the most dangerous, and hence primary emphasis should be placed on keeping it under control.

Kennan was also making the point that because capabilities were limited, priorities of interest had to be established. He elaborated on this in an unusual public address late in 1949:

The problems of this world are deeper, more involved, and more stubborn than many of us realize. The limitations on [what] this nation, or any other single nation, can accomplish with that margin of its energies and material production which it can afford to devote to outside affairs are greater than we are often inclined to remember. It is imperative, therefore, that we economize with our limited resources and that we apply them where we feel that they will do the most good.

What was required was the identification of "certain categories of needs to which we will be able to respond less promptly and less fully than to others." Such a procedure should not be taken as suggesting either inconsistency or the absence of policy; rather, it was simply a recognition of the fact that "no global policy which has reality in deeds as well as in words can fail to be primarily a policy of priorities—a policy of wise economy in the use of our own strength."¹⁶

A second corollary of Kennan's argument was that the internal organization of states was not, in and of itself, a proper matter of concern for American foreign policy. "It is a traditional principle of this Government," he wrote in late 1948, "to refrain from interference in the internal affairs of other countries. . . . Whoever proposes or urges such intervention should properly bear the burden of proof (A) that there is sufficiently powerful national interest to justify our departure . . . from a rule of international conduct which has been proven sound by centuries of experience, . . . and (B) that we have the means to conduct such intervention successfully and can afford the cost in terms of the national effort it involves."¹⁷ The United States could coexist with, even benefit from, diversity; what was dangerous was the combination of hostility with the ability to do something about it.

Principles like non-intervention were of course not infallible guides to action in all situations, but they did reflect certain internal priorities distinctive to the American system of government and could not be disregarded without in some way diminishing those priorities. "I think there is a close connection between foreign policy and internal policy," Kennan

observed, "and a change in one cannot take place without a change in the other. I have a feeling if we ever get to the point . . . where we cease having ideals in the field of foreign policy, something very valuable will have gone out of our internal political life." In times of uncertainty the best the nation could do was "to see that the initial lines of its policy are as close as possible to the principles dictated by its traditions and its nature, and that where it is necessary to depart from these lines, people are aware that this is a departure and understand why it is necessary."¹⁸

A third and related corollary was that there need be no conflict between the demands of security and those of principle, provided the first were understood as necessarily preceding the second. "Our country has made the greatest effort in modern times . . . to treat questions of international life from the standpoint of principles and not of power," Kennan told students at the Naval Academy in May 1947, "but even we in the end are compelled to consider the security of our people, . . . because . . . unless they can enjoy that security they will never be able to make any useful contribution to a better and more peaceful world."¹⁹ No set of ideals could survive anarchy, or even chronic insecurity; certain minimal standards of stability had to be established before principles could be put into effect.* This reasoning led Kennan back to the concept of the balance of power as the most appropriate way of reconciling national aspirations with the national interest.

Kennan's was, then, a conception of interests based on a pessimistic view of the international order, but on a degree of measured optimism as to the possibilities for restraining rivalries within it. This could be done, not by relying on artificial sanctions and constraints, but by making use of the equilibrium maintained by the very tensions inherent in the system. It was a view conscious of the fact that because capabilities are finite, interests must be also; distinctions had to be made between what was vital and what was not. It was also sensitive to the need to subordinate means to ends; to the danger that lack of discrimination in methods employed could corrupt objectives sought. Finally, it insisted on using this perception of interests as a standard against which to evaluate threats, not the other way around: threats had no meaning, Kennan insisted, except with reference to and in terms of one's concepts of interests.

* Kennan's views on this point paralleled those of Reinhold Niebuhr. See, for a sampling, Rex Harry Davis and Robert Crocker Good, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics* (New York: 1960), especially pp. 65, 107, 182, 245, and 280–81.

II

The only nation that met Kennan's test of combining hostility with capability was, of course, the Soviet Union. Despite his reservations about the possibility of postwar cooperation, Kennan had had no quarrel with the wartime strategy of reliance on the Russians to help defeat Nazi Germany: there had been no basis for coexistence with Hitler.* "We had to use [the Soviet Union] although we should have known that it was devoted and consecrated to our destruction." But the effect of victory had been to place the Red Army in a dominant position throughout Eastern Europe and parts of East Asia, bringing it within striking distance of the devastated but still revivable industrial centers of Germany and Japan. This circumstance, together with the presence throughout much of the rest of the world of communist parties subservient to Moscow's will, seemed to place the Russians in a position to obtain what the war had been fought to prevent: control of two or more world power centers by forces hostile to the United States and its democratic allies.²⁰

Moscow's antipathy for the West, Kennan argued, grew out of both historical and ideological circumstances. Russian history afforded ample evidence to sustain the impression of a hostile outside world; it also provided precedents for the concept of the state "as an ideological entity destined eventually to spread to the utmost limits of the earth." Marxism-Leninism reinforced those tendencies, as did the conspiratorial habits Soviet leaders had picked up during years in the underground and the predictably unsympathetic responses their post-1917 policies had provoked in the West. There was, thus, "a highly intimate and subtle connection between traditional Russian habits of thought and the ideology which has now become official for the Soviet regime."²¹

Kennan regarded that ideology as fulfilling several functions. It served to legitimize an illegitimate government: if one could not rule by the will of God, as had the Russian tsars, then ruling by an appropriately tailored

* Kennan acknowledged that "there was a great deal in Hitler's so-called new order which would have made sense if the guiding spirit behind it had not been Hitler. But we had to recognize that this was a force which was trying to seize Western Europe, although it emerged from inside Western Europe. It was a force with which we could never have lived at peace, a force which if successful could have come to dominate the eastern power center, too. To have mobilized those two forces together in this way would have been just about as dangerous to us, perhaps not quite, as though it had been the other way around and the Russians had come into possession of the West." (National War College lecture, September 17, 1948, Kennan Papers, Box 17.)

historical imperative was the next best thing. It excused the repression without which unimaginative Soviet leaders did not know how to act: as long as the rest of the world was capitalist, harsh measures could be justified to protect the leading communist state. It associated the U.S.S.R. with the aspirations and frustrations of discontented elements in other countries, thereby creating in the international communist movement an instrument with which to project influence beyond Soviet borders.²²

But Kennan did not see the ideological writings of Marx and Lenin as a reliable guide with which to anticipate Soviet behavior. "Ideology," he wrote in January 1947, "is a product and not a determinant of social and political reality. . . . [I]ts bearing is on coloration of background, on form of expression, and on method of execution, rather than on basic aim." Furthermore, Marxism-Leninism was so amorphous an ideology that, like many others, it required intermediaries—in this case the Soviet government—to apply it to the real world. This circumstance placed Stalin in a position to say what communism was at any given moment. "The leadership is at liberty," Kennan wrote in a little-noticed portion of the "X" article, "to put forward for tactical purposes any particular thesis it finds useful . . . and to require the faithful and unquestioning acceptance of that thesis by the members of the movement as a whole. This means that truth is not a constant but is actually created, for all intents and purposes, by the Soviet leaders themselves. . . . It is nothing absolute and immutable."²³

Ideology, then, was not so much a guide to action as a justification for action already decided upon. Stalin might not feel secure until he had come to dominate the entire world, but this would be because of his own unfathomable sense of insecurity, not any principled commitment to the goal of an international classless society. It followed, therefore, that the objective of containment should be to limit Soviet expansionism, and that communism posed a threat only to the extent that it was the instrument of that expansion.

Kennan did not expect the Soviet Union to risk war to gain its desired ends. Neither the Russian economy nor the Russian people were in any condition to stand another conflict so soon after the last. Nor could Kremlin leaders feel confident of their ability to sustain offensive military operations beyond their borders—experiences with Finland in 1939–40 and Japan in 1904–05 could hardly have been encouraging in this respect. Stalin was no Hitler; he had no fixed timetable for aggression and would prefer, if possible, to make gains by political rather than military means. Miscalculation, of course, remained a danger: "War must

therefore be regarded, if not as a probability, at least as a possibility, and one serious enough to be taken account of fully in our military and political planning." But "we do not think the Russians, since the termination of the war, have had any serious intentions of resorting to arms."²⁴

More serious was the possibility of conquest by psychological means: the danger that the people of Western Europe and Japan, two of the five vital centers of industrial power, might become so demoralized by the combined dislocations of war and reconstruction as to make themselves vulnerable, through sheer lack of self-confidence, to communist-led coups, or even to communist victories in free elections. Since both European and Japanese communists were, at that time, reliable instruments of the Kremlin, such developments would have meant in effect the extension of Moscow's control over Europe and much of East Asia as well. It was against this contingency that the strategy of containment was primarily aimed—not Soviet military attack, not international communism, but rather the psychological malaise in countries bordering on Moscow's sphere of influence that made them, and hence the overall balance of power, vulnerable to Soviet expansive tendencies. As Kennan reminded students at the National War College in June 1947: "it is the shadows rather than the substance of things that move the hearts, and sway the deeds, of statesmen."²⁵

Ultimately, Kennan believed, these shadows, if not dispelled, would demoralize American society as well. Democracy at home might not require the existence of a completely democratic world, but neither could it survive in one that was completely totalitarian: the United States did have a vital interest in the continued independence of at least some nations resembling it. "The fact of the matter is," Kennan argued, "that there is a little bit of the totalitarian buried somewhere, way down deep, in each and every one of us." The Soviet threat lay not in the area of military potential, but rather "in the terrible truths which the Russians have discovered about the vulnerability of liberal democratic society to organizational and propaganda techniques totally cynical in concept and based on the exploitation of the evil, rather than the good, in human nature." The progressive subjugation of nations lying between the United States and the center of world communism could, if unresisted, reduce Americans "to a position of helplessness and loneliness and ignominy among the nations of mankind."²⁶

But the challenge was not without its compensations, and at times Kennan even appeared to welcome it. "To avoid destruction," he noted in the

“X” article, “the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation. Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than this.” Two-and-a-half years later, he told students at the National War College that the real problem of Western democracy was “the crisis produced by the growing disproportion between man’s moral nature and the forces subject to [his] control.”

For us in this country the problem boils down to one of obtaining a social mastery over the runaway horse of technology; of confining and bending to our will these forces . . . ; of creating here at home a stable balance between consumption and resources, between men and nature; in producing here institutions which would demonstrate that a free society can govern without tyrannizing and that man can inhabit a good portion of the earth without devastating it . . . ; and then, armed with this knowledge, . . . going forth to see what we can do in order that stability may be given to all of the non-communist world.

Communism was not the disease; it was only a complication. “We will not cure the disease by treating the complication alone.” Nor, Kennan added, “should [we] get too violently indignant over the fact that such a complication exists. As one of my associates recently said: ‘If it had never existed, we would have had to invent it, to create the sense of urgency we need to bring us to the point of decisive action.’”²⁷

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Because Kennan saw the Soviet challenge as largely psychological in nature, his recommendations for dealing with it tended to take on a psychological character as well: the goal was to produce in the minds of potential adversaries, as well as potential allies and the American people, attitudes that would facilitate the emergence of an international order more favorable to the interests of the United States. By the end of 1948, Kennan had come to regard three steps as necessary to accomplish this objective: (1) restoration of the balance of power through the encouragement of self-confidence in nations threatened by Soviet expansionism; (2) reduction, by exploiting tension between Moscow and the international communist movement, of the Soviet Union’s ability to project influence beyond its borders; and (3) modification, over time, of the Soviet concept of international

relations, with a view to bringing about a negotiated settlement of outstanding differences.^{28*}

“All in all,” Kennan wrote late in 1947, “our policy must be directed toward restoring a balance of power in Europe and Asia.” The best means of accomplishing this “would . . . seem to be the strengthening of the natural forces of resistance within the respective countries which the communists are attacking and that has been, in essence, the basis of our policy.” What had sapped resistance in areas vulnerable to Soviet expansion was not so much the threat of a new war as the persisting effects of the last: “the profound exhaustion of physical plant and of spiritual vigor.” What was needed was action dramatic enough to make an immediate psychological impression, and yet substantial enough to begin to deal with the underlying problems involved. It was to economic aid that Kennan primarily looked to produce this effect.²⁹

The public announcement of a long-term program of American economic assistance would in itself do much to restore self-confidence in Western Europe, Kennan believed, so long as it treated that region as a whole, and allowed recipients considerable responsibility for planning and implementation. This emphasis on European initiative had several motivations behind it. It was consistent with the principle of minimizing interference in the internal affairs of other countries. It also took into account American capabilities—given Washington’s limited experience at that time with administering large foreign aid programs, it is questionable whether the United States could have done anything other than leave implementation largely up to the Europeans.³⁰ But, most important, it would provide a test of the extent to which “natural forces of resistance” still existed in Europe. “With the best of will, the American people cannot really help those who are not willing to help themselves. And if the requested initiative and readiness to bear public responsibility are not forthcoming from the European governments, then that will mean that *rigor mortis* has already set in on the body public of Europe as we have known it and that it may be already too late for us to change decisively the course of events.”^{31†}

* Kennan did not always list these steps in the same order, and at one point he listed as the third step “to see that the power of Europe, as Europe revives, does not again fall into the hands of people like the German Nazis, who did not know how to use it, who would do stupid things with it, and who would turn it against ourselves and who would eventually probably destroy it.” (Naval War College lecture, October 11, 1948, Kennan Papers, Box 17.)

† Kennan later pointed out that European initiative did not mean abdication of overall American control: “It doesn’t work if you just send the stuff over and relax. It has to be played polit-

Kennan's insistence on treating Western Europe as a unit* reflected the obvious point that together the states of that region could better withstand Soviet pressure than if they acted separately, but it was also an indirect means of integrating Germany into European society. If aid could be directed to Western Europe as a whole, Kennan reasoned, then the British, French, and American zones of occupation in Germany could be included. It was crucial to keep German industry, located primarily within these zones, out of the hands of the Russians. Full-scale occupation could not continue indefinitely, both because of its expense and because of the hostility the long-term presence of foreign troops would generate. Rearming the Germans themselves would only alarm their former victims, both to the west and the east. If the German economy could be interwoven with that of Western Europe, though, this might lead the Germans "out of their collective egocentrism and [encourage them] to see things in larger terms, to have interests elsewhere in Europe and elsewhere in the world, and to learn to think of themselves as world citizens and not just Germans." Such a policy would require eliminating the more punitive aspects of the occupation; it would also necessitate careful coordination with Germany's West European neighbors. "Yet without the Germans, no real European federation is thinkable. And without federation, the other countries of Europe can have no protection against a new attempt at foreign domination."³²

In Japan as well, American occupation authorities had initially emphasized the punishment of former adversaries. Kennan favored instead, as in Germany, organizing centers of resistance to potential new ones. Hence, he recommended shifting the goal of Japanese occupation policy from control to rehabilitation, and delaying the signing of a peace treaty that would end the occupation until the basis for a stable, self-confident society had been established. This willingness to transform erstwhile enemies into allies reflected Kennan's concern with global equilibrium: "Any world balance of power means first and foremost a balance on the Eurasian land mass. That balance is unthinkable as long as Germany and Japan remain power vacuums." What had to be done was "to bring back the strength and the will of those peoples to a point where they could play their part in the

ically, when it gets over. It has to be dangled, sometimes withdrawn, sometimes extended. It has to be a skillful operation." (NWC lecture, December 18, 1947, Kennan Papers, Box 17.)

* Kennan's original proposal called for extending aid to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as well, but this was a tactic for straining the relationship between Moscow and its satellites, not a serious plan to undertake the rehabilitation of those areas. See below, p. 65.

Eurasian balance of power, and yet to a point not so far advanced as to permit them again to threaten the interests of the maritime world of the West.”³³

Kennan fully acknowledged the importance of military forces in maintaining this balance: “You have no idea,” he told students at the National War College in 1946, “how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little quiet armed force in the background.” The mere existence of such forces, he wrote two years later, “is probably the most important single instrumentality in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.” A Policy Planning Staff study done under Kennan’s direction in the summer of 1948 concluded that armed strength was essential as a means of making political positions credible, as a deterrent to attack, as a source of encouragement to allies, and, as a last resort, as a means of waging war successfully should war come.³⁴ And Kennan himself advocated maintaining and at several points considered the possibility of using small, highly trained mobile forces, capable of acting swiftly in local situations to restore the balance of power.*

But military forces had their distinct limitations as well, especially for a democracy: “It cannot use them as an offensive threat. It cannot manipulate them tactically, on any extensive scale, for the accomplishment of measures short of war. They therefore constitute, for the most part, a fixed, rather than a mobile, factor in the conduct of foreign policy.” Moreover, recent history had demonstrated that military victories brought with them as many problems as they solved:

We may defeat an enemy, but life goes on. The demands and aspirations of people, the compulsions that worked on them before they were defeated, begin to operate again after the defeat, unless you can do something to remove them. No victory can really be complete unless you eradicate the people against you were fighting or change basically the whole compulsions under which they live. For that reason I am suspicious of military force as a means of countering the political offensive which we face with the Russians today.

* Kennan is on record as having at least considered the possibility of U.S. military intervention in Greece in 1947, in Italy in 1948, and on Taiwan (for the purpose of ejecting the Chinese Nationalists) in 1949. (See *FRUS: 1947*, V, 468–69; *FRUS: 1948*, III, 848–49; and *FRUS: 1949*, IX, 356–59.) None of these instances reflected positions consistently advocated, however, and their importance has at times been exaggerated. (See, for example, C. Ben Wright, “Mr. ‘X’ and Containment,” *Slavic Review*, XXXV [March 1976], 29; Eduard Mark, “The Question of Containment: A Reply to John Lewis Gaddis,” *Foreign Affairs*, LVI [January 1978], 435.) It should also be noted that Kennan, like most Washington officials, supported the use of United States troops in 1950 to defend South Korea.

“Remember,” Kennan told a National War College audience in October 1947, in a point he would emphasize repeatedly during the next several years, “that . . . as things stand today, it is not Russian military power which is threatening us, it is Russian political power. . . . If it is not entirely a military threat, I doubt that it can be effectively met entirely by military means.”³⁵

Implicit in this warning about excessive reliance on the military was the assumption that weapons and troop levels were not the only determinants of power on the international scene—politics, psychology, and economics also played a role. And it was in this last area that the United States possessed a particular advantage: through loans and outright grants of aid it alone was in a position to affect the rate at which other countries reconstructed or modernized their economies. It should not be surprising, then, that Kennan seized on this instrument as the primary (but not the only) means of restoring the world balance of power; significantly, his plans for aid to Europe envisaged no formal military commitment to the defense of that region.³⁶ Rather, his idea was one reminiscent of an earlier period when the European balance of power had been threatened—the “arsenal of democracy” concept of 1939–41, with its assumption that the most effective contribution the United States could make toward stabilization of the international order lay in the area of technology, not military manpower.³⁷

This program of attempting to strengthen “natural forces of resistance” was not to be applied indiscriminately. By the end of 1947, Kennan had worked out three specific criteria to govern the dispensing of American aid: (1) “Whether there are any local forces of resistance worth strengthening.” Where strong traditions of representative government existed, there was no problem, but where the choice was between a communist regime and some other variety of totalitarianism no less repressive, “we have to be careful not to lend moral prestige to unworthy elements by extending American aid.” (2) “The importance of the challenged areas to our own security.” What would a communist takeover of the country in question mean for the safety of the United States? Could that country’s resources be combined with those of the Soviet Union to produce significant military power? (3) “The probable costs of our action and their relation to the results to be achieved.” There had to be a kind of “business accounting procedure in political terms” to see whether the expenses likely to be incurred outweighed the expected benefits. “Our opposition to communist expansion is not an absolute factor,” Kennan stressed. “It . . . must be

taken in relation to American security and American objectives. We are not necessarily always against the expansion of communism, and certainly not always against it to the same degree in every area. It all depends on the circumstances.”^{38*}

As vital but vulnerable industrial centers, Western Europe and Japan, of course, had first priority: the idea, Kennan wrote in 1949, was “that we can continue to make it . . . overly risky for Russians to attack as long as they have only their own power base.” But the defense of these areas also required safeguarding selected non-industrial regions around them. Hence, Kennan strongly supported the Truman administration’s request for aid to Greece and Turkey early in 1947; he was also an early advocate of what came to be known as the “defensive perimeter” concept in East Asia—the idea that U.S. interests in the Western Pacific could best be secured through the defense of such island strongholds as Okinawa and the Philippines, while avoiding mainland commitments. But Kennan objected vigorously to the notion that the United States had to resist communism wherever it appeared. Such an approach would cause “everybody in the world [to start] coming to you with his palm out and saying, ‘We have some communists—now come across.’ . . . That obviously won’t work.” China specifically was an area the United States should avoid: “If I thought for a moment that the precedent of Greece and Turkey obliged us to try to do the same thing in China, I would throw up my hands and say we had better have a whole new approach to the affairs of the world.”³⁹

The ultimate goal was not a division of the world into Soviet and American spheres of influence, but rather the emergence over the long term of independent centers of power in Europe and Asia. “Our objective,” Kennan told students at the National War College, “is . . . to make it possible for all the European countries to lead again an independent national existence without fear of being crushed by their neighbor to the east.” The emphasis in Japanese occupation policy, he stressed, “should lie in the achievement of maximum stability of Japanese society, in order that Japan

* Kennan put forward a similar but less elaborate set of criteria in discussing aid to Greece before a National War College audience on March 28, 1947: “(A) The problem at hand is one within our economic, technical, and financial capabilities; (B) If we did not take such action, the resulting situation might redound very decidedly to the advantage of our political adversaries; (C) If, on the other hand, we do take the action in question, there is good reason to hope that the favorable consequences will carry far beyond the limits of Greece itself.” (Quoted in *Memoirs: 1925–1950*, p. 320.)

may best be able to stand on her own feet when the protecting hand is withdrawn." These arguments had in common the assumption that Russians and Americans could not indefinitely confront one another across World War II truce lines; at some point a mutual withdrawal from these artificial positions would have to occur. To replace them, Kennan hoped for a world order based not on superpower hegemony, but on the natural balance only diverse concentrations of authority, operating independently of one another, could provide.⁴⁰

The second stage in Kennan's strategy, once the balance of power had been restored, was to seek to reduce the Soviet Union's ability in the future to project influence beyond its borders. That influence had been extended in two ways: (1) through the installation, primarily in Eastern Europe, of communist governments subservient to Moscow; and (2) through the use, elsewhere in the world, of communist parties which at that time were still reliable instruments of Soviet foreign policy. The United States should try to counter these initiatives, Kennan argued, by encouraging and where possible exploiting tension between the Kremlin leadership and the international communist movement.⁴¹

This strategy would work, he thought, because of the Russians' chronic inability to tolerate diversity. As a Policy Planning Staff study done in the summer of 1948 noted: "[T]he history of the Communist International is replete with . . . instances of the difficulty non-Russian individuals and groups have encountered in trying to be the followers of Moscow doctrines. The Kremlin leaders are so inconsiderate, so relentless, so overbearing and so cynical in the discipline they impose on their followers that few can stand their authority for very long." It was this tendency of the Kremlin "to leave in its train a steady backwash of disillusioned former followers" that created opportunities for the United States and its allies.⁴²

The temptations of disaffection would intensify, the Policy Planning Staff suggested, as communist parties outside the Soviet Union assumed the responsibilities of government: "the actions of people in power are often controlled far more by the circumstances in which they are obliged to exercise that power than by the ideas and principles which animated them when they were in opposition." As long as they were only revolutionaries seeking power, communists outside the Soviet Union had little choice but to look to Moscow for leadership and support, whatever the frustrations involved. "But now that they have the appearance and considerable of the substance of power, subtle new forces come into play. Power, even

the taste of it, is as likely to corrupt communist as bourgeois leaders. Considerations of national as well as personal interest materialize and come into conflict with the colonial policy pursued by the Soviet interests.”^{43*}

The most obvious place for this to happen, of course, was Eastern Europe, the only area outside the U.S.S.R. (and Mongolia) where communists actually controlled governments, even if by virtue of Soviet military power. The problem of maintaining authority there, Kennan thought, would become an increasingly difficult one for Moscow: “It is unlikely that approximately one hundred million Russians will succeed in holding down permanently, in addition to their own minorities, some ninety millions of Europeans with a higher cultural level and with long experience in resistance to foreign rule.” Kennan predicted accurately late in 1947 that the Russians would not long tolerate the existence of an independent Czechoslovakia. When the Yugoslav schism appeared in the summer of 1948, he welcomed it as confirming his analysis, and as a precedent for what might happen elsewhere.⁴⁴

“I can’t say to you today whether Titoism is going to spread in Europe,” Kennan told an audience at the Naval War College in October 1948, “[but] I am almost certain that it is going to spread in Asia.” Kennan had been predicting for the past year and a half that the Soviet Union would not be able to control communism in China, should it come to power: “The men in the Kremlin,” he had observed in February 1947, “would suddenly discover that this fluid and subtle oriental movement which they thought they held in the palm of their hand had quietly oozed away between their fingers and that there was nothing left there but a ceremonious Chinese bow and a polite and inscrutable Chinese giggle.” Kennan even suggested at one point that a communist-dominated China might pose more of a threat to the security of the Soviet Union and to Moscow’s control over the international communist movement than it would to the United States, since such a China would lack for many years an industrial base capable of producing the instruments of amphibious and air warfare.⁴⁵

Kennan also expected splits to develop between the Kremlin and local communists in Western Europe and the Mediterranean countries. “Here

* Kennan had noted in a paper produced in May 1945 that “He who holds that national salvation can come only through bondage to a greater nation may be, in some cases, a far seeing man. It is not easy for him to be a popular figure.” (“Russia’s International Position at the Close of the War with Germany,” May 1945, printed in Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950*, p. 536.)

we have the weakest and most vulnerable points in the Kremlin armor," he noted in May 1947. "These Communist Parties do not yet have behind them the bayonets of the Soviet secret police power. . . . Their fate may still be influenced by the electorates of those countries or by the governments there in power, or by the actions of other free governments such as our own." If conditions that made the communist appeal popular in the European democracies could be successfully dealt with by other means, then these parties would never come to power. And even if they did, this would be no calamity for the United States so long as the government in question remained independent of Soviet police or military power:

A communist regime in power in some such country which either failed to meet its responsibilities and discredited itself in the eyes of the people or which turned on its masters, repudiated the Kremlin's authority, and bit the hand which had reared it, might be more favorable to the interests of this country and of world peace in the long run than an unscrupulous opposition party spewing slander from the safe vantage point of irresponsibility and undermining the prestige of this country in the eyes of the world.⁴⁶

The United States had the power to accelerate fissiparous tendencies within the international communist movement, Kennan thought, but only by indirect methods. Blanket condemnations of communism everywhere would not work because they focused attention only on the symptoms, not the disease itself. Nor could much be expected from issuing ultimatums to Moscow, since the Russians did not control all communists and might not be able to call them off, in certain parts of the world, even if they wanted to. Direct military intervention to prevent communist takeovers would only propel the United States into a series of civil wars from which it would be difficult to extricate itself. And if the intervention was directed against a communist government that had come into power through democratic processes—a very real possibility in Western Europe in 1947 and 1948, Kennan believed—this "would constitute a precedent which, in my opinion, might have a demoralizing influence on our whole foreign policy and corrupt that basic decency of purpose which, despite all our blunders and our shortsightedness, still makes us a great figure among the nations of the world."⁴⁷

One thing the United States could do, though, was to make the economic rehabilitation of Western Europe succeed. This would have the advantage, not only of restoring the balance of power, but of removing or at least mitigating the conditions that had made indigenous communism popular there in the first place. Moreover, the example would severely

strain Moscow's control over Eastern Europe, since the Soviet Union was so much less equipped than the United States to emulate it. "It has been our conviction," Kennan commented late in 1948, "that if economic recovery could be brought about and public confidence restored in western Europe—if western Europe, in other words, could be made the home of a vigorous, prosperous and forward-looking civilization—the communist regime in eastern Europe . . . would never be able to stand the comparison, and the spectacle of a happier and more successful life just across the fence . . . would be bound in the end to have a disintegrating and eroding effect on the communist world."⁴⁸

The retention of American military forces in key areas could also be used to promote tension between European communists and the Kremlin. Kennan believed that Moscow had given its followers permission to try to seize power in their respective countries, but only if the result was not to bring an American military presence closer to that of the Red Army. Should the price of a communist victory in Italy or Greece be an increase in American air or naval strength in the Mediterranean, then the Russians would not be prepared to pay it. American forces could best be employed, therefore, not by trying to oppose indigenous communists within their own countries, something Kennan considered a "risky and profitless undertaking, apt to do more harm than good," but by showing that "the continuation of communist activities has a tendency to attract U.S. armed power to the vicinity of the affected areas, and that if these areas are ones from which the Kremlin would definitely wish U.S. power excluded," then Moscow would have to "exert a restraining influence on local communist forces." The effect would be to produce a conflict "between the interests of the Third Internationale, on the one hand, and those of the sheer military security of the Soviet Union, on the other. In conflicts of this sort, the interests of narrow Soviet nationalism usually win."⁴⁹

The United States could also work to encourage Titoism within the communist bloc. It was important to do this discreetly, though, because one of the few things Kennan thought the Russians might risk war for would be to maintain their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. "They are not so dumb," he commented in September 1948; "they realize what is going to happen to them once that process sets in." Hence, the United States should not openly call for the overthrow of Soviet-controlled governments in that part of the world. As a 1949 Policy Planning Staff study put it: "Proposed operations directed at the satellites must . . . be measured against the kind and degree of retaliation which they are likely to provoke

from the Kremlin. They must not exceed in provocative effect what is calculated suitable in the given situation." The United States should not, of course, forget that its ultimate aim in Eastern Europe was the establishment of governments free from all forms of totalitarianism. But since such regimes were a distant prospect at best, given the absence of democratic traditions in the region, "strong tactical considerations . . . argue against setting up this goal as an immediate objective." Rather, the objective should be "to foster a heretical drifting-away process on the part of the satellite states" without assuming responsibility for it. And for the moment that meant being willing to tolerate, and even cooperate with, East European communist governments independent of the Soviet Union for the purpose of containing the Soviet Union.⁵⁰

Interestingly, Kennan saw no comparable possibilities of working with a Chinese Communist government, should one come to power: "We have . . . no reason to believe that the Chinese communist leaders would be inclined to pay serious heed to the views of the United States people, whose motives and aspirations they have been maliciously maligning and distorting for years." The best policy for the United States in China would be one of "hands-off" rather than "the kind of meddling in which we have indulged to date." Fortunately, though, the Russians could expect as much or more difficulty in trying to establish their own authority in Beijing, even if Washington did nothing. "Events have borne out [the] view," Kennan wrote early in 1950, "that the projection of Moscow's political power over further parts of Asia would encounter impediments, resident in the nature of the area, which would be not only not of our making but would actually be apt to be weakened by any attempts on our part to intervene directly." As a result, the overall situation in Asia, "while serious, is neither unexpected nor necessarily catastrophic."^{51*}

* Kennan's reservations about dealing with the Chinese communists did not imply sympathy for Chiang Kai-shek. In July 1949 he suggested (but immediately withdrew) a proposal to use American forces to eject the Chinese Nationalists from Formosa, which he preferred to leave under Japanese (and hence American) control for the time being. (Policy Planning Staff 53, "United States Policy Toward Formosa and the Pescadores," July 6, 1949, *FRUS: 1949, IX*, 356–60.) He elaborated on his views in a September 1951 memorandum: "As for China, I have no use for either of the two regimes, one of which has intrigued in this country in a manner scarcely less disgraceful to it than to ourselves, while the other has committed itself to a program of hostility to us as savage and arrogant as anything we have ever faced. The tie to the Chiang regime I hold to be both fateful and discreditable, and feel it should be severed at once, at the cost, if need be, of a real domestic political showdown. After that, the less we Americans have to do with China the better. We need neither covet the favor, nor fear the enmity, of any Chinese regime. China is not the great power of the Orient; and we Americans

"[I]t has often been alleged," Kennan told a Pentagon audience in November 1948, "that our policy, usually referred to . . . as the policy of 'containment', was a purely negative policy, which precluded any forward action. . . . That is entirely untrue." For reasons of discretion the United States could not openly acknowledge that it was seeking to fragment the international communist movement. "[W]e have no need to make a gratuitous contribution to the Soviet propaganda effort by assuming responsibility for a process of disintegration which communism had brought upon itself and for which it had no one but itself to blame."⁵² But such public acknowledgment was hardly necessary, because in this case little positive action was needed to gain the objective. The breakup of international communism was an irreversible trend, certain to proceed regardless of what the United States did. Washington need only align its policies with it.

Kennan based this conclusion on what one might call an "imperial analogue"—the idea that international communism, whatever its surface manifestations, in fact differed little from and was subject to many of the same self-destructive tendencies of classical imperialism. He liked to quote Edward Gibbon's proposition that "there is nothing more contrary to nature than the attempt to hold in obedience distant provinces." The very process of trying to maintain an empire would, sooner or later, generate resistance sufficient to undermine it. "[T]here is a possibility," Kennan commented in September 1949, "that Russian Communism may some day be destroyed by its own children in the form of the rebellious Communist parties of other countries. I can think of no development in which there would be greater logic and justice." Failing that, there might at least develop opposing blocs within the communist world. "A situation of this description," a Policy Planning Staff study noted, "might eventually provide us with an opportunity to operate on the basis of a balance in the communist world and to foster the tendencies toward accommodation with the West implicit in such a state of affairs." Nationalism, then, would prove the most durable of ideologies; it would be through the encouragement of nationalism, whether in areas threatened by communism or within the communist bloc itself, that the objectives of containment would largely be achieved.⁵³

But because Kennan believed Moscow's hostility toward the West to be rooted in forces deep within Russian society, he did not expect "tenden-

have certain subjective weaknesses that make us ill-equipped to deal with the Chinese." ("Summary by George F. Kennan on points of difference between his views and those of the Department of State," September 1951, Kennan Papers, Box 24.)

cies toward accommodation” to emerge until a fundamental change had taken place in the Soviet concept of international relations. The third step in his strategy was to bring about such a change: to effect a shift in the thinking of Kremlin leaders away from their own version of universalism—the conviction that security required restructuring the outside world along Soviet lines—to particularism—to toleration and even the encouragement of diversity.⁵⁴

One conceivable way to achieve this objective, of course, would be to go to war, but Kennan repeatedly warned against such measures as inconsistent with the desired end. A war with the Soviet Union would not resemble World War II, he pointed out; the United States and its allies could hardly expect to conquer and occupy the entire territory of the U.S.S.R., or to impose unconditional surrender on its government. And even if that were possible, no one could guarantee that whatever successor regimes might arise would be any less difficult to deal with. Atomic bombs and other weapons of mass destruction were useful only for destroying an adversary, not for changing his attitudes. Finally, such an all-out war could well imperil the very society it was supposed to defend:

It would be useful, in my opinion, if we were to recognize that the real purposes of the democratic society cannot be achieved by large-scale violence and destruction; that even in the most favorable circumstances war between great powers spells a dismal deterioration of world conditions from the standpoint of the liberal-democratic tradition; and that the only positive function it can fulfill for us—a function, the necessity and legitimacy of which I do not dispute—is to assure that we survive physically as an independent nation when our existence and independence might otherwise be jeopardized and that the catastrophe which we and our friends suffer, if cataclysm is unavoidable, is at least less than that suffered by our enemies.*

* Much has been made of the transcript of a lecture Kennan gave at the Air War College on April 10, 1947 (Kennan Papers, Box 17), which reports him as having said in answer to a question that the United States might be justified in considering a preventive war against the Soviet Union. (See, for example, Wright, “Mr. ‘X’ and Containment,” p. 19.) But the full context of Kennan’s transcribed remarks makes it clear that he discussed preventive war only as a last resort, to be considered if Soviet war-making potential was exceeding that of the United States and if opportunities for peaceful solutions had been exhausted, situations which, he believed, did not exist at that time. And by January 1949 Kennan was appearing to rule out preventive war altogether: “[A] democratic society cannot plan a preventive war. Democracy leaves no room for conspiracy in the great matters of state. But even if it were possible for democracy to lay its course deliberately toward war, I would question whether that would be the right answer. . . . [W]e are condemned, I think, to define our objectives here in terms of what can be accomplished by measures short of war. And, while this is a matter of personal philosophy rather than of objective observation, I for one am deeply thankful that Providence has placed

Not surprisingly, then, Kennan concluded: "I would rather wait thirty years for a defeat of the Kremlin brought about by the tortuous and exasperatingly slow devices of diplomacy than to see us submit to the test of arms a difference so little susceptible to any clear and happy settlement by those means."⁵⁵

At the opposite end of the scale was the possibility of changing the Soviet concept of international relations through negotiations. Mere exposure to the American point of view was not likely to have much effect, Kennan warned: "[T]hey are [not] going to turn around and say: 'By George, I never thought of that before. We will go right back and change our policies.' . . . They aren't that kind of people." But if self-confidence in Western Europe could be restored, and the vacuum left by Germany's collapse filled, then the Russians might indeed be willing to "talk turkey," at least regarding a lowering of tensions in Europe; certainly the United States should be prepared for that eventuality. That day would come "when they have arrived at the conclusion that they cannot have what they want without talking to us. It has been our endeavor to assist them to that conclusion."⁵⁶

But the most effective means of modifying Soviet behavior lay in a combination of deterrents and inducements that Kennan called "counter-pressure." "The shape of Soviet power," he explained in February 1947, "is like that of a tree which has been bent in infancy and twisted into a certain pattern. It can be caused to grow back into another form; but not by any sudden or violent application of force. This effect can be produced only by the exertion of steady pressure over a period of years in the right direction." Later that year, Kennan shifted to the analogy to chess to clarify how "counter-pressure" was to be achieved: "It is through the way in which you marshall all the forces at your disposal on the world chess-board. I mean not only the military forces you have, although that is very important, but all the political forces. You just have to dispose of your pawns, your queens and kings in such a way that the Russian sees it is going to be in his interests to do what you want him to do, and then he will go ahead and do it."* NSC 20/1, the comprehensive overview of the U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union that Kennan supervised in the summer of 1948, used more

that particular limitation on us." (Lecture to Foreign Service Institute, January 19, 1949, Kennan Papers, Box 17.)

* Kennan used the term "counterforce" instead of "counter-pressure" in the "X" article, but failed to clarify its meaning—a fact which, he admits, has given rise to much confusion. (Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950*, pp. 359–60.)

general terminology to express the same idea: “[T]he Soviet leaders are prepared to recognize situations, if not arguments. If, therefore, situations can be created in which it is clearly not to the advantage of their power to emphasize the elements of conflict in their relations with the outside world, then their actions, and even the tenor of their propaganda to their own people, can be modified.”⁵⁷

Americans could hasten this process, Kennan thought, simply by being themselves: “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 Russian national effort can find its expression only in peaceful and friendly association with other peoples and not in attempts to subjugate and dominate those peoples.” This emphasis on the force of example reflected Kennan’s identification with the architects of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American foreign policy, who thought in similar terms; it was also a manifestation of his belief in the importance of “good form” in both private and public affairs:

[I]f we wish our relations with Russia to be normal and serene, the best thing we can do is to see that on our side, at least, they are given the outward aspect of normalcy and serenity. Form means a great deal in international life. . . . What is important, in other words, is not so much what is done as how it is done. And in this sense, good form in outward demeanor becomes more than a means to an end, more than a subsidiary attribute: it becomes a value in itself, with its own validity and its own effectiveness, and perhaps—human nature being what it is—the greatest value of all.

Soviet-American relations therefore boiled down, Kennan told students at the Naval Academy in May 1947, “to a sort of long-range fencing match in which the weapons are not only the development of military power but the loyalties and convictions of hundreds of millions of people and the control or influence over their forms of political organization. . . . It may be the strength and health of our respective systems which is decisive and which will determine the issue. This may be done—and probably will be done—without a war.”⁵⁸

IV

Kennan gave relatively little thought to the problems of explaining containment to Congress, the bureaucracy, or the general public, all of whose support would be necessary to implement it. This was partly because as a planner of policy he did not consider it his responsibility to devote much

time to justifying it, partly also because he never succeeded in reconciling in his own mind the need for precision and flexibility in diplomacy with a constitutional framework that seemed at best inhospitable to those qualities:

The pursuit of power by diplomatic means—like the pursuit of power by military means—calls for discipline, security, and the ability to move your forces swiftly and surely, taking full advantage of the concealment of your own thoughts and the element of your surprise. . . . [C]an you conduct a modern foreign policy where one great part of your action can be determined on a day-to-day basis . . . by persons subject to professional discipline in matters of security and other matters, whereas another great part of your action has to be determined in bodies which meet only periodically and take their decisions under the peculiar pressures of public debate and compromise?⁵⁹

The complaint embraced problems of both bureaucracy and democracy. With regard to the first, Kennan saw professionalism and discipline as the solution: “The understanding of governmental policies in the field of foreign affairs cannot be readily acquired by people who are new to that field,” he noted in 1948, “even when they are animated by the best will in the world. . . . It is a matter of educating and training, for which years are required.” And once policy had been established, the bureaucracy had a responsibility to carry it out faithfully. “I think we must not fear the principle of indoctrination within the government service,” he wrote two years later. “The Secretary of State is charged personally by the President with the conduct of foreign affairs, and there is no reason why he should not insist that his views and interpretations be those of the entire official establishment.”⁶⁰

But the task of combining professionalism with discipline was not an easy one. The very act of transforming expertise into policy guidelines distorted that expertise, Kennan believed. It was misleading to assume it possible “to describe in a few pages a program designed to achieve U.S. objectives with respect to the U.S.S.R.” Documents of this nature produced oversimplification and rigidity when what was needed were sophisticated assessments of changing situations, together with the flexibility to act on the basis of them. And even if usable guidelines could be devised, there was no guarantee that the bureaucracy would follow them:

[T]he operating units—the geographical and functional units—will not take interference from any unit outside the line of command. They insist on an effective voice in policy determination; if one of them cannot make its voice

alone valid, it insists on the right to water down any recommendation going to the Secretary to a point where it may be meaningless but at least not counter to its own view. If an unwelcome recommendation does find the Secretary's approval, they will perhaps give it perfunctory recognition, but they will pursue basically their own policies anyway, secure in the knowledge that no one can really survey their entire volume of work, that the issues which agitate the present will soon be outdated, and that the people who are trying to force their hand will soon be gone.

The simple fact was that "no policy and no concept . . . will . . . stick in our government unless it can be drummed into the minds of a very large number of persons, including quite a few whose mental development has not advanced very far beyond the age which is said to be the criterion for the production of movies in Hollywood."⁶¹

The problem of how to win support for policy without distorting it also came up in dealings with Congress and the general public. The government had an obligation to lead, Kennan acknowledged: "I think we would be very poor representatives of our country indeed if we were to sit back passively, knowing all we know, and to say: 'Our own views don't come into the question, and we do just do what the people tell us to do.'" But leadership too often took the form of exaggerated rhetoric, not education. The prime example was President Truman's March 1947 speech to Congress on aid to Greece and Turkey—an employment of universalist rhetoric for particularist purposes that deeply offended Kennan's sense of the proper relationship between ends and means. He also despaired of the administration's willingness to modify carefully formulated policies in order to placate Congressional critics: "my specialty," he noted angrily in January 1948, "was the defense of US interests against others, not against our own representatives."⁶²

It was not Kennan's allegiance to democracy that was in question here; on the contrary, he relied heavily, as has been seen, on the force of the democratic example to attract the uncommitted, reassure the allied, and discomfit the hostile. Nor was it logical, if as he asserted the aim of strategy was to protect the nation's domestic institutions, to abandon those institutions in the interest of furthering that strategy. What Kennan did question was the extent to which the requirements of democracy, like those of bureaucracy, required generalizing about the particular:

There are very few general observations which can be made about the conduct of states which have any absolute validity at all times and in all cases. The few that might have such validity are almost invariably to be found in

the realm of platitude. If this absolute validity is lacking, the chances are that the utterance in question will some day rise to haunt us in a context where it is no longer fully applicable. If, on the other hand, the utterance remains in the realm of platitude, then there is all the more reason why we should not associate ourselves with it.

“It is simply not given to human beings to know the totality of truth,” he concluded. “Similarly, no one can see in its totality anything so fundamental and so unlimited in all its implications as the development of our people in their relation to their world environment.” And yet without some confidence that strategies chosen for surviving in that environment would work, there would be little support for them. This was the central dilemma for which Kennan never developed a satisfactory answer. It would account for many of the difficulties he encountered in seeking to implement his strategy of containment.⁶³