

CHAPTER
T W E L V E

*Epilogue: Containment After
the Cold War*

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Great grand strategies are bounded by time and space, but they also transcend time and space. They all arise, as containment did, within particular periods, places, and sets of circumstances. They cannot be divorced, in this sense, from the historical contexts in which they originated. And yet, the adjective “great” implies relevance beyond context. It suggests that the strategy in question can serve as a guide in periods, places, and circumstances yet to come.

When George F. Kennan returned to Washington in the spring of 1946, having riveted the attention of the United States government with the longest telegram ever sent from its embassy in Moscow, his first job was to design a course on strategy and policy at the National War College. “We found ourselves thrown back,” he recalled, “on the European thinkers of other ages and generations: on Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Gallieni—even Lawrence of Arabia.” Total war in a nuclear age would be “suicidal” or at least “out of accord with every principle of humanity,” and yet there was no American tradition of limited war. It was necessary, then, to explore other traditions: for example, Talleyrand’s view that “nations ought to do one another in peace the most good, in war—the least possible evil,” or Gibbon’s claim that the “temperate and indecisive conflicts” of the eighteenth century had been a strength rather than a weakness of that era.¹ Kennan was relying here upon the principle of *transferability*: that grand strategies from the past could suggest what to emulate and what to avoid in shaping grand strategies for the future.

It seems fair enough, therefore, to apply this standard to the strategy

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Kennan himself devised after moving to the State Department early in 1947. To what extent might containment work in other periods, places, and sets of circumstances? Not at all, he seemed to suggest during the Vietnam War: "I emphatically deny the paternity of any efforts to invoke that doctrine today in situations to which it has, and can have, no proper relevance."² The possibility that there could be *strategies* of containment—that his own strategy could spawn mutations of which he disapproved—left Kennan frustrated, apologetic, and often angry. The sensation, he recalled, was that of having "inadvertently loosened a large boulder from the top of a cliff and now helplessly witness[ing] its path of destruction in the valley below, shuddering and wincing at each successive glimpse of disaster."³

Disasters did occur, and Vietnam was the worst of them. But by the end of the Cold War, the successes of containment had clearly outweighed its failures. There was no war with the Soviet Union, as there had been twice with Germany and once with Japan between 1914 and 1945. There was no appeasement either, as there had been in the years between the two world wars. Whatever the oscillations between symmetry and asymmetry, whatever the miscalculations, whatever the costs, the United States and its allies sustained a strategy that was far more consistent, effective, and morally justifiable than anything their adversaries were able to manage. Indeed it is difficult to think of *any* peacetime grand strategy in which the results produced in the end corresponded more closely with the objectives specified at the beginning.

Students of strategy will be studying containment, hence, for decades, even centuries to come. Leaders will be applying its lessons in periods, places, and circumstances that nobody can now foresee. Transferability, however much Kennan might resist the notion, is unavoidable. But because the context can never again be that of the Cold War, not all aspects of that strategy are likely to transfer equally well.

I

Kennan suggested one that might not as early as 1947: it was the requirement that the adversary to be contained *share one's own sense of risk*. Containment probably would not have succeeded against Napoleon or Hitler, he pointed out, because both had set deadlines—determined presumably by their own mortality—for achieving their goals. Sticking to timetables was more important to them than avoiding war. They lacked

the caution that Marxism-Leninism had instilled in Soviet leaders: "the Kremlin is under no ideological compulsion to accomplish its purposes in a hurry," Kennan noted in the "X" article. "Like the Church, it is dealing in ideological concepts which are of long-term validity. . . . It has no right to risk the existing achievements of the revolution for the sake of vain baubles of the future."⁴ Convinced that history was on their side, Stalin and his successors were prepared to be patient: that bought the time needed for containment to demonstrate that they were wrong.

Nor is it clear that containment would have worked against states whose leaders believed, as Sir Michael Howard has put it, "in the inevitability of, and the social necessity for, armed conflict in the development of mankind."⁵ Such views were common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a fact that helps to explain how so many great powers could have blundered so easily, in 1914, into a Great War. But that global conflict and the one that followed in 1939 profoundly shook "bellicist" assumptions; the use of atomic bombs in 1945 shattered them. Quite apart from the presence of a cautious adversary, therefore, there was in the postwar era a far more favorable psychological climate than had previously existed for developing "measures short of war," such as containment.⁶

That sense of shared risk persisted throughout the Cold War, which is why the adjective remained attached to the noun. It did not matter whether Democrats or Republicans occupied the White House, or whether reformers or reactionaries inhabited the Kremlin: all feared a third world war. All had societies to defend, and hence a state to preserve. Total war had ceased to be a means by which that could be done, even if limited wars were still possible.⁷ It is hardly surprising, then, that Kennan and his war college students read Clausewitz, for it was his great principle that the use of force must never become an end in itself: "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."⁸ No major leader during the Cold War would have disagreed.⁹

That fact suggests a second limitation on containment's applicability beyond a Cold War context, which is that it was a *state-based strategy*. It depended not only on the fear of all-out war, but also upon the existence of identifiable regimes that could manage the running of risks short of war. This too was consistent with Clausewitz: where else could the capacity to constrain force come from if not the state, the entity created, at the dawn of the modern era, to monopolize the means of violence?¹⁰ To

imagine Clausewitz apart from the state is to imagine a boat without water. Might the same be said, then, of containment? Can that strategy function in an environment in which states are no longer the principal threats to be contained?

The attacks of September 11, 2001, posed that question for the United States in the starkest possible terms. On that day, nineteen members of a terrorist gang killed more Americans on their own soil than had the Imperial Japanese Navy six decades earlier at Pearl Harbor. The George W. Bush administration was quick to conclude, in response, that Cold War strategies—containment and the deterrence that accompanied it—would not have worked against al-Qaeda. How does one contain someone who, before striking, is invisible? How does one deter someone who, in the act of striking, is prepared to commit suicide? These problems led Bush, in the fall of 2002, to announce a new grand strategy of *pre-emption*:* that the United States would henceforth act multilaterally where possible, but unilaterally where necessary, to take out terrorists before they could hit their intended targets.¹¹ The purpose was to defend states against stateless enemies.

Bush's strategy was less of an innovation than it at first seemed to be. Pre-emption had never been ruled out during the Cold War: no American president, in a nuclear age, would have knowingly risked another Pearl Harbor. The doctrine was simply not publicized to the extent that Bush chose to do.¹² Nor was al-Qaeda an entirely stateless enemy. Osama bin Laden ran it from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, against which the Bush administration had swiftly and successfully retaliated in the fall of 2001. Its first clear act of pre-emption also took place against a state, Iraq, in March 2003. The justifications cited included claims that Saddam Hussein had supported al-Qaeda while accumulating weapons of mass destruction, neither of which held up under subsequent scrutiny. A justification not cited—but undoubtedly present—was that deposing the Iraqi despot would frighten the leaders of any other states who might be harboring terrorists or thinking about doing so: that, however, was deterrence, with a view to countering an anticipated danger. Pre-emption by

*In doing so, Bush broadened the Cold War definition of "pre-emption"—action taken against a state that was about to launch an attack—to include the Cold War meaning of "prevention"—action taken against a state that might, at some point in the future, have that capability. He did so because the distinction makes little sense when one is dealing with invisible and potentially suicidal terrorist gangs. (For more on this, see John Lewis Gaddis, "Grand Strategy in the Second Term," *Foreign Affairs*, LXXIV [January/February 2005], 3.)

the Bush administration's logic, then, led back to containment. It did not replace containment.¹³

There is, however, another way of understanding September 11 that, if confirmed, might indeed make containment obsolete. It comes from claims that the attacks could only have happened because the international state system had become weaker than it once was. The simultaneous advance of economic integration and political fragmentation had diminished the capacity of *all* states to control what went on within their territories and across their borders.¹⁴ If September 11 initiated a new age of insecurity in which the actions of only a few individuals could endanger entire societies, then strategies of containment as traditionally conceived would be of little use. Containment presumed threats from states seeking to survive. It was never meant for movements seeking martyrdom. Pre-emption in situations like this, the argument runs, may be the only feasible option.

A third limitation on containment's relevance beyond a Cold War context has to do with the persistence, throughout that conflict, of *something worse than American hegemony*.^{*} It is clear in retrospect that the United States retained a preponderance of power—in all of the categories that constitute power—throughout the last half of the twentieth century.¹⁵ As the Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad has pointed out, however, it did so more often by invitation than imposition.¹⁶ For as long as the Soviet Union was the alternative, there was always something worse, in the eyes of most of the rest of the world, than the prospect of American domination. That minimized the “friction”—to use Clausewitz's term—that hegemony might otherwise have generated.

With the end of the Cold War, the unintended advantage the Soviet Union had given the United States disappeared—as did the urgency of cultivating allies and neutrals who, if neglected, might defect to the other side, or at least threaten to do so. Multilateral consultation diminished steadily throughout the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, not because the principle was objectionable, but because the practice seemed less necessary than it had during the Cold War. The George W. Bush administration inherited what was coming to be called American unilateralism. It did not invent it.¹⁷

^{*}I owe this “something worse” principle to Kennan, who got it from Hilaire Belloc's poem, in his *Cautionary Tales*, about the unfortunate Jim, who was eaten by a lion: “And always keep ahold of Nurse / For fear of finding something worse.”

It did, however, intensify unilateralism in several ways: through tactless diplomacy with respect to the Kyoto Protocol on global climate change, the International Criminal Court, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; through the casualness with which it brushed aside offers of help from NATO allies in invading Afghanistan; through its single-minded determination to overthrow Saddam Hussein despite widespread opposition within the international community; and through its reluctance to acknowledge, having conquered Iraq, that it had no clear idea what to do there. All of this led to an unprecedented loss of support throughout the rest of the world for the United States and its foreign policy objectives. The view seemed to be emerging that there could be *nothing worse* than American hegemony if it was to be used in this way.¹⁸

If this trend continues, then the basis for American power will indeed have shifted from invitation to imposition, a very different context from the one in which containment arose during the Cold War. When Kennan wrote in 1947 that “the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions,”¹⁹ he assumed that those traditions would have greater appeal beyond its borders than would those of the Soviet Union and the international communist movement. He was right about that: the existence of such rivals provided an eminently realistic reason for Americans to respect their own ideals and to try to reflect them, for the most part successfully, in their actions. But if in the absence of useful adversaries the United States ceases to do that—if it creates a new tradition of imposed rather than invited power—then it should hardly be surprised to find little that might transfer from the strategy of containment that produced its own preeminence.

II

Containment cannot to be expected to succeed, therefore, in circumstances that differ significantly from those that gave rise to it, sustained it, and within which it eventually prevailed. Kennan’s objection to invoking it “in situations to which it has, and can have, no proper relevance,” in this sense, makes sense. He never claimed that the pre-containment strategies he studied at the National War College could be wrenched from their historical contexts and applied uncritically in the early Cold War. And yet, he obviously did believe in *selective* transferability: otherwise there would have been no point in teaching the grand strategists of the past to his war

college students. It is worth considering then, from this perspective, what aspects of containment might remain relevant in a post-Cold War, post-September 11 world.

One has to do with a kind of intellectual geography: the fact that Kennan's strategy of containment *mapped out a path between dangerous—even deadly—alternatives*. Despite the persistence of a multipolar international system, the dominant trend in thinking about strategy through the end of World War II was one of bipolar extremes: war *or* peace, victory *or* defeat, appeasement *or* annihilation. The idea that there could be something in between—neither war *nor* peace, neither victory *nor* defeat, neither appeasement *nor* annihilation—had never been clearly articulated. It had been implicit, as Kennan noted, in the strategies of earlier eras; but it had disappeared with the advent of mass mobilizations, lethal technologies, and the total wars they made possible. Imagination itself had failed, making the first half of the twentieth century a period of unprecedented violence among the great powers: there seemed to be no middle ground.

The second half of the twentieth century turned out to be very different. Despite the emergence of a bipolar international system, the dominant trend in thinking about strategy was one of avoiding extremes. Nuclear weapons had something to do with this, to be sure, but so too did the idea of containment—which preceded the Soviet-American nuclear stalemate by almost a decade. When seen in this context, then, containment was a feat of imagination, made all the more impressive by the bleak circumstances in which it originated. The transferable lesson here is a psychological one: that any strategy in which the only choices available are deadly, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable requires rethinking. That is how Nixon and Kissinger responded when they inherited the Vietnam War, the product of an inability to rethink. In doing so, they were following Kennan's precedent.

A second transferable principle follows: it is that a desirable alternative in strategy is for *enemies to defeat themselves*. The idea goes back at least as far as Sun Tzu. It pervades Clausewitz. It is what Marx and Lenin expected would happen to capitalism, the internal contradictions of which were to supposed bring about its collapse.²⁰ Both Kennan in the late 1940's and Reagan in the early 1980's reversed this logic, insisting that it was Marxism-Leninism, not capitalism, that carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The United States could, through its actions, increase the strains under which the Soviet Union and its allies operated: in the

end, though, the inefficiencies of command economies, the absence of political accountability, and the improbability that an internationalist ideology could indefinitely suppress nationalist instincts would cause communism's demise. Americans and their allies needed only to be firm and remain patient while this happened.

The idea also makes sense in a post-September 11 era, for the interests of terrorists and the states that support them—or at least tolerate them—are not in all instances the same. Terrorists have no economic program; states in an increasingly interdependent world must have one. Terrorists substitute intimidation for representation, a bargain that has not proven sustainable in a democratizing age. Finally, states seek to survive even if terrorists do not: even rogue states have an interest in preserving the international state system, because they have no way of knowing what might replace it. These contradictions are at least as striking as the ones within the communist world that the Cold War practitioners of containment successfully exploited.

How does one know, though, when such opportunities exist? Answering this question brings up a third transferable principle from the strategy of containment, which is that *history is a better guide than theory in shaping it*. Kennan's insights during the early Cold War went well beyond the conventional wisdom of the time: that Stalin was not another Hitler; that an authoritarian state need not be impermeable to external influences; that an ideology based upon a deterministic view of the past could miscalculate the future; that international communism would not remain monolithic; that war and appeasement were not the only choices open to the United States and its allies in dealing with the dangers that confronted them.

It is not at all clear what *theories* might have yielded such conclusions. They came instead from Kennan's reading of Gibbon on the Roman Empire, from his knowledge of the history and culture of Russia, from his own crash course on the great grand strategists while at the National War College—and even from works of imagination, as when Kennan used Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks* to make the point, about the Soviet Union, that "human institutions often show the greatest outward brilliance at a moment when inner decay is . . . farthest advanced."²¹ Formal theory, in seeking universal validity, too often disconnects itself from the flow of time. It pays insufficient attention to how things became what they are, which usually offers the best clue as to what they will become. History, in contrast—but also literature—distills past experience in such a way as to

prepare one for future uncertainties, rather in the way that athletic training builds stamina and accumulates experience, but does not in itself determine the outcome of future games.²²

The process is intuitive, even impressionistic, involving the ability to see that a current situation is “like” one or more that have existed in the past, and that it is worth knowing how they were handled. It requires the self-confidence to be selective, the self-discipline to be clear, and a certain amount of self-dramatization when needed to get one’s point across: what else could an 8,000-word telegram be? It benefits greatly from insights into human nature, which theory rarely provides. It is ironic that Kennan is remembered today as one of the founders of “realism” within the field of international relations, for he never considered himself to be a theorist at all.²³ He was, however, by temperament, training, and later in life by choice, a historian. And he would have liked to have been a novelist.

A fourth aspect of containment that might well transfer to other contexts is the extent to which, as implemented, it combined *coherence with accountability*. Here Kennan was less than prescient: he worried that the volatilities of domestic politics would make it difficult, if not impossible, for a democracy to sustain a consistent grand strategy.* In one sense, he was right: there were repeated oscillations between symmetrical and asymmetrical containment, with each new administration appearing to have to learn their virtues and deficiencies. When one looks at the American record throughout the Cold War, though, one cannot help but be struck by the extent to which the larger objectives of containment—avoiding the extremes of war and appeasement while waiting for the Soviet Union to change itself—remained the same, regardless of which party occupied the White House and which approach to containment each chose to embrace.

From that perspective, then, the shifts that took place can be seen as course corrections imposed by the obligation of accountability inherent in democratic procedures. The requirement to hold an election every four

*“I sometimes wonder whether . . . a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin: he lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.” (*American Diplomacy: 1900–1950* [Chicago: 1951], p. 66.)

years may have made it difficult to maintain consistency, but it was a safeguard against complacency, against the tendency to persist in counterproductive strategies in the face of evidence suggesting that they were just that. To see the value of such accountability, consider the performance of the Soviet Union, China, and the satellite regimes of Eastern Europe, where the only way to replace ineffective strategies was to wait for their architects to die or to be overthrown. This did, of course, happen, but not frequently enough to provide protection against the dangers of authoritarian autism—the tendency to persist in error which the absence of accountability encourages.

Nor did alternations between symmetry and asymmetry impede another kind of accountability, which was the need to combine *leadership with consent*. It is striking that after four and a half decades of the Cold War, the alliances with which the United States began that contest were largely intact, while the Soviet Union had hardly any allies left. The prospect of something worse than American hegemony helps in part to explain this outcome. It is also the case, though, that the strategists of containment, whether of the symmetrical or asymmetrical persuasion, never underestimated the importance of allies. They worked hard to maintain multilateral consent for United States leadership in waging the Cold War, without at the same time allowing the need for consultation to paralyze the alliance. Containment in that respect also sets a standard to which future grand strategists—perhaps even current ones—might aspire.

A final lesson from the past that will be usable in the future comes chiefly from Eisenhower—although Kennan agreed with it: it was that containment *must not destroy what it was attempting to defend*. Eisenhower's concern was that, in the effort to contain an authoritarian adversary, the United States itself might become authoritarian, whether through the imposition of a command economy or through the abridgment of democratic procedures. That never happened. Despite the military-industrial complex the nation maintained its markets; despite McCarthyism it sustained and ultimately strengthened civil liberties; despite the excesses of Vietnam and Watergate the strategy of containment never came close to corrupting fundamental American values. They remained, at the end of the Cold War, what they had been at its beginning. The same can hardly be said of fundamental Marxist-Leninist values. So in this sense too, containment was consistent with Clausewitz: it was an extension of war, diplomacy, and values by other means.

III

George F. Kennan celebrated his 100th birthday on February 16, 2004. Born thirteen years before the Soviet Union, he had now survived, by thirteen years, its demise. Physically frail but still mentally alert, the old statesman held court, in the upstairs bedroom of his Princeton home, for a stream of visitors including family, friends, his biographer, and even the Secretary of State of the United States, Colin Powell.

Fifty-eight years earlier, almost to the day, sick in another bedroom from the rigors of a Moscow winter and irritated as usual at the Department of State, Kennan had summoned his secretary, Dorothy Hessman, and dictated an unusually long telegram. That document has a better claim than any other to having laid out the path by which the international system found its way from the trajectory of self-destruction it was on during the first half of the twentieth century to one that had, by the end of the second half, removed the danger of great power war, revived democracy and capitalism, and thereby enhanced the prospects for human liberty beyond what they had ever been before.*

An extravagant claim? Perhaps—but would anyone on February 22, 1946, have regarded the world as safe from the scourge of great power war? How could it be, when in contrast to the aftermath of World War I, it had not even been possible after World War II to convene a comprehensive peace conference? As safe from the dangers of authoritarianism? How could it be, when the Western democracies had had to rely upon one authoritarian state to defeat the others? As safe from a recurrence of economic collapse? How could it be, since there was no assurance that another global depression would not return? As safe from abuses of human rights? How could it be, when one of the most advanced nations in Europe had just committed the crime of genocide on an unprecedented scale? As safe from the fear that in any future war no one would be safe? How could the world be that either, with atomic weapons now having been developed, with little prospect that they would remain under exclusive American control?

What Kennan opened up, on that bleak day in Moscow in 1946, was a

*The “long telegram” was on display, on this centennial occasion, in an appropriately long display case in Firestone Library at Princeton University.

way out: a grand strategy that rejected both the appeasement and the isolationism that had led to World War II, on the one hand, and on the other the alternative of a third world war, the devastation from which, in a nuclear age, could be unimaginable. Fifty-eight years later there was more than just a 100th birthday to celebrate.*

*George F. Kennan died peacefully, surrounded by family, in the upstairs bedroom of his Princeton home on the evening of March 17, 2005, at the age of 101.

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