**George F. Kennan’s Cold War  
by Louis Menand  
from the New Yorker**

**

*Kennan at Tempelhof airport, in Berlin, in 1952, en route to Moscow. Five months later, he was declared persona non grata by Stalin.*

The one puzzle in John Lewis Gaddis’s first-rate biography of the diplomat George Kennan, which Gaddis began in 1982, when his subject was seventy-eight, and waited nearly thirty years to complete, since Kennan lived to be a hundred and one, is the subtitle. The book is called “George F. Kennan: An American Life” (The Penguin Press; $39.95), and the most peculiar thing about Kennan, a man not short on peculiarities, is that he had little love for, or even curiosity about, the country whose fortunes he devoted his life to safeguarding.

Between 1926, the year he began his Foreign Service career, in Geneva, and 1946, when he made a heroic return from Moscow as the author of the primal document of Cold War foreign policy, the Long Telegram, Kennan lived mostly abroad. The woman he married, in 1931, Annelise Sørensen, was Norwegian, and when he and his family resettled in the United States—where he remained, apart from two prematurely terminated appointments as Ambassador, first to the Soviet Union (1952), and then to Yugoslavia (1961-63)—he spent almost all of his time in the State Department, or at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, or on the secluded farm he owned in Pennsylvania, outside a town it amused some god of geopolitics to have named East Berlin.

Kennan thought that Americans were shallow, materialistic, and self-centered—he had the attitude of a typical mid-century European—and the more he saw of them the less fond of them he grew. “You have despaired of yourself,” he wrote in his diary after a visit to Chicago; “now despair of your country!” He had a special distaste for what he called “the Latin-American fringe”—Florida, Texas, and California. “Before us stretches the whole great Pacific Coast,” he wrote in the diary on a plane trip West, “and my only thought, as we approach it, is: throughout the length and breadth of it not one single thing of any importance is being said or done.”

He was firmly anti-majoritarian, not only in foreign affairs, where he considered public opinion a menace, but in governmental decision-making generally. “I hate the rough and tumble of our political life,” he wrote, in 1935, to a sister, Jeanette, to whom he was close. “I hate democracy; I hate the press. . . . I hate the ‘peepul’; I have become clearly un-American.” In the draft of an unfinished book, begun in the nineteen-thirties, he advocated restricting the vote to white males, and other measures designed to create government by an élite.

Many people gave up on liberal democracy in the nineteen-thirties, but Kennan, even after the war, and in his most widely read books—“American Diplomacy,” published in 1951, and the first volume of his “Memoirs,” which came out in 1967 and won a Pulitzer Prize—was blunt about his estrangement from American life and his antipathy to democracy. He believed that a nation’s form of government has little to do with the quality of life, and he admired conservative autocracies such as prewar Austria and Portugal under António Salazar. In the second volume of the “Memoirs,” published in 1972, he proposed that one of the few times American diplomacy had been conducted with integrity, and without political pandering, was the period from 1945 to 1949—which happened to be the years of his own greatest influence.

The country he felt closest to—just to make the irony complete—was Russia. Russia was “in my blood,” he says in the “Memoirs.” “There was some mysterious affinity which I could not explain even to myself.” He wondered whether he had lived in St. Petersburg in a previous life. The Russia he loved, or fantasized about, was, of course, a pre-Bolshevik and pre-industrial Russia—the Russia of Tolstoy, whose estate, Yasnaya Polyana, he visited in 1952, feeling, he said later, “close to a world to which, I always thought, I could really have belonged,” and of Chekhov, whose biography he several times contemplated writing.

He had no sympathy for, or much interest in, Marxism, and he had no illusions about Stalin. He despised the whole Soviet apparat—in part because its minions prevented him from associating with ordinary Russians when he was stationed in Moscow. But he thought that even under Communism Russians cultivated a resilience of character that was disappearing in the West. After running across a Danish youth festival in the nineteen-seventies, a scene, as he described it, “swarming with hippies—motorbikes, girl-friends, drugs, pornography, drunkenness, noise,” he remarked, in an interview, “I looked at this mob and thought how one company of robust Russian infantry would drive it out of town.”

And when he imagined the day the Iron Curtain lifted, a day that his own policy recommendations were intended to bring about, he dreaded what would happen to the Russians after being exposed to “the wind of material plenty” and its “debilitating and insidious breath.” Although he long advocated the reunification of Germany, he took little satisfaction when it happened. It was just the result, he thought, of agitation by young East Germans motivated by the hope of “getting better jobs, making more money, and bathing in the fleshpots of the West.” He wondered whether this was what we had really wanted when we set out, more than forty years before, to wage a Cold War.

Yet he is commonly regarded as the wisest of the Wise Men. That was the name, semi-facetious, that Lyndon Johnson’s national-security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, gave to the members of the old Cold War foreign-policy establishment whom Johnson called upon, long after their time in office had passed, to help extricate his Administration from the quagmire in which it was eventually consumed, Vietnam. Among the elders Johnson consulted were Averell Harriman, who had been Roosevelt’s Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Kennan’s boss in Moscow; Dean Acheson, Truman’s Secretary of State and Kennan’s boss in Washington; and Charles Bohlen, Kennan’s oldest and closest friend in the Foreign Service and his successor as Ambassador to the Soviet Union.

The Wise Men were not happy with Johnson’s war. They were not thrilled with Johnson, either. They were East Coast lawyers and bankers, Ivy Leaguers, liberal internationalists—men who did not descend to partisan wrangling. When they ran policy, back in the day (“Present at the Creation” was the modest title Acheson gave his memoirs), Southern Democrats were a type they avoided.

But they found themselves in an awkward place. Vietnam was one of the great foreign-policy disasters in American history. Although it may have done little harm to the national security, it damaged the national image and it ruptured the national psyche. It divided a generation. But the war was fought in the name of checking Communist aggression, and checking Communist aggression was the very face of the policy that the Wise Men had put in place at the start of the Cold War, when the Soviets were swallowing up Eastern Europe.

Kennan’s signature was on that policy. When historians discuss American actions in the Cold War, usually the first texts they cite are the Long Telegram, which Kennan composed in February, 1946, and the so-called X article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” which he published, in *Foreign Affairs*, a year and a half later. Vietnam seems the lineal offspring of those pieces. Was Kennan misunderstood? The question is at the heart of any assessment of his career.

Kennan was not born into the establishment. His father was a Milwaukee tax attorney who was fifty-two when his son was born; his mother died, of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix, when he was two months old. (The story, which Gaddis does not repeat, is that the doctors refused to operate without permission from the husband, who was away on a fishing trip.) George went to St. John’s Military Academy, in Wisconsin, and then to Princeton, where he landed squarely in the role of outsider, a role that was partly cultivated and partly thrust upon him.

Kennan was a Midwestern Presbyterian. He had read “This Side of Paradise” in high school, but preppiedom was foreign territory. “My college career bore little resemblance to Fitzgerald’s,” as he puts it in the “Memoirs.” He once told a story of being left behind while his classmates went off to the Yale game. He hitched a ride to New Haven, but, since he didn’t have a ticket, he couldn’t get into the stadium, and he returned to Princeton as solitary as when he left.

In his freshman year, he had an attack of scarlet fever, which set him back socially, and which also seems to have triggered a lifelong susceptibility to illness. Gaddis lists the major ones: appendicitis, amoebic dysentery, ulcers, kidney stones, herpes zoster, prostate problems, jaundice, arthritis, and heart irregularities—all prone to being compounded by drug reactions. Kennan was often hospitalized at key moments in his career; some colleagues thought these hospitalizations tended to coincide with opportunities for advancement, and were Kennan’s way of drawing attention to himself. (Kennan’s own explanation was that he had a thing about nurses. That much seems credible.)

Whatever the reason for the illnesses, he was ambitious. He quickly took advantage of a State Department offer to pay for graduate study in Europe for Foreign Service officers who agreed to achieve fluency in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, or Russian. This was in 1928, and the United States did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. But Americans did business there (Harriman was one of them: he owned a manganese concession, in the Caucasus, in the nineteen-twenties), and Kennan saw that the freeze could not last forever. He felt destiny operating, as well, in the form of an uncle, also named George Kennan, who had been a Russia expert and had written important books on the Siberian prison system under the tsars.

Kennan spent two years in Berlin, learning Russian at Friedrich Wilhelm (now Humboldt) University and taking classes in Russian history at the University of Berlin. His subsequent diplomatic appointment was in Riga, in Latvia, essentially a listening post for gathering intelligence about the Soviet Union. Kennan specialized in Soviet economic affairs. When Roosevelt reopened diplomatic relations, in 1933, the year Hitler came to power, Kennan was sent to accompany the new American Ambassador, William Bullitt, and helped to set up the Moscow Embassy.

Among his other duties in Moscow, Kennan reported on the show trials of the old Bolsheviks, where he also served as an interpreter for Bullitt’s successor, Joseph Davies. Regular dealings with the Kremlin had soured Bullitt on the Soviet experiment; Davies chose not to be disillusioned, and he and Kennan did not get along. Kennan was transferred, first to the Russia desk in the State Department, and then to Prague.

He arrived on September 29, 1938, just as the Munich Pact handed over to Hitler the part of Czechoslovakia the Germans called the Sudetenland. Kennan was in Wenceslas Square when the pact was announced. “One of my first impressions of the post-Munich Prague,” he writes in the “Memoirs,” “was thus the sight of crowds of people weeping, unabashedly, in the streets at this death knell of the independence their country had enjoyed for a brief twenty years.” Within six months, the German Army had occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. When Germany invaded Poland, in September, 1939, and the war began, Kennan was transferred to Berlin.

On December 11, 1941, four days after Pearl Harbor, Germany declared war on the United States. The American legation was taken from Berlin by special train to the town of Bad Nauheim, where it was interned, incommunicado, under the supervision of the Gestapo. Kennan was in charge of the hundred and thirty Americans, an experience he recalled with a degree of disgust extreme even for him. “The details of this ordeal would alone make a book,” he says in the “Memoirs.” He was not referring to the Gestapo; he was referring to the Americans, who he thought behaved like spoiled children. When everyone was released, after five months, he wrote a satirical poem about his fellow-inmates.

Kennan’s next posting was to Lisbon. The Ambassador, a man named Bert Fish, was a patronage appointee and rarely visited the Embassy. His sudden death, in 1943, left Kennan free to negotiate, face to face with Salazar, for the use of bases in the Azores by U.S. aircraft. In January, 1944, when the end of the war was in sight, Kennan served in the American delegation to the European Advisory Commission, in London. Bohlen (who had been in Tokyo when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and was interned for six months) remembered Kennan returning to Washington “appalled by the behavior of American soldiers—their reading of comic books, their foul language, and their obsession with sex, among other things. He wondered whether the United States was capable of being a world power.”

Then Kennan got a major break. Bohlen, now chief of the State Department’s Soviet section, introduced him to Harriman, Roosevelt’s new Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and Harriman offered Kennan the position of minister-counsellor—essentially, second-in-command. Kennan arrived in Moscow on July 1, 1944. He flew in by way of Stalingrad, where the Red Army had turned back the Germans that winter. From the air, he wrote, the entire city looked as though it had been destroyed.

Like the man who appointed him, Harriman believed in personal diplomacy. He had, after all, done business with the Soviets back in the nineteen-twenties; in fact, he still had a financial interest left from the manganese enterprise when he became Ambassador. He thought he could talk turkey with Stalin. Kennan emphatically did not believe in personal diplomacy. He thought the idea that Stalin was someone the United States could cut reasonable deals with was delusional.

As Gaddis points out, this made Harriman Kennan’s ideal superior. Kennan was already notorious in State Department circles for filing lengthy and opinionated reports, and Harriman was happy to let him continue, since if the reports didn’t interest him he just ignored them. He didn’t care if Kennan’s views diverged from official policy, either, because he didn’t negotiate from policy. He flew by the seat of his pants. And although he affected brusqueness—he was known as the Crocodile: somnolent until provoked—he admired Kennan and respected his intellect. “I’ve never been able to work with anyone as closely as I did with him,” he told Gaddis in 1982.

The war in Europe was won on the Eastern Front. Between June 22, 1941, the day Germany invaded Russia, and June 6, 1944, D Day, ninety-three per cent of German military casualties—4.2 million missing, wounded, or killed—were inflicted by Soviet forces. Stalin was not an ally of choice; Roosevelt and Churchill understood the ethical niceties of the situation they found themselves in. In an earlier book, Gaddis quotes a saying of Roosevelt’s (apparently a Balkan proverb): “It is permitted you in time of grave danger to walk with the devil until you have crossed the bridge.” The Allied coalition was held together by one common goal: the total defeat of Nazi Germany.

There is no doubt that Stalin saw things the same way. In the most uncharacteristic blunder of his career, he had imagined that he could talk turkey with Hitler, and, in 1939, had signed a non-aggression treaty with Nazi Germany. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, twenty-two months later, Stalin was completely unprepared—one reason that the death toll in the East was so enormous. The Wehrmacht had come within sight of Moscow; it cost the Soviets almost a million lives to beat the Germans off, and millions more to drive them all the way back to Berlin. In the end, Soviet dead exceeded twenty-six million, roughly fourteen per cent of the population. (Fewer than half a million Americans died in the war.) Stalin needed a second front in the West, just as Roosevelt and Churchill needed the Red Army in the East.

From the start, the question was what the price would be. Stalin’s view was uncomplicated. “This war is not as in the past; whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system,” he explained privately to a group of Communist officials when the Red Army was bearing down on Berlin. “Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise.” This is exactly the way Kennan thought that the Soviets understood the matter, and he regarded Soviet intentions in Eastern Europe as the worm in the Allied apple. Once Germany was defeated, Moscow would revert to prewar form, and the United States would have little leverage. But he could not seem to get anyone to acknowledge that the worm was there.

In August, 1944, with Soviet troops less than sixty miles from Warsaw, partisans in the Polish Home Army staged an uprising against the city’s German occupiers. Stalin failed to intervene militarily; he refused to airlift armaments to the Polish fighters; and he turned down Harriman’s personal appeal to allow Allied planes to refuel at Ukrainian bases so they could get supplies into Warsaw. Stalin’s motives were not hard to guess. He was waiting for the S.S., which had taken over the battle in Warsaw, to annihilate the Home Army for him, thereby removing a potential obstacle to the establishment of a Soviet puppet regime when the war was over.

The S.S. more than obliged. Though Stalin eventually relented, and the Soviets airlifted (actually, simply dropped from planes) matériel into Warsaw, it was to little effect. In two months, the Germans killed twenty thousand members of the Home Army and massacred two hundred and twenty-five thousand civilians. Half a million Poles were shipped to concentration camps, a hundred and fifty thousand were sent off to forced labor in Germany, and, on Hitler’s orders, Warsaw was razed. When the Red Army entered the city, in January, 1945, not a single inhabitant was left.

Kennan always believed that this was the moment when Stalin showed his hand. In the “Memoirs,” he recalls Harriman returning from his futile meeting about the Ukrainian bases “in the wee hours of the night, shattered by the experience. There was no doubt in any of our minds as to the implications of the position the Soviet leaders had taken. This was a gauntlet thrown down, in a spirit of malicious glee, before the Western powers.” Kennan thought that the Soviets should have been given the choice, right there, of relinquishing their designs on Eastern Europe or forgoing further American assistance. He didn’t think that this would have stopped Stalin; he considered the creation of a Soviet “sphere of influence” inevitable. But it would have ended the impression of American acquiescence.

In all his reports, Kennan’s repeated message to Washington was “Get real.” He didn’t just disapprove of idealistic policy talk. He deeply loathed it. Declarations about the self-determination of peoples or international economic coöperation—the kind of thing that Roosevelt and Churchill announced as Allied war aims in the Atlantic Charter—seemed to him not only utopian and unenforceable but dangerously restrictive on a government’s scope of action. If you tell the world that you are fighting to preserve the right of self-determination, then any outcome short of that makes you look hypocritical or weak. Concessions to Soviet national-security interests were going to be necessary in Eastern Europe; it was better to be frank about this, and to stop pretending that Moscow and Washington had the same goals and values. But for domestic political reasons the American government always wants to appear virtuous, Kennan thought; so it continued to call the Soviets comrades and allies even as they were clearly preparing to walk all over the Atlantic Charter.

Kennan put much of this in a long letter to Bohlen in the winter of 1945. The United States, he wrote, should abandon Eastern Europe to the Soviets, accept the division of Germany, and give up plans for the United Nations, which he considered a classic instance of political wishful thinking. When Bohlen received the letter, he was busy with the Yalta Conference, where the Big Three negotiated the future of Europe, and his reply to Kennan was brief. “Foreign policy of that kind cannot be made in a democracy,” he said.

A year later, Kennan got his chance to wake Washington up. In February, 1946, Stalin delivered a speech in which he described the Second World War as the “inevitable result . . . of modern monopoly capitalism,” and suggested that capitalism and socialism could never coexist. It was a perfectly doctrinal speech. That capitalist countries will always go to war was a basic tenet of Marxism-Leninism, and saying so was unusual only in the context of the short period of the wartime alliance. Kennan didn’t think the speech was worth more than a summary in his regular report.

But Stalin’s words were read with alarm in Washington, and the Secretary of State, James Byrnes, asked the Embassy for an analysis. Harriman had left Moscow, and he gave Kennan his blessing to reply as he saw fit. Kennan seized the day. “They had asked for it,” he wrote in the “Memoirs.” “Now, by God, they would have it.” The result was reputedly the longest telegram in State Department history—more than five thousand words, in five numbered parts. Characteristically, Kennan was ill, and he was lying in bed when he dictated it.

The Long Telegram was Kennan unbound. Yes, he said, American capitalism and Soviet Communism were incompatible systems; Washington shouldn’t have been surprised to hear Stalin say so. But this had more to do with the nature of Russia than with the nature of Communism. Russian foreign policy had always been motivated by fear of the outside world, and Marxism gave the current regime, which Kennan considered simply the latest in a line of Oriental despotisms, an ideological fig leaf for its insecurity and paranoia. Whatever it might say, the Soviet Union would always seek to undermine the West. That was just the Kremlin’s nature. It was a case of the scorpion and the frog.

Still, there was a modus vivendi available for the short term. The Soviet Union was relatively weak; it was overstretched territorially; and it did not want war. It wanted only to take advantage of opportunities. The proper policy of the United States, therefore, was vigilance against allowing opportunities to arise for the Soviet Union to take advantage of. If the United States demonstrated resolve whenever Moscow made threatening noises; if it extended aid to the European democracies, so that they would know who their friends were; and if it otherwise tended to the cultivation of its own garden there was no reason to expect World War Three.

In Washington, the telegram was a sensation. There’s no evidence that Truman read it, but, thanks largely to the Navy Secretary, James Forrestal, who had it mimeographed and circulated, it was seen by the Cabinet and by senior military officials. Kennan was summoned to Washington and installed in the newly created National War College as Deputy Commandant for Foreign Affairs. The State Department dispatched him on a lecture tour to instruct the public on the true nature of the Soviet threat; at the War College, he lectured on international relations to military, State Department, and Foreign Service officials. “I seem to have hit the jackpot as a ‘Russian expert,’ ” he wrote to Jeanette.

In 1947, George Marshall, the Secretary of State, appointed Kennan chief of a new Policy Planning Staff—an effort to think ahead in the area of international relations, not something that the United States had had much practice with. The staff, Gaddis says, became the principal source of policy ideas for Marshall and for the National Security Council, and thus for the President. Kennan dominated the staff meetings, did most of the writing, and worked in the office next to Marshall’s. For two years, he essentially formulated American foreign policy.

The greatest of his contributions was to the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Western Europe, a program that echoed policy recommendations made in the Long Telegram. It was Kennan’s idea that aid under the plan should be offered to the Soviet Union and its satellite states, with the expectation that Stalin would prohibit his satellite regimes from accepting. Stalin did exactly that, and thus put himself in the position of taking blame for the division of Europe.

Kennan’s second major Cold War treatise was the 1947 article for *Foreign Affairs*, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” The essay began as a paper written for Forrestal. In many respects, it was an eloquent re-statement of the Long Telegram, and it is famous for a single sentence: “It is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”

This gave a name to American Cold War policy, and, with a few tweaks and many exceptions, what Kennan had called “containment” remained American policy until the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. Wherever there was “Communist aggression,” the United States pushed back. As long as the Communists remained in their box, the United States did not (except rhetorically) seek to intervene. And, as Gaddis says, even Reagan, despite talk of liberation and “rollback,” stayed largely true to containment policy.

The article was signed with an “X” because Kennan did not want it to seem that, as a State Department employee, he was stating policy, but his identity was quickly revealed, and for the rest of his career he was known as the author of containment. He had reasons to resent this.

When Acheson replaced Marshall as Secretary of State, in 1949, Kennan’s influence was diminished—though Acheson was friendly and solicited his advice. Kennan gave counsel to the Administration during the Korean War, and was instrumental in setting up the covert-operations wing of the Central Intelligence Agency. His tenure as Truman’s Ambassador to the Soviet Union ended abruptly when, at a press conference at Tempelhof airport, in Berlin, he compared life in the Moscow Embassy with his internment by the Nazis at Bad Nauheim. Stalin declared Kennan persona non grata, and he was denied reëntry to the country.

He turned down offers from Harvard, M.I.T., Dartmouth, Princeton, and Yale to take a position at the Institute for Advanced Study, where, whenever he was out of public life, he distracted himself by writing history. His major policy statements in the nineteen-fifties came in two lecture series. The first, at the University of Chicago in 1951, was a survey of American foreign policy since the Spanish-American War, and a running critique of the deleterious effect of domestic politics on international relations.

It was in this work, published as “American Diplomacy,” that Kennan ventured his famous analogy between democracy and “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.

Kennan’s other notable policy statement came in the Reith lectures, broadcast on BBC Radio in 1957, in which he called for the demilitarization and neutralization of Germany. Since 1957 was the year of Sputnik, and since West Germany was a key member of the NATO alliance, this was not a good time to imply that there was no real Soviet threat to Western Europe. Kennan’s old friend Acheson was so infuriated that he said in a speech, quoted in the New York *Times,* that Kennan had always taken “a rather mystical attitude” to the realities of power relations. The remark stung.

Kennan’s lectures did have an admirer: Senator John F. Kennedy wrote him a complimentary note. When Kennedy became President, he named Kennan Ambassador to Yugoslavia. Kennan liked Yugoslavia, and he thought Tito was a valuable demonstration of a point he had often made, which was that Communism was not monolithic. But Kennan resigned out of pique when he felt Kennedy had crossed him up by signing a trade bill that stigmatized Yugoslavia.

Throughout his life, Kennan was a prolific writer and an exceptional stylist, somewhat in the manner of his historian hero, Edward Gibbon. He claimed to find serenity in writing history, but in Gaddis’s account of the later years you can feel the old warhorse listening for the trumpet to sound. Each time a new Administration arrived in Washington, Kennan seems to have sat by the phone. He was honored as a wise man, but he remained outside the halls of power. In 1989, as the Cold War was ending, he was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President George Bush.

Gaddis is a historian, not a biographer. His Cold War scholarship is canonical in the field—particularly “The United States and the Origins of the Cold War,” his first book, published in 1972, which explains how domestic political pressures helped push the United States toward the Cold War, and “We Now Know,” published in 1997, which reviews Cold War historiography in light of the knowledge gained from the opening of Communist archives. Kennan’s life maps right onto twentieth-century political history, and no one is better qualified than Gaddis to lead the way through it.

He does make the reader work a little to construct an image of Kennan the person. “The Hawk and the Dove,” a dual biography of Kennan and Kennan’s protégé and policy antagonist Paul Nitze, by Nicholas Thompson (currently an editor at *The New Yorker*), gives us the personality more pungently in a few choice details—the story about the Yale game, for example. “The Wise Men,” Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas’s popular group biography of Kennan, Bohlen, Harriman, Acheson, Robert Lovett, and John J. McCloy, is more entertaining than Gaddis’s book.

The only notable feature of Kennan’s private life is a history of extramarital affairs. He was an anxious, driven, thin-skinned man—“He doesn’t bend; he breaks,” his friend Isaiah Berlin told Gaddis—and he needed succor (thus the attraction to nurses). He had an affair when he was posted to Berlin in the early years of the war, and almost certainly had another in Bad Nauheim. There are hints of more in the diaries, sometimes in passages written in Russian. He appears to have tormented himself about them all.

There is also his bizarre request for suicide pills, made when he was Ambassador in Moscow. One theory is that he believed that the Soviets had discovered that he was having an affair. If the woman was Russian (even if not), this was obviously a major security breach, and Kennan may have wanted a means of suicide in case he was exposed. Pushing the theory a little farther leads to the thought that the Tempelhof indiscretion might have been deliberate—an embarrassing but salvageable way to escape a reputation-destroying scandal.

Gaddis does not go in for this sort of speculation. He doubts that the suicide pills had anything to do with what he refers to as “a dalliance with a dame,” and about the affairs generally he says, “George led multiple lives through most of their marriage, and Annelise knew that he did. What these were when—which were real, which imagined, which dreamt—is harder to establish and doesn’t much matter.” It would matter to a professional biographer. But Gaddis has written with care and elegance, and he has produced a biography whose fineness is worthy of its subject.

Why did Kennan resent his fame as the author of containment? The answer has to do with the unusual position he occupied. As Gaddis says, it wasn’t so much what Kennan wrote about foreign policy that made him important; other people were writing the same things. It was the fact that he wrote from inside. You can compare him with a man whose views on foreign policy and American democracy were very similar, the columnist Walter Lippmann. Lippmann was a foreign-policy intellectual. What he wrote might or might not have influence, but he wrote from outside. Kennan was a foreign-policy intellectual who also happened to be a government official, and this gave his writing special interest on the outside and authority on the inside.

By the same token, Kennan was a government official who happened to be a foreign-policy intellectual, and, from that point of view, his position was tricky. Apart from his two years as director of the Policy Planning Staff, when creating ideas for policy was his job, it was normally not only his role but his professional duty to execute faithfully policies that had been made by others. Kennan was attracted to the discipline this demanded, but it was a cause of endless frustration. He had a hard time watching statesmen act ignorantly, and he was usually watching from very close up.

And, as someone who proposed policy rather than administered it, Kennan was susceptible to the standard fate of policy intellectuals. Either he could get credit for providing a rationale for what was already the government’s de-facto policy or his recommendations could be harnessed to purposes he did not endorse.

It has sometimes been claimed that the Long Telegram was not news to most people in Washington, that it merely gave the Truman Administration an intellectual peg to hang its hat on. This underestimates what the Long Telegram accomplished. The Truman Administration did not really have a policy, even an unarticulated one, regarding the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1946. As Gaddis argues, Kennan provided Washington with a middle path, a way of being unequivocally anti-Communist without going to war. Kennan didn’t say that the Soviets were reasonable or democratic or decent in any way; he said that we did not need to drop the bomb on them.

When the X article appeared, on the other hand, the United States did have a policy. It had the Truman Doctrine, as announced by Truman in a speech to Congress in March, 1947. “It must be the policy of the United States,” Truman said there, “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” “Armed minorities” meant Communist insurgents; “outside pressures” meant the Kremlin.

The purpose of the speech was to request aid for Greece and Turkey, nations the Administration feared might otherwise become Communist. But Truman had been urged to turn the request into a general call to arms against Communist expansion anywhere in the world by advisers like Acheson, who warned that if Greece and Turkey fell they would be like rotten apples in a barrel: the whole Mediterranean region could be affected. This was, of course, the thinking behind the American involvement in Vietnam: contain Communist aggression, and prevent a domino effect in the region.

Kennan was appalled when he read the draft of Truman’s speech, and for the rest of his life he protested that he had meant containment to be a policy of selective confrontation, and its means to be diplomatic and economic, not military. But he was construed otherwise. Lippmann wrote a book, called “The Cold War,” in 1947, attacking Kennan and containment, on the assumption that the X article, which appeared four months after Truman’s speech, was meant as a justification of the Truman Doctrine. Lippmann had got Kennan completely wrong. Kennan was so upset that he wrote Lippmann a long letter explaining his mistake, but could never bring himself to send it.

The hard-line interpretation of containment won out—in part because Nitze, who took over Kennan’s job as chief of policy planning in 1950, supervised the call for a vast military buildup. In 1947, the year of Truman’s speech, the American military budget was $12.8 billion; in 1952, Truman’s last full year in office, it was $46.1 billion. Nitze always claimed he was just putting into effect the practical means for securing Kennan’s vision of containment. The Cold War became an arms race, exactly what Kennan had hoped to prevent.

By the nineteen-sixties, after the Reith lectures, Kennan’s position had become much clearer. He was one wise man Johnson did not even invite to the White House, and his televised testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in 1966, where he spoke out against the Administration’s Vietnam policy, was a turning point in the antiwar movement.

The theory of international relations that the advice to “get real” belongs to is, of course, realism, and realism’s first premise is that there *is* no god of geopolitics. That Kennan lived near a town called East Berlin is not a cosmic joke. It’s just a coincidence. Nations deal with one another “under an empty sky from which the gods have departed,” as the University of Chicago professor Hans Morgenthau put it in “Politics Among Nations.” Morgenthau’s big and influential book was published in 1948. Kennan invited him to join the Policy Planning Staff as a consultant soon afterward, and Morgenthau in turn arranged for the Chicago lectures that became “American Diplomacy.”

The realist view is that a nation’s foreign affairs should be guided by a cold consideration of its own interests, not by some set of transcendent legal or moral principles. In words of John Quincy Adams that Kennan loved to quote, a nation should not go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.” This often means letting foreign evils go unaddressed, and, in a commencement speech at Harvard, in 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn attacked Kennan, by name, for refusing to apply moral values to politics. “Thus we mix good and evil, right and wrong, and make space for the absolute triumph of absolute Evil in the world,” he said.

Solzhenitsyn was right that Kennan was allergic to concepts that were important to Soviet dissidents, concepts like “human rights.” The reason Kennan considered the United Nations a bad idea was that it is an organization based on the pretense that every nation can subscribe disinterestedly to international legal principles—when nations are always, and rightly, interested primarily in preserving or extending their own power. He was horrified by the Nuremberg Trials. “Crimes against humanity” was just the sort of exalted legalism that he thought led to foreign-policy disaster. In any case, he believed that, once the United States accepted Stalin as an ally, it lost the moral authority to condemn Nazism. Kennan spent a good deal of his early life in Germany; in the two volumes of his memoirs, there is not a single mention of the Holocaust.

All this makes realism seem a philosophy for the heartless, and one more reason to wonder about the nature of Kennan’s contribution to American life. It was a little strange that he regarded a nation that, under no serious threat to its own sovereignty, undertook to go to arms to save the world from fascism and militaristic imperialism as decadent, naïve, and deluded by idealism. Americans may be self-centered and internationally uneducated, but they do believe that there are values whose defense calls for commitment and self-sacrifice, even if the United States might ignore the threats to them safely. Someone has to do the right thing. At a minimum, someone has to say the right thing, even if it gives people like Kennan hives.

In practical terms, a policy committing the United States to intervene whenever a non-Communist government was threatened anywhere in the world was untenable, as even Acheson quickly acknowledged to congressional leaders after Truman’s speech. But, in principle, simply the existence of totalitarian states is an affront to democratic values. Totalitarian governments throw their political opponents into prison or kill them; they pursue genocidal policies toward their own people and try to dominate their weaker neighbors. If democratic governments are not committed to the abolition of such regimes—sooner or later, by some means or other—then their foreign policies are not worth much. Kennan wanted totalitarianism abolished, but he thought the United States could accomplish this largely by going about its business. Much of what Kennan predicted about the Soviet Union came to pass; it’s not clear that this was because the United States minded its own business.

Still, buried within Kennan’s realism there is a moral view: that in relations of power, which is what he thought international relations ultimately are, people can’t be trusted to do the right thing. They will do what the scorpion does to the frog—not because they choose to but because it’s their nature. They can’t help it. This is an easy doctrine to apply to other nations, as it is to apply to other people, since we can always see how professions of benevolence might be masks for self-interest. It’s a harder doctrine to apply to ourselves. And that was, all his life, Kennan’s great, overriding point. We need to be realists because we cannot trust ourselves to be moralists.

This was the danger that the United States faced after Europe had destroyed itself in the Second World War. We had power over other nations to a degree unprecedented in our history, possibly in the world’s history, and it was natural for us to conclude that we deserved it. “Power always thinks it has a great soul,” as another Adams, John, once said. Containment was intended as a continual reminder that we do not know what is best for others. It is a lesson to be ignored only with humility. ♦