

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

Diplomacy's Wise Man?

SKETCHES FROM A LIFE. By George F. Kennan. Pantheon. 364 pp. \$22.95

GEORGE KENNAN AND THE DILEMMAS OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. By David Mayers. Oxford. 402 pp. \$32.50

KENNAN AND THE ART OF FOREIGN POLICY. By Anders Stephanson. Harvard. 380 pp. \$35

George Kennan, diplomat, historian, essayist, and diarist, is the putative philosopher-king of American diplomacy. More conspicuous than Clark Clifford, more cerebral than Paul Nitze, more compelling than Dean Rusk, he has outlived and outwritten all the rest. His prodigious meditations on foreign policy quicken with the intensity of their author's personal experience and his awareness that the arc of his life describes nearly the entire history of U.S.-Soviet relations.

Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1904, educated at Princeton, and trained in Berlin as one of the fledgling Russianists of the Foreign Service, Kennan helped to open the first U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1934. He has observed and commented upon the behavior and culture of the Soviet Union ever since, first as a professional diplomat in the 1930s, 1944-46 and 1952, and subsequently on visits as a distinguished academician. Yet Kennan's role in the evolving U.S.-Soviet relationship has defied easy assessment. An anecdote from *Sketches from a Life* dramatizes the paradox of Kennan's career.

In December 1987, a typically self-conscious Kennan found himself in Washington ("not my Washington, of course...") to attend a reception for General Secretary Gorbachev at the Soviet embassy. "Remembering my wife's admonishments not to stand uncomfortably in the back-

ground as I normally do on such occasions but to insist on meeting the guest of honor and adding my particular set of banalities to the others he was condemned to endure," Kennan moved nearer to the crowd around Gorbachev.

At this point "the latter, whom I was meeting for the first time, appeared to recognize me, and amazed me by throwing out his arms and treating me to what has now become the standard statesman's embrace. Then, still holding on to my elbows, he looked me seriously in the eye and said: 'Mr. Kennan, we in our country believe that a man may be the friend of another country and remain, at the same time, a loyal and devoted citizen of his own; and that is the way we view you.'"

Kennan was stunned. Sixty years of Sovietology swam before his eyes. For Kennan it was a valediction, fitting yet melancholic. "If you cannot have this sort of recognition from your own government to ring down your involvement in such a relationship, it is nice to have it at least from the one-time adversary."

The anecdote, like many others in the richly evocative *Sketches*, captures the ironies of George Kennan's career. He spent decades serving the U.S. government, yet considered himself an outsider; he was known as a political realist, yet his sensibilities were those of a detached writer; for 50 years he penned prescriptions for a 20th-century democracy, yet he himself subscribed to virtues more suitable to an 18th-century aristocracy.

Since Kennan is today better known than most U.S. secretaries of state, it comes as some surprise to realize how brief was the period of his influence. It was largely confined to the period 1946-47, when he wrote three official or semi-official papers: the clarion call "Long Telegram" of February 22, 1946, from Mos-

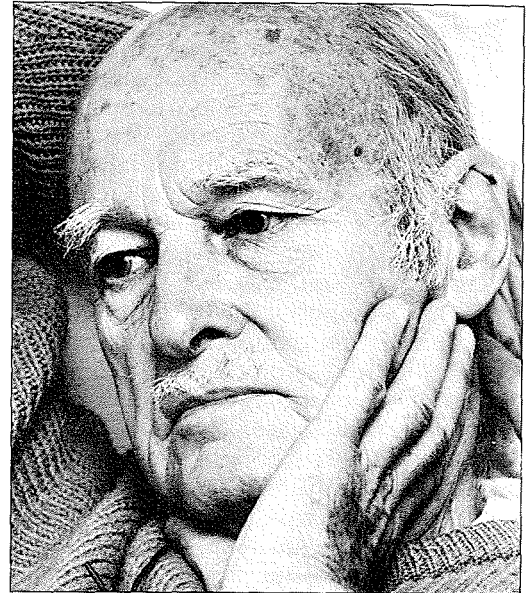
cow; the "Mr. X" article on "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," published in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*; and the masterly report of May 25, 1947, on "Certain Aspects of the European Recovery Program from the United States' Standpoint," which unified State Department thinking on what became the Marshall Plan.

The "Mr. X" article in particular lingers in the collective memory of students of American foreign policy. The article spun an alluring and prophetic vision of "either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power." But the article's influence rested on its famous prescription for "long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansionist tendencies . . . by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy."

It seemed that a new doctrine for U.S. foreign policy had been formulated, in terms more comprehensive than anything since the Monroe Doctrine (1823). Just as Winston Churchill's famous phrase, the "iron curtain," became forever associated with both him and the Cold War, so the Cold War concept of "containment" attached itself unshakably to the name of George Kennan. Henry Kissinger later observed that "Kennan came as close to authoring the diplomatic doctrine of his era as any diplomat in our history."

Although the containment article had been published anonymously, its author was unmasked within weeks. Recognition came with a vengeance. Kennan, like many another sudden celebrity, soon felt trapped by the source of his fame. He saw his meaning distorted and his message misread. Yet in 1946 and 1947, when it mattered most, Kennan—the consummate stylist—failed to make his message clear. At the time, several critics, notably Walter Lippmann, excoriated containment as a "strategic monstrosity," reactive, almost pathologically indiscriminate, and unduly militarized.

The galling truth was that Kennan sympathized with the thrust of Lippmann's



criticism. In between Kennan's drafting the "Mr. X" article in the winter of 1946-47 and its publication the following July, President Truman announced his "blank check" doctrine. According to the doctrine, America had the right to intervene anywhere in the world where it perceived a communist threat. In 1950, the United States did precisely that, sending U.S. troops to fight in the Korean conflict. Kennan's qualms about these developments caused him to change, in Anders Stephanson's words, "from wanting to contain the gushing Soviet flood to wanting to contain the ensuing American one." But Kennan's clarification of his position was slow in coming and was not widely known till he published his two-volume *Memoirs* in 1967 and 1972.

The outline of Kennan's career as sketched above appears in both of the studies reviewed here. The first, by David Mayers, a professor of political science at Boston University, is the more straightforward book—a conventional, scholarly mix of political and intellectual biography, detailed, decent, and, it must be said, dull.

Despite his soporific approach, Mayers effectively shows that Kennan's genteel drift to the margins of American public life had already begun by 1948. Kennan had

no stomach for bureaucracy. His short-term analyses were often unrealistic. (Throughout 1948 he argued against a commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, yet in the same year he was perfectly willing to contemplate direct U.S. intervention in the Italian electoral process.) Kennan increasingly found himself out of temper with the times, the "court jester" of the State Department, as he described himself. In 1952, as ambassador to the Soviet Union, the American who above all others could lay claim to a sympathetic understanding of that country and its people was declared *persona non grata*; he had compared conditions in Moscow with those of his internment under the Nazis 10 years earlier. In 1953, clearly incompatible with the newly installed secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, he resigned and retreated to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. There, with only short intermissions, he has remained, writing his polished books, articles, and pronouncements on foreign policy and Western civilization.

It is Kennan's realism, both as a diplomat and as a writer-analyst, that Mayers in conclusion praises: "Kennan," he writes, "has crusaded against the crusading and moralistic spirit of American foreign policy, has insisted on some version of the national interest as primary, and has uncompromisingly affirmed the superiority of diplomacy over the rigidity of military thinking on the one hand and naive internationalism on the other."

By contrast with Mayers, Anders Stephanson, a historian at Rutgers, has written a vigorous intellectual study, not exactly a biography, nor yet a history, but something akin to a sustained argument in historical perspective, a critical examination of the very thing that makes Kennan so interesting—his thinking.

To understand so unusual a political creature as Kennan, Stephanson blends the theoretical stratagems of political science, ethics, and even aesthetics. For the original Kennan he comes up with an original label: "organicist conservative". By this label, Stephanson distinguishes Ken-

nan from American conservatives who place excessive faith in individualism, competition, and material values, all of which Kennan views with a skeptical eye. Kennan's organicist conservatism is at odds with America's blatantly "inorganic" mobility and mass-produced culture. Although Kennan's vision of traditional values, elitism, and benevolent hierarchy did not force him to leave the country, as similar visions did Henry James and T. S. Eliot, it has made him, as he described himself in *Sketches*, an "expatriate in time," in his own "internal migration."

Stephanson's study shows how Kennan's outsider status has served him well. "It is [his] very marginality that has allowed him to see things outside the common purview and to argue, rightly or wrongly, what no one in a 'responsible' political position could." Kennan's elegant self-contradictions—the "internal expatriate" involved in public affairs, the 18th-century elitist working for a 20th-century democracy—made him "not always a great diplomat," Stephanson argues. But he quickly adds that Kennan "was a great analyst and policy-maker, one of the very few this country has produced in foreign affairs, perhaps the finest since John Quincy Adams."

The final irony of Kennan's long, distinguished career is being played out even now. Kennan's renown, which began with his authoring the Cold War doctrine of containment, has concluded with applause for his declaring that doctrine at an end. On April 4, 1989, 42 years after publishing his anonymous "Mr. X" article, the 85-year-old Kennan testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the future of Soviet-American relations. "Whatever reasons there may once have been for regarding the Soviet Union primarily as a possible, if not probable, military opponent," he declared, "the time for that sort of thing has clearly passed." As the session ended, the entire committee, a body not usually given to sentimental excess, rose in standing ovation.

—Alex Danchev, '89