

Foreign Policy and the Professional Diplomat

by George F. Kennan

"I have always been regarded by the United States establishment as an oddball, and I *am* a strange mixture of a reactionary and a liberal," George Kennan said in a lengthy *Encounter* interview last September. "It is perfectly true that in my attitude toward what is going on in the United States and Western civilization . . . I am worried and profoundly pessimistic."

Long a student of Russia, Mr. Kennan was U.S. Ambassador in Moscow during the Stalin era, and a career diplomat already known inside the State Department for his lucid dispatches to Washington. He became known to the American public through his much-cited, often-misunderstood 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs* advocating "containment" of Soviet expansionism. In recent years, he has, on occasion, outraged both liberals (with his critiques of egalitarian "mediocrity") and conservatives (by his antipathy to nuclear weaponry). In this essay, Mr. Kennan views the special burdens borne by American career diplomats, ranging from the "domestic-political distractions of their official masters," to popular distrust of their profession as "elitist," to the growing role of non-diplomats in foreign policy. He suggests, in effect, a fresh look.

Many of the forms of discomfiture experienced in the American effort to reconcile professional diplomacy with democracy are ones felt to some extent in every country where government is to a significant degree responsive to the popular will.

In the service of any such country there are times, I am sure, when the diplomatic professional finds himself

resenting the intrusion of domestic-political considerations into what he thinks should be the pure and rarified air of enlightened national interest, times when he longs for more concise, consistent, and sensible instructions from his own Foreign Office, times when he regrets his great distance, geographic and even intellectual, from those charged with the

making of policy. The American diplomat senses a certain community of experience with all these foreign colleagues—a certain comradeship in adversity—knowing that at least a part of his experience is theirs as well.

Nor is this sense of comradeship restricted entirely to diplomats who represent regimes we are accustomed to call "democratic." The distinctions between such regimes and ones of another character are not sharp enough to permit of any such clean distinction. Even the most tyrannical dictator has to give heed at times to domestic-political restraints of one sort or another on the plenitude of his power. He, too, is always to some extent in a competitive position, domestically.

Thus every foreign policy is to some extent a mixture of foreign-political motives and impulses with domestic-political ones; and every governmental leader, as he formulates and articulates foreign policy, appears partly as the protagonist of the general interests of his entire nation but partly also as a competitor in the struggle for domestic power, representing the interests of one particular faction against its domestic-political rivals, actual or potential.

Diplomats and Conservatism

This being so, all diplomats suffer to some extent from what we might call the domestic-political distractions of their official masters. Those who serve authoritarian regimes probably suffer the least, because here the intrusion of domestic-political considerations is usually at a minimum. But all suffer to some extent. And this, incidentally, is why the diplomat tends to be a conserva-

tive: he longs instinctively for a high concentration of authority behind him—for a government which knows what it is doing, which remains in office long enough to gain the confidence of other governments, which devises wise, far-seeing policies and sticks to them.

In all of this, the American diplomat is no exception. But he does suffer from some burdens that are unique in intensity if not in nature; and I think we should note what some of these are.

The peculiar impediments that rest upon the United States government in the conduct of foreign policy are ones that flow partly from institutions, imbedded as these are in the revered and almost ancient Constitution, but partly also from deeply ingrained traditions, customs, and habits of thought—all those things that Tocqueville referred to as *les manières* and to which, incidentally, he attributed greater importance, as determinants of national behavior, than to institutions.

The American federal government has, except in the field of taxation, relatively few powers or responsibilities of interior administration. Much of what in Europe would be called interior administration is left to the individual states; but insofar as such powers devolve upon the central government, they are largely left to the law-making powers of the Congress and thereafter to the haphazard and wholly unstructured judgments of the courts of law. The executive branch of the government hardly enters into the process of administration as an executive agent. The courts are required to decide literally hundreds of questions which in any European democracy would be decided by the internal admin-

istrative apparatus on the basis of the policies of the government then in power. But the courts decide questions, of course, on the basis of law, not of policy; and the executive branch of the government has as little influence over the decisions of the courts as it has over the Congress that passes the laws in the first place.

Domestic Limitations

This has important implications from the standpoint of foreign policy. I have often had occasion to point out that to conduct the foreign policy of a nation means to shape the behavior of that nation in all those aspects of its behavior which have a significant impact on the lives and interests of other peoples—even those aspects which are not customarily thought of as matters of foreign affairs. But this, precisely, is what the executive branch of the United States government, controlling neither Congress nor the courts, is in a very poor position to do. The President and the Secretary of State are expected to communicate with other governments concerning those as-

pects of American behavior which affect them; but it is a behavior they do not, and in many instances cannot, control. Thus they find themselves forced, in many instances, into the position of helpless intermediaries between internal and external forces both of which lie beyond their effective power of influence.

One might suppose that this deficiency would be at least in some degree remedied by the influence of the two major political parties which, after all, supply the senior personnel for both the executive and legislative branches of the government. But these, in contrast to their European equivalents, are not ideological parties. They are competing instrumentalities for the arrangement of consensus among a large number of vocal and powerful interest groups within the body of the citizenry; and their concept of their function is purely pragmatic. They have no strongly held ideas of their own, particularly not any of a theoretical or philosophical nature; and they experience no shame over the lack of them. If there are occasionally important issues on which the parties

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differ, these are more apt to reflect the geographic or professional interests of the elements to which they look for electoral support—not ideological considerations. Their task, as they conceive it, is to seek votes, not to shape opinion. Their counsels are the last place where anyone would look for the evolution of long-term, consistent policies.

It is, incidentally, with regard to the nature of the pressures that determine the conduct of these political parties that my view would diverge somewhat from that of my esteemed friend and colleague, Louis Halle. He sees the deficiency of American diplomacy primarily, as I understand it, in its helplessness before the tyranny of mass opinion. I see it rather in its helplessness before the pressures of various highly organized lobbies and interest groups, which intimidate the legislators and cause American foreign policy to be conducted in the interests of minorities rather than of the population at large. And it is with the resulting deficiency—the lack of rational, informed, and consistent policy, founded on the interests of the nation as a whole and the needs of world peace and stability—that the American diplomat has, in the first instance, to contend.

The Anomalous Diplomat

Secondly, this diplomat has to recognize that he is himself something of an anomaly within the traditional structure of American government—something for which there is not, and could not be, any fully natural and accepted place. He is not politically appointed—a circumstance which is sometimes a source of irritation, one suspects, for politicians, who see him as preëempting positions

and salaries that might otherwise be used to reward political supporters. But he is also not, or at least should not be, a member of that great body of lower-level servicing personnel known as the civil service, which constitutes the overwhelming majority of those, other than the political appointees, who serve the government. But between these two categories of people who work for the government—the political appointees and the domestic civil servants—there is no third category, familiar to American politicians and to public opinion generally, to which the Foreign Service could be assigned.

With minor exceptions the United States has no tradition at all of a self-administered career service within the *civilian* (as distinct from the military) sector of government. To the extent, therefore, that the American Foreign Service remains a career service, immune to political appointment and resistant to control by the domestic civil service, it tends to become an object of bewilderment and suspicion in the eyes of Congress, of the political parties, and of much of the press. And yet the legislators and the party politicians, in particular, are precisely the people on whom the Foreign Service is of course dependent for its appropriations, its salaries, and the physical premises and facilities with which it has to work.

Underlying this organizational isolation, and in part explaining and reinforcing it, is an even more widespread and serious Foreign Service burden—namely, a deeply ingrained prejudice against people who give their lives professionally to diplomatic work. This prejudice operates within the political establishment in the first instance but also with much

of the press and portions of the public.

Meritocracy in a Democracy

The late French ambassador, Jules Cambon, in the celebrated series of lectures he once delivered before the French *Académie* (published in 1926 under the title of *Le Diplomate*), observed that "democracies will always have ambassadors and ministers; it remains to be seen whether they will have diplomats. . . . [Diplomacy] is a profession that requires of those who practice it some cultivation and a certain *habitude du monde* [roughly: sophisticated view of the world]." But, he went on, to find people with these qualities, and to bring them together in a professional service, requires a certain process of selection; and this, he thought, would always be disagreeable to democratic tastes because "democracies have a difficult time tolerating anything that resembles selection."

However true these words might be with respect to other countries, they could not be more true of the United States, particularly at this time. We live, as we all know, in an age when egalitarianism is the prevailing passion, at least in many intellectual and political circles. We seem to stand in the face of a widespread belief that there is no function of public life that could not best be performed by a random assemblage of gray mediocrity. For people who see things this way, the idea of selecting people for any governmental function on the basis of their natural suitability for that sort of work must be rejected; because to admit that some people might be more suitable than others would be an elitist thought—hence inadmissible.

And not only is selection *per se* distasteful to many Americans, but the particular qualities that would have to underlie any proper selection for professional diplomacy are especially odious. The very idea of this *habitude du monde* of which Cambon spoke is repugnant to many because the experience essential to its acquisition is one that cannot be obtained within our society; it can be obtained only by residence and work outside it.

To many people in journalistic and political life this *habitude du monde* is particularly disturbing, because it seems to imply on the part of the professional diplomat a certain deliberate self-distancing from those great currents of mass reaction and emotion to which American society is uniquely vulnerable and by which journalists and politicians, above all others, are carried, of which they are the spokesmen, and in the reflection of which they find their inner security. To them, the outlook of the diplomatic professional is a challenge—all the more provoking because it is one they cannot meet on its own ground. And the result of this is that the diplomat comes only too easily to be viewed as a species of snobbish and conceited elitist, *dépaysé*, estranged from his own country and countrymen, giving himself airs, looking down upon his fellow citizens, fancying himself superior to them by virtue of his claim to an esoteric knowledge and expertise in which they cannot share and which by the very fact of its foreign origin challenges the soundness and adequacy of their world of thought.

And in this way there emerges, and finds partial acceptance, the familiar stereotype of the American diplomat as a somewhat effeminate, rather Anglicized figure (the British are

usually made the victims of our inferiority complexes), as a person addicted to the false attractions of an elegant European social life, usually to be found at parties, attired in striped pants, balancing a teacup, and nursing feelings of superiority towards his own country as he attempts to ingratiate himself with the hostesses and the officials of another one. The fact that there is no substance for this stereotype—the fact that what little substance it might once have had passed out of our lives decades ago, the fact that this particular professional dedication involves today a great deal of hard work, much discomfort, much loneliness, a dedication to the service of the nation far beyond what most people at home are ever asked to manifest, and, last but not least, in many instances no small amount of danger—all this is of no avail. The stereotype exists. It persists. It is gratifying to many egos. It will not soon be eradicated.

A Service without Defenders

The multiplicity of critics and detractors of the American Foreign Service would not be so serious, perhaps, if it were balanced by any considerable body of defenders; but this, unhappily, is not the case. The Department of State, which theoretically controls the Service and ought properly to defend it, has neither the ability nor the will to act very effectively in this direction. The ability is lacking because, of all the departments and agencies of the United States government, the Department of State is perhaps the only one that has no domestic constituency—no sizeable body of the citizenry, that is, which understands its function and is concerned for it, no special

interest groups who stand to profit by its activity and are ready to bring pressure to bear on Congress on its behalf. Lacking these things, it has little domestic influence. And the State Department's own will to defend the Service is also often lacking, because the Department is normally headed and administered by people without foreign-service experience—sometimes even by people who share the very prejudices and failures of understanding just referred to.

A diplomatic service, to be what it should be, would have to be self-administered. Only people who have some personal knowledge and experience of the substance of its work could fully understand its needs. But the Service has for decades been administered, as a rule, by people of whom this could not be said. With the exception of the brief incumbency of Christian A. Herter (1959–1961), it is hard to think of the name of any Secretary of State over the last half-century who was seriously interested in the Service as an organization, who had understanding for it, and was concerned to improve it. For most of these men, so far at least as I personally could see, the Foreign Service was a strange duck, not fully comprehensible and of uncertain value, for the further fate of which it was best to avoid responsibility.

Our Crowded Outposts

The helplessness of the American Foreign Service makes itself felt particularly in its relations with the other departments and agencies of the United States government. These latter tend to see, one suspects, in the American diplomatic and consular missions abroad pleasant and convenient places for the stationing of personnel. They sometimes view

with envy and disapproval the exclusive preëmption of such stations by the Department of State. They have long insisted, and with much success, on the right to supply those stations with abundant personnel of their own. The worst offenders are the military and the intelligence and security services; but there are many others as well. The result is that today the American official establishments in other countries are said to contain more people sent out by other departments and agencies of the government than by the Department of State; and they are, for this reason, only partially under the State Department's control.

Generalist vs. Specialist

This phenomenon of the preëmption of a large part of the staffing of the American missions abroad by agencies of the government other than the Department of State is, of course, closely connected with a theoretical problem which has long bedeviled the discussion of the problems of professional diplomacy. This is the perennial question of "generalists vs. specialists"—more specifically, the question of the relative value, in diplomacy today, of the generally trained diplomatist as compared with that of the functional specialist: the economist, the scientist, the public expert, the sociologist, the anthropologist, etc. It is often argued that in the face of the growing complexity of international life, together with the fact that many questions are now treated in highly specialized multinational forums, the role of the generally trained diplomatist, schooled in the handling of political relations with other governments at the bilateral political level, is fading; and that the diplomacy of

the future is unavoidably going to be conducted, increasingly, by large bodies of specialists schooled in the intricacies of one or another of the technical and functional aspects of modern life. This is a view, incidentally, which naturally finds support among those who consider it unnecessary and undesirable that diplomacy should flow exclusively from a single disciplined coördinating center and who think that it would be more "democratic" if there were a greater involvement of the common citizenry and if the impulses and initiatives sprang from a multitude of private or semi-private sources.

The thesis of the greater and growing usefulness of the technical and scientific expert is of course agreeable to agencies of the government other than the State Department because most of the people they would like to station abroad belong to this category. But it is also congenial to the outlooks of many people outside the governmental establishment. Americans have a general inclination to place confidence in the expert. He is reassuringly free, as a rule, from anything resembling Cambon's *habitude du monde*. His American integrity is not suspected of having been contaminated by long residence abroad or familiarity with foreign tongues. He does not deal with the political aspects of foreign relations. He is thus seen as a relatively safe and dependable sort of person—honest, sensible, and down-to-earth—in contrast to the professional diplomat who gets involved with foreign societies and makes himself, as one suspects, the spokesman for foreign values.

Although I could discuss this problem at length, let me say only that no one questions the need for expert

assistance in the conduct of foreign relations in this age. Many of the problems that arise have highly complex technical or scientific implications of which the policy-maker needs unquestionably to be informed. But the generalist—the person of wide cultural horizons and knowledge of the world at large and experience with its bitter political problems—is needed, too. And of the two, the generalist occupies the more central and essential position; for without his guidance and coordination of their efforts the experts, however admirable, would produce only chaos.

Faced with the obstacles I have just described, the American Foreign Service has had a troubled and discouraging history. Established in 1924, and initially administered by people who had some personal experience or familiarity with diplomatic work, it functioned for a few years more or less as it had been intended to function. Admission was only at the bottom, by competitive examination. The examinations were well-designed, severe, and impartially administered. The persons admitted were few and, for the most part, well selected. The results, as it seems to me, were relatively good.

But with the onset of the economic crisis, at the beginning of the 1930s, the lack of understanding for the Service in wider circles of the political establishment began to make itself felt. Congress, during certain of the years of the economic crisis, neglected to appropriate money for further recruitment into the Service, thus starving it of personnel and seriously disrupting its age structure. Then, during World War II, it was decided that diplomatic work represented in wartime an inferior form of service as compared with military

service; and recruitment was again suspended for a time, on the theory that the Service should not compete with military conscription.

The Era of Lateral Entry

It was unavoidable, in these circumstances, that when the war came to an end, the Service was far too small, numerically, for the expanded postwar functions it was now being called upon to perform; and this then became the excuse for transferring into the Service large bodies of surplus personnel from the bloated and now redundant special wartime agencies. This was not always unfortunate. Among these, there were always some competent and even talented people. But the original standards of selection had of course been violated.

By the early 1950s a situation had been created in which only a minority of those who went by the name of Foreign Service Officer had entered at the lowest rank and in the normal manner; the others had simply been grafted onto the Service, mostly at intermediate levels, without competitive examination. This situation has, I understand, been somewhat improved in recent years, but by no means entirely corrected.

It should also be mentioned that in the years after World War II the positions of senior administrative authority came to be staffed, both at home and abroad, by a new race of professional administrators usually chosen from outside the Service itself. Their selection and appointment reflected, one must assume, a view on the part of higher circles in Washington that there was such a thing as a pure administrative science, divorced from deep acquaintance with the substantive aspects of an

organization's work.

I would not like to oversimplify this question. There are indeed certain abstract administrative principles that are applicable to any large organization, and certain useful forms of administrative experience that can be acquired in fields of work other than the one in which one ultimately serves. Not only that, but many of these administrative experts proved to be useful and dedicated people who soon developed, as they served abroad, a fifth sense for what diplomatic work was all about. But the addition of this component to the Foreign Service added importantly both to its numbers and to the bureaucratic cumbersomeness of the organization.

The Mockery of a Dream

It is not surprising, in these circumstances, that the American Foreign Service we know today bears only a limited resemblance to what its founders, in 1924, expected it to be. Commanding understanding neither in official nor in private opinion; the helpless football of a thousand minor abuses and jealousies at the hands of official Washington; vastly overstaffed; its official premises in other countries cluttered with people who were never intended to be diplomats and never will be; theoretically governed by a Department of State as helpless in the jungle of Washington bureaucracy as is the Service itself; actually governed by a confused interaction of budgetary experts, congressional committees, professional administrators, labor union organizers, and mathematical computers;—the American Foreign Service stands today, for many of us old hands, as a sad mockery of the dream of those who

established it, the dream of a rigorously selected, highly qualified, dedicated, and disciplined corps of career officers, entrusted with the performance of the traditional diplomatic and consular functions, and enjoying the confidence at home that the importance of their work, and their high standards of devotion and integrity, warranted.

The roots of this situation go back, as we have seen, to a number of causes. But there is one which I have not mentioned thus far and which deserves particularly to be emphasized. In the hope of placing it on a sound basis, the Service has been subjected, since World War II, to a long series of investigations (usually by outsiders) and attempts at reform. Some of these have been better, some of them worse. But their greatest deficiency has lain not so much in their nature—in the nature, that is, of the various reforms proposed or attempted—as in their frequency and in the resulting lack of consistent treatment of these problems over long periods of time. In a professional career organization of this nature (and, I suspect, of any other nature) there is at least a 15-year interval between cause and effect—between the vital administrative decisions and the most important results. It is approximately this span of time that has to elapse between the initial recruitment of the beginning officer and his emergence as a mature and experienced diplomat entrusted with senior responsibility. If the process of training and advancement is to be fully effective, the treatment of the officer must be consistently adhered to over this 15-year period. Plainly, this cannot be the case with a Service which is delivered up every four years or

so to a new panel of investigators and a new set of administrative chiefs, each bringing to his tasks not only his own ideas but his own ignorance of what has been done before.

Yet the Species Survives

It might seem surprising, in these circumstances, that I should venture to speak at all, as I have been doing here, of the American diplomatic professional; and yet I have good reason for doing so. Because the truth is that notwithstanding all these obstacles and discouragements there are to be found within the ranks of this service today, not always visible to the naked eye through the forest of bureaucratic excrescences by which they are surrounded but there nevertheless, an amazingly large number of talented, imaginative, and devoted younger people who fully deserve the name of "diplomat" in the best sense. They are there, and they do what they do, not *because* of the system by which they are chosen and governed, but *in spite* of it. They represent, one can only conclude, a mutation of the species. They are born, not made.

It would seem that somehow or other, perhaps because of the multiplicity of national origins out of which our population has been formed, American society has the capability of producing out of its own midst, by its own mysterious genetic processes and other influences, a considerable number of people qualified by taste, temperament, and character for the pursuit of a diplomatic career, capable of learning by themselves in their work what others have failed to teach them, capable of acquiring in that field of endeavor, with little help from Wash-

ington, a competence which is as valuable to their own country (and, some of us like to think, to other countries as well) as it is unappreciated by most of those whom they serve.

It is of these people—of this unsung minority of what you might call self-taught and self-encouraged public servants—that I am speaking when I use the term "American diplomat." They have no organization and no collective authority of their own. Not all are even technically career people. They are not easy to identify—except by their own colleagues. They find themselves organizationally lost in a much larger body of people, most of whom share neither their experience nor their outlooks. Many resign at a tragically early stage and seek less frustrating channels of self-expression. Nobody in Washington cares.

But they do exist. They exist in larger numbers than anyone has a right to expect. And they stand as the refutation, at least in the United States, of Cambon's first assertion: that whereas democracies would always have ambassadors, it was a question whether they would ever have diplomats. The United States government, I am happy to say, still has both. At times they are even identical. Their existence may serve as a reminder that the dream of providing my country with a professional diplomatic arm commensurate in quality with its weight in world affairs is not a lost cause. Perhaps some day one or another of those surprising turns that do from time to time occur in American political life will provide us with the basis for a new and more promising attack on this time-honored but retractable problem.