
The Northern Mind in American Diplomacy

ALAN K. HENRIKSON

Geographical nativism and political cosmopolitanism are not usually combined. An understanding of the relationship between them, however, can illuminate the problem of the relationship of the United States of North America (as it was once sometimes called) to the rest of the world. Perhaps no other major power, because of the physical remoteness of its national territory from the countries of origin of its diverse population and the many places overseas where its diplomats, soldiers, and other citizens are engaged today, has such a complex history of correlating “home” and “abroad.” In the development of national policy, it risks launching into interventionism or lapsing into isolationism. Individual Americans as policymakers, with their different familial and geographical backgrounds, have different perspectives on how the “home/abroad” balance should appropriately be made. To an extent, these perspectives are *regional*, with transnational extensions—spread across climatic zones, or isothermal belts in Alexander von Humboldt’s global cartography. If those in political positions have sufficient power and authority, their geographically formed regional outlooks, “northern” or “southern,” can shape U.S. national and international policy.

Twenty years ago, I was invited by the *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* to author an article examining Dean Rusk, U.S. secretary of state between 1961 and 1969 and a figure whose life and career exemplified “The Southern Mind in American Diplomacy.”¹ Born and raised in Georgia, Rusk went to college in North Carolina and, owing to his close friendship with President Lyndon B. Johnson and the family memory of an early kinsman’s migration westward, enjoyed a strong connection with Texas

Alan K. Henrikson is director of diplomatic studies at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where he teaches U.S. diplomatic history, the theory and practice of diplomacy, and political geography.

as well. Rusk's diplomacy was influenced also, of course, by his formative experiences as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and as a soldier in India during the Second World War. Yet the "Southern mind," of which historians—notably W. J. Cash and C. Vann Woodward—have written, surely continued to affect his thinking.² The South's having fought and lost a civil war, its experience of poverty, its "peculiar institution" of slavery and legacy of racial discrimination, and its military tradition and associated code of honor were not merely regional memories and mores. They were shared with much of mankind, especially in developing countries—the global South. The need for political reconstruction, economic development, and social justice became urgent and evident during Rusk's time, and he recognized it. Even the American South's impulse to "rise again," to regain lost status and to build a prosperous future (a "New South"), can be understood as an element in a wider *southern* consciousness. It is a dynamic, progressive element in the "Southern Mind."

The recent publication of *George Kennan: A Study of Character*, by the historian John Lukacs provides an opportunity to consider whether there might be a "Northern Mind" at work in American diplomacy.³ George F. Kennan, the first director of the U.S. Department of State's Policy Planning Staff—whose policy focus was the developed First World and Second World (mainly, Soviet Russia)—lived most of his life in the North. Kennan, of Scottish and English ancestral origin, was born in Wisconsin. He studied at Princeton, a community to which he returned, following his State Department career, as a researcher and later professor in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study. He owned a farm in Pennsylvania and, for many years, summered in Norway, the home country of his wife, Annelise. Perhaps most importantly, his overseas diplomatic experience was primarily in northern Europe and Russia. That left an imprint on him.

In proposing the topic, "The Northern Mind in American Diplomacy," as a counterpart article on George F. Kennan, one is raising a number of questions. What does Kennan's own outlook and policy view—and that of the broader "Northern Mind"—consist of? What are its elements? If there are, principally, two regional "minds" that govern American diplomacy, how are they related? Do they interact, and do they do so harmoniously—or disharmoniously? Together, do they make up an ideological-psychological whole—an overall "American" mentality that, however complex (with "East Coast" and "West Coast" perspectives not forgotten), is more or less unified, and hence stable over time? Or does "North" vs. "South" continue to divide Americans in the way they think about the world and

their nation's place in it? Does the "Northern Mind," as will be suggested in this essay, imply a national self-containment of a particularly septentrional kind? Is it essentially preservative, even conservative? Does it, in foreign policy terms, promise equilibrium and peace with the world, or is it likely to be disruptive in its narrow emphasis on restraint—against a "Southern Mind" emphasis on political and military commitment and on economic and social development?

George Kennan's concept of the world and of the role of the United States in it is a good starting-point for assessing what is here posited as the "Northern" factor in U.S. foreign relations. His uniqueness, for there was "only one George Kennan," as many who knew him have emphasized, makes an effort to generalize his outlook, like that of any other single person, ultimately impossible. But Kennan's very singularity is so definite, so strong as to specify a new genus of American policymaker and diplomat.

"A SORT OF NORDIC COSMOPOLITAN"

George Kennan's slant on the world was *northern*, and his view was remarkably consistent. In much too simple terms, it was aimed at the world above approximately 40 degrees North latitude. It governed his sense of who he was, and who he became. This was in turn broadly circumscribed by where he felt *at home*. He was far from alone among American citizens of any generation in having a "northern" personal and family homeland-sense, but his self-awareness in that respect was exceptionally keen. It was informed by history, the outdoors, his travels, and by his lifelong habit of self-reflection in the mirror of his environment, especially the natural environment as he envisioned it before being despoiled by industrialization. He came to see himself as "a sort of Nordic cosmopolitan"—which, in his case, does not seem at all oxymoronic.

In an essay in his book of scenic thought-pieces, *Sketches from a Life*, Kennan reflects upon the various places that he could possibly identify as "home," recognizing that no single location would suffice. These were not just the places where he had lived but also, as he notes, "those curious places—parts of Rhode Island, certain sections of Moscow and of Leningrad—where I had felt so overpowering a sense of familiarity as to evoke the mystery of a former life." In his view, geographic places were fixed in with memory, and geographical spaces were filled with remembered history. Thus, for him, "home" was "the whole great arc of the northern and western world, from Moscow across Scandinavia and the British Isles to Wisconsin. One was, in other words, a sort of Nordic cosmopolitan,

truly domiciled only in the natural beauty of the seas and countrysides of this northern world, in its seasons, its storms, its languid summers, but occasionally also in its vanishing urban settings, the half-remembered ones, pictured as they were before the inundation by the automobile.”⁴

Kennan’s standards and ideals were northern-culture ones. His lineage, as Kennan himself described it in his *Memoirs*, was “a straight line of pioneer farmers, digressing occasionally into the other free professions”—including the clergy.⁵ His father, Kossuth Kent Kennan, who was born in 1851 and whose first name was inspired by the tour throughout the United States of the exiled Hungarian patriot, Lajos Kossuth, was a lawyer. “The outstanding characteristics of all of them,” of both his male and his female forbears, “was an obdurate, tight-lipped independence, a reluctance to become involved with other people (unless a church community), a fighting clear of every form of association that might limit one’s freedom of individual choice.”⁶ It is not difficult to see in Kennan’s characterization of his ancestors a *self*-description—as well as an acknowledgement of his personal and even his political and social values: freedom as a way of life and work, and independence in the sense of individual self-reliance and community self-sufficiency.

The very word “freedom,” as the historian David Hackett Fischer has pointed out, “derives from a large family of ancient languages in northern Europe.”⁷ In contrast with “liberty,” for which the Hungarians as well as the Greeks and Italians and others around the Mediterranean in the South fought, the term “freedom” referred to being a “free people,” joined naturally by kinship and rights of belonging, rather than having been violently liberated or otherwise emancipated, by higher authority or through heroic action. Freedom, unlike liberty, was not an escape from servitude or other form of bondage. It was a birthright, possessed inherently, rather than externally bestowed or forcibly seized. It was autonomy, not won, but lived, in more or less the same place, and in a kind of perpetuity, if with certain ingrown characteristics.

In *Around the Cragged Hill*, Kennan recognizes that “the decision to emigrate” perhaps especially from such northerly places as the British Isles was in most cases not the result of necessity but, commonly, “a matter of individual choice and decision”—and, as such, it was often “debatable and even controversial,” particularly in the eyes of those “left at home.” A dialectic of pride and guilt thereby was created. The idealized image of the United States as a land in which every child “born in freedom” would have a perfectly equal chance, owes something, Kennan suggests, to the “pressure to vindicate” the emotion that immigrants to America felt “before

those who remained at home in the old country.”⁸ Kennan thus did not see America and Europe as having fully broken into two separate worlds, with one inherently superior or inferior to the other. Like earlier members of the Kennan family, of whom he wrote a detailed history when in his nineties, he felt a continuing Old World bond.

For Kennan as a writer, who was influenced early in his career by the travelogist Alfons Paquet, there lay “in all scenes observed” a deeper reality; it was “there to be sensed, if not seen, with the requisite intuition and effort.”⁹ The places he attempted to experience were for him, as for his literary model Paquet, situations of potential meaning, sites with dimensions of significant direction. His bias was toward the north. “The high northern latitude, the extreme slant of the sun’s rays, the flatness of the terrain, the frequent breaking of the landscape by wide, shimmering expanses of water,” Kennan wrote when later serving in Russia of the “city of Sankt Petersburg” (then Leningrad), “all these combine to accent the horizontal at the expense of the vertical and to create everywhere the sense of immense space, distance, and power.” Moreover: “At every hand one feels the proximity of the Russian north—silent, somber, infinitely patient.”¹⁰

Lukacs, in *George Kennan: A Study of Character*, similarly writes: “The physical and sometimes even intellectual characteristics—and, more important: inspirations—of George Kennan were northern: but also European, meaning, among other things, something wider than Scottish or English or Bostonian. He had what a sensitive French writer in the early twentieth century (it may have been Valéry Larbaud) once phrased as *la nostalgie du Nord*, a phrase whose literal translation in English may be precise but somehow inadequate.”¹¹

Lukacs goes on to note another element in Kennan’s makeup that may be related to his northward yearning: “a kind of sensitivity so fine as to be somehow feminine—surely feminine rather than masculine. It existed not contrary to but in harmony with his other, so often straight and sometimes even rigid but at other times boyish kind of manliness.”¹² Lukacs follows another writer on Kennan, John Lamberton Harper, who associates Kennan’s response to “The call of the North” even more closely with his “feminine” side—more precisely, with an unmistakable maternal orientation. Harper sees the North as “the natural theater for Kennan’s melancholy disposition—a setting suited to a person for whom the experience of beauty was inseparable from the sense of loss.”¹³ Kennan’s mother, Florence James Kennan, died when he was only two months old, and, although lovingly looked after by attentive older sisters, his mother’s passing left him with an unfillable void well into adulthood.

Later that same year in Berlin, where he had been studying history and the Russian language, he met and soon became engaged to Annelise Soerensen from Kristiansand, Norway. He traveled by steamer to Norway to meet his fiancée's parents. As he recalls, with unabashed thankfulness, he was "received into the family from that moment on like a son and brother, and treated thenceforth, over some thirty-five years with an openhearted warmth and kindness that ignored or accepted my failings and made the most of what was left."¹⁴ He soon acquired a house nearby and a sailboat (his first, the *Nagawicka*, was named for a lake in Wisconsin, and his second, the more sea-going, was called *Northwind*). Vacationing in Norway with his combined family whenever possible for decades, he felt that it had become for him "a second country."¹⁵

It may even be that Kennan had in the back of his mind, as a subregional model for his controversial "disengagement" proposal put forward in his BBC Reith Lectures in 1957, the historically "neutral," politically nonaligned tradition of the Nordic countries. The North during the Cold War was the "quiet corner" of Europe. One reason for Kennan's personal opposition to forming a transatlantic defensive pact—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—in the first place was his belief that to introduce into East-West relations the note of "military defense" would frighten the outlying countries, notably the Scandinavian states.¹⁶ Although Norway and Denmark as well as Iceland chose to become NATO members, a peaceful "balance" was kept throughout the northern subregion without heavy strategic military deployments. The northern countries cooperated in the regional Nordic Council on the basis of a common northern identity and sense of familiarity that interstate diplomacy, and "paradiplomacy," involving non-central authorities, has kept alive.¹⁷ The peoples of the North had a communal character that was formed by, and was revealed in relationships with others in a way that, using Lukacs's fine phrase, "goes beneath the category of 'foreign relations.'"¹⁸

Kennan's "Nordic cosmopolitanism" was personal and familial to him. It was also a larger, international view, common to northern climes. But was it shared by his fellow U.S. citizens? Is a "northern mind," such as he himself strongly possessed, evident also in the policy of the United States of America in its relations with the world?

KENNAN'S "NORTHERN HEMISPHERIC" VIEW AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Although his horizons were broadened by his experiences, Kennan's perspective on the world was nonetheless limited. He did see the entire

globe, but his picture of it was, as he himself suggested, framed by the “great arc” of Milwaukee to Moscow. Within that span, he was comfortable and “at home.”

If an individual is influential enough, as Kennan arguably was, in the making of American foreign policy, his personal perspective can shape an entire nation’s thought and behavior. In what specific ways might U.S. foreign policy in the postwar period be considered to be “northern,” and even reflective of Kennan’s own character and thinking? One must look, first, at the Containment policy which was, at least in its origin, distinctly “his.” As many historians and policy commentators have noted, the notion of “containing” Russian or, more broadly, communist expansion, has been a continuing thread in American foreign policy, whether made by Democrats or

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Republicans, almost to the present day.¹⁹ In his initial exposition of the “containment” concept in the latter half of the 1940s, Kennan did not qualify it as having a particularly northern geographical reference. Later, however, he made its geostrategic focus, as well as its primarily *political* character, clearer. Speaking at a “Containment” conference at the National Defense University in 1985, he said that when he had used the word “containment” with respect to Russia in 1946, what he had in mind was “not at all the averting of the sort of military threat people are talking about today.” He recalled:

What I *did* think I saw—and what explained the use of that term—was what I might call an ideological-political threat. Great parts of the Northern Hemisphere—notably Western Europe and Japan—had just then been seriously destabilized, socially, spiritually, and politically, by the experiences of the recent war. Their populations were dazed, shell-shocked, uncertain of themselves, fearful of the future, highly vulnerable to the pressures and enticements of communist minorities in their midst. The world communist movement was at that time a unified, disciplined movement under the total control of the Stalin regime in Moscow.²⁰

His policy focus was clearly on Moscow. Even in the late 1940s, however, Kennan could see fissures within the communist movement: the breaking away of Tito’s Yugoslavia in 1948, and also the growing independence from

Moscow of China's communist leadership under Mao Tse-tung. Kennan's longstanding interest in Titoism probably was a factor in inclining him in 1961 to accept President John F. Kennedy's offer of the U.S. ambassadorship to Yugoslavia (his other choice being Poland). Long hopeful for an end to the East-West divide in Europe, Kennan had been appalled by the simplistic Captive Nations Resolution that Congress had passed in 1959 and also by the adoption of discriminatory trade measures that could only drive Yugoslavia back into the Soviet bloc.²¹ As for China, he had recognized early on the potential for Mao-Stalin rivalry, caused not only by differences over Marxist-Leninist doctrine but also by a divergence of Chinese and Russian ambitions. In one of his lectures at the National War College in 1947 he had said that "if you let the Russians alone in China, they will come a cropper on that problem just as everybody else has for hundreds of years."²²

Lukacs, noting that Kennan "foresaw conflicts between Moscow and Peking long before these became apparent," adds, speculatively but entirely plausibly: "I even make bold to say that when it came to conflicts between Russians and Chinese, Kennan would incline to favor the former—the very opposite of the policies that such different presidents as Nixon and Carter and Reagan and Clinton and now, more than a half-century later, Bush had chosen to take."²³ Given Kennan's strong "northern" identification with Russia, its people, and its culture, this makes sense. The speculation is supported by the advice he once gave to Congress at the time of the Vietnam War: "I think we will find it easier to deal with the Chinese in the long run if the Russians remain in a reasonably close and intimate relationship with the West."²⁴ He himself felt "closer" to Russia, and probably believed that the United States, in its policy and diplomacy, should, too.

From his northern vantage, Kennan emphasized the strategic interest of the United States in secure communications across both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This reflected the navalism of Alfred Thayer Mahan, and also the profound strategic circumstance of the United States having emerged victorious, in both theaters, from the Second World War.²⁵ "From the standpoint of American security, Japan occupies in the Pacific region a position analogous in certain respects to that of the British Isles in the Atlantic region," he argued in *Around the Cragged Hill* (1993). "In both instances, the United States has a definite interest in seeing that the respective archipelagoes do not become victim to aggression or intimidation by any of their great continental neighbors, and that there is preserved a relationship with their governments that is based on the recognition of a community of strategic interests." These, as Kennan defined them, were "The Real Alliances" of the United States of America.²⁶ They were based on

historical affinity, on economic ties, and also on relative geographical proximity, along with physical and political access—via U.S. sea and air power and U.S. diplomacy. Beyond these spheres in which the United States could, if necessary, exercise direct control, Kennan believed, it should cooperate with regional allies, thus relying on co-optation rather than on force.

Kennan's geostrategic vision, though narrower than that of many of his successors among U.S. foreign policy planners, did not fundamentally differ from theirs in having a North American core—the geographical base. The great strategic lines of the later Nixon-Kissinger "triangular" diplomacy—with the United States self-positioned as a balancer between Russia and China—and of the Carter-Brzezinski "trilateral" diplomacy—with the United States, plus Canada, placed as the intervening middle partner between Western Europe and Japan—also are, essentially, *northern* hemispheric structures of grand strategic thinking. Looking outward from North America, the Nixon school focused primarily on the geopolitical tensions within the "East," between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, with only a secondary focus on insular Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and other southerly zones of regional conflict. The Carter school did turn somewhat away from North America, and even from Western Europe and Japan, toward the emerging Third World countries whose resources the northern "industrial democracies" required and whose economies they proposed to help develop, and whose human rights they wished to promote. But, in the end, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it too reverted to a northern concentration on Russia.

Kennan himself had notoriously very little interest in "the South." In this he differed markedly from the below-the-Mason-Dixon Line personal interests of Jimmy Carter or, before him, his fellow Georgian, Dean Rusk. This was a matter of temperament—and, actually, of temperature. In every respect,

Kennan considered the broad region of developing countries toward the Equator an intemperate zone. In 1950, near the end of his work in the State Department, he made an official trip throughout Latin America, where he never previously had been. For many Americans, in their popular literature as well as official pronouncements like the Monroe Doctrine, the countries to the south were part of an extended hemispheric "home."²⁷

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For Kennan, it was alien territory, and almost physically unwelcoming. “I found the journey anything but pleasant,” he confessed in his *Memoirs*. “At Mexico City the altitude bothered me; the city made upon me a violent, explosive impression. I felt that it never slept at night (perhaps because I myself didn’t). The sounds of its nocturnal activity struck me as disturbed, sultry, and menacing.” He was hardly less disturbed by sensations inflicted upon him in Caracas, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Lima, as in Central America. He felt overwhelmed by “the tragic nature of human civilization in all those countries to the south of us.” His discomfort was political, too. In some of the capitals he visited he was met with communist-organized demonstrations and slogans of “Kennan, Go Home!”²⁸

His report to Secretary of State Dean Acheson contained a deeper, yet impressionistic analysis—an example of his geographical *Realien* approach. “As for nature, one is struck at once with the way in which South America is the reverse of our own North American continent from the standpoint of its merits as a human habitat.” Whereas North America is “broad and ample in those temperate portions of it which are most suitable to human life,” South America is “wide and vast in those portions of it which are close to the equator and least suited to human habitation.” In the latter, “climate, combined with Castilian tradition, has pressed a number of the more important urban communities up into poorly accessible mountain sites, at the price of tragic and ineradicable artificiality.” Because of these circumstances, Kennan judged, “the shadow of a tremendous helplessness and impotence falls today over most of the Latin American world.” He later recognized the starkness of his description and, in his *Memoirs*, he added this partially compensating afterthought: “Latin America is the only one of the world’s great subdivisions where the human being is still entirely human, where no one has nuclear weapons or is even thinking of developing them, where the great fund of precept and experience and custom that has been created in the Christian West to reconcile man with God and with the requirements of a civilized condition is still wholly relevant.”²⁹

Kennan’s view of Latin America, fortunately, never became the policy of the United States. The assistant secretary for that region at the time prevailed upon Secretary Acheson to forbid the report’s distribution.³⁰ “His sardonic summaries of what he saw as a fatally flawed civilization disconcerted even some of his remaining associates on the planning staff,” as Lukacs recounts the reaction Kennan’s report caused.³¹ Nonetheless, the very fact that his “funereal assessments” were quickly and unceremoniously buried is, indirectly, an indication that the “northern” attitude toward the Western Hemisphere’s southern half that Kennan expressed

was, though unavowable, to some degree at least shared within the government. Circulation of the report would have caused embarrassment as a measure of what, perhaps, some American policy-makers *really* thought. That Kennan, as the State Department's leading planner with the rank of Counselor, *did* think these things was itself such proof.

Other parts of the global "South" did not appeal to Kennan either. In 1944, he had passed through Baghdad on the way to Moscow. He found it an "inferno of heat." The vertical sun of Iraq was to him an "unbending hostile power." He saw its people as a "population unhygienic in its habits, sorely weakened and debilitated by disease, inclined to all manner of religious bigotry and fanaticism, condemned by the tenets of the most widespread faith to keep a full half of the population—namely, the feminine half—confined and excluded from the productive efforts of society by a system of indefinite house arrest."³²

Africa did not seem to him much better—also in part because of its geographical and climatological conditions. On a trip to southern Africa in 1970 he saw "a countryside not without a certain pale, calm beauty, but pathetic in its ravaged, depleted character." A university he saw there made upon him "a sad, incomplete, unsuccessful impression." He could not help but think "how unfortunate the white man had been, in all his undertakings for Africa, how false and misconceived had been his effort to Westernize the African." Reflecting "on the quiet, dry vastness of this southern African countryside," he wondered: "Why anyone should have wanted to trek across it and to establish himself in it in the first place, I could not understand."³³

Southeast Asia, with its jungles and rugged terrain, did not seem to Kennan a suitable place for Western settlement or involvement either. As the first deputy for foreign affairs at the National War College, he had lectured in early 1947 about the French colonial role, the "Annamese movement," and the question of the Soviet influence there. After a briefing in which the territory of French Indochina was described as a "rough country, malarial, and extremely difficult" for exploration or any other operation, Kennan spoke about Ho Chi Minh and his prospects for gaining independence. Kennan expressed his doubt that the Soviet Union had "anything to do" with the start of the current Vietnamese uprising against the French. Not convinced that "the Annamese are far enough advanced to set up a government which will be really their own and will not be susceptible to penetration by outside forces whether from Kuomintang China or Yenan China," he did acknowledge that he could "be wrong." Yet he had not seen evidence that "these people are fit to govern themselves." For American

policy, this implied caution. “I don’t consider people fit to govern themselves who can’t keep their own national movement out of the hands of outside forces. I think we have to be careful in supporting people when that is the case.”³⁴

Years later, when U.S. support for the government of South Vietnam had drawn the United States into war in Indochina, Kennan testified against deeper engagement there. Speaking before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee in 1965, he postulated that “take-overs by political forces that make a pretense of Marxist conviction [may] not always be so intolerable to our interests as we commonly suppose.” Especially in the context of the Chinese-Soviet rivalry, Hanoi might show “Titoist tendencies.” Viewed in isolation, the actual stakes for the United States were low: “In itself, if you could separate this Viet-Nam situation from the repercussions that it radiates in all directions, from the factors of prestige that now became associated with it.” He did not think that Vietnam, “in itself,” was “an area of vital importance to this country.” Kennan emphatically did not intend to suggest that “we can just clear out everywhere in the world.” As he acknowledged, “I think there are situations, places, and times where we have to continue our effort. But I doubt that we will solve our world problems unless we make use of the device of laying off as well as the device of committing ourselves.”³⁵

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skeptical of further overseas intervention, even for (or perhaps *especially* for) purely humanitarian purposes—as in Somalia in 1992. When Kennan saw on his television screen on December 9 the Marines going ashore in Somalia, he was appalled. He recorded his reaction, and the reasoning to support it, in his “personal diary” only—“in justice to myself.” He then saw “no advantage” in making his criticism known, lest, to the extent it attracted public attention, it be “received as something tending to demoralize the forces now in action by sowing doubt as to the worthiness of the

effort.” As he saw it, the “dreadful situation” in Somalia reflected “a much wider and deeper problem,” of Africa—apparent drought, overpopulation,

and chaos in the absence of any governmental authority—greater than any action to treat “a limited and short-term aspect” of it could solve. He went on to argue, rather grandly for a diary entry, in geographical as well as historical terms:

The dispatch of American armed forces to a seat of operations to a place far from our own shores, and this for what is actually a major police action and in a situation where no defensible American interest is involved—this, obviously, is something that the Founding Fathers of this country never envisaged or would ever have approved. If this is in the American tradition, then it is a very recent tradition, and one quite out of accord with the general assumptions that have governed American public life for most of the last two hundred years.

After a respectful period, Kennan did publish his critique in *The New York Times*, under the curious, but revealing, title, “Somalia, Through a Glass Darkly.”³⁶ The only way by which, he seemed to think, Americans, including himself, could perceive the Somalis in their situation was through a conceptual lens that was less a window than a mirror—and an imperfect and distorting one. At least in his case, this semi-opaque mental screen was a “northern” one.³⁷

Kennan’s perspective both narrowed and widened in his later years. Like many other Americans, he became concerned about changes in the global environment, which somewhat drew him out of his growing “isolationist” mood. In a planetary context, the distinction between what was “home” and what was “abroad” began to disappear. Always mindful of the land, from his youth in Wisconsin, of the sea, and later from his Norwegian experience—as well as of the sky overarching them—he began to see the globe in a more encompassing way. Spiritually as well as physically, nations were increasingly united in a common human fate. This reality could be a basis for practical cooperation even between the United States and the Soviet Union. The area of their “common interest” was, as he wrote in 1983, not “limited to the need of both these peoples to see world peace preserved.” Both are “great industrial powers” and, as such, they have “a growing number of common problems,” prominent among them being their urgent environmental concerns. “Both countries occupy major portions of the environmentally endangered Northern Hemisphere”—their common northern homeland.³⁸

Mankind, as Kennan recalled his first ambassadorial chief, Bill Bullitt, in Moscow, once saying, is “a skin disease of the earth.” There must be, Kennan had come to think, “an optimal balance, depending on the manner of man’s life, between the density of human population and the

tolerances of nature.” It seemed to him that the United States of America had surpassed its own systemic limit when its population reached, “at a very maximum, two hundred million people, and perhaps a good deal less.”³⁹ His country had become an overdeveloped “monster nation.” Its excesses had early on become evident to him in the sprawl, synthetic quality, and physical sensuality and indulgence of Southern California. “I feel great anxiety for these people,” he wrote during a brief stay in Pasadena in 1953, “because I do not think they know what they are in for. In its mortal dependence on two liquids—oil and water—which no individual can easily produce by his own energy (even together with family and friends), the life of this great area only shares the fragile quality of all life in the great urban concentrations of the motor age.”⁴⁰

The whole “growth” mentality, perhaps especially that of the United States in its rapidly growing southern regions, was for Kennan something that needed to be *contained*. As he stated in the “Containment” conference at the National Defense University in 1985,

There is much in our own life, here in this country, that needs early containment. It could, in fact, be said that the first thing we Americans need to learn to contain is, in some ways, ourselves: our own environmental destructiveness, our tendency to live beyond our means and to borrow ourselves into disaster, our apparent inability to reduce a devastating budgetary deficit, our comparable inability to control the immigration into our midst of great masses of people of wholly different cultural and political tradition.

“In short, if we are going to talk about containment in the context of 1985,” he reasoned, “then I think we can no longer apply that term just to the Soviet Union”—particularly to a Soviet Union still envisaged by many as it was in Stalin’s time. We are going to have to develop “a wider concept of what containment means,” Kennan concluded, “a concept more closely linked to the totality of the problems of Western civilization at this juncture in our history.”⁴¹

THE “NORTHERN” AND “SOUTHERN”—AND THE “AMERICAN”—MINDS

Kennan saw himself as a man of the twentieth century. “My friend John Lukacs observed that each of the last few centuries of European history had “a certain special character of its own,” he wrote in 1995. None was “neatly bounded by the years that formally defined it.” As a historical period, the chronological century then nearing its close “really began in 1914 and ended in 1989.” Kennan placed himself, and his own experience

as a contemporary, within these historical bookends. “If this was a valid perception,” he added, “then my own life, as a person old enough to have some awareness of what was happening on the larger scale around him, has embraced very neatly the dimensions of this twentieth century. (I was ten years old in 1914, and eighty-five in 1989.)”⁴²

Kennan viewed the past century as “a tragic one in the history of European (and American) civilization”—with its two world wars as the century’s two great “mountain ranges,” as Lukacs described its topography.⁴³ With those events receding into the past, and with technological and demographic changes suggesting a turbulent and unpredictable future, Kennan, somewhat like Henry Adams a century earlier, felt no longer “a citizen of this age.”⁴⁴ He had a sense, as Lukacs and others have noted, of being an exile in time—as being perhaps more “at home” in the nineteenth century, or even in the eighteenth century, than in his own twentieth century, or younger generations’ twenty-first century, into which he nevertheless survived, until the age of 101.

If an exile in time, was he also an exile in space—detached from his own state and nation, if not the larger world? In some ways, Kennan was displaced by his own isolating temperament and by his diplomatic conditioning and overseas service. He never fully reconciled himself to the political and governmental system of the United States itself or the manner in which his own country made decisions—that is, democratically, through majority rule and response to popular wishes.⁴⁵ Almost “as a matter of principle,” Kennan refused to admit the appropriateness of domestic political considerations having a bearing on foreign policy. This even fellow diplomats and close friends such as Ambassador Jack Matlock considered a “defect” in his record as a diplomat and policymaker.⁴⁶ Kennan, recalling his service as director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, wrote in *Around the Cragged Hill*: “Our duty, I insisted, was to tell the President and the Secretary what in our view was in the national interest.”⁴⁷ Toward the end of his life, he proposed solutions to his country’s governance problems that had no chance whatever of acceptance: a federal advisory “Council of State” to help establish national policy on a rational basis, and, somewhat self-contradictorily, decentralization of the United States of America into “something like a dozen constituent republics”—in the hope of overcoming the disadvantages of “bigness.”⁴⁸

In commenting on these principled but preposterous speculations, Lukacs states frankly: “George Kennan had an extraordinary mind; but he was not a philosopher.” Lukacs acknowledges as well, as other commentators have done, the similarity of some of Kennan’s political suggestions with

the practices of certain authoritarian regimes—notably, that of President Antonio Salazar in Portugal, where Kennan was posted during 1942-1943, and for which he had a “sympathetic regard.” In 1938, before the war began, Kennan had even started to write a book about what was, to him, the inevitable “correction” needed in popular and parliamentary government. “Fortunately,” notes Lukacs, he abandoned that project, but he “returned to such preoccupations” fifty years later with ideas that seemed to him “reasonable and practical”—which they were not.⁴⁹ Other admirers of Kennan, including his designated biographer John Lewis Gaddis, have recognized that he was neither “a philosopher nor a theologian,” although he was, it appears, religious. Gaddis acknowledges that he was “a consumer” of philosophical and theological thought, but emphasizes that he was someone who “reflected it back in his own very inimitable way.”⁵⁰

Kennan’s mind was refractive as well as reflective. His perceptions were often oblique, but penetrating in their very angularity. Sharp and sensitive in observation, he captured the atmosphere of places and situations while exploring their depths. Landscapes, and the histories they held, were of greater interest to him than were persons, or their idiosyncratic ideas. His intellect broke up the phenomena he observed into sensations that carried moral and emotional meaning as well as physical quality. His judgments were not absolutist. They were conditioned by his experience, at home and abroad and over a long lifetime (1904-2005). His diplomatic career enabled him to see much of the world—but always from the perspective of the North. Professor Allen Lynch has interestingly suggested that an insistence on “the relativity of values, the relativity of aesthetics, and the relativity of historical circumstances” could be “the unifying field theory” for understanding Kennan’s prismatic sensibility. Kennan’s reversals of perspective—his looking upon the United States from the outside in as well as from the inside out—allowed him to be critical of his own country, as well as deeply concerned about it. “It makes him less American,” Lynch concludes, “but it also makes him more human in that respect.”⁵¹

In an opposite way, the Southern-influenced mind of Dean Rusk also was “less American” and “more human.” The historical experience of Rusk’s native Georgia—the defeated, agricultural, and impoverished but subsequently fast-growing South—also has a broad comparability—a transregional relation—with the rest of the world, in his case the largely southern, developing world which, too, was connected with the United States demographically.

The two mentalities, the “Northern” and the “Southern” do not sit easily with each other. The Northern mind counsels restraint, and indeed

carries a cool air of self-righteousness along with a reservedness of behavior. It is elitist as opposed to egalitarian, although in the case of George Kennan, not born into great wealth and an outsider to the East Coast establishment, the term meant, to him, “an elite of service to others, of conscience, of responsibility, of restraint of all that is unworthy in the self.”⁵² The Southern mind is more active, engaged, committed, and democratic—sympathetically involved, as Dean Rusk himself urged, with “that great mass of humanity of the Third World.”⁵³ It is one of the ironies of American history, notes the historian C. Vann Woodward, that the “parochial” Southern experience is more universal than the American national experience. “For from a broader point of view,” he writes, “it is not the South but America that is unique among the peoples of the world.”⁵⁴ Could it be the *northern* factor then, so well exemplified by the mentality and sensibility of George Frost Kennan, that contributes to the United States what is most “peculiarly” American about it? ■

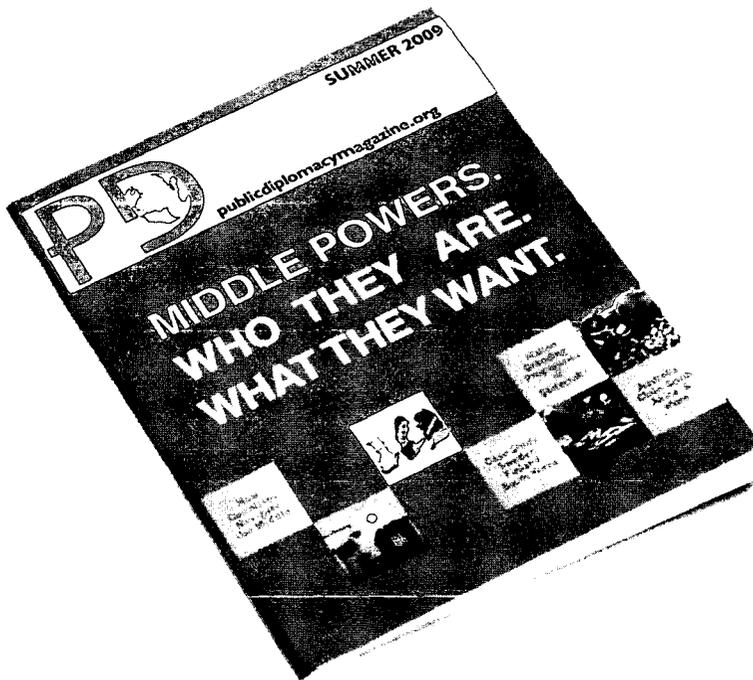
ENDNOTES

- 1 Alan K. Henrikson, “The Southern Mind in American Diplomacy,” review essay based on Thomas J. Schoenbaum, *Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), in *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 13, no. 2 (Summer, 1989): 376-87.
- 2 On the Southern mind and the national and also international relevance of the South’s historical experience, see W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), and C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 167-68, and also his *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). For Rusk’s own appreciation of “the culture of the South” and its meaning for him, see Dean Rusk, as told to Richard Rusk, *As He Saw It*, ed. Daniel S. Papp (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 55, 182, 337, 406, 581-83, 587, and 607.
- 3 John Lukacs, *George Kennan: A Study of Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 4 This is a passage written in February 1965 when Kennan gave a lecture at Ripon College, which his father had attended in the 1870s. George F. Kennan, *Sketches from a Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 207-8.
- 5 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 5.
- 6 Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950*, 6.
- 7 David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America’s Founding Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.
- 8 George F. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), 33.
- 9 Kennan, *Sketches from a Life*, ix-x. The work that so influenced him is *Städte, Landschaften, und Ewige Bewegung* (Hamburg: Grossborstel, 1927), whose title Kennan gave in English as *Cities, Landscapes, and Never-ending Motion*.
- 10 Kennan, *Sketches from a Life*, 231-32.
- 11 Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 9.

- 12 Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 10.
- 13 John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, and Dean G. Acheson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 148-51.
- 14 Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950*, 39.
- 15 Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950*, 39; "Unused Material Written for Possible Inclusion in *Memoirs, 1950-1967*," quoted in Harper, *American Visions of Europe*, 150-1.
- 16 Alan K. Henrikson, "The Creation of the North Atlantic Alliance," in *American Defense Policy*, ed. John F. Reichart and Steven R. Sturm (5th ed.; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 300.
- 17 See Stanley V. Anderson, *The Nordic Council: A Study in Scandinavian Regionalism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967). On the phenomenon of multi-level paradiplomacy, see Ivo D. Duchacek, *The Territorial Dimension of Politics Within, Among, and Across Nations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986).
- 18 Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 153.
- 19 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 20 George F. Kennan, "The Origins of Containment," in *Containment: Concept and Policy*, ed. Terry L. Deibel and John Lewis Gaddis, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1986), I, 26. Kennan included a shorter version of his conference talk under the title, "Containment: Then and Now (1985)," in his *At a Century's Ending*, 110-15.
- 21 George F. Kennan, *On Dealing with the Communist World* (New York: Harper and Row, published for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1964).
- 22 Kennan lecture of May 6, 1947, in *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946-47*, ed. Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1991), 199.
- 23 Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 114.
- 24 George F. Kennan, "American Involvement," Report of the Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, released May 14, 1965, in *The Viet-Nam Reader*, ed. Marcus G. Raskin and Bernard F. Fall (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 29.
- 25 Alan K. Henrikson, "The Map as an 'Idea': The Role of Cartographic Imagery During the Second World War," *The American Cartographer* 2, no. 1 (1975): 19-53.
- 26 Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, 194-95.
- 27 Gretchen Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 28 Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950*, 476, 480.
- 29 Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950*, 480-82, 483."
- 30 Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950*, 480. Since his report "was never accepted and distributed," Kennan surmised in his *Memoirs*, it "must therefore be assumed not to have entered into the official custody of the government files." He was incorrect. It was published by the U.S. Department of State in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, vol. 2: *The United Nations; The Western Hemisphere* (Washington, DC, 1976), as Roger R. Trask points out in "George F. Kennan's Report on Latin America (1950)," *Diplomatic History* 2, no. 3 (July 1978): 307.
- 31 Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 108.
- 32 Kennan, *Sketches from a Life*, 81, 82.
- 33 Kennan, *Sketches from a Life*, 230.

- 34 Kennan briefing on current political affairs, January 10, 1947, *Measures Short of War*, 91, 99, 106-7.
- 35 Kennan, "American Involvement," *The Viet-Nam Reader*, 15, 16, 17.
- 36 George F. Kennan, "Somalia, Through a Glass Darkly," *The New York Times*, September 30, 1993.
- 37 The reference in the title of Kennan's essay is to the Bible (1 Corinthians 13:12), and possibly also to the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's 1961 film *Sasom i en Spegel*, which he might have seen. As Bergman said about the film: its intent was to conquer certainty. The CNN "effect"—the looking-glass of CNN—was similarly problematical.
- 38 Kennan, *At a Century's Ending*, 87. Kennan, though something of a pioneer among diplomats in his environmentalism, was not unique. The American prototype was the Vermont-born polymath George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882), U.S. Minister to the Ottoman Empire and later to the Kingdom Italy. Marsh's "Northern studies" and his travels around the Mediterranean, filtered through his early northern experience and scientific mind, led him to correlate historical patterns of deforestation with actual changes in the climate—more generally, the effect of human action upon physical geography. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* [1864], ed. David Lowenthal (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965).
- 39 Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, 142.
- 40 Kennan, *Sketches From a Life*, 148.
- 41 Kennan, "The Origins of Containment," in *Containment: Concept and Policy*, 30; see also "Containment: Then and Now," in Kennan, *At a Century's Ending*, 114-15.
- 42 Kennan, *At a Century's Ending*, 7.
- 43 Kennan, *At a Century's Ending*, 7. Kennan cites Lukacs's *The End of the 20th Century: And the End of the Modern Age* (New York: Tichnor and Fields, 1993), 1-3.
- 44 The phrase is Kennan's from his 1985 address at the National War College. Kennan, "The Origins of Containment," in *Containment: Concept and Policy*, 31.
- 45 Lukacs interestingly makes a distinction between public opinion and popular sentiment, noting that these—belief and feeling—can diverge. Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 77.
- 46 Matlock, "George F. Kennan the Policymaker," *Reflections on George F. Kennan*, 6.
- 47 Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, 190.
- 48 Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, 149, 236-48.
- 49 Lukacs, *George Kennan*, 39, 180-81.
- 50 John Lewis Gaddis, comment in *Reflections on George F. Kennan*, 35.
- 51 Allen Lynch, comment in *Reflections on George F. Kennan*, 29.
- 52 Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, 133. On the question of an elite in the making of U.S. foreign policy, see Alan K. Henrikson, "Elitism," in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, ed. Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns, and Frederik Logevall, 3 vols. (2nd ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002), II, 17-31.
- 53 Rusk, *As He Saw It*, 182.
- 54 Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 167-58.

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