



Memoirs, 1925-1950

George F. Kennan

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This book is the personal and professional record of one of America's most distinguished diplomats, George F. Kennan. On his graduation from Princeton in 1925, moved perhaps by the example of his distant cousin George Kennan, who wrote the classic work on Siberia, the younger George prepared to enter the Foreign Service. After a short exposure to diplomacy in Germany and on the Baltic Coast, the young consul felt so inadequate that he was about to resign. His career was salvaged when the State Department registered him as a student of Russian at the University of Berlin, and here he began to acquire his knowledge of and insight into the Russian character which were to serve him so well.

It has been Mr. Kennan's destiny to be posted repeatedly at the threshold of crises. His fluency in Russian make him an indispensable member of Ambassador Bullitt's small staff which reopened the American Embassy in Moscow in 1933. He was an observer at Stalin's famous purge trials. He was in Prague when the Germans took over Czechoslovakia. When Hitler declared war on the United States, Mr. Kennan was in Berlin and was interned for six months. He was Harriman's right-hand man in Moscow from 1944 to 1946 during the strenuous war negotiations with the Kremlin. Throughout this long exposure to the agony of Europe, Mr. Kennan was evolving policies for dealing with the Russians and, after the end of the war, the Germans. His Russian policies he defined in a series of farsighted Position Papers, which were sent to the State Department and pigeonholed without comment. These historic papers have been released by the State Department and are published at the end of this volume.

When he was recalled to Washington in 1946, Kennan came into his own as a positive force in American foreign policy. President Truman and Secretary Marshall gave him the scope which F.D.R. had denied him. Kennan played a formative part in the development and application of the Marshall Plan. He was sent to Japan to help reform our occupational policy. He drew up a blueprint for the peaceful settlement of Central Europe -- a settlement in which he strongly resisted the rearming of Germany with nuclear weapons.

This long and detailed account of twenty-five years of diplomatic history is written with extraordinary eloquence and lucidity. Mr. Kennan's portraits of Stalin, William Bullitt, Alexander Kirk, Harry Hopkins, General Marshall, Ambassador Harriman and Charles Bohlen are superbly drawn. The generous excerpts from his journals reveal his sensitivity to human details and his skill at evoking scenes and incidents from his travels in many lands.

Mr. Kennan never loses the overview. Transcending the personal encounters, the specific events and positions, are his clearly articulated principles for the just government of foreign affairs in a world for which, like it or not, we as Americans bear a major responsibility. This makes these memoirs the most important book Mr. Kennan has yet written.

Memoirs, 1925-1950 Details

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Erin Carrington says

What an unexpectedly wonderful book. I pulled this one from my shelf as part of a New Year's resolution to read more of the books I already have, and I'm so glad that I did! Kennan is a fascinating man who overcame paralyzing social anxiety to build an incredible life and career in the foreign service. Like a world history version of Where's Waldo, Kennan pops his head up in just about every major world event that took place during his tenure with the State Department, almost always with brilliant, though often overlooked, insight into the world's greatest crises and the actors involved. The lead up, duration, and aftermath of WWII have been written about thousands of times. But, Kennan's memoirs brings the period to life in an incredibly unique and engaging way.

Zachary says

Not only is this great from a historical perspective but there are interesting vignettes of life as a bachelor living in between the wars. That and when he does marry and have a child, they think it is OK to secure the baby stroller, with the baby in it, to the deck of a ship while they sight see nearby.

Ben says

Just the best book about American diplomacy at the beginning of the Cold War. Kennan, more than anyone else, established our containment policy, but also saw it perverted by Vietnam and other interventions. Anyone looking for a diplomatic history of the Cold War should start with this.

Czarny Pies says

Political memoirs never get better than this. It is an important document about the cultural formation of George Kennan who played a major role in pushing America into its policy of containment of communism (i.e. the cold war). Strangely enough Kennan could not only speak Russian well but thoroughly loved Russian culture and the Russian people. Treating the Russians as enemies was for Kennan a very sad duty but a duty nonetheless.

Scott Pierce says

Interesting to read this book in the 1980s when the Cold War was ongoing, then to take some notes now on the lessons learned from Kennan's memoir. Plenty to learn here, though Kennan does go to lengths to distance himself from Vietnam and ensure that his ideas on "containment" are not marked as the cause of our involvement there.

Kennan believes that growing up in a farm family, his family did not look to Washington, nor did they view themselves as exploited - ideas which helped shape his anti-Marxism.

By staying in Prague in 1939 when the rest of the staff left, Kennan gained some valuable insight on the ground. He predicted war, Hitler or not - "the consequent lust to dominate Europe which are all that most Germans really have in common." Early on Kennan saw the Soviets with an advantage as they had a potentially universal ideology, but he also feared that in trying to defeat the Nazis, the U.S. would side too closely with the Soviets. Once the Soviets refused to help the Warsaw fighters vs. Germany, and refused to let us help, Kennan thinks we should have broke from them. He understood that Europe would be divided, and thought our best course was to create a free and vibrant West Germany.

In order to avoid a universal policy of containment from being misused, Kennan called for criteria to be applied: is intervention within our capabilities, if we take no action will the situation worsen, if we take action will the results carry beyond our area of interest, will the threatened people be willing to bear some of the burden.

Kennan lists Marshall's qualities:

unshakable integrity
consistent courtesy
ironclad sense of duty
lack of vanity or ambition
impeccable fairness

David says

I read this over a period of several years at breakfast only. This memoir covers some really important moments in modern history, and Kennan's writing is excellent. VERY interesting to see how spot-on Kennan (writing in 1967) was about the USSR and even about today's foreign policy. He did write with a little chip on his shoulder -- not all his advice was accepted by politicians. When I finished it (three years before this writing) I thought it was almost worth starting over to read again, this time in a MUCH shorter period. 565 pages includes appendices of papers he wrote during his service.

Charlie Brown says

George Kennan was a foreign service officer, trained in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany. He was stationed in Riga to learn Russian. He observed the rise of Hitler in Germany, and was in the Soviet Union during the purges and WWII. He knew John Paton Davies, who might be described as his counterpart in China during these years. He was ambassador to the Soviet Union, a rare appointment of a professional foreign service officer to such a post. This book is a good companion to Montefiore's book on Stalin. Kennan offers insight into the Russian nation and its incredible people that is not available elsewhere. The memoir is in two volumes: the first covers 1925-1950, and the second from 1950-1963. These books are a nice place to start for a historical understanding of how the U.S. became embroiled in Vietnam.

Marcos Renaux says

Li a tradução brasileira, editada em dois volumes pela Topbooks.
Tradução que por vezes deixa a desejar, mas não compromete.
Um autor fantástico, tem muita verve.
Vale muito a leitura, você verá a guerra fria com outros olhos.
Recomendo.

Aaron Million says

George Kennan was the foremost Russian authority in America during his time (which was basically for the past century as he lived until age 101 in 2005). This book focuses on his rise through the Department of State from Foreign Service officer to a respected voice on Russian and German affairs in particular, and European and Asian affairs in general. Kennan begins by briefly touching on his youth in Milwaukee, and closes by describing how he gradually fell out of favor in government and left a few months after the onset of the Korean War in 1950.

Kennan quotes liberally from his copious and extensive diary entries. Indeed, the entries are so full of detailed information about people, places, and things that - coupled with all of the official papers and memos that he wrote during his government career - one wonders if he ever had time to do anything else other than write. But the diary entries that he chose to highlight here really provide the most interesting reading: he writes of encountering a German prostitute one night in pre-WWII Berlin, and how he declined her services but instead had her accompany him to a bar where they talked about her life for awhile; he describes his constant travels throughout Europe (in the days before jet travel, he was constantly taking long and arduous train journeys); his virtual imprisonment by the Germans following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor; his rocky tenure as charge d'affaires in Portugal; his journeys to remote Russian villages to see old churches; and his insightful portraits of people in power whom he came into contact with.

This book does contain a heavy dose of melancholy, which no doubt reflected Kennan's personality. He was too hard on himself, minimizing achievements and magnifying defeats. He writes of his isolation and loneliness as a student at Princeton in the 1920s and how he did not fit in, and yet he did not want to fit in. He was frequently ill with various ailments, yet as mentioned above, he lived an incredibly long life. Fortunately, the melancholy is balanced with wry humor as Kennan had the ability to laugh at himself, at the frequent obtuseness of the State Department, and admit when he was in error.

Especially enlivening were the chapters on non-Russian topics. His time in Lisbon, Portugal was interesting, and ultimately resulted in a low-point (being summoned home to Washington to face an intimidating and hostile panel of the Secretary of War, the Secretary of State, and high-ranking military officials and being curtly dismissed from the room) and a high-point (two private meetings in the Oval Office with FDR). Similarly, his meetings with General Douglas MacArthur in Tokyo following WWII were also interesting to read about. Because Kennan is so closely associated with Russian studies, one does not picture him anywhere else in the world or thinking about any other country. But that is to sell him well short; he had a global perspective and the ability to both compartmentalize when needed, and also to understand strategically how an action in one part of the world would most likely impact a faraway country.

As the book goes along, Kennan becomes more heavily focused on the policy side of things and the inner workings of policy meetings, especially during his time as head of the Policy Planning Staff. Numerous meetings are recounted as policy proposals are bandied about. While Kennan's writing style is fluid and he keeps the story moving, these sections are not as interesting as his reminiscences about certain episodes in his life. Nonetheless, for any interested in WWII and post-WWII era history and U.S. foreign relations, this book is well worth the time needed to read it.

James Spencer says

50 years after it was first published, this is still a fabulous look at the history of diplomacy in the early days of the Cold War. While Kennan is considered the father of the policy of containment, he was absolutely not a militarist and opposed most of the Truman and Eisenhower policies which, as Kennan predicted, made the Cold War last as long as it did. Recommended highly.

Paul Jellinek says

This is the second time I read this classic memoir. Having just read his somewhat disappointing new biography by Gaddis, I thought I'd go back to the source again, but sadly it didn't impress me as much as it did the first time I read it years ago. Maybe it's just that I'm older now, but Kennan--for whom I have immense respect--seems almost petulant at times, and clearly resents the way he has been treated over the years--by the State Department and by a whole parade of luminaries (and dimminaries). That said, he is a superb writer, and his inside account of some of the most pivotal moments of 20th century history remains as compelling as ever. Maybe if I read it a third time some years from now, I'll be in a more forgiving frame of mind.

Rob MacCavett says

The Foreign Service strategist who invented America's "Containment Policy" toward the Communist Bloc, Kennan has been called "An intellect without being an Intellectual." Brilliant yet reserved, the book opened my eyes to how rational thought might be used to create excellence in deed and execution.

Ci says

** Preview notes, Oct 2016

Kennan's voice comes clear from his introduction, a voice of unpretentious yet deep cultivation of style and intelligence, as well as a mind thinking and reflecting. He gave no varnish to his awkward student life, while genuine in his appreciation of others who had guided him. This is a mind worthy knowing through close reading, which I shall attempt in near future.

John says

This was a well written work on the involvement of the united states in world affairs in the time period of 1925 to 1950 in the view of the author. It was a very dry read for me, Was very glad to reach the end.

Kevin Craw says

A must-read for anyone working in or interested in working in American foreign policy, this book is a good example of the type of deep thinking and analysis we want our public servants to exhibit. I didn't know the first thing about George Kennan when I ran into this book a used book store, so I delved into the book without preconceptions. I guess there is a Part 2, but I haven't read that yet.

Kennan was a foreign policy realist who thought a step ahead of his contemporaries. He was a Soviet-hawk and hater of communism but argued for a withdrawal of American forces from Europe after World War 2. No need to have them there; it would only provoke the Soviet Union. He knew that it would one day that the Russian political system would be revealed as a farce and burn out. In the book, he correctly predicts that the Soviets would eventually retreat from Eastern European countries, arguing that they would be too difficult to govern from Moscow. If he were around today, Kennan would detest American policy to expand NATO up against Russia's borders; in fact, he even argues in the book against the US, Canada, and Britain even being in NATO in the first place (he wanted a North Atlantic alliance for those 3) separate from continental European countries.

My favorite parts of the book are those dealing with what he was doing when he was off duty, traveling around pre-WW2 Russia often by rail. His descriptions are so vivid that they remind me of those of a travel writer. I also liked the descriptions of his encounters with Stalin and MacArthur. An interesting insight is his description of the US military's dominance over the State Department in policy making--that hasn't changed today. On the other hand, his deliberations on foreign policy get a little tedious at times, but are essential to understanding how the post-WW2 Europe came to be.

The last chapter about the invasion of South Korea by the North Koreans was really good. If Washington establishment listened to his advice to not pursue the North Koreans above the 38th parallel, tens of thousands of American lives could have been saved.

Billie Pritchett says

George Kennan's *Memoirs, 1925-1950* tells the story of Kennan's rise to become one of the United States' leading diplomats and major architects of the Cold War. The book contains Kennan's detailed analysis on Germany, Russia, as well as other countries that got pulled into the Cold War. What might be apparent to the reader (what seemed to be the case to me) was that his commentary around his quoted analysis seemed rather sensible but within the analysis itself, it seemed eerily nationalistic, talking about the great pride of the German peoples, for example, or at turns orientalist, when he discusses how the United States can't trust "the Russians."

Another issue worth discussing is Kennan's Cold War containment policy. He tells in the book that he never intended it to become policy, but it was only a specified tactic, as with the Greek Civil War. Even so, the result of the so-called containment of the Communist spread into Greece led to irrational fears that the Soviet Union was orchestrating this spread there, when in fact the Communist party had overwhelming democratic support in Greece. The result of the Greek Civil War was British and American support of a dictator.

If you read the book, read with a vigilant eye.

Jim Talbott says

This is a fantastic book. Like all information, it implicitly but deeply condemns our current foreign policy. I must say the insights about where policy goes awry remain fresh and insightful.

Scott says

You probably don't want to read this book - its an 'academic' or 'intellectual' self biography about cold war politics, and I confess I bogged down and quit on page 373 ... but if someone else could please review 374 to 500 plus annexes, I would appreciate it. The tone is dry, pretends to be impersonal, and quotes from a vast body of writing that Kennan evidently kept intact for years. Mention of his personal life is limited, and the scope is around the world political, how he saw it, and how he impacted it. In summary, a book for a scholar, not for a general reader.

Kennan was one of the great architects of the cold war and the theory of Communist containment. As such he marches across political history as a giant, so this book is strangely illuminating - our giant was only a man after all.

In the beginning of the book, Kennan is a romantic young nebbish (a Princeton loner and graduate) in the US Foreign Service, struggling around Europe without being really connected to Washington or good field leadership. He grows through several postings abroad to finally be the man setting up the US Embassy in Moscow. Married to a Norwegian and seldom home until after World War II, he felt he represented the best of America without truly being at home in America. In spite of his sense of isolation in the Service, he had outstanding access to the President and was asked to take on the really big roles. Its interesting to watch his immaturity harden up into the attitudes towards the diplomatic service that he would hold at least into 1950 - if I could enumerate them, I saw:

-Only the people in the field know what's going on.

-Washington is filled with dangerously ignorant amateurs.

-The people in the field don't have the long view because nobody tells them anything, so they can't act in the US's best interest.

-Only the staff in the first US Embassy in Moscow understood the horrors of Communism and Stalin, (especially George). Truman was manipulated by the Commies.

-George was doomed to be misunderstood and often misquoted.

-The National War College, set up by Kennan and 2 other men, was a strategic breakthrough for research, training, and advancement of US military and diplomatic leaders (this one is actually true).

-Prolific academic writing is the way to run diplomacy. Its better to send a 20 page wire as a briefing to Washington than to actually talk to someone.

Kennan no doubt saw a lot with clarity that others lacked, and freely admits to those big mistakes he made.

Still, through all this, the reader's view of history will not change appreciably, and with the tidal wave of quotes from his personal, Foreign Service, and public writings, you will gain a sense of why his memos went largely unread. If he had had Galbraith's sense of style and composition, he would have been intensely effective in the 30's and 40's, rather than out in the cold.

Mikey B. says

George Kennan was an American diplomat stationed in the Soviet Union before and after World War II. He was also in Germany when the United States entered the war in December, 1941. He, along with other American diplomats, was incarcerated in Germany, only to be released in mid-1942. Mr. Kennan does not dwell on this; I only mention it because I was unaware of this detainment of the diplomats of the United States.

Mr. Kennan spoke fluent Russian and German. Unlike many diplomats George Kennan was not afraid to voice his opinion. This often put him at odds with Washington. He understood very clearly the nature of Stalin and the Soviet dictatorship in the 1930's – when there were others who idealized Marxist-Soviet communism. Later, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, he correctly stated the true nature of the new found Soviet allies who wanted as much aid as possible to combat the German invasion. He saw clearly that Stalin would want to occupy permanently any territories acquired during the war. In fact this had already happened with the occupation of the Baltic States and Eastern Poland and the attack on Finland after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939.

But also Kennan did not want a war with the Soviets – he saw that Soviet intentions were not oriented in that direction. They understood the language of power – and George Kennan was a most pragmatic person.

He also ignores Churchill who also, after the Warsaw uprising in 1944 came to have a different view of the Soviet Union and the nature of Stalin's acquisitions in Eastern Europe.

This book is chiefly about the methodology of diplomacy and the history of it during Kennan's tenure. Kennan was a passionate person and would not withhold his judgements. He was very unique in this way. Perhaps the tone is rather detailed at times – and the reading varies from page-turning to somewhat arduous (in my opinion) – maybe too much on the nuances of diplomacy. Don't look for anything personal about George Kennan's life in this book. In passing, he mentions that after spending so much time in the Soviet Union and Germany that upon his return to his native state of Wisconsin he felt alienated and unable to fit in. Too much had happened to both him and his native state in the interim. This distancing of himself from his homeland allowed him to view the United States as merely one of the countries on the world stage, albeit a significant one.

A favourite quote respecting the U.S. (from page 496 of my edition):

“... we Americans may be profoundly convinced that we are “right”. In our participation on the international scene we are only one of a number of contenders for the privilege of leading a national existence on a portion of the territory of the world ...let us recognize the legitimacy of differences of interest and philosophy between groups of men and not pretend that they can be made to disappear behind some common philosophical concept.”

David Hill says

Before reading this book, I had in my ignorance, a somewhat negative view of Kennan and his positions. I was pleasantly surprised to find myself in fundamental agreement with just about every position he espoused.

The book covers his adult education, early career up to his initial departure from government service. This includes stints in the Baltic states, in Moscow, in Prague, and in Berlin. He was interred when the US entered the war, but this episode is dismissed in a few sentences. After this, he was in Lisbon and back in Moscow for the end of the war.

He relies to a great extent on his journals and official documents. Overall he is thoughtful and articulate, but for me the highlights are the extended excerpts from his personal journals.

The book has an index but no notes or bibliography. He does mention a few specific books in footnotes, at least one of which I will read as a result of reading this. I have also decided I will read (in addition to the second volume of these memoirs) some of his other work.

Highly recommended.
