

A war best served cold

By Nicholas Thompson

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Sixty years ago this summer, writing under the byline of X, George Kennan supposedly laid out America's Cold War foreign policy. Kennan's essay is often said to be the most influential article in the history of America's foreign policy, but neither Harry Truman, nor any president after him, actually followed X's recommendations. "Containment," the word the essay introduced, was applied in a bellicose way that Kennan didn't intend.

But while Truman dodged X's advice, President George W. Bush should follow it. Kennan was wrong about how the United States would win the Cold War, but right about how to fight the war on terrorism.

In the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan, who was then the State Department's policy planning chief, gave American strategy a name, but not much else. He argued that the United States didn't have to actively defeat the Soviet Union, only outlast it. Communism held inside itself "the seeds of its own decay." The United States should refrain from provoking Moscow, whether through confrontation or histrionics.

Patience would lead to success.

The article's influence was grounded in a misunderstanding. Kennan didn't make clear whether he intended containment to be primarily a political or military strategy. Despite the article's ambiguity, everyone assumed the latter. The most important columnist of the time, Walter Lippmann, wrote 14 consecutive critical essays about the X article - later collected in a book that coined a phrase with its title, "The Cold War" - declaring that containment was a military doctrine and a bad one at that.

But in a letter to Lippmann that Kennan never mailed (most likely because his boss, Secretary of State George Marshall, had chastened him for causing a ruckus), Kennan explained that he didn't mean containment with guns. He didn't want American armed forces to intervene in countries where the Soviets were mucking around but hadn't gained control, like Greece, Iran and Turkey.

The Soviets are making "first and foremost a political attack," Kennan wrote. "Their spearheads are the local Communists. And the counter weapon that can beat them is the vigor and soundness of political life in the victim countries."

American policymakers viewed containment in military terms. The United States soon built up its forces to defend Western Europe, created NATO and engaged in a huge arms race. Eventually containment would mean soldiers in Vietnam and thousands of nuclear weapons pointed at the Soviet Union.

Kennan opposed every one of these actions. Long called the man who defined U.S. Cold War policies, Kennan was probably containment's most consistent, and persistent, critic. He spent decades denying paternity of the doctrine everyone credited him with creating.

Today America faces vastly different challenges from those the nation confronted right after World War II. The enemy is dispersed; there's a constant threat of suicide attacks; nuclear weapons can be hidden in suitcases instead of dropped from airplanes. Still, when it comes to overarching strategy, Kennan's desired but never executed policy from 60 years ago offers profound wisdom for today.

Kennan's insight was that a long-term, complex struggle wasn't best judged in terms of winning or losing. Communism wasn't something the United States could immediately conquer. The same holds true for Al Qaeda, a movement that, like Soviet Communism, offers its subjects oppression and poverty. Time is on America's side - particularly if Washington acts in a way that doesn't inflame its enemies' pride and anger and win them new recruits.

Kennan's insistence on a political strategy, rather than a military one, makes more sense now than it did when he published his essay. Applied today, that advice would entail spending more time and money building up America's Muslim allies. The Center for Strategic and International Studies reports that only about \$900 million of the \$10 billion America has given Pakistan since 2002 has gone to health, education and democracy promotion. Most of the rest has gone to the military. The Bush administration has recently taken steps to change this ratio. But Kennan, one of the authors of the Marshall Plan, would have wanted the numbers to be closer to the reverse.

A 21st-century rendering of X's vision of containment would involve the closing of the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, an unambiguous renunciation of torture and an abandonment of the notion that U.S. legal and moral norms don't apply to the current struggle. Kennan believed America gave its opponents a propaganda victory each time it acted in a manner unfitting of its ideals.

"To avoid destruction," Kennan concluded the X article, "the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation."

We can't know for sure how his recommended, wholly political version of containment would have fared in the Cold War. But we do know that a militant foreign policy didn't lead to nuclear war and did, eventually, help bring about the collapse of Soviet Communism. We also know that a strong offensive policy has yet to succeed against Al Qaeda.

Kennan died two years ago at the age of 101. One of his last public statements was a critique, in 2002, of the looming Iraq invasion. War, he said, was too unpredictable, and this one wasn't worth it. As he wrote to Lippmann six decades ago, "Let us find health and vigor and hope, and the diseased portion of the earth will fall behind of its own doing. For that we need no aggressive strategic plans, no provocation of military hostilities, no showdowns."

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