GEORGE KENNAN IN THE *FSJ*: A COMPILATION OF HIS WRITINGS

THOUGH VARIED, THE CONTRIBUTIONS OVER THE YEARS OF THIS SCHOLAR AND DIPLOMAT ALL FEATURE HIS CHARACTERISTIC TRENCHANT ANALYSIS AND PASSION FOR THE FOREIGN SERVICE.

BY SUSAN MAITRA

Starting with a letter to the editor in 1938, containing an eminently practical proposal to AFSA concerning Foreign Service housing, George Kennan has made many contributions to the *Foreign Service Journal* over the years.

These contributions varied greatly — from an essay, "Russia and the Alaska Purchase," based on documents from the archives of the Tsarist government, to an official report, "The Internment and Repatriation of the American Official Group in Germany, 1941-1942," prepared by then-First Secretary George F. Kennan. They also included several reprints. In June 1953, the *Journal* reprinted "Education for Statesmanship," which had been featured in the *Atlantic Monthly* a month earlier. "The Future of Our Professional Diplomacy," Kennan's commentary on the Wriston Committee's report on the state of the Foreign Service, was reprinted from *Foreign Affairs* in September 1955, along with a response to Kennan by Dr. Wriston.

Starting in August 1963, the *Journal* carried the three-part "World Problems and America's Administrative Response," an article focused on government bureaucracy and the status of foreign policy-making that had been written by Kennan for a scholarly discussion in May 1957. In March 1961, the *Journal* addressed the "fashionable and serious topic" of foreign policy planning at State. The views of those who had directed the Policy Planning Staff until then were featured: Mr. Kennan was first, and, not surprisingly, most succinct.

Here are excerpts from five other articles by Mr. Kennan that appeared in the *Journal*.

May 1947 — University Education and the Foreign Service

While deputy for foreign affairs at the then two-month-old National War College, Career Minister George F. Kennan addressed the Princeton University Bicentennial Conference on University Education and the Public Service. The entire address was published in the Foreign Service Journal. *Here is an excerpt, on the education required for a Foreign Service officer.*

… It is my own belief that full success in Foreign Service, and by that I mean the attainment of really high value to the government, requires an educational background considerably wider than what is afforded by the normal undergraduate training. A successful representative abroad should be not only better educated with respect to the world outside the borders of the United States, but he should also have an exceptional understanding of his own country. He should be better

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equipped than is the average American college graduate in all those things which contribute to his ability to observe and interpret a foreign environment, in the things that appeal to the eye and ear: architecture, applied arts, industrial processes, methods of agriculture — in all those things, in other words, that make up the outward expressions of custom, tradition and belief.

I have often been appalled and dismayed to see the imperviousness and indifference of young Americans to phenomena of a foreign environment which are new to them and which, as it now seems to me, should set them agog with astonishment and wonder. And what appalls and dismays me most is to reflect that of all the Americans I have known to whom this might be said, I think the worst case I have ever known was myself, as I was when I first went to live abroad some 23 years ago.

Finally, he should have a sufficient experience with real scholarship, in the genuine academic sense, to understand at least the meaning of that concept, and to distinguish an unscholarly and unsound bit of intellectual work from a scholarly and sound one. I personally do not think we can say that average undergraduate training in this country generally satisfies these demands.

It was for this reason that I was one of those who looked with some favor on the scheme of a special Foreign Service Academy along the lines of West Point and Annapolis …

Again, we have the possibilities of in-service training. I am enthusiastic about that program. I think it deserves every support. But I am still inclined to feel that the raw material with which we work in the Service should come to us initially with broader and better intellectual equipment than has been the case in the past. And this, to my mind, means that a larger percentage of our candidates should undergo a year or two of appropriate post-graduate study before coming to the Foreign Service.

… In my opinion, the subject of post-graduate study is not really important, providing it affords a genuine intellectual discipline and the appreciation of the meaning of scholarship which I have just mentioned.

Here, of course, we have the question of special instruction in the foreign relations field. This is a very complicated one. There is no simple answer to it. My own feeling is that where such instruction is founded on a fearless realism as to the nature of the world in which we live and particularly the nature and limitations of our own country, and where it is rooted firmly in the basic sciences of which it can, in my opinion, constitute only an eclectic synthesis, then it can be possibly the best preparation a man could have for Foreign Service. But where foreign affairs instruction fails to meet these requirements, where it is not based on realism and where people become carried away with the pleasant sound of their own pleasant words, then I think it can easily degenerate into a pseudo-science, which is of little use to anybody and particularly to us. … What we need most of all is sufficient insight into one field of academic research to enable the man to understand the intertwining and the interdependence of all forms of human learning, to give in this way a universal quality to his curiosity and his interests, and to instill in him a dignified humility before the complexity and profundity of the problems of our time.

October 1951 — How New Are Our Problems?

The first of two articles written for the FSJ *while in Europe, on extended leave from the Department of State.*

… If, then, the newness of our age lies neither in man himself nor in the natural environment with which he is surrounded, where does it lie? I would suggest that it lies in three things: first, in the greater numerousness of the human species; second in the

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tools which man has in his hands for good and evil; and, third, in the changing relationship between man and man, that is, in the requirements for the organization of society implicit in the complicatedness of modern industrial and urban civilization. …

As things stand today, I think we must adjust ourselves to the prospect that a large segment of the world's population, in terms of numbers, is destined to continue to live in a state of bitter competition for possession of inadequate resources; that this is going to continue to produce reactions which will not be happy ones and which are bound to seem unnatural to us and to place limitations on the degree of intimacy that we can hope to achieve between ourselves and themselves. This dilemma is so profound, and exists on so vast a scale, that no one has yet suggested any material answers to it, as far as I know, which are more than the most tentative palliatives. I am not saying that there are no answers, or that the peoples themselves will not find them. But it does not seem to me that we have those answers. And not having them, I think we must be very careful what we say and do, and above all not give the impression that we have the answers.

This is the essence of one of our great problems of foreign affairs, namely our relations with the peoples whose lives are marked by a technical backwardness and a material poverty as striking as our technical advance and our material abundance. We should be extremely careful what we say to the peoples who are materially less well endowed; and should be careful to talk to them in terms of their problems and aspirations — not our own.

The second thing I mentioned as having changed was the nature of the tools in man's hands. … The most important of these … are the ones we call weapons. And you may be surprised to hear me say that I think the most important change has not been in the tools for international war, where the atomic bomb is involved, but in the tools of internal police power: the weapons by which the authority of government can be enforced over its subjects. …

The interest of the United States in international affairs is not a detached interest in our international environment for its own sake.

These changes have done things with respect to international warfare which are also highly significant for our international relations. I suspect that they have increased, temporarily at least, the relative independence and effectiveness of land power over that of sea power. …

Now this fact has a very special importance for the United States. It is not just that it is Russian power which has broken through to the oceans; but it is continental land power, with all that that implies. …

To deal with the collective disciplined power made possible by modern technology and inspired by the older land power habits of thought is a new and baffling experience for this country. We find our noses being rubbed constantly into the dilemma which rises from the fact that he who would cope effectively with modern land power in its totalitarian form must make himself similar to it in many respects. He must learn to regiment his people, to husband his resources, to guard against hostile agents in his midst, to maintain formidable armed forces in peace time, to preserve secrecy about governmental decisions, to wield the weapons of bluff and to wage war in peacetime — and peace in wartime. Can these things be done without the selling of the national soul? History offers us no answer to this question; for here — in the greater expanse of territory controlled by the grim and sullen forces of modern despotism — we have a problem that is really new. …

November 1951 — The National Interest of the United States

The second of the two articles written for the FSJ *while on leave in Europe.*

"National interest" is one of those things that you know must exist but it is too vast, too rich in meaning, too many-sided, for any positive definition. And for that reason, I'm going to ask your indulgence if I try to make it clearer by talking — not about what it is — but about what it is not.

The first would be this: the interest of the United States in international affairs is not a detached interest

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in our international environment for its own sake, independent of our own aspirations and problems here at home. It does not signify things we would like to see happen in the outside world primarily for the sake of the outside world.

Why is this? It's because we do not live just for our relations with others — just in order to conduct foreign policy. It would be more correct to say that we conduct foreign policy in order to live as a people, joined together in a social compact, for a purpose related primarily to ourselves and not to others.

It is not an expression of national selfishness to say that our first duty, as a nation, is to ourselves. It is an expression of self-respect. A nation which is meeting its own problems, and meeting them honestly and creditably, is not apt to be a problem to its neighbors. And, strangely enough, having figured out what it wants to do about itself, it will find that it has suddenly and mysteriously acquired criteria, which it did not have before, for knowing what to do about its relation with others. …

On every side of us we see the proof of this thesis that our American civilization is still something experimental, unfinished, not fully tested. We see it in our failure to bring our lives into balance with the natural resources of this continent; we see it in our failure, to date, to find a happier and more orderly answer to the problems of labor and wages and prices; we see it in the depressing and flimsy aspect of great portions of our sprawling big cities; we see it in the pathetic shallowness and passiveness of our recreational habits, we see it in our bewilderment as to how to handle the forces which modern technology has released among us — the telephone, the automobile, the television sets, atomic energy.

That being the case, we must preserve a certain modesty about what we conceive to be our role on the stage of international affairs. We have no right to recommend our institutions to others — we have no right to expect others to understand entirely what it is we are doing here in this country; and by the same token — not having yet finally demonstrated to ourselves the permanent validity of our own system — we have no right to be too emphatic or critical in our views about the validity of others. …

I want to hoist my second warning flag. It would be this: the national interest does not consist in abstractions. And we will not get closer to it if we try to think in abstractions.

What do we mean by peace? Is it just an absence of international violence? You can have that sort of peace very easily. All you need is non-resistance. That sort of peace prevails today in the Kremlin's satellite area.

Well, you may say, that's all right; but what we mean is a just peace. That, again, is a fine idea, within limits. But beware of carrying it to extremes. Beware of the assumption that in every one of the quarrels which wrack the lives of other peoples in this world there is always distinguishable some moral issue — that there is always some party which is "right" and another party which is "wrong" by our standards. Too often you will find hatred pitted against hatred, error against error, treachery against treachery. …

Now for the third. National interest is not primarily a question of purpose or objectives. It is a question of method. It is a question of the "how" rather than the "what." This is not to say that we do not have an interest as a nation in what we do and in what results stem from ouraction; but I would submit that we have a greater interest still in how we do those things we feel we must do.

Remember that none of us can really see very far ahead in this turbulent, changing, kaleidoscopic world of foreign affairs. A study of the great decisions of national policy in the past reveals that too often the motives of national action are ones dictated for government by developments outside of its control. Its freedom of action, in these cases, lies only in the choice of method — in the how rather than the what.

The national interest does not consist in abstractions.

Let no one underestimate the importance in this life of the manner in which a thing is done. …

I would plead, then, for concepts of national interest more modest than those with which we are accustomed to flatter our sensibilities, and for a greater dignity and quietness and self-discipline in the implementation of those concepts. I would plead, particularly at this genuinely crucial moment in American history, for cool nerves and a clear eye, for the husbanding of our strength, and for an iron self-discipline in refusing to be provoked into using that strength where we cannot see some plausible and reasonably promising end to what we are beginning. I would plead for the restoration of a sense of comradeship and tolerance in our public life and public debates, and for a recognition of the fact that Americans may be wrong without being evil, and that those wrong ones may even conceivably be ourselves.

If we can achieve these things we need not be too exacting in our demands for a definition of national interest. We will then have done the best we can do to bring the world closer to that state of understanding, based necessarily more on respect than on intimacy, but fortified by mutual restraint and moderation, and all the more durable and serviceable for its modesty of concept. Therein — not in the world of hatred or of intolerance or of vainglorious pretense — lies the true glory and the true interest of this nation.

May 1961 — Diplomacy As a Profession

From Ambassador Kennan's March 30, 1961, speech to AFSA.

It is not easy for me to tell you with what feelings I find myself again in this company. Twenty-seven years in the American Foreign Service do not come and go without leaving their marks on a person. Of course, this is not the only life one can lead; there are other things you can do, even in the wake of a Foreign Service career, and great satisfaction to be derived from doing them. But an organizational framework which has held you for so many years of your life, and particularly of your youth, never fully loses its claim on your feelings. …

This is, of course, not exactly the same Service that I entered 35 years ago. Great changes have occurred, in spirit and in organization. …

But despite these changes, it seems to me that the basic function of the Foreign Service has remained the same. This is the classic function of diplomacy: to effect the communication between one's own government and other governments or individuals abroad, and to do this with maximum accuracy, imagination, tact, and good sense. Of course, this is not all there is or not all there is on the surface. But at the bottom of almost every fact of Foreign Service work, if you analyze it, you will find, I think, that what is essentially at stake is this process of communication.

People have often alleged that the invention of the telegraph and other technological changes have detracted from the importance of this task — that they have reduced the diplomatist to a glorified messenger boy. This view could not, I think, be more mistaken. The sort of communication which the modern diplomatist is called upon to effect demands from him an independent contribution fully as responsible, and just as replete with possibilities for originality and creativity, as that of any other profession. Any of us who has had so much as a single year in this work has learned, I am sure, the first great lesson it has to teach: and that is, that what is important in the relations between governments is not just, or even predominantly, the "what" but rather the "how" — the approach, the posture, the manner, the style of action. The most brilliant undertaking can be turned into a failure if it is clumsily and tactlessly executed; there are, on the other hand, few blunders which cannot be survived, if not redeemed, when matters are conducted with grace and with feeling. …

There is a special reason, in my mind, why it is important to recognize this connection between diplomacy and the life of the intellect. …

[When I joined the Service] there was still a hangover from the older assumptions of dynastic diplomacy. It was still assumed that what was most importantly involved was to know and understand, in any given country, only a small group of highly placed and influential individuals. It has taken the events of recent decades to teach us that in the modern age diplomacy has a task far wider, more difficult, more challenging than this. The conduct of foreign policy rests today on an exercise in understanding truly staggering in its dimensions — understanding not just of the minds of a few monarchs or prime ministers, but understanding of the minds and emotions and necessities of entire peoples, and not just of a few peoples at that, but of a round hundred of them — peoples in all conceivable stages of progress from the state of primitive man to the greatest complexity of modern industrial society. And what is involved here is the necessity for understanding the lives of these peoples in all their aspects: social, economic, cultural, as well as political. It is this vast work of cognition and analysis in which the Foreign Service officer participates so prominently and responsibly; and it is in this task, commensurate — I repeat — in its demands on the mind with the tasks of academic scholarship and science, that I have personally come to see diplomacy's escape from the triviality and sterility that so recently threatened it, and its elevation to one of the really great and challenging callings of mankind.

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On the other hand, inspiring as this task may be, I think we have to recognize that this profession also suffers from certain inevitable and probably incurable handicaps. The first of these is its congenital remoteness from popular understanding. I doubt that this can ever be fully cured. The external needs of a democratic country are always going to be to some extent in conflict with the internal attitudes and aspirations of its people. To most national societies, the world outside is mainly and normally a nuisance: something that impedes and limits the ability of people to live the way they would like to live. And the diplomatist cannot help it: his duty is to reflect the realities of this bothersome outside world, whether his fellow-countrymen like it or not. It is his task, very often, to say the unpleasant things — the things people neither want to hear nor like to believe. …

The second great drawback of foreign service seems to me to be the fact that it so often is, or can so easily become, an unhealthy mode of life — unhealthy in the sheer physical and nervous sense. …

But the question arises: if this is really the nature of our profession — if it is really thus isolated, thus misunderstood, thus unhealthy and dangerous — where does one find the rewards, the satisfactions, the compensations that could make it personally worthwhile? …

To find meaning and satisfaction in this work, one must learn, first of all, to enjoy it as a way of life. One must be able to love the great diversity of nature and of human living — to forget one's self at times, to be curious and detached and observant, to be sensitive to beauty and to tragedy, grateful for the opportunity to see life from many sides, accepting gladly the challenge that the external world presents to the understanding and the capacity for wonder. This is something which the over-ambitious, self-centered man will never be able to do, because he will never be able to see much beyond himself. …

But there is something more, too, something more important still. You must also have, if you are to taste the full satisfactions of this work, a belief in its essential importance and even — if I may use this term — its solemnity.

I don't want to sound corny. Perhaps, for this reason, the less I say about this, the better. But this is, after all, an endangered world, endangered in the grimmest sense of that term: a world endangered by the atom, by the phenomenon of overpopulation, by the lack of uniformity in the economic and social advancement of various branches of the human family, with all the tensions that produces, and finally by the ideological prejudices in the name of which certain great peoples are today ruled. It is to this pattern of dangers that the foreign policies of our country are, in large part, addressed; there is no country whose policies are, from this standpoint, more important; and there is no Foreign Service officer whose work and attitudes do not have something to do with the formulation of these policies.

Unless one realizes these things, unless one cares

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about them, unless one has a real love of life and a belief that there are things worth living for; unless one trembles occasionally for the civilization to which he belongs; unless one can contrive to see his work as related, however modestly, to the problem of saving this civilization; unless one consents, accordingly, to recognize that there are things at stake in his work vastly more important than the comforts or the financial enrichment or the career advancement of any single individual — unless one can do these things, then, my friends, I can give no assurance whatsoever that the strains and drawbacks of Foreign Service life are ever going to find their compensation.

Whoever cannot understand that values more important than his own immediate personal interests are involved in the work he performs, and that unless these values are preserved, his own individual life can never attain full richness and meaning, that man does not belong in this profession; for to him it will never reveal its true rewards. …

September 1992 — The *Original* Planning Staff

The end of the Cold War prompted a new look at the policy planning function. Amb. Kennan's incisive portrait of the Policy Planning Staff he established in 1947 led off the Journal*'s discussion.*

The State Department Policy Planning Staff of Secretary of State George Marshall's time, from 1947 to 1948, was very much a unit of his creation. …

There were at that time in the Department of State only three officials charged with the duty and authority of looking at American foreign policy in its entirety … the Secretary himself, the under secretary, and (when there was one, depending on the way in which he was used) the counselor of the department.

This, however, placed a heavy burden on these three officials, the first two in particular. The recommendations reaching their offices from the various geographical and functional divisions were sometimes conflicting. Not only that, but the recommendations normally reflected short-term and parochial views of the problems in question, not fitted into any more long-term and comprehensive concepts of what American policy ought to be. The senior officers of the department were usually too busy to do the spadework in analyzing the conflicts between the views and recommendations of individual subordinate offices. They often needed someone to help them by studying through the matters at hand and suggesting ways in which the conflicts could be resolved. They also needed someone to help them infuse into the work of the individual subordinate offices an understanding of the larger concepts on the basis of which policy was being conducted at the top. And, finally, they needed someone who could examine the day-to-day decisions being taken in the various offices of the department to see how these related to the more long-term interests of the country. …

The staff had the privilege of direct access to the Secretary of State and the under secretary. We did our best to avoid abusing this privilege. In particular, we were concerned at all times not to undercut State's individual geographic and functional offices. We invited them, in every instance that I can recall, to send representatives to join us in the study of each of the questions we took under advisement. Where there were unresolved differences with them, we urged the Secretary and the under secretary to hear their views as well as our own. …

Finally, I might mention that we took pains to keep the staff small. We had a table that seated about 10 people at a maximum, and I can recall saying at the time that, if we ever had more members than could sit around that table, our usefulness would be lost, because we would fall victim to the disease of bureaucracy that affected so much of the remainder of the department. …

When, in 1949, a new under secretary of state, James Webb, decided that the staff should no longer have direct access to himself and the Secretary but that its papers would now require clearance throughout the department before being presented to them, I knew that this was the end of the usefulness of the staff for the purposes Gen. Marshall had intended it to serve. …

If we did not always persuade others of the soundness of our views, we stimulated them to a brand of thinking of which there had previously been very little in the department. We provided a useful link, which had not existed before, between the department and outstanding thinkers on problems of foreign policy outside the governmental establishment. (Gen. Marshall had been particularly insistent that we draw them into our deliberations and tap their wisdom before putting our own recommendations before him.) And, while the example did not last very long at that time, we established the precedent, and made clear the importance, of a sharp delineation between the concept of the national interest in what might be called its pure and unadulterated form, and the necessities of domestic politics. These, in my retrospective judgment, were valuable services, at least with relation to the needs of those crucial immediate postwar years.

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Finally, our method of operation, along the lines laid down by Gen. Marshall, served to emphasize and illustrate the need for a central concept of American policy, comprehensive, coherent, and consistently pursued, to replace the helter-skelter multiplicity of uncoordinated concepts and impulses, arising from within the Department of State and from other parts of the government, of which America's conduct in foreign affairs is so often the reflection.

I am glad that the experience of the Planning Staff at that time is still being examined and consulted in a different age — an age with quite different but no less grave and fateful problems. ■

Need to Sound the Alarm About Something?

Why not write a "Speaking Out" column for the *Foreign Service Journal*?

"Speaking Out" is your forum to advocate policy, regulatory or statutory changes to the Foreign Service. These can be based on personal experience with an injustice or convey your hard-won insights into a foreign affairs-related issue.

Writers are encouraged to take strong stands, but all factual claims must be supported and documented. Submissions should be approximately 1,500 words in length and should be sent via e-mail to journal@afsa.org.

Please note that all submissions to the *Journal* must be approved by the Editorial Board and are subject to editing for style, length and format.