

Excerpts from "X"

Excerpts from X (George Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947: <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19470701faessay25403/x/the-sources-of-soviet-conduct.html>

*[A native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, **George F. Kennan** (1904-2005) graduated from Princeton University in 1925 and soon thereafter went to work for the U.S. State Department as an expert on Russia. He spent much of the 1930s attached to the U.S. embassy in Moscow, where he witnessed firsthand the internal workings of the Soviet Union, including the show trials in which Stalin condemned thousands of suspected political opponents to death. This experience convinced Kennan that there was little hope for lasting cooperation between the Soviet Union and the West. In May 1944 he was appointed deputy chief of the U.S. mission in Moscow, where in 1946 he drafted a telegram [see previous lesson] that laid out his views on why the Soviets were behaving as they were. This telegram proved to be highly influential among many of Truman's foreign policy advisers, who encouraged him to publish an article clarifying some of his ideas. What follows is a much shortened version of that article, which appeared in the July 1947 issue of the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*. Because the author was a prominent official in the State Department, he used a false name ("X") rather than his own.]*

....[I]t is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with...threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward "toughness." While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable [unresponsive] to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism. The Russian leaders are keen judges of human psychology, and as such they are highly conscious that loss of temper and of self-control is never a source of strength in political affairs. They are quick to exploit such evidences of weakness....

It is clear that the United States cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the Soviet regime. It must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena. It must continue to expect that Soviet policies will reflect no abstract love of peace and stability, no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist and capitalist worlds, but rather a cautious, persistent pressure toward the disruption and, weakening of all rival influence and rival power.

Balanced against this are the facts that Russia, as opposed to the western world in general, is still by far the weaker party, that Soviet policy is highly flexible, and that Soviet society may well contain deficiencies which will eventually weaken its own total potential. This would of itself warrant the United States entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.

It would be an exaggeration to say that American behavior unassisted and alone could exercise a power of life and death over the Communist movement and bring about the early fall of Soviet power in Russia. But the United States has it in its power to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection than it has had to observe in recent years, and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.