



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report originated while Melvyn P. Leffler was a Jennings Randolph Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. He was writing his book on what appeared to be the most intractable and ominous conflict of the post-World War II era—the Cold War. He was addressing the questions of why the Cold War lasted as long as it did and why it ended when it did. As part of the ongoing dialogue at the United States Institute of Peace, he was repeatedly asked about the lessons of the Cold War for our contemporary problems.

His attention was drawn to the career of George F. Kennan, the father of containment. Kennan was a rather obscure and frustrated foreign service officer at the U.S. embassy in Moscow when his “Long Telegram” of February 1946 gained the attention of policymakers in Washington and transformed his career. Leffler reviews Kennan’s legacy and ponders the implications of his thinking for the contemporary era. Is it possible, Leffler wonders, to reconcile Kennan’s legacy with the newfound emphasis on a “democratic peace”?

Melvyn P. Leffler, a former senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, won the Bancroft Prize for his book on the origins of the Cold War and the national security of the Truman administration. His new book, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, will appear in 2007. He is the Edward Stettinius Professor of American History at the University of Virginia.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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Melvyn P. Leffler

Remembering George Kennan

Lessons for Today?

Summary

- Kennan’s thinking and policy prescriptions evolved quickly from the time he wrote the “Long Telegram” in February 1946 until the time he delivered the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago in 1950.
- His initial emphasis was on the assessment of the Soviet threat. With new documents from the Soviet archives, we can see that the “Long Telegram” and the “Mr. X” article contained both brilliant insights and glaring omissions.
- After he was appointed by Secretary of State George C. Marshall to head the newly formed Policy Planning Staff, Kennan’s thinking evolved from a focus on threat assessment to an emphasis on interests. Believing that the Soviet threat was political and ideological, and not military, Kennan stressed the importance of reconstructing Western Europe and rebuilding western Germany and Japan. The key task was to prevent the Kremlin from gaining a preponderance of power in Eurasia.
- Kennan always believed that containment was a prelude to rollback and that the Soviet Union could be maneuvered back to its prewar borders. Eventually, the behavior of the Kremlin would mellow and its attitudes toward international relations would change.
- The United States needed to negotiate from strength, but the object of strength was, in fact, to negotiate—and compromise. It was important for the United States to avoid overweening commitments.
- American insecurity stemmed from a mistaken emphasis on legalism and moralism. The United States could not transform the world and should not seek to do so. Goals needed to be modest, linked to interests, and pursued systematically.
- Kennan would have nothing but disdain for a policy based on notions of a “democratic peace.” But the empirical evidence of social scientists cannot be ignored. Should the pursuit of democracy no longer be seen as a value, but conceived of as an interest?

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Introduction

It is a very appropriate time to remember George F. Kennan, arguably the most influential Foreign Service officer in United States history. He died on March 17, 2005 at age 101. There were many extensive obituaries at the time, and all of them correctly stressed that Kennan was the father of the containment policy, the strategy that shaped U.S. diplomacy throughout most of the Cold War. Kennan first outlined that strategy in a confidential dispatch he sent from the U.S. embassy in Moscow in February 1946. He repeated it in an article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” that he published under the pseudonym “Mr. X” in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Now, on the sixtieth anniversary of the so-called “Long Telegram,” I want to place it in perspective and compare it to some of the new information we have since the end of the Cold War about Soviet foreign policy. I also want to assess the ways in which Kennan quickly adjusted his thinking to the challenges he faced when he became the director of the State Department Policy Planning Staff in 1947. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I seek to reflect on the lessons that Kennan’s prescriptions and strategy may have for our own time.

The “Long Telegram”

Kennan was the number two man in the U.S. embassy in Moscow at the end of World War II. He was often ill and irascible. He felt isolated in Moscow and ignored in Washington. He believed that America’s plans and commitments for the postwar world “were based on a dangerous misreading of the personality, the intentions, and the political situation of the Soviet leadership.”¹ In Kennan’s view, that leadership, headed by Joseph Stalin, was intent on exploiting its victory over Nazi Germany to gain preponderance in Europe. Yet American officials, in Kennan’s view, did not have the guts, the “political manliness,” to thwart Stalin’s ambitions.²

In mid-February 1946, Ambassador W. Averell Harriman was out of the country. Kennan was in charge of the embassy. But he was bedridden. “I was taken,” he recalled, “with cold, fever, tooth trouble, and finally the aftereffects of the sulpha drugs administered for the relief of these other miseries.” His secretary brought to his sickbed a bunch of messages, one of which reduced him “to a new level of despair—despair not with the Soviet government but with our own.” The Treasury Department, in its naïveté, in its “anguished cry of bewilderment,” was seeking to understand why the Soviet government was rejecting the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The issue was trivial, Kennan thought, compared to so many others. But the more he pondered the situation, “the more it seemed to be obvious that this was ‘it.’” For eighteen months, he had been talking to “a stone.” Now, “it would not do to give them [his superiors in Washington] just a fragment of the truth. Here was a case where nothing but the whole truth would do. They had asked for it. Now, by God, they would have it.”³

Kennan dictated his thoughts to his secretary, and the words comprised what became known as the “Long Telegram.” Clearly organized and evocatively argued, Kennan examined the Soviet outlook, analyzed the Kremlin’s prospective policies, and deduced lessons that he hoped policymakers in Washington would absorb and follow. The Soviet Union, he insisted, was motivated by traditional Russian insecurities and Marxist-Leninist dogma. Stalin sought to preserve his totalitarian system at home and expand Soviet power abroad. The United States could not negotiate with or placate Soviet leaders. They had a “neurotic” view of the world. They “were a conspiracy within a conspiracy.” They had no sense of the real world outside Russia’s borders, no sense of “objective truth.” They would exploit every Western vulnerability, seeking to foment disunity and hoping to stimulate violence: “poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents, etc.” Beyond Europe, the Kremlin would seek to erode the power and influence of the Western powers over colonial and dependent peoples. “In summary,”

Kennan said, “we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with U.S. there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure. . . . Problem of how to cope with this force is undoubtedly greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced and probably the greatest it will ever have to face.”⁴

Yet Kennan insisted there was no need to despair. The problem, he advised, is “within our power to resolve—and that without recourse to any general military conflict.” “Soviet power,” he emphasized, “was neither schematic nor adventuristic. It does not work by fixed plans. It does not take unnecessary risks. Impervious to logic of reason, . . . it is highly sensitive to logic of force.” The Soviets were basically weak. When faced with resistance, they would retreat. “Gauged against the Western world as a whole, Soviets are still by far the weaker force.” Their expansion would be thwarted if the West acted with “cohesion, firmness, and vigor.”⁵

More than thwarted! Kennan intuited that the Soviet system itself was vulnerable. Stalin might not be able to digest the lands he annexed and the countries he occupied. He might not even be able to retain the loyalty of his own peoples. Most Russians, Kennan said, were more emotionally removed from the doctrines of communism than ever before. Communist ideology no longer served as an emotional inspiration. “Thus, internal soundness and permanence of movement need not be regarded as assured.” What the United States had to do, Kennan pronounced, was to educate its own citizenry, tackle key domestic problems, maintain its self-confidence, and act with patience.⁶

Looking back, the “Long Telegram” contained brilliant insights and glaring omissions. There was no discussion of U.S. interests; no enumeration of U.S. priorities; no real prescriptions, except to contain Soviet power. As a summary of the variables and conditions bearing on immediate postwar Soviet policy, there were notable blanks and misleading innuendos. Soviet peoples had suffered horribly from Nazi aggression and German occupation. Twenty-seven million people were dead; tens of millions homeless; millions more injured and incapacitated. The misery, hunger, and desolation of the war bequeathed incalculable hardship as well as a deep hatred and fear of the German enemy.⁷ New documents and books not only illuminate the suffering of the Soviet peoples, but also the preoccupations of Soviet leaders with the prospective and inevitable revival of German and also Japanese power. In conversation after conversation at the end of the war, whether these conversations were with his Kremlin comrades, or his East European minions, or Western statesmen, Stalin time and again talked about the recrudescence of German power. “I HATE THE GERMANS,” he declared, but it was impossible to destroy them permanently. “In 1871,” Stalin recalled, “Germany attacked France. . . . Forty years later, in 1914, Germany attacked again. After the last World War, Germany restored its strength and began to wage war in 1939. Germany possesses an immense regenerative capability.” Fear of Germany, and fear of the possibility of a revived Germany uniting with its former Western foes in an alliance against the Soviet Union, was a factor bearing on the thinking of Stalin and his successors for the entirety of the Cold War.⁸

Kennan, of course, was fully aware of Soviet security concerns. But he treated them as if they were unfounded, “neurotic,” and “instinctive.”⁹ He made no effort to place them in the context of the aftermath of a terrible, bloody, and cruel war whose strategic lessons had to be pondered carefully if any lasting accommodation with the Soviet Union were to be reached. But in the “Long Telegram,” Kennan discounted any such possibility. Hence he did not address ongoing U.S. initiatives that were agitating Soviet leaders, like Secretary of State James F. Byrnes’ practice of atomic diplomacy at the first postwar conference of foreign ministers or General Douglas MacArthur’s insistence on excluding the Soviets from any role in the postwar governance of Japan.¹⁰ Nor did Kennan dwell on the sources of Western vulnerabilities, like the socio-economic unrest and political turmoil in Western Europe, the vacuums of power in Germany and Japan, and the emergence of revolutionary nationalist unrest in the Third World. Rather than explain these vulnerabilities, Kennan’s

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aim was to highlight the intent and ability of the Soviet Union to capitalize on these vulnerabilities. The Kremlin's "political action," Kennan wrote a year later in the "Mr. X" article, "is a fluid stream which moves constantly wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power."¹¹

Much of the new literature on Soviet foreign policy at the end of World War II presents Soviet policy in a more textured way. Without discounting Stalin's large share of responsibility for the Cold War and without trivializing the ideological framework that shaped his thinking, historians also emphasize the manifold strategic and security factors bearing on Soviet policies. In fact, the crosscutting nature of diverse ideological and strategic factors contributed to the inconsistency and ambiguity of Soviet policy.¹² At the time, many U.S. analysts were aware of these inconsistencies and they puzzled some. The great appeal of the "Long Telegram" was due in no small part to Kennan's masterful ability to simplify reality. Rather than tackle deep-seated problems in different parts of the globe, Kennan urged his superiors in Washington to approach all issues from the standpoint of competition with the USSR. Since Soviet fears and insecurities were said to be irrational and neurotic, U.S. officials need not agonize over accommodating legitimate Soviet interests; there were none. Policymakers need not scrutinize avenues for compromise; it was futile. Policymakers need not be dismayed by Soviet power; the Kremlin was a paper tiger. "I was conscious," Kennan wrote a year later, "of the weakness of the Russian position, of the slenderness of the means with which they operated, of the ease with which they could be held and pushed back."¹³

The "Long Telegram" made Kennan's career. His message was circulated widely around the corridors of power in Washington. Top officials, like Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who were already fearful of Soviet power, used it to push forward their own agendas.¹⁴ Kennan was called back to Washington, given a position at the National War College, and then selected by incoming Secretary of State George C. Marshall to head his newly formed Policy Planning Staff at Foggy Bottom. "My official loneliness," Kennan recalled in his memoir, "came to an end. . . . My reputation was made. My voice now carried."¹⁵

Kennan, of course, shrewdly grasped that his message commanded attention because it arrived at precisely the right moment. Six months earlier, he reminisced, the telegram would have been greeted "with raised eyebrows"; six months later, "it would probably have sounded redundant, a sort of preaching to the convinced."¹⁶ In fact, Kennan did not realize the extent to which the administration of Harry S. Truman was already heading in the direction of containment.¹⁷ Most illustrative of that fact was the memorandum that the president himself wrote in preparation for a meeting with Secretary of State Byrnes after the latter returned from a meeting in Moscow at the end of December 1945. Truman was growing irritated with Byrnes for not consulting him more closely and for taking positions that were engendering criticism at home without doing much good abroad. Many years ago, the historian Robert Messer fleshed out the context of this meeting between the president and the secretary of state.¹⁸ There is no reason to discuss it at length here. But Truman's memorandum reflected the trend of his thinking: he was fed up with the behavior of the Soviets in the Balkans, angry about their actions in Eastern Europe, and furious over their refusal to withdraw troops from Iran, as they had been obligated to do. "There isn't a doubt in my mind," Truman wrote, "that Russia intends an invasion of Turkey and the seizure of the Black Sea Straits to the Mediterranean. Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language another war is in the making. Only one language do they understand—'How many divisions have you?' I do not think we should play compromise any longer. . . . I'm tired of babying the Soviets."¹⁹

Kennan's message clearly arrived at the right time. His "Long Telegram" simplified reality and obfuscated the ambiguities and inconsistencies of Soviet policies. But his message also contained brilliant insights into Soviet policy and the international situation. Most of all, he stressed that the Soviet Union was not a military threat. The Soviets had "no

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fixed plan” and would respond to “strong resistance.” If the United States maintained sufficient force and demonstrated that it was ready to use it, the Kremlin would back away from confrontation. The West, he stressed, despite all its problems was much stronger. Even though the appeal of communist ideology in the aftermath of depression, war, and holocaust was widespread, Kennan insightfully saw that the communist system was alienating its own people, that its economic achievements were superficial, and that its people were sullen and demoralized.²⁰

A year later, in “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Kennan wrote even more emphatically that the Russian people were “physically and spiritually tired.” Soviet power might still radiate abroad and communist ideology might still attract allegiance from demoralized and destitute peoples in many lands, but Russians knew their system’s fragility. So long as their economic problems were not overcome, the Soviet regime would remain vulnerable. “If disunity were ever to seize and paralyze the party, the chaos and weakness of Russian society would be revealed in forms beyond description. . . . Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies.”²¹ Hence Kennan believed that the United States could do more than hold the line. “It is entirely possible for the United States to influence by its actions the internal developments, both within Russia and throughout the international communist movement. . . . [T]he 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 break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.”²² In other words, Kennan always believed that within the strategy of containment, there resided a positive thrust to roll back Soviet power and transform the Kremlin’s approach to international affairs.

But, somewhat curiously, neither in the “Long Telegram” nor in the “Mr. X” article did Kennan define U.S. interests or discuss U.S. priorities. He simply stated that the United States should contain Soviet power. The United States, he said in the “Mr. X” article, should practice a policy of firm containment, designed to “confront the Soviets with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.”²³ Later, he would regret this vague phrasing, which suggested the use of military force everywhere.²⁴ But whereas in both the “Long Telegram” and the “Mr. X” article he was vague about what the United States should actually do abroad, he was emphatic that the United States should never lose sight of the home front. “Much depends,” he wrote at the end of the “Long Telegram,” “on the health and vigor of our own society. World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is the point where domestic and foreign policies meet. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale, and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués.” The deficiencies of our society, he stressed, must not be treated “with fatalism and indifference.”²⁵

The Architecture of Containment

Once Kennan assumed the leadership of the Policy Planning Staff, he was forced to figure out the architecture of containment. What he advocated in the years 1947–49 was actually far more important than anything he wrote in the “Long Telegram.” He buttressed containment with a concrete foundation based on a careful calculation of Western vulnerabilities and U.S. interests. In other words, he quickly filled in and clarified the glaring omissions that existed in both the “Long Telegram” and “Mr. X” article. U.S. security, he argued, depended on preventing any adversary from gaining control of the power centers of Eurasia. Other than the United States, there were four centers of power in the

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world: the British Isles, Germany and Europe, Russia, and Japan. The key to U.S. security was to insure that Soviet Russia not lure or co-opt the other centers of power across the Eurasian land mass.²⁶ Kennan's greatest fear was a joining of Russian and German power. "The only really dangerous thing in my mind," he wrote in April 1947, "is the possibility that the technical skills of the Germans might be combined with the physical resources of Russia."²⁷ In a speech to the National War College in September 1948, he laid out his definition of interests with even more clarity. If Russia and European power were joined together even for a few years, he warned, "there would be the possibility of mobilization and employment of such tremendous economic and military strength from that side as to constitute a real threat to the security of the North American continent."²⁸

Kennan calculated (correctly) that the Kremlin did not seek to use force to gain control of the resources and manpower of Germany and Western Europe. In Kennan's view, Stalin was betting that he could lure Germany into the Soviet orbit and capitalize upon the appeal of communist parties in France and Italy.²⁹ During the very first meetings of the Policy Planning Staff in May 1947, Kennan stated that the problems facing the United States were political, not military, and that the political problems needed to be addressed through economic policies. He championed the allocation of economic aid and played a key role in formulating the Marshall Plan. The focus of attention, he insisted, must not be on the communist threat, but on restoring the health and vigor of European society. Moreover, occupation policies in Germany and Austria needed to be configured so that their resources could make a maximum contribution to overall European recovery. The place to begin, Kennan advised, was the coal-producing areas of the Rhine River Valley. Coal production, in Kennan's view, was the key to reviving production in Western Europe, overcoming the dollar gap, generating hope, and undercutting the appeal of indigenous communists.³⁰

Kennan emphasized that he was against allocating resources wherever communists were active. In the Truman Doctrine, the president had declared that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities and by outside pressures."³¹ Kennan recoiled at such indiscriminate commitments. In his view, U.S. interests needed to be defined much more carefully.³² Money needed to be used selectively where it was likely to achieve maximum results.³³ His focus was on the centers of world power, areas where there existed natural resources, industrial infrastructure, and skilled manpower. The western zones of Germany and Japan were of critical importance. Turning his attention to East Asia in early 1948, he emphasized that "The security of the United States must never again be threatened by the mobilization against us of the complete industrial area there as it was during the Second World War." The Japanese economy needed to be rehabilitated. Risky reforms must cease. Indigenous communists must not be allowed to capitalize on the dire economic situation. The Soviets must not be allowed to lure Japan into their orbit. Nothing else was really important in Asia. If the United States could keep Japan out of a communist sphere and maintain its own bases offshore, for example, in the Philippines and on Okinawa, the United States would achieve its overriding security goals.³⁴

Kennan grasped that U.S. initiatives in the western zones of Germany, Western Europe, and Japan would provoke a Soviet reaction. When Stalin launched the Cominform, incited riots and strikes in France and Italy, and helped to orchestrate a communist seizure of power in Prague, Kennan was not surprised. Soviet actions, he wrote, "were a quite logical development . . . in the face of increasing American determination to assist the free nations of the world both economically and politically." Subject to a squeeze play, the Kremlin was desperately trying to undercut the Marshall Plan before it became a reality. "The halt in the communist advance in Western Europe has necessitated a consolidation of communist power throughout Eastern Europe," Kennan wrote in November 1947. "It will be necessary for them, in particular, to clamp down completely on Czechoslovakia."³⁵

Kennan, however, calculated that the Soviets did not want war. Should war come, "it will be against their will and not as a result of their design."³⁶ Stalin, he insisted, wanted

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to bore from within and capture Western Europe and western Germany through political subversion, not through war. The United States, meanwhile, needed to keep focused on priorities, like the recovery of Western Europe, western Germany, and Japan. Kennan grasped that the United States had limited means; the key was to unleash the natural forces within western European societies that were resistant to communism. If the United States catalyzed those forces, eventually it could turn its attention to the liberation of Eastern Europe. But priorities were priorities, and they should not be confused.³⁷

Kennan did not think the Soviets wanted war, but he recognized that the United States needed military capabilities to support its diplomacy. The initiatives Washington was taking in Western Europe and in western Germany could not help but be seen as provocative in the Kremlin. The Kremlin must not be allowed to thwart the achievement of U.S. priorities. Stalin had to be deterred from going too far, and potential friends in Western Europe had to be reassured that the United States would support them should the Soviets overstep the bounds of their existing sphere of domination in Eastern Europe. The United States, Kennan emphasized in early 1948, needed forces-in-being so that everyone would know that “we could pack a mean punch in a short time on any limited theater of operations, even if far from our shores. . . .” Friends and foes alike also needed to know that the United States had the will and the capacity to mobilize quickly for a major armed conflict. The shadow of U.S. armed forces needed to support a risk-taking diplomacy that was designed to shore up the balance of power in Europe and prevent the Kremlin from achieving its goals through intimidation, subversion, and political warfare.³⁸ Elsewhere, U.S. credibility had to be preserved. Countries like Greece and Italy could not be allowed to fall to domestic communists, lest such developments have a bandwagon effect on more important centers of power.³⁹

Once the United States had achieved a position of strength, Kennan changed his attitude toward negotiations. And this happened with surprising swiftness. After the communist coup in Prague, the U.S. Congress passed the Marshall Plan and modestly boosted defense expenditures. The communists lost the elections in Italy. Their strikes and demonstrations in France petered out. The processes of recovery, already under way before the Marshall Plan, became much more visible. Stalin blockaded Berlin, but the United States, Britain, and France did not deviate from their intentions to merge the three western zones in Germany, carry out currency reform, raise the level of industrial production, and organize self-governing institutions in western Germany. Stalin blustered and threatened. He blockaded Berlin, but did not dare to interfere with the airlift. Kennan continued to think that Stalin would not go to war. “The danger of political conquest,” he wrote in November 1948, “is still greater than the military danger.”⁴⁰

Kennan, therefore, boldly pushed for the opening of negotiations over the future of Germany. He was willing to contemplate unification and neutralization, provided the Kremlin withdrew its forces not only from eastern Germany, but also from Eastern Europe.⁴¹ Kennan was impressed by the split between Tito and Stalin, and intuited that it opened additional possibilities in Eastern Europe. He supported modest covert operations and was a great champion of the dissemination of information throughout the eastern bloc. Titoism, he thought, provided opportunities to intensify the strains between the Russians and their satellites and to nurture centrifugal forces. Kennan wanted the United States to calibrate its actions carefully, seeking to avert war, yet hoping to experiment with political warfare, as well as with innovative negotiating strategies. His aim was to liberate Eastern Europe from the Soviet yoke and to force the Soviets back to their approximate prewar borders. In a talk at the National War College in September 1948, he stated clearly that our aim was “to maneuver the Russian bear back into his cage and keep him there where he belongs.” Now that the United States had succeeded in thwarting the Kremlin’s political offensive in Western Europe, the national security goal of the United States was to get Russia to return to its “natural” borders, “to a place where it can no longer threaten to seize and command the power of Europe as well as of Russia.”⁴²

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How did the United States come to feel as insecure as it now did, Kennan asked in the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago.

In order to do this, Kennan wanted to negotiate a mutual withdrawal. He believed that the key was to pull back American and Soviet power while nurturing European union. He did not want to risk the possibility of allowing Germany to resume its mastery over Europe, but he wanted to absorb German power in a united Europe that could operate independently of American and Soviet power. This vision revealed both his intent on containing and retrenching Soviet power as well his skepticism of the capacity of the United States to play a long-term role in Europe. The task was to nurture the restorative forces in the Old World and promote its unity in order to balance Soviet power and allow the United States to escape the trap of overweening commitments abroad that would sap its energy and risk maladroit adventurism.⁴³

We tend to look back nowadays and think that the reconstruction of Western Europe and integration of western Germany were part of an inevitable trajectory once the Marshall Plan was implemented and the Soviet blockade of Berlin was overcome. But that was not the case at all. During 1949, Kennan and his colleagues agonized over the seemingly intractable problems they faced. The communists took power in China, revolutionary nationalist strife mounted in Indochina and Southeast Asia, and the Soviets tested their first atomic weapon. But nothing worried U.S. officials more than their floundering occupation policies in Germany and Japan. Kennan and his new boss in the State Department, Dean G. Acheson, lamented conditions and ruminated over the prospect that German demoralization could set back all their efforts. British financial weakness and French fears of a revived Germany complicated their planning. Stalin's bluster and Soviet power were only a small part of the larger configuration of problems they faced. The whole structure of the Western world, Acheson conceded at one tense and frustrating planning session, could fall apart unless U.S. officials could decide how to grapple with the interrelated problems of European reconstruction, British devaluation, German integration, revolutionary nationalism, and atomic strategy.⁴⁴

Kennan, along with his colleagues, pondered the intractable issues. There were no clear answers. There were frightening uncertainties and scary scenarios. Kennan sought to rivet attention on key priorities. He did not think his colleagues should dwell on Mao's seizure of power in China or Stalin's acquisition of atomic capabilities. There were greater threats. Most important were the occupation policies in Germany and Japan. "Any world balance of power," he wrote the year before, "means first and foremost a balance on the Eurasian land mass. That balance is unthinkable as long as Germany and Japan remain power vacuums." He lamented the diffusion of authority in Washington and the bureaucratic conflicts. He struggled to enhance the State Department's control of overall policy and he warned that Germany and Japan could still wind up working with the adversary.⁴⁵ He pondered the architecture of the non-communist world and concluded that European union needed to be based on French leadership and Franco-German cooperation. Washington should not push for British leadership; London exerted a negative influence on prospects for European integration. The British, Canadians, and Americans could form their own configuration and work out their own arrangements for developing and handling atomic weapons. Meanwhile, opportunity must be left for the possibility that East Europeans might be lured westward. If the satellites could be weaned from the Kremlin, their form of government was of no great consequence. Nor did Kennan think that the United States should develop a hydrogen bomb. The struggle with the Kremlin was essentially a political one, and the overriding task was to assure the vitality of representative governments and democratic institutions in Western Europe and the United States.⁴⁶

The Walgreen Lectures

During 1949, Kennan's differences with Acheson grew and his influence waned. He resigned in early 1950, and soon thereafter gave the most famous series of lectures ever delivered on American diplomacy. How did the United States come to feel as insecure as it now did, Kennan asked in the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago. His

answer was straightforward. America's moralistic and legalistic attitudes were the source of American ineptitude and insecurity. Looking at the history of American diplomacy from the Spanish-American War to the end of World War II, Kennan focused particular attention on America's open door policy in East Asia and Wilsonian diplomacy at the end of World War I. His indictment was scathing. Americans had "made themselves slaves of the concepts of international law and morality. . . ." They had given little thought to the strategic sensibilities of other great powers and ignored their own interests. They were infatuated with notions of their own superiority. U.S. officials bowed to domestic opinion and ignored calculations of power. They allowed war hysteria and impractical idealism to shape policy. They "indulged in the colossal conceit of thinking that you could suddenly make international life over into what you believed to be your own image." They "dismissed the past with contempt, rejected the relevance of the past to the future, and refused to occupy [themselves] with the real problems that a study of the past would suggest." They foolishly assumed that "if [their] principles were commendable, their consequences could not be other than happy and acceptable." They naively believed that their foreign policy goals could be achieved by "inducing other governments to sign up to professions of high moral and legal principle. . . ."47

Nothing Kennan would ever write again would have the impact of the "Long Telegram," the "Mr. X" article, and the Walgreen Lectures. Subsequently, he would serve briefly as ambassador to the Soviet Union (1952) and to Yugoslavia (1961–63). He would write two Pulitzer Prize-winning books and several volumes of memoirs that rank among the best ever written in America. He would become a critic of the policies he helped birth, ridiculing U.S. policies in Vietnam and remonstrating against the nuclear arms race. He would lament the abuse of the environment and ruminate about the foibles of democratic governance. He remained a thorn in the side of virtually every U.S. presidential administration from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush. Officials grew tired of his criticism, but never could dismiss or ignore him. After all, Kennan had been the father of containment, predicting from the very outset of the Cold War that the United States could vanquish Soviet communism without war, that totalitarianism was vulnerable because of its own shortcomings, that the Kremlin's influence could be contained, and that victory was achievable if the United States replenished the vitality of its own society. Moreover, he buttressed his initial ideological assessments with brilliant policy prescriptions and analyses once he was tasked with helping to design the architecture of containment. Not all his recommendations were adopted, and many remain controversial to this day, but nobody can reread his policy planning papers without an appreciation for his intellect, his capacity to weigh the pros and cons of different options, his sensibility to the concerns of adversaries as well as allies, and his careful calculation of U.S. interests.

Kennan's Legacy and the Democratic Peace

Consequently, it is worth pondering whether there is anything to extrapolate from Kennan that might apply to the present dilemmas of U.S. foreign policy. Kennan began his "Mr. X" article by stressing that Soviet power was a product of ideology and circumstances. Circumstances today are far removed from those that existed in the aftermath of World War II. The contemporary terrorist threat does not emanate from a sovereign state. Borders today are more porous; people are more mobile; and weapons of mass destruction are more plentiful and more susceptible to proliferation. The ideology of the adversary today, to the extent that there is an ideology, is a form of Islamic fundamentalism that, however popular in North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, is much less appealing than communism was after World War II. Everywhere, then, as U.S. officials themselves acknowledged, liberal capitalism was on the defensive.

Notwithstanding these salient differences in circumstance and ideology, the advice, prescriptions, and policies that Kennan formulated and espoused at the height of his

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The advice, prescriptions, and policies that Kennan formulated and espoused at the height of his influence retain considerable resonance.

Most of all, American officials should not become infatuated with their own values and institutions and think they had universal application.

Democracies, Kennan believed, often exercised power foolishly.

Kennan wanted officials to grasp the underlying roots of the threats they faced and to deal with the vulnerabilities within Western societies.

To achieve its goals, the United States must serve as an exemplar of a vibrant liberal society rather than as a proselytizer of democratic ideals abroad.

influence retain considerable resonance. His emphasis was on threat perception. The key was to understand that the United States faced a political and ideological threat, not a military one. The task was to define interests and priorities in relation to the threat. Threats, moreover, should not be exaggerated. Emotion should not take over. Democracies had great difficulty formulating constructive policies, and political partisanship and paranoia must not supplant reason and calculation. Most of all, American officials should not become infatuated with their own values and institutions and think they had universal application. "We should stop putting ourselves in the position of being our brothers' keeper and refrain from offering moral and ideological advice. We should cease to talk about vague and . . . unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization."⁴⁸ Even in the West, according to Kennan, liberal values remained tenuous and uncertain, as they collided with the forces of modernization, industrialization, and technology.

Democracies, Kennan believed, often exercised power foolishly. U.S. power, therefore, needed to be conserved, nurtured, and applied prudently and sparingly. No nation, least of all a democratic nation susceptible to the whims of a volatile electorate, could transform the world. Goals needed to be more modest, linked to interests, and pursued systematically over a long period of time. War waged to do away with war and to eradicate violence often make "violence more enduring, more terrible, and more destructive to political stability than did the older motives of national interest. A war fought in the name of high moral principle finds no early end short of some form of total domination."⁴⁹

Kennan wanted officials to grasp the underlying roots of the threats they faced and to deal with the vulnerabilities within Western societies. Officials needed not so much to attack communists as to tackle the circumstances that permitted communism to flourish. Hence economic reconstruction assumed more importance than military rearmament. Filling vacuums of power and allaying the grievances of disaffected peoples in key areas was more important than flaying the monster in Moscow. That monster would perish from its own disease once it was deprived of nourishment abroad.

Terrorists today, like communists in the 1940s, Kennan would be thinking, would encounter insuperable obstacles if they were deprived of the conditions under which they flourish, that is, if they could not capitalize on regional rivalries, thwarted aspirations, and truncated modernization efforts. In the same way that Kennan grasped that the intractable Franco-German rivalry had to be overcome if Western Europe were to be secure, policymakers today might realize that the intractable Palestinian-Israeli problem must be resolved if the adversary is to be deprived of fertile ground for its recruitment purposes. Just as Kennan recognized that refugees fleeing from Eastern Europe and eastern Germany needed an outlet for their aspirations, European officials today must muster the imagination and determination to provide Muslim minorities in Europe with avenues to advance. Just as Kennan always claimed that the Russian people would reject communism, he would be assuming today that Islamic peoples would rebuff fundamentalism if the United States exercised prudence and wisdom. To achieve its goals, the United States must serve as an exemplar of a vibrant liberal society rather than as a proselytizer of democratic ideals abroad. From a position of strength, Kennan would be advising that the United States ponder the feasibility of negotiating with rogue regimes and maybe even with terrorist factions, much as he came to favor negotiations with the Soviet Union after spurning opportunities in 1945 and 1946. For Kennan, negotiation was possible because his goals were limited and calibrated. But negotiation never meant retreat from priorities or the compromise of interests; nor should they today.

Remembering George Kennan does not mean idolizing him. As indicated above, much in the world has changed, and Kennan was not as prescient as some would like to think. He predicted the end of communism, but never appreciated the appeal of consumer capitalism, democratic values, and soft power, all of which were so important to the collapse of the Soviet empire. Yet remembering George Kennan means honoring his memory by

thinking about the issues that he deemed most salient: the interpretation of threat and the calculation of interest.

Although Kennan stressed that the military threat was not the most salient danger to U.S. interests during the early days of the Cold War, it behooves us to ponder this matter. Might one argue nowadays that the principal threat, unlike the situation with Soviet Russia after World War II, is a military/terrorist threat, as illuminated by the events of 9/11? Or must 9/11 be placed in a larger perspective, however horrendous the loss of life and prestige was on that mournful day? Threat perception is a key to policymaking, and calculating the magnitude of disparate threats is something that Kennan would be encouraging us to do.⁵⁰

Kennan would also be cautioning that actions to deal with threats should produce more good than harm. He intuited, for example, that the Marshall Plan would produce a clampdown in Eastern Europe. He accepted this tradeoff. But he warned that actions to thwart Soviet expansion should not end up allowing the Germans to become the masters of Europe. Nor should efforts to maneuver the Soviets back to their prewar boundaries be so crude as to ignite a war that would be disproportionate to the interests at stake. Threats needed to be handled in nuanced ways. For the latter half of his life, Kennan regretted that his "Long Telegram" and "Mr. X" article simplified threat perception and encouraged others to think in terms of military containment and zero-sum outcomes. Foreign policy, in his view, demanded prudence and calculation, not lofty ideals and vacuous rhetoric about inchoate dangers. Only as he served on the Policy Planning Staff was he forced to translate the general policy of containment into an architectural achievement that would endure.

To do this required an appreciation of interests. Kennan challenged his colleagues to think systematically about interests. In his days on the Policy Planning Staff, he defined them in terms of centers of industrial infrastructure, skilled labor, and natural resources. But how should America's most vital interests be defined today? Securing access to the petroleum resources of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East is an indisputable interest. Removing governments that nurture or tolerate the breeding of terrorists is an indisputable interest. Kennan, I think, would appreciate those calculations. But he would be profoundly suspicious of the notion that those interests can be promoted most effectively by seeking to transform societies and impose a democratic way of life. Like Francis Fukuyama, Kennan would be profoundly skeptical of the capacity of the United States to impose democracy through the assertion of its power. "By definition," Fukuyama has written, "outsiders can't impose democracy on a country that doesn't want it; demand for democracy and reform must be domestic. Democracy promotion is therefore a long-term and opportunistic process that has to await the gradual ripening of political and economic conditions to be effective."⁵¹

But given the nature of contemporary threats, many analysts would argue that waiting could be self-destructive. Democracy promotion, they insist, makes sense not for idealistic reasons but for reasons of calculated interest.⁵² Democracies, they claim, would not harbor terrorists or wage aggressive war. Since Kennan's "Long Telegram" and Walgreen Lectures, these analysts have mustered a salient intellectual tradition, one that goes back to Kant, but that has its more recent roots in the empirical research of social scientists.⁵³ Democracies, this research suggests, rarely wage war against one another. Shared norms and institutional constraints militate against conflict. Elected governments are constrained by their electorates, which seek to avoid the loss of life, the sacrifice of property, and the burden of taxation. Further, democracies learn habits of compromise that nurture accommodation in the conduct of foreign relations much as they require horse-trading at home. Hence the spread of liberal ideals and democratic institutions becomes a national security imperative itself, a vital interest, as President George W. Bush has argued again and again over the past few years.

Threat perception is a key to policymaking, and calculating the magnitude of disparate threats is something that Kennan would be encouraging us to do.

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Like Francis Fukuyama, Kennan would be profoundly skeptical of the capacity of the United States to impose democracy through the assertion of its power.

Yet democratic peace theorists and writers have made a case that has catapulted an intellectual tradition and a scholarly debate into the very heart of policymaking. Is it a vital interest to spread democracy? Would external dangers diminish if more nations were democratic?

Kennan would be profoundly skeptical of such arguments. Ideals and interests, he would claim, should not be confused and conflated. Like many critics of the democratic peace theory, he would distrust the statistical data and look disdainfully on the proposition that democracies are less likely than other states to enter militarized interstate disputes.⁵⁴ He took a dim view of the capacity of people to govern themselves and exercise prudent self-discipline. He would sneer at President Bush's homilies about the universal appeal and benign influence of democracy. In his view, societies possessed immutable cultural features and nations possessed permanent interests; neither of these were likely to be transcended or superseded by popular elections or self-governing institutions.

Yet democratic peace theorists and writers have made a case that has catapulted an intellectual tradition and a scholarly debate into the very heart of policymaking. Is it a vital interest to spread democracy? Would external dangers diminish if more nations were democratic? Remembering George Kennan means that we should tackle these issues seriously because they involve fundamental issues of threat perception and interest assessment, matters that represent the core of Kennan's legacy and that were at the very heart of the "Long Telegram," the "Mr. X" article, and the Walgreen Lectures.

NOTES

1. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950* (New York: Bantam, 1969), 236.
2. *Ibid.*, 581.
3. *Ibid.*, 307–9.
4. Excerpts from the “Long Telegram” can be conveniently found in *ibid.*, 583–98; quotations are from pp. 588 and 595.
5. *Ibid.*, 595–98.
6. *Ibid.*, 596–98.
7. For the impact of the war, see, for example, Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Richard Overy, *Russia’s War* (London: Penguin Books, 1997); Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957*, trans. and ed. Hugh Ragsdale (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 20ff.; Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *The People’s War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Anna Krylova, “‘Healers of Wounded Souls’: The Crisis of Private Life in Soviet Literature, 1944–1946,” *The Journal of Modern History* 73 (June 2001): 308–9. For hatred of Germans, see, for example, Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 227–28.
8. For the quotations, see Mark Kramer, “The Soviet Union and the Founding of the German Democratic Republic: 50 Years Later—A Review Article,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 6 (1999): 1097–98; “Notes of V. Kolarov from a Meeting with J. Stalin [January 28, 1945],” in “Stalin and the Cold War, 1945–1953: A Cold War International History Project Document Reader” (prepared for the Yale University conference on “Stalin and the Cold War, 1945–1953,” September 23–25, 1999).
9. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 586.
10. For the impact of these matters on Stalin, see Vladimir O. Pechatnov, “*The Allies Are Pressing on You to Break Your Will . . .*”: *Foreign Policy Correspondence between Stalin and Molotov and other Politburo Members, September 1945–December 1946*. Cold War International History Project Working Paper, no. 26 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1999); David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 116–71.
11. Mr. X [George F. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947: 566–82, reprinted in George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (New York: Mentor Books, 1951), quotation from p. 98.
12. See, for example, Pechatnov, “*The Allies Are Pressing on You*”; Norman M. Naimark, “Stalin and Europe in the Postwar Period, 1945–1953: Issues and Problems,” *Journal of Modern European History* 2 (2004): 28–56; Silvio Pons, “In the Aftermath of the Age of Wars: The Impact of World War II on Soviet Security Policy,” in *Russia in the Age of Wars, 1914–1945*, ed. Silvio Pons and Andrea Romano (Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 2000), 277–307; Geoffrey Roberts, “Ideology, Calculation, Improvisation: Spheres of Influence and Soviet Foreign Policy, 1939–1945,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 655–73; Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 491–520.
13. For the quotation, see Kennan’s “Notes on the Marshall Plan,” December 15, 1947, George F. Kennan Papers (hereinafter, “Kennan Papers”), Box 23, Seely G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. For an analysis by the author, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 106–9.
14. For a vivid analysis, see Lloyd C. Gardner, *Architects of Illusion: Men and Ideas in American Foreign Policy, 1941–1949* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970), 270–300.
15. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 310.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 55–99.
18. Robert L. Messer, *The End of an Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman, and the Origins of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 156–66.
19. Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 79–80.
20. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 596.
21. X [Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” in Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 102–4.
22. *Ibid.*, 105–6.
23. *Ibid.*, 104.

24. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 378.
25. *Ibid.*, 597.
26. George F. Kennan, "Contemporary Problems of Foreign Policy," September 17, 1948, and "United States Foreign Policy," October 11, 1948, Kennan Papers, Box 17.
27. George F. Kennan, "Russia's National Objectives," April 10, 1947, Kennan Papers, Box 17.
28. George F. Kennan, "Contemporary Problems of Foreign Policy," September 17, 1948, Kennan Papers, Box 17.
29. George F. Kennan, "Current Problems of Soviet-American Relations," May 9, 1947, Kennan Papers, Box 17.
30. For the meetings of the Policy Planning Staff in May 1947, see Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972), vol. 3: 222–23 (footnotes 1 and 2); Minutes of Meetings, May 5 and 8, 1947, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Minutes of Meetings, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Kennan to Dean G. Acheson, May 23, 1947, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, vol. 3: 226–27.
31. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963), 178–79.
32. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 337–38.
33. Kennan to Acheson, May 23, 1947, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, vol. 3: 229.
34. George F. Kennan, "Problems of Far Eastern Policy," January 14, 1948, Kennan Papers, Box 17; *idem*, "Review of Current Trends: U.S. Foreign Policy," February 24, 1948, in *The State Department Policy Planning Papers*, ed. Anna Kasten Nelson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), vol. 2: 123.
35. Kennan to Robert Lovett, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, National Archives, Record Group 59, Box 33; Policy Planning Staff Report 13 (PPS 13), "Resumé of the World Situation," November 6, 1947, in Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Papers*, vol. 1: 132.
36. George F. Kennan, "Preparedness as Part of Foreign Relations," January 8, 1948, Kennan Papers, Box 17.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 194–96.
40. George F. Kennan, Memorandum, November 24, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948*, vol. 3: 283–85.
41. Policy Planning Staff Report 37 (PPS 37), "Policy Questions Concerning a Possible German Settlement," August 12, 1948, in Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Papers*, vol. 2: 322–35; Minutes of the Policy Planning Staff, August–September 1948, Policy Planning Staff Papers, National Archives, Record Group 59, Box 32.
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43. *Ibid.*; Kennan, "Considerations Affecting the Conclusion of a North Atlantic Security Pact," November 23, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948*, vol. 3: 287.
44. Minutes of Policy Planning Staff, October 11, 1949, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949*, vol. 1: 403; see also Meeting of U.S. Ambassadors at Paris, October 21–22, 1949, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. 4: 469–96.
45. "Where We Are Today," December 21, 1948, and Kennan's remarks at CIA conference, October 13, 1949, Kennan Papers, Box 17.
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47. The Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures were published as *American Diplomacy*; for the quotations, see pp. 50, 61–62, 45, and 44.
48. Policy Planning Staff Report 23 (PPS 23), "Review of Current Trends," February 24, 1948, in Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Papers*, vol. 2: 122.
49. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 87.
50. Robert L. Hutchings, "X + 9/11," *Foreign Policy*, July–August 2004.

51. Francis Fukuyama, "After Neoconservatism," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 2006, 67.

52. See, for example, John M. Owen IV, "Democracy, Realistically," *The National Interest*, Spring 2006, 35–42; Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

53. Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (Summer–Fall 1983): 205–35, 323–53; Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post–Cold War World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); see also the articles on the democratic peace theory by Christopher Layne, David Spiro, and John Owen (and their many citations to the literature) in the Fall 1994 issue of *International Security* (and the exchange that followed in the Spring 1995 issue of the journal).

54. For a brief summary, with citations, of the criticisms of the democratic peace theory, see John M. Owen, "Democratic Peace Research: Whence and Whither," *International Politics* 41 (2004): 606–7.

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