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*George F. Kennan*

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## American Diplomacy George F. Kennan

Drawing on his diplomatic experience and expertise, George F. Kennan offers an informed, plain-spoken appraisal of United States foreign policy. His evaluations of diplomatic history and international relations cut to the heart of policy issues much debated today.

This expanded edition retains the lectures and essays first published in 1951 as *American Diplomacy*, 1900-1950 and adds two lectures delivered in 1984 as well as a new preface by the author. In these additional pieces, Kennan explains how some of his ideas have changed over the years. He confronts the events and topics that have come to occupy American opinion in the last thirty years, including the development and significance of the Cold War, the escalation of the nuclear arms race, and the American involvement in Vietnam.

"A book about foreign policy by a man who really knows something about foreign policy."—James Reston, *New York Times Book Review*

"These celebrated lectures, delivered at the University of Chicago in 1950, were for many years the most widely read account of American diplomacy in the first half of the twentieth century. . . . The second edition of the work contains two lectures from 1984 that reconsider the themes of *American Diplomacy*"—*Foreign Affairs*, Significant Books of the Last 75 Years.

## American Diplomacy Details

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# From Reader Review American Diplomacy for online ebook

## Hadrian says

This is a series of lectures given at the University of Chicago on the great transformation of American foreign policy from 1900-1950. He starts off with a discussion of the first American expansionist ventures in the Spanish-American War and concludes with the world after the World Wars and the darkest points of the Cold War.

Kennan was a hard realist, and often cautioned against using moral justifications to enter foreign conflicts. This is not from discounting international laws or our sense of morality, but that overusing this justification might eventually compel us to enter a war which would serve no purpose, or a war which is easy in a military sense, but lacks a defined purpose afterwards. Talk of 'regime change' will make the enemy only fight harder to stay in power.

This edition includes a reprint of his "Mr. X" telegram on the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, and a later warning about the hawks in foreign policy, and his fears the 'crusaders' of foreign policy kill us all, or get us entrenched in problems too vast or too entangled for us to solve on our own.

Although these essays might no longer be classified as part of 'modern foreign policy' and instead as a historical classic, their advice is by no means irrelevant. To quote Twain: "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

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## Linda says

I was inspired to read this book because I was taking the Foreign Service exam, but it was a quick, eye-opening read that I recommend to all. First of all, Kennan is as smart and wise as people say he is. Second, everyone who is lost in the hazy world of modern technology and 24-hour instant everything would do well to read this for the sheer fact that it reminds you our grandparents and their grandparents knew a thing or two about the world, too. Third, this book presented so many lessons from the first half of the twentieth century that, if heeded, could have possibly lessened some of the damage of the second half of the twentieth century. Finally, I love George Kennan's wisdom about Russia/the Soviet Union. There are lessons in what he says that we still haven't heeded about dealing with empires and perceived "enemies." Straightforward, informative, and interesting, this book is small but worthy.

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## evren says

Outstanding! Kennan beautifully makes theory and practice meet each other. His predictions about the post-Cold War are awe-inspiringly accurate. Chapter 6 (Diplomacy in the Modern World) is to be read and reread by anyone who is crazy enough to go after a career either as a policy-maker/policy-implementer or a theoretician/academic. This book is the ultimate wherewithal for those who want a clearer perception on how to read international trends, how to make policy, how to make it work, what to do if it turns sour. It is especially respectable in its invitation to humility and common sense. Absolutely gorgeous!

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## **Eric Smith says**

A must read..... The beautiful logic of realism, applied with evenhanded sensitivity and strategic wisdom, a clear affirmation of the need for American reemphasis of reason over ideology and civilian over military concerns. Not to mention it's incredible ability to dispel myths about the traditions of American international relations and the fall of the Soviet Union.

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## **Michael says**

George Kennan provides an unflattering assessment of the Wilson administration's overall diplomatic accomplishments. The father of post-WWII "realism" Kennan approaches the history of WWI with the expressed purpose of gleaned lessons which will enhance American security in the present (i.e. 1951). Since much of Kennan's thought came to influence American foreign policy Kennan's work blurs the line of distinction between source document and popular monograph.

It is virtually impossible from the perspective of 1993 to view his assessment of WWI outside the context of the Cold War. It is the Soviet threat which concerns Kennan. Hence, his primary criticism of America's approach to WWI is that America aided in the destruction of Europe's balance of powers and ultimately opened the door to Nazi and then Soviet expansionism. If only America had recognized in 1914 that its interests were involved in this European conflict, and not sought the total defeat of Germany after its entrance into the war, the conflict could have been brought to a close more quickly and we would not have had to fight a war against Nazism (not to mention the Cold War). Yet, even Kennan admits in this short piece that popular opinion would have been extremely hard to sway in favor of military intervention before April 1917, or for moderation once the fight was joined. Certainly unhappy with President Wilson's leadership, Kennan is even less happy with the functioning of democracy. Therein lies the rub.

For Kennan, the central problem in American foreign policy is how to maintain the external trappings of democracy while gutting its content. As such Kennan's interpretation of history goes beyond traditionalism (which focuses on the policies of elites) and enters the realm of elitism, urging the positive role of elites in determining what is "best" for the benighted American nation.

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## **Charles Ray says**

Two years ago, I did a series of lectures at a local university on 'the History of American Diplomacy.' Over two semesters, I consistently infuriated about half of each class with my thesis that, despite some significant successes over the centuries, American diplomacy is, for a host of historical reasons, rather dysfunctional. My students, from a conservative region, were offended that I would criticize 'their' country—ignoring the fact that I'd served for over 30 years as an American diplomat, was an avid student of history, and sort of knew what I was talking about.

The late George F. Kennan, architect of America's Soviet Containment Policy, and a veteran American diplomat himself, in his book *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950*, which reproduces a series of lectures he gave at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, agrees with me. While he is less blunt about it (in my lectures

I described American diplomats as sometimes being ‘sheep in wolves clothing,’ a blunt terminology the staid Kennan would never use), he does not hesitate to describe the hubris of the US Government as it pursues its foreign policy around the globe, excoriating other countries for behavior that we ourselves are often guilty of, and demanding countries take actions that we refuse to take.

Kennan focuses on the period 1900 to 1950, from the Spanish American War, and America’s brief flirtation with colonization, to the outbreak of the Korean War, and describes in detail the forces that shape the country’s foreign policy, and often significantly impact the methods we employ to pursue that policy. While he is circumspect in his criticism, he leaves no doubt that American diplomacy is a product of a domestic system that focuses on short-term goals, does not make actions conform to ideals, and often takes no lessons from the past.

As we prepare to witness what might be the most historic political transition in American history, one that will have a far-ranging impact (whether negative or positive, it’s too early to say) on our international relations. It behooves us as citizens, then, to understand the factors that, though distant, can impact our lives significantly.

American Diplomacy is a good starting point for understanding how the world really works.

I received this book as a gift.

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## **Don says**

Six lectures and two additional essays. A reflection on the direction and accomplishments of American diplomacy in the first half of the 20th Century, augmented by two essays published in *Foreign Affairs* (1947 & 1951) providing analyses of America’s relations with Russia and elements of effective diplomacy within that relationship.

Kennan’s writing/speaking is insightful, articulate, measured, both pragmatic and hopeful. His words resonate in the early 21st century, as well. Two excerpts will have to suffice (and to advise us as we go forward in our own international context).

In the first, Kennan draws a conclusion in 1951 that remains valid and still aspirational today. Summarizing his analysis of World War I and its context, Kennan concludes: “...the truth is sometimes a poor competitor in the market place of ideas – complicated, unsatisfying, full of dilemmas, always vulnerable to misinterpretation and abuse. The counsels of impatience and hatred can always be supported by the crudest and cheapest symbols; for the counsels of moderation, the reasons are often intricate, rather than emotional, and difficult to explain. And so the chauvinists of all times and places go their appointed way: plucking the easy fruits, reaping the little triumphs of the day at the expense of someone else tomorrow, deluging in noise and filth anyone who gets in their way, dancing their reckless dance on the prospects for human progress, drawing the shadow of a great doubt over the validity of democratic institutions. And until peoples learn to spot the fanning of mass emotions and the sowing of bitterness, suspicion, and intolerance as crimes in themselves – as perhaps the greatest disservice that can be done to the cause of popular governments – this sort of thing will continue to occur.” (p. 56)

In the second, as the Cold War became more frigid and talk of the inevitability of war between the USA and the Soviet Union set the context, Kennan, summarizing his thoughts about World War II and its continuing ripples, generalized about the need to understand our purposes in any moment of engaging in war and about the need to remain aware of the limitations of the war as an instrument of ‘world improvement.’ : “...there lay a deeper failure of understanding [underlying and guiding our actions during World War II], a failure to

appreciate the limitations of war in general – any war – as a vehicle for the achievement of the objectives of the democratic state. ... But, basically, the democratic purpose does not prosper when a man dies or a building collapses or an enemy force retreats. It may be hard for it to prosper unless these things happen, and in that lies the entire justification for the use of force at all as a weapon of national policy. But the actual prospering occurs only when something happens in a man's mind that increases his enlightenment and the consciousness of his real relation to other people – something that makes them aware that, whenever the dignity of another man is offended, his own dignity, as a man among men, is thereby reduced. And this is why the destructive process of war must always be accompanied by, or made subsidiary to, a different sort of undertaking aimed at widening the horizons and changing the motives of men and should never be thought of in itself as a proper vehicle for hopes and enthusiasms and dreams of world improvement. Force, like peace, is not an abstraction; it cannot be understood or dealt with as a concept outside of the given framework of purpose and method.” (pp. 77-78)

I found Kennan's book engaging and still relevant to a 2016 readership. I recommend it to your attention.

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### **Canavan says**

★★★★★

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### **Hotavio says**

American Diplomacy contains lectures given by the "Father of Containment" posing the familiar questions "Where did we go wrong?" to try and right the United States position in the Cold War. Mostly what Kennan determined was the need to use common sense, something that was not always done in diplomacy. He also urged the need to truly understand "enemy" countries. This remains something we have a problem with today.

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### **The American Conservative says**

'Everything Kennan ever wrote is worth reading... But of course, what makes us go back to Kennan's works decades after the Cold War are his enduring insights into American foreign policy. That few Americans read him today says more about the public than it does about Kennan. To profit from his genius, American Diplomacy is the best place to start.'

Read the full review, "Why Kennan Matters," on our website: <http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

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### **Therese May says**

This book was pretty interesting. It was nice to hear from someone whole lives around the time and actually had a say in what was going on as Kennan did. A great little book to read if you want to learn more about the background of the World Wars!

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## **Trav says**

Frank and insightful discussion of US foreign policy in the first half of the American century, together with the defining piece on US-Soviet relations at the beginning of the Cold War. Kennan's analysis is thought-provoking and highlights the potential pitfalls for basing foreign policy on ill-defined and ill-considered moralistic and legalistic views of the way the world should be. Reading this book with an eye to the pursuit of regime change in the Middle East and South Asia provides the reader with food for thought that is relevant more than 60 years after the initial lectures contained in the book were delivered.

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## **Gyoza says**

This book consists of six Walgreen lectures Kennan gave in the 1950's about the major wars the U.S. participated in, including the Spanish American War, World War I, and World War II, and his observations about American foreign policy during that time. Also included is the famous "Long Telegram," which he sent to the State Department during his service as an ambassador. It is a concise explanation of the ideology of the Soviet Union, their motivations, and how best to deal with them--apparently given as the answer to the question of why the Soviets were becoming less and less cooperative after World War II.

One of the main ideas behind the book is the warning that moral considerations should not be relied upon too much when determining foreign policy or entering wars. He favors the approach more common in the 19th century and earlier of pursuing national interests because it limits military engagements to the accomplishment of well defined goals, rather than the unconditional surrender and regime change that characterized 20th century wars. He got a (figurative) black eye for this idea from Alexander Solzhenitsyn during the latter's 1978 Harvard Commencement Address. While the narrow pursuit of national interest made sense during the 19th century, when there was a strong moral consensus among the nations, it may be inadequate when dealing with totalitarian regimes whose moral outlook (or lack of one) is very different from one's own and lies at the very root of the war.

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## **Rob says**

Persevere beyond the China/Manchuria lecture and you will be richly rewarded. The piece about the humanity of Russians and pointlessness of unconditional surrender as a military objective are great.

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## **Whitlaw Mugwiji says**

It is a well written and easy to read analysis of the American Foreign policy from 1900 to 1955. The book is divided into two parts. The first part analyses the American war with Spain, America's open door policy on China, America and its antagonisms with Japan, World War 1 and World War 2 . The second part analysis America's relations with the Soviet Union and it attempts to visualise what the future relationship between America and Russia should look like in the future. It is indeed interesting to read this latter part bearing in mind the strenuous relationships between America and Russia.

