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RESEARCH REPORT No. 1

United States Containment Policy 1947-1950

— Research Note —

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I want to thank Professor Hiroshi Yamada, research associate at the Institute for peace Science, Hiroshima University, for discussing with me various aspects of containment during my preparation for this paper.

Today the study of the origins of the Cold War does not attract scholars' attention as much as it did a decade ago. But we see each year still more published works on this subject and this phenomenon will probably continue for some time as the declassification of United States Government documents encourages scholarly research.

Basing his analysis on fresh scholarly materials, John L. Gaddis wrote in July, 1977, a well-timed article on "containment" for *Foreign Affairs*⁽¹⁾—the journal which had published George F. Kennan's famous Mr. "X" article exactly thirty years before. The Gaddis article, interesting and provocative, aroused renewed interest among historians in the problem of containment and the related issues. In this short paper an attempt will be made to place in a proper perspective differing interpretations of containment at its initial stage—with a view to obtaining a clearer understanding of this influential (and confusing) policy.

A scholar cannot isolate himself from contemporary events: since the late 1960s American students of cold war history have had to deal, intellectually at least, with the Vietnam War. A conservative-realist, perhaps akin to Hans Morgenthau, Gaddis appears critical of America's military involvement in Indochina for its essential "univer-

salism." "Universalism" (as opposed to "particularism") makes no clear differentiation between "vital" and "peripheral" interests of the country, and worse still, confuses ends and means, or national objectives and capabilities.

The architect of America's containment policy, George F. Kennan, was, in Gaddis' judgment, one of the very few policymakers in Washington who, capable of seeing things clearly in these terms, "ranges himself firmly on the 'particularist' side."⁽²⁾ The implication is that had the Americans at the time heeded Kennan's advice the United States might well have been spared later lives, money and domestic turmoil, and the world its tensions. In fact, the author of the X article emerges in Gaddis' study as a tragic hero: much misunderstood by his contemporaries, Kennan was to be vindicated only a quarter of a century later by the detente policy of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

Among scholars, however, there has been a great amount of confusion about what was meant by Kennan's concept of containment. According to one observer, the X article was "something of a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."⁽³⁾ At the time of its publication in July 1947, this article received a serious criticism from Walter Lippmann, the dean of political journalists at that time. In a series of *New York Herald Tribune* articles soon to be published in

book form,⁽⁴⁾ Lippmann pointed out the grim implications of the containment policy—America's intervention all over the world and the freezing of the division of Europe.

Lippmann disagreed with Kennan that Soviet diplomacy was ideologically motivated. Rather, he viewed Stalin pursuing conservative power politics in a quest for national security. He therefore envisaged a possibility of detente through mutual withdrawal of military power from central Europe.⁽⁵⁾ (Consequently Lippmann opposed the Truman Doctrine but supported the Marshall Plan.)

Even Gaddis agrees with others that the X article was a vague document, pointing out its three major problems:

The article implied an automatic commitment to resist Russian expansion wherever it occurred [thus agreeing with Lippmann]; there was in it little sense of the administration's preoccupation with limited means and of the consequent need to distinguish between primary and secondary interest. Nor did the piece make it clear that economic rather than military methods were to be employed as the chief instrument of containment.⁽⁶⁾

Nevertheless, Gaddis insists that if the body of Kennan's policy papers are taken as a whole, his concept of containment clearly shows evidence contrary to the general impression the X article has conveyed to the reader. Only the very vagueness of the X article, asserts Gaddis, in time corrupted the concept: "The result would be the eventual promulgation of policies under the rubric of 'containment'

far removed from what that doctrine had been originally intended to mean."⁽⁷⁾ This is the whole thrust of Gaddis' recent writings.

For example, as a piece of evidence to support his argument, Gaddis cites a Policy Planning Staff memorandum, "Resumé of World Situation," drafted by Kennan for Secretary of State George C. Marshall on November 6, 1947. In it, (1) Kennan tries to alleviate the fear of war with Russia, by stating that "Soviet Government neither wants nor expects war with us in the foreseeable future"; and (2) he shows his awareness of the limits of America's capabilities by stressing the need to make distinctions between the areas viatal and peripheral to United States security—with China and Korea, for instance, falling into the latter category.⁽⁸⁾

All in all, Gaddis' interpretation of Kennan's concept of containment may be summarized, in desperate brevity, in the following way:

(1) The containment policy outlined by Kennan was "the most coherent single attempt made during the early Cold War to formulate a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union."⁽⁹⁾

(2) Since containment of the Soviet Union had to be implemented in such a way as not to disperse scarce American resources, it required selectivity.

(3) Accordingly, a differentiation was made between

the areas vital to United States security and those which were not. Containment was then defined by Kennan as a policy to prevent these vital areas from falling under Russian influence.

(4) Europe, especially the Rhine area of Germany, received a top priority; Japan was considered to be the only vital region in Asia. It was intended to build up self-confidence in these areas—mainly through economic (not military) assistance.

(5) Thus it was highly realistic policy—realistic, because of its keen awareness of America's limits of power and of its selectivity.

(6) Moreover, Kennan showed rare foresight by anticipating a Sino-Soviet split and, more generally, fragmentation of the "communist bloc." He also understood the enduring nature of nationalism in the world—which led him to believe that nationalism would eventually undermine monolithic communism.

(7) The ultimate goal of containment was to create a stable world by forcing the Soviet Union to live with a diverse world and to modify its "aggressive" foreign policy accordingly.

(8) To bring about such a condition, Kennan never precluded negotiations with the Russians. Only some domestic factors, notably McCarthyism, checkmated this process

after 1947.

(9) Indeed, the Nixon-Kissinger diplomacy was not a new departure but a return to Kennan's concept of containment.⁽¹⁰⁾

Although Gaddis' work sheds some light on important questions, it leaves others still unanswered.

I

One of the key questions concerning Kennan's containment is "whether ideology motivated, or was the instrument of, Kremlin policy?" as Gaddis phrased it.⁽¹¹⁾ Or to put it another way, did the Soviet leaders intend to spread world revolution or were they motivated by Russia's traditional quest for national security, using ideology as a tool? Gaddis is not precise on this moot question. In one place he does state that "Kennan did not see ideology as a determinant of Soviet policy." Yet in another place he concedes, "Kennan's analyses themselves had not been entirely clear on that point."⁽¹²⁾ Overall, however, Gaddis accepts Kennan's explanation that the kind of totalitarianism that existed in the Soviet Union required outward expansion so as to maintain such an unstable system at home.⁽¹³⁾

Eduard Mark, in his perceptive critique of Gaddis'

Foreign Affairs article, points out Kennan's emphasis had somewhat shifted in early 1946: although Kennan had earlier explained Soviet expansionism much in terms of national security, he, by the time of his famous "Long Telegram" of February 1946, began to emphasize Soviet totalitarianism as a source of "potentially unlimited" expansion. Thus Kennan occasionally spoke of Soviet expansionism as though it were ideologically motivated, explains Mark.⁽¹⁴⁾

Daniel Yergin thinks that Kennan, overzealous to "stress the importance of ideology in the official Soviet psychology," confused "Marxist rhetoric" with "Soviet reality."⁽¹⁵⁾ Yergin cites as an example Kennan's "Long Telegram" of February 1946 from Moscow, which portrayed Stalin as "a fanatical revolutionary, rather than a careful, calculating politician." As a result, Kennan, the diplomat, essentially abandoned diplomacy by proclaiming the danger of diplomacy and accommodation with the Russians. So argues Yergin closely following the line of Lippmann.⁽¹⁶⁾ He further asserts that the X article was a continuation of the line of the argument made in the Long Telegram.⁽¹⁷⁾

Moreover, Yergin contends—with Walter La Feber and Lloyd C. Gardner—that Kennan and other Soviet specialists since the pre-WWII years had been deeply distrustful of Stalin and intensely hostile toward the Soviet Union. They were vehemently opposed to Rooseveltian diplomacy of com-

promise and spheres of influence, which Yergin considers to have been a realistic approach to the existing situation and might have led to a detente with the Soviet Union.⁽¹⁸⁾

In 1944, for example, Kennan favored a showdown with the Russians over eastern Europe, which was not by any standard vital to America's interests.⁽¹⁹⁾ After Harry S. Truman took office Kennan's warnings were at last heard within the administration. Yergin appears to say, therefore, that Kennan was responsible for hardening American attitudes toward the Russians and bringing about the cold war.

II

Another controversial issue on containment is what did Kennan mean by "counterforce" or "force"? In a critique of Gaddis' *Foreign Affairs* article James W. Coogan and Michael H. Hunt stress the vagueness in Kennan's use of these terms. For instance, Kennan did use such words and phrase as "force" (in the Long Telegram of February 1946), "counterforce" and "force" (in the X article) and "by every means possible" (in NSC 20/1 of August 1948).⁽²⁰⁾ Kennan's description of Russian expansion as a wound-up toy, in particular, provided the reader with a very sinister image of the Soviet Union:

...the whole Soviet government machine including the mechanism of diplomacy, moves inexorably along the prescribed path,

like a persistent toy automobile wound up and headed in a given direction, stopping only when it meets with *some unanswerable force*.⁽²¹⁾

In all these cases Kennan failed to specify what he meant by these terms.

To be sure, George Kennan registered strong dissent to the Truman Doctrine and the creation of NATO. Yet, in specific cases Kennan did actually propose military intervention on two occasions, as Mark as well as Coogan and Hunt point out—in Italy in March 1948 and Taiwan in July 1949.⁽²²⁾

In general, however, Gaddis seems right in his assertion that Kennan never placed "*primary emphasis*" in military power as a means of implementing the containment policy,⁽²³⁾ and that Kennan intended containment to be a limited, non-interventionist policy, pursued through political and economic means. Gaddis explains why:

He acknowledged the importance of maintaining strong armed forces, but evinced an extreme reluctance to commit them overseas. In part, this view reflected his fear of dispersing scarce resources; in part, too, it arose out of skepticism regarding the American military's ability to operate overseas without alienating populations with which it came into contact. Reinforcing this distrust of military solutions was Kennan's conviction that the most effective instrument the United States had for projecting influence in the world was its economic power—the capacity to affect, to varying degrees, the rate at which other countries reconstructed or

modernized their economies. (24)

Nevertheless, regardless of Kennan's original intent, his idea contained an inherent weakness: political measures alone would not always counter Soviet "expansionism" everywhere, as Mark points out, and when political containment fails, military force would have to be employed. There was undeniably a "political and economic" aspect to containment, but it was necessary to contain the Russians "both militarily and politically." (25) This aspect of containment led La Feber to entitle a chapter in his book "Two Halves of the Same Walnut," describing the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. (26)

III

Equally confusing in Kennan's containment was its geographic scope. A passage in the X article reads:

The Soviet pressure can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at *a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points*, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy. (27)

It must have been this sentence that led Lippmann to warn that the United States would be in the state of "unending intervention in all countries." (28)

Thirty years later Gaddis tells us that Kennan made a

sharp distinction between the areas which constituted vital interests to the United States and those which did not. Drawing on Kennan's memoirs written in 1967, Gaddis argues that Kennan primarily defined containment as preserving the areas possessing industrial (and thus military) potentials, such as the Rhine Valley and Japan, from falling into Russian control. The Marshall Plan and the reorientation of Japanese occupation must be seen in this light, argues Gaddis. (29)

On the other hand, Lloyd Gardner points out that Kennan did not limit himself geographically only to these areas in 1947 because Kennan also considered such regions as the Middle East and India highly important. Gaddis too is ambiguous about Kennan's position on the Middle East. (30)

While in Europe perhaps the containment line roughly corresponded with the military boundary that divided Europe between East and West at the end of the war, in Asia there was no clear idea about where to draw a line of containment. This problem may have partly stemmed from the fact that Roosevelt and Stalin did not define their own spheres in Asia at Yalta, as Akira Iriye suggests. (31)

Nevertheless, the United States avoided military involvement in the Chinese civil war, and also withdrew its troops from South Korea in 1948-49, argues Gaddis. In fact, according to Gaddis, the concept of "defensive perimeter," as articulated by Secretary of State Dean Acheson at the

National Press Club in January 1950, reflected Washington's realistic appraisal of United States capabilities and objectives. Thus it was fully in line with Kennan's "particularism."

The defensive perimeter concept was based on two kinds of thinking on the part of the Washington policymakers:

(1) the United States was concerned lest it might expend scarce resources in less vital areas when they were believed to be needed most in Europe;

(2) Washington fully recognized the supremacy of nationalism over communism in Asia and elsewhere, and even anticipated a Sino-Soviet fissure, thus drawing a parallel between Mao's China and Tito's Yugoslavia. In order to keep the possibility of the Sino-Soviet discord alive, it was necessary for the United States not to conspicuously take sides on the Kuomintang in Taiwan and antagonize Mao's new regime. (32)

Although the "defensive perimeter" concept left little room for misinterpretation, actual American policy toward Asia was dismally ambiguous. For such areas as Taiwan and Indochina, though placed outside the perimeter, were nonetheless regarded as highly important to the national interests of the United States. This point, even Gaddis concedes. (33)

Russell D. Buhite's recent study focuses on this cru-

cial ambiguity. "[A] delineation of American interests as vital and peripheral is too facile and oversimplifies the story of American approaches to China, Taiwan, and Korea," writes Buhite. He tells us that these areas, called more properly "major interest", "required more support and attention in the early years of the Cold War than that normally accorded to peripheral areas."⁽³⁴⁾ While Gaddis explains America's swift and decisive reaction to the outbreak of the Korean War in terms of loss of prestige in case the United States did not forcefully intervene, Buhite thinks the utilization of "substantial resources and 'some force'" in the defense of such areas as Korea was logical consequence of the fact that Americans accorded such importance to the containment of Soviet expansion.⁽³⁵⁾

In a similar fashion was United State policy toward Asia interpreted by historians like La Feber and Yergin who have paid close attention to America's early involvement in Indochina.⁽³⁶⁾ Yergin, for example, quotes in his book a memorandum of March 1950, prepared by Dean Rusk, then Deputy Undersecretary of State:

[The State Department] believes that within the limitations imposed by existing commitments and strategic priorities, the resources of the United States should be deployed to reverse Indochina and Southeast Asia from further Communist encroachment.⁽³⁷⁾

Given these ambiguities of America's policy toward

Asia, it may not be a coincidence that the United States fought two hot wars in Asia within the two decades following the end of World War II.

IV

Another area of interpretational difference between Gaddis and others is whether or not Kennan was consistent with his policy throughout his career. Gaddis writes: "there is in Kennan's writings a degree of foresight and a *consistency* of strategic vision for which it would be difficult to find a contemporary parallel."⁽³⁸⁾

Yergin, on the other hand, as we have seen, emphasizes Kennan's anti-Russian prejudice (which Lloyd Gardner seems to attribute to Kennan's "moralism") as a factor in hardening of American policy toward the Soviet Union.⁽³⁹⁾

A "universalistic" cold war document of 1950, NSC-68, is described by Yergin as a lineal descendant of the Long Telegram of 1946. Kennan's opposition to NSC-68 and the creation of NATO, therefore, can be explained only by a change in Kennan's position. ("[H]e had surely moved," writes Yergin.) Lloyd Gardner also thinks that by the 1950s "Kennan had shifted to a new formulation of disengagement."⁽⁴⁰⁾

The difference between Gaddis and Yergin may be derived from how much emphasis each places on Kennan's earlier policy statements. The former certainly underrates their significance.

V

Finally, one major problem with Gaddis' interpretation appears to lie in his close identification of actual United States policy with that of George Kennan. To put it another way, he may have read too much Kennan's thinking into American foreign policy after World War II.

For example, Gaddis dismisses the Truman Doctrine as insignificant and as mere rhetoric because the Doctrine does not appear to him a true expression of Kennan's containment, whereas Walter Lippmann considered it to be a natural outgrowth of the X article. As has been seen, La Feber also views the Doctrine as an inevitable development of the containment policy. Yergin, along with La Feber, assigns larger importance to the Doctrine than Gaddis, describing it as "a turning point in history" and "a milestone in American history," respectively.⁽⁴¹⁾

Gaddis may have assigned bigger than life-size significance to George F. Kennan in shaping United States

foreign policy. To be sure, in 1947 Kennan provided an eager audience with a basic strategic concept at the moment when the lack of such an outline was keenly felt. It must be noted also that as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff the role Kennan played in evaluating world situations and proposing strategies must have been substantially large within the Truman administration. But whatever influence Kennan may have had on Washington decision-making seems short-lived. Gaddis himself notes that it had diminished by 1948.⁽⁴²⁾

* * *

By way of concluding this paper, it may be pointed out that John L. Gaddis offered a fresh post-Vietnam evaluation of United States policy during the early cold war years and revived interests in the subject. Yet further publication of contemporary documents (such as the Kennan papers) and debates based on new material seem to be needed before we reach a definite conclusion—if there is ever such a thing in historical writing—as to what containment was meant by George Kennan and how it was interpreted and implemented by others.

NOTES

- (1) John Lewis Gaddis, "Containment: A Reassessment," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1977), pp. 873-87.
- (2) Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 26.
- (3) Charles Gati, "What Containment Meant," *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1972), p. 22.
- (4) Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947).
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 33-34, 43; See also Walter La Feber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1975* 3rd edition (New York: John Wiley, 1976), p. 65.
- (6) John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History* (New York: John Wiley, 1978), p. 187.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 188; *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1947 I* (Washington D. C.: United States Government Printing Office), pp. 772-77, reprinted in Etzold and Gaddis, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- (9) Etzold and Gaddis, *ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 370; Gaddis, "Containment...", p.884.
- (11) Gaddis, *Russia...*, p. 195.
- (12) Gaddis, "Containment...", p. 874; *Russia...*, p. 195.
- (13) Etzold and Gaddis, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.
- (14) Eduard Mark, "The Question of Containment: A Reply to John Lewis Gaddis," *Foreign Affairs* (January 1978), pp. 431-32.
- (15) Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977), p. 170.
- (16) *Ibid.*, pp. 168-70; Lippmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 33-34, 60-61.

(17) Yergin, *ibid.*, p. 323.

(18) *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 35-36; La Feber, *op. cit.*, p. 64; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Architects of Illusion: Men and Ideas in American Foreign Policy, 1941-1943* (Chicago: Quadrangel Books, 1970), p. 292.

(19) Yergin, *ibid.*, p. 75.

(20) John W. Coogan and Michael H. Hunt, "Kennan and Containment," *The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Newsletter* (March 1978), p. 24.

(21) Reprinted in George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 117. Emphases added.

(22) Mark, *op. cit.*, p. 435; Coogan and Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

(23) John Lewis Gaddis, "Kennan and Containment: A Reply," *The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Newsletter* (June 1978), p. 27. Emphasis original.

(24) Etzold and Gaddis, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

(25) Mark, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

(26) La Feber, *op. cit.*, Ch. III.

(27) Kennan, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

(28) Lippmann, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

(29) Gaddis, "Containment....," p. 877.

(30) Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 281; Gaddis, *Russia...*, p. 188.

(31) Akira Iriye, *The Cold War in Asia: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 131.

(32) John Lewis Gaddis, "Korea in American Politics, Strategy, and Diplomacy, 1945-50," in Yonosuke Nagai and Akira Iriye, eds., *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1977), p. 284; also John Lewis Gaddis, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Defensive Perimeter' Concept: United States Strategy in the Far East, 1947-1951" (unpublished paper delivered at the Kyoto Specialists' Conference on July 27, 1978) deals more directly with this subject.

(33) Gaddis, "Korea...", p. 285; Gaddis' Kyoto Conference paper.

(34) Russell D. Buhite, "'Major Interests': American Policy toward China, Taiwan, and Korea, 1945-1950," *Pacific Historical Review* (August 1978), p. 426.

(35) *Ibid.*, p. 427.

(36) La Feber, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 109-111; Yergin, *op. cit.*, p. 405.

(37) Yergin, *ibid.*

(38) Gaddis, "Containment...", p. 886. Emphasis added.

(39) Gardner, *op. cit.*, pp. 285, 299.

(40) Yergin, *op. cit.*, pp. 390, 402; Gardner, *ibid.*, p. 297.

(41) John Lewis Gaddis, "Was the Truman Doctrine A Real Turning Point?", *Foreign Affairs* (January 1974), especially, p. 386; Lippmann, *op. cit.*, especially p. 44; Yergin, *ibid.*, pp. 275, 295; La Feber, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 64.

(42) Gaddis, *Russia...*, p. 197.

