

In Kennan's Shadow: U.S. Ambassadors to Putin's Russia and "the New Cold War"

David S. Foglesong

Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. xiii + 506 pp.

William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and The Case for Its Renewal*. New York: Random House, 2019. 501 pp.

John J. Sullivan, *Midnight in Moscow: A Memoir from the Front Lines of Russia's War Against the West*. New York and Boston: Little, Brown, 2024. xii + 404 pp.

"In some sense Kennan was my muse," writes John J. Sullivan, the U.S. ambassador to Russia from December 2019 through the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 (p. 127). After serving as Deputy Secretary of State during the first three years of the first Donald Trump administration, Sullivan prepared to take over the ambassadorship in Moscow by re-reading George F. Kennan's Long Telegram from 1946 and his "X" article in *Foreign Affairs* from 1947. Sullivan then kept copies of Kennan's essays on his desk at the embassy as guides to his own diplomatic work. Throughout his memoir he cites Kennan's analysis and advice from the late 1940s, which he sees as directly applicable to contemporary relations with Russia. According to Sullivan, today's Russian leaders, like the Soviets after World War II, are relentless in pursuing their interests without concern for morality. As in Joseph Stalin's time, they see an innate antagonism with the United States, their implacable adversary. The Kremlin was a police regime under Stalin and is one now under President Vladimir Putin. Invoking Kennan's stress on the disrespect of Russians for objective truth, Sullivan asserts that truth has never been valued by any government in Moscow. Sullivan even likens the Soviet "expulsion" of Kennan in 1952 to how Russian officials asked him to leave Moscow in the spring of 2022, after President Joe Biden agreed with the idea that Putin was a "killer" (177).¹

Midnight in Moscow is not the only recent reminiscence by a U.S. diplomat to show the long shadow cast by George F. Kennan (1904-2005). In *The Back Channel*, William J. Burns recalls the uneasy pride he felt sitting in Kennan's

¹ The Soviet government actually declared Kennan *persona non grata* in 1952 after he unwisely compared his treatment in Moscow to his confinement by Nazi Germany in 1941-1942 during remarks to the press in Berlin. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1950-1953* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 159.

old seat when he led the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department in 1992, remembers being enthralled by stories of Kennan's experiences in Moscow in the 1930s when he became deputy chief of mission at the embassy there in 1994, and reflects on how Russian surveillance when he served as U.S. Ambassador from 2005 to 2008 resembled Soviet surveillance during Kennan's brief tenure as ambassador in 1952 (78, 85, 204). In *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, Michael McFaul, who represented the United States in Moscow from December 2011 to early 2014, notes that he often quoted Kennan on the importance of open diplomacy, praises Kennan as a champion of transparency, and compares his inability to return to Russia after his ambassadorship to Kennan's being barred from the Soviet Union (287, 304, 423).² John F. Tefft, who succeeded McFaul as ambassador (2014-2017), observes that he attended Marquette University in Kennan's hometown of Milwaukee, recalls that reading Kennan's memoirs was one of the main reasons he devoted the bulk of his professional career to Russia and neighboring countries, and notes that, like most diplomats of his generation, he was strongly influenced by Kennan's "example and thinking."³

As the deep imprint of Kennan on Tefft, McFaul, Burns, and Sullivan suggests, scholars of Russian-American relations have much to learn from considering recent memoirs by U.S. diplomatic representatives in the former Soviet Union within a longer term historical perspective. In this essay, I focus especially on how these recent books interpret the descent of U.S.-Russian relations into what many have called a "new cold war," and on how the authors echo, apply, and misunderstand the ideas of George F. Kennan. I argue that, in different ways, the three ambassadors reflect selective and misleading views of Kennan that have been widely embraced by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Finally, I describe Kennan's ideas for improving relations with the USSR in the last decade of the old Cold War, a vital phase that has not been given sufficient attention by his biographers.⁴

From Thomas Pickering (1993-1996) and James F. Collins (1996-2001) to Alexander Vershbow (2001-2005), U.S. ambassadors to post-Soviet Russia did not publish books about their diplomatic service in a country that many U.S. political leaders viewed as weak and much less important than the Soviet superpower had been. Yet, as relations between the United States and Russia worsened in this century, several diplomats have taken opportunities to write accounts of their experiences in the former Soviet Union.

These three books invite us to ask many questions. Given the inclination of many memoir writers toward self-defense or self-glorification, how candid, revealing, and self-critical are the recent works? What light do the recent memoirs, along with books by other U.S. officials, shed on the allegations of collusion between Donald Trump and Russia during the 2016 presidential campaign or the accusations that Trump was a "puppet" of Russian President Vladimir Putin? How much influence did the U.S. representatives have on U.S. policy?

² McFaul misdates Kennan's banishment as occurring in 1950, rather than 1952.

³ John Tefft, "George Kennan's Impact on My Career as a U.S. Foreign Service Officer," in *A Kennan for Our Ties: Revisiting America's Greatest 20th Century Diplomat in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, 2019), 123.

⁴ Most recently: John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Frank Costigliola, *Kennan: A Life between Worlds*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2023.

Finally, how shrewd were the U.S. diplomats? To what extent did they propagate misperceptions or myths?

According to a rich recent study by a sociologist, during the Cold War, when many experts on the Soviet Union were émigrés from Eastern Europe, it became common to say that “to study Russia is to hate it.”⁵ In contrast, all three U.S. ambassadors to post-Soviet Russia discussed here regarded themselves as Russophiles.

“I liked Russians, respected their culture, [and] enjoyed their language,” Burns remembers in *The Back Channel* (203). His revealing memoir is frankly critical of U.S. policies toward Russia that were warped by hubris, self-centeredness, and a persistent belief in the possibility of maneuvering around Moscow. Burns thought Kennan’s public warning that the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe in 1997 constituted “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era” was “a little hyperbolic” (109-111). Yet Burns himself cautioned in 1995 that Russian political elites were united in opposition to NATO expansion, which would give ammunition to “stab-in-the-back” theorists (105, 108). A decade later, Burns believed that a further NATO expansion was “a serious strategic mistake” (111). In a February 2008 email to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Burns quotes at length, he presciently warned: “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin).” Burns rightly predicted that it would “create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine,” and that offering a NATO membership action plan to Georgia would create a high risk of a Russian-Georgian armed conflict (233). Yet President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney disregarded the warnings from Burns, partly because of “geopolitical and ideological inertia” and partly from a desire to leave a historical legacy in line with the administration’s “freedom agenda” (230, 234). Burns does not blame Washington alone for the degeneration of relations at the end of his ambassadorship; he also faults “the dark side of Putin’s rule at home” and calls Putin “paranoid about American conspiracies” (221-2). Yet, much like Kennan, especially in his later years, Burns sought to understand Russian feelings and attitudes, including frustration at the disregard of Russian concerns and “wounded pride” (224, 241). In a sentence that Kennan would have agreed with, Burns concluded: “Understanding the Kremlin was as much about psychology as about geopolitics” (224).

When Burns turns at the end of his astute memoir to the question of how to fashion a U.S. strategy for the future, he cites “Kennan’s containment doctrine,” which centered on the importance of reviving and conserving the strength of democratic, market-oriented states, as well as “a cold-eyed recognition of the weaknesses that would eventually unravel the Soviet Union and its unwieldy Communist bloc” (401-2; see also 418). Like Kennan, Burns calls for patience, urging “a long-game strategy” that would not give up “on the possibility of an eventual mellowing of relations” with Russia after Putin (403). Although Burns

⁵ David McCourt, *The End of Engagement: America’s China and Russia Experts and U.S. Strategy since 1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 8; see also 224 on hatred by contemporary think tankers. However, David Engerman argued that the Russian Studies field as a whole was not dominated by fervent anti-Communists. *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

rightly notes that by 1950 Kennan grew disenchanted with the militarization of containment (48), he does not consider how far Kennan shifted away from his views of the late 1940s and how he came to believe that containment actually needlessly prolonged the Cold War after Stalin's death in 1953. Since Russia and China have become much closer partners in recent years, rather than colliding in Central Asia, as Burns anticipated (403-4), it seems questionable that a restrained U.S. policy of containment will lead to the unraveling of Russia and Russian-Chinese friendship.

After serving for four years in the Joe Biden administration as CIA Director, Burns still appeared to favor a long-term strategy of containing Russia. Interviewed in January 2025, he argued for helping "the Ukrainians to hold the line on the battlefield" and continuing "to inflict costs on Russia so that Putin understands that time is not necessarily on his side." Although he suggested that approach would enhance the leverage of Ukraine in eventual negotiations, he did not articulate a vision of any future beyond containment and punishment of Russia.⁶

Michael McFaul was, in his own way, even more of a Russophile than William Burns. As an undergraduate student, he studied Russian language in Leningrad in the summer of 1983 and was excited to find that many Russians were, like him, Led Zeppelin fans. "We seemed more alike than different," he recalls in his massive and valuable memoir (2). Whereas Kennan loved Russia more for its difference from America, whose crass popular culture and crude, ignorant politics he loathed, McFaul dreamed of helping Russia to become a liberal democracy like the United States. Indeed, during a second sojourn in the USSR, in Moscow in 1985, McFaul already began to believe that "only democratic change inside the Soviet Union would allow our two governments and our two societies to come closer together" (3). Unaware of the very friendly relations between the United States and Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century, McFaul persistently saw the democratization of Russia as a crucial condition for good relations between the two countries.⁷ After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, he "moved to Russia to help support market and democratic reforms there, believing that those changes would help bring our two countries closer together" (xi). The unpopularity of the market reforms and the anti-democratic orientation of many Russian liberals did not dent McFaul's faith.⁸ Instead, the conviction that Russia must complete its unfinished revolution formed the core of his most important academic publication.⁹

Championing liberal democracy in Russia also inclined McFaul toward an adversarial relationship with Vladimir Putin from the outset of his presidency. In 2001, McFaul called for the United States to expand its propaganda to exploit the supposed divergence between the Putin regime and the Russian people, who were

⁶ "Transcript: NPR's full conversation with CIA Director William Burns," January 10, 2025, www.npr.org.

⁷ McFaul writes that throughout U.S. history, the country's deepest allies have been democracies while all of its enemies were autocracies (66, 113).

⁸ Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski. *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001); Gary Saul Morson, "With Liberals Like These," *New York Review of Books*, February 13, 2025.

⁹ Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

more pro-American than their ruler.¹⁰ Although McFaul did not cite Kennan, he thus echoed Kennan's belief in the late 1940s in a gulf between the Russian people and their Stalinist leaders, which underpinned his promotion of U.S. propaganda campaigns and covert action geared to the liberation of the peoples of the Soviet bloc from communism.¹¹

As a Russian expert at the National Security Council in the first term of Barack Obama's presidency, McFaul was one of the architects of a "reset" of relations with Russia under President Dmitry Medvedev, who "seemed like a pro-Western modernizer" and envisioned "making Russia more democratic" (viii, 421). Yet, after Putin, an "anti-American autocrat," returned to being President, McFaul felt, the "reset" could not continue. Disregarding Putin's extensive cooperation with President George W. Bush, particularly on the U.S. war in Afghanistan, and ignoring Putin's cooperation with Obama on the removal of chemical weapons from Syria and the restriction of Iran's nuclear weapons program, McFaul declares categorically: "While Putin ruled Russia, strategic partnership was impossible" (317).

With impressive candor, McFaul confides, "I fear sometimes that my Montana optimism coupled with my normative commitment to democracy might be clouding my judgment" (426). Yet that worry does not hold him back from blaming Putin alone for the "renewed confrontation with the United States" (424). McFaul does acknowledge that the U.S. angered and undermined Medvedev in 2011 with a "bait and switch on Libya," winning Medvedev's acquiescence in a UN resolution for a limited intervention to protect civilians and then proceeding to bomb Libya for months until the overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi (220-7).¹² But such U.S. actions do not figure in McFaul's basic explanation of the degeneration of U.S.-Russian relations, which centers on Putin's alleged domestic political need to make the United States an enemy. This approach leads to confusion and contradiction. McFaul acknowledges that Putin's persistent popularity in Russia "suggests a deep societal demand for this kind of autocratic leader, and this kind of antagonistic relationship with the United States and the West" (425). Yet he clings to his memories of meeting "many Russians who believe in democracy," going back to his encountering "people who loved Led Zeppelin" as much as he did in the early 1980s (427). This faith in a democratic Russia makes McFaul quite different from Kennan, who persistently doubted Russian understanding of or readiness for democracy, even at the height of his enthusiasm for liberating the country from Stalinism and at the peak of Gorbachev's democratization of the

¹⁰ Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, "America's Real Russian Allies," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 6 (November/December 2001), 46-58.

¹¹ For further discussion, see David S. Foglesong, "The Perils of Prophecy: American Predictions About Russia's Future Since 1881," in *Russia and the United States: Perceiving Each Other*, ed. V. V. Noskov and W. G. Rosenberg (Saint Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2015), 282-298.

¹² McFaul's denial that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other US officials sought regime change is unconvincing. See Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall," *New York Times*, February 27, 2016; Ben Rhodes, *The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018), 111-121, 151-2; Philip H. Gordon, *Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020), 8-9, 184-5.

USSR.¹³

Near the end of his remarkable memoir, McFaul recounts how, after Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which almost all Russians enthusiastically approved, he called for a tough new strategy of confronting Russia. "I deliberately echoed some, though not all, of the themes of containment codified a half century earlier by George Kennan," McFaul recalls (407). While punishing Russia with sanctions and isolation, he urged, the United States should continue to "engage with proponents of democracy, including Ukrainian allies and Russian society" (408). That strategy would require patience, he acknowledged. "Still, like Kennan, I was confident that victory was certain" (408). McFaul does not consider how Kennan came to believe that the militarized U.S. Cold War policy and confrontational rhetoric of hard-liners was counterproductive, since it "strengthened comparable hard-liners in the Soviet Union" and heightened "the tendency in Moscow to tighten the controls by both party and police." Nor does McFaul recognize how Kennan in 1992 adamantly rejected the triumphalist notion that the U.S. government "had the power to influence decisively the course of a tremendous political upheaval in another great country on another side of the globe."¹⁴

The continuing Russian popular support for Putin, even during the years of war in Ukraine, has confounded McFaul, prompting him to question his long-held distinction between Putin and the Russian people, and leading him to wonder whether most Russians are imperialists. Somewhat as Kennan was disturbed in June 1945 by how the Russian people had placed "itself in the hands of a ruthless authoritarian regime," McFaul has been troubled by whether "we can no longer give Russian society a pass" for atrocities committed in Ukraine. Yet McFaul has been unwilling to give up his faith that in a more democratic Russia people will have very different views. "A total Russian defeat in Ukraine, like Hitler's in Europe in 1945 or the Soviet Union's in Afghanistan in 1990," he has written, might create conditions for radical shifts in Russian popular attitudes. (Soviet forces actually withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989 in good order after winning all major battles in the preceding years.)¹⁵ As we shall see, Kennan's thinking during the horrific Soviet war in Afghanistan was quite different from McFaul's during the war in Ukraine.

While McFaul's book garnered considerable attention (both favorable and critical),¹⁶ John Sullivan's narrative of his experiences in both Washington and Russia has received much less notice thus far. In one of very few reviews, Lyle

¹³ David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" Since 1881* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122-3; Entry for December 3, 1989 in Frank Costigliola, ed. *The Kennan Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 602-3.

¹⁴ George F. Kennan, "The G.O.P. Won the Cold War? Ridiculous," *New York Times*, October 28, 1992.

¹⁵ Michael McFaul, "Are Russians Imperialists?" *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2022): 421-31; Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire"*, 105; Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 132, 145, 307.

¹⁶ Friendly reviews by Angela Stent in *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 1 (February-March 2019), 226-7, and Amy Knight in *Times Literary Supplement*, August 3, 2018; more critical reviews by Daniel Beer in *New York Times*, July 6, 2018, George Beebe in *The National Interest* (July/August 2018), 82-6, and Hamza Karcic in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 5, 2019, 858-9.

Goldstein, a prominent expert on China at Brown University, harshly concludes that Sullivan's memoir shows "he was the wrong man at the wrong place at the wrong time." According to Goldstein, the result of Sullivan's uncompromising "good-versus-evil worldview" was "an escalatory spiral in U.S.-Russia relations that ended in catastrophe for Ukraine," a criticism that appears to overstate Sullivan's personal responsibility. Faulting Sullivan for having "made misstep after misstep," Goldstein contrasts him "to George Kennan – one of America's most famous and far-sighted diplomats" (thereby overlooking Kennan's own missteps).¹⁷

Yet the substantial and very detailed account offered in *Midnight in Moscow* is worth more careful and extended consideration. Although it occasionally becomes tedious in its recounting of bureaucratic processes or maneuvers, it is a valuable and thus far underutilized resource for scholars of Russian-American relations.

Born in 1959, Sullivan became intrigued by Russian history and culture in his youth. A hockey fan, his interest was piqued when the Soviet national team played Team Canada in 1972 and the Soviet players showed they could match the best players in North America. By the time the U.S. hockey team defeated the Soviet team in the "miracle on ice" at the Lake Placid Olympics in 1980, Sullivan was "hooked on all things Russian and Soviet" (47). At Brown University, he took classes in Russian history while majoring in U.S. history. Although he did not learn to speak Russian, he recalls that he was "a budding amateur Russophile" (47). That interest led him to travel with his wife to Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, and Yalta in the summer of 1989, near the peak of *perestroika* under Mikhail Gorbachev.

Sullivan's later service in the U.S. government included being Deputy Secretary of Commerce in the last years of the George W. Bush administration (2007-9) and leading the U.S.-Iraq Business Dialogue during the presidency of Barack Obama. He voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, though he was not an active supporter of Trump. Although Sullivan found reports of Russian interference in the election on behalf of Trump to be credible, he also believed that media reporting on a supposed corrupt relationship between Trump and Putin to be "mostly erroneous." As Deputy Secretary of State under Trump, he "never saw evidence of a corrupt bargain between Trump and Russia" (42). Sullivan thereby concurs with other aides to Trump who wrote memoirs, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster.¹⁸ Moreover, the Trump administration did not go "soft on Russia": it increased sanctions, expelled Russian diplomats, provided Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, and withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 (44). That record contradicts claims by Democrats, including Michael McFaul, that Trump

¹⁷ Lyle J. Goldstein, "John Sullivan: Biden's Failed Diplomat in Moscow," *Responsible Statecraft*, January 31, 2025. John Bolton, who served briefly as Trump's National Security Adviser before being fired, made few direct comments about Sullivan's book except to call it "a cautionary tale for those thinking about joining a Trump administration redivivus." *Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 2024.

¹⁸ Mike Pompeo, *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the America I Love* (New York: Harper Collins, 2023), xix-xx, 113-9; H.R. McMaster, *At War with Ourselves: My Tour of Duty in the Trump White House* (New York: HarperCollins, 2024), 6, 13.

consistently embraced and supported Putin.¹⁹

In June 2019, when Ambassador Jon Huntsman announced his intention to resign as Ambassador to Moscow, Sullivan asked Pompeo to send him to replace Huntsman. As Sullivan explains, he found the position of Deputy Secretary of State in the Trump administration stressful and wearing. He wanted to be his “own boss in running the US mission in Russia and less subject to the undisciplined machinations of the White House” (41).

Sullivan’s description of his relations with the Russian government is contradictory. On one hand, he emphasizes his belief that “we needed to stop digging the hole that we were in.” Consequently, he made pragmatic efforts to halt the worsening of relations through talking to key Russian officials, particularly Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei A. Ryabkov and former ambassador to the United States Yuri Ushakov, with whom Sullivan thought he could “do business” (6, 64, 83). On the other hand, he regarded Russia as an “uncompromising foe” that was “malevolently undermining” U.S. interests around the world (46, 39). He recalls that he “was treated with respect” by Russian officials, with no efforts to provoke or embarrass him, yet he also claims in the introduction that “the Russian government devoted a huge number of personnel and resources to try to annoy, provoke, criticize, frustrate, embarrass, and compromise” him (91, 6).

Such contradictions foster doubts about the reliability of Sullivan’s description of the degeneration of U.S.-Russian relations before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. *Midnight in Moscow* depicts the United States as consistently innocent and virtuous. Writing about the Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine in the spring of 2021, Sullivan declares that “Americans, unlike Russians, generally are not clever at disguising our desires and true motives from an adversary” (183) – a view that disregards a rather long history of deception and covert action in countries such as Iran, Guatemala, Cuba, and Vietnam. Sullivan calls Russian claims that the United States broke a promise in 1990 not to expand NATO to the east simply a “lie – pure disinformation,” thereby ignoring the reasons Russian leaders believe a promise was made (280).²⁰ Setting aside the role of NATO in the bombing of Serbia in 1999 and as an expeditionary force in Afghanistan, Sullivan insists that NATO has always been “a defensive alliance” (89, 281). Although Sullivan faults the Biden administration for not talking with Russian officials about Ukraine for four months after the Biden-Putin summit in Geneva in June 2021, he denies that the United States or Ukraine did anything to provoke Russia. There is no mention in *Midnight in Moscow* of the signing of a U.S.-Ukraine strategic partnership in the fall of 2021 that committed the United States to support Ukrainian efforts to recover full territorial sovereignty, including Crimea, which Russia had annexed

¹⁹ Michael McFaul, “Why Trump’s complacency about Putin is a problem – whatever his motives,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2020. The best studies of “Russiagate” and its effects on U.S.-Russian relations are Richard Sakwa’s *Deception* (Lexington Books, 2021) and *The Russia Scare* (Routledge, 2023).

²⁰ As Burns recalls, “[Boris] Yeltsin and the Russian elite assumed, with considerable justification, that [Secretary of State] Jim Baker’s assurances during the negotiation of German reunification in 1990 – that NATO would not extend its reach ‘one inch’ farther east – would continue to apply after the breakup of the Soviet Union” (107).

in 2014.²¹ Sullivan criticizes Biden for remarks at a press conference on January 19, 2022, that signaled a lack of resolve and “emboldened Putin” (247), but otherwise his account one-sidedly puts blame on Russia.

When Sullivan turns to the question of future U.S. policy toward Russia, like Burns, McFaul, and many other writers, he adopts George Kennan’s concept of “containment.” He forecasts that “a strategy of containing Russian aggression ... will pay substantial dividends, just as Kennan correctly predicted of containment in the Cold War” (376-7). Sullivan does not recognize that Kennan came to believe a militarized policy of containment actually prolonged the Cold War by delaying the dramatic internal changes that finally came in the late 1980s.²² Instead, Sullivan only vaguely comments, “I found some of his [Kennan’s] criticisms of US policy in the late twentieth century unpersuasive” (128). *Midnight in Moscow* thus disregards how Kennan shifted to become an advocate of détente and how he argued in the 1980s that what needed to be contained was “not so much the Soviet Union as the weapons race itself.”²³ Yet at the end of his sometimes-contradictory book, after movingly telling the story of his wife’s death from cancer, Sullivan calls Kennan’s opposition to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the 1990s “prescient” and he agrees with Kennan that the United States should have done more to reconcile with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (378-9).

Ambassadors Sullivan, McFaul, and Burns are not unusual in believing that Kennan’s strategy of containment from the late 1940s succeeded four decades later in bringing U.S. victory in the Cold War. For example, Hal Brands, a prolific professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, has repeatedly claimed that “containment yielded an epochal strategic victory,” just as Kennan promised: “denied easy expansion, Soviet power mellowed and crumbled.”²⁴ Nor are the recent ambassadors alone in expecting that containment of Putin’s Russia will be similarly effective. Even the Kennan Institute, which Kennan helped to found at the highpoint of détente in 1974, asserted in a program about responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that Kennan’s recommendations in the Long Telegram, which “became the foundation of America’s containment policy against the Soviet Union,” four decades later “contributed to a peaceful resolution of the Cold War.”²⁵

What is surprising and troubling about these views is that they completely disregard how Kennan responded to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, how he argued against a harsh, militarized form of containment

²¹ Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 258.

²² George F. Kennan, “The G.O.P. Won the Cold War? Ridiculous,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1992.

²³ George F. Kennan, “Threat Lies in Arms Race, Not Force” (letter), *New York Times*, December 8, 1985; idem, “Containment Then and Now,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Spring 1987), 889.

²⁴ Hal Brands, “Containment Can Work Against China, Too,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 3, 2021; see also Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

²⁵ “Kennan at 50: Global Reach and Impact of Russia’s Invasion in Ukraine,” Kennan Institute webcast, October 31, 2024.

in the 1980s, and how he encouraged a very different approach, which arguably was more effective in dramatically reducing U.S.-Soviet tension by the end of the decade. Kennan's ideas in the final years of the Cold War, which have been neglected even by his best biographers, are worth close attention by historians of American-Russian relations.²⁶

When the Kremlin started a brutal war that led to the deaths of more than a million Afghans (far more people than have been killed in Ukraine), President Jimmy Carter declared that the invasion was the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War, warned about a further Soviet move into the oil-rich Persian gulf, vowed that the United States would respond with military force to such a threat, declared an embargo on sales of grain to the USSR, and terminated cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union. Although Kennan agreed that the invasion had to be condemned, he quickly denounced the Carter administration's overreaction to what he rightly interpreted as a defensive response to political instability in a country on its border.²⁷ Vigorously challenging "the assumption that it was a prelude to aggressive moves against various countries and regions farther afield," Kennan questioned the "effort to contain the supposedly power-mad Russians" and criticized the far-reaching "militarization of thought and discourse" in Washington, which heightened the danger of war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Arguing that it was unlikely that open pressure would cause the Kremlin to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, Kennan urged the restoration of "political communication" that had been broken off.²⁸

After Ronald Reagan succeeded Carter, Kennan continued to criticize a militarized policy of containment and to urge an alternative approach. In a November 1981 address at Dartmouth College that drew wide attention, Kennan deplored the "Cold War policies" of the Reagan administration as "negative and hopeless," with no vision beyond "indefinitely increasing political tension and nuclear danger" (a critique that could also be made of the Joe Biden administration's policy of providing military support to Ukraine for as long as it takes and leaving it up to Ukrainians to decide when and how to negotiate an end to the war). While he called the Soviet war in Afghanistan a mistake that the Kremlin would come to regret, he emphasized that both sides had contributed to the very serious deterioration of Soviet-American relations (a point worth bearing in mind in relation to the one-sided blame of Russia for the "new cold war" and of Putin for a supposedly "unprovoked" war in Ukraine). A balanced, reasoned, and effective approach to the Soviet Union was impeded, Kennan believed, by an extreme, subjective, and unrealistic view of the USSR propagated

²⁶ In his brief treatment, John Lewis Gaddis criticized the aged Kennan for failing to keep "his emotions apart from his strategies" and defended the Reagan administration against Kennan's criticisms. *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, esp. 644, 660. Frank Costigliola, who relied heavily on Kennan's mournful diary entries, emphasized Kennan's supposed failure to have an impact. Costigliola, *Kennan*, 467, 474, 529, 538.

²⁷ On the Kremlin's motives for the misguided invasion, including worries about political turmoil and suspicion that a Communist leader was turning to the United States, see Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 7, 71-77, 112-3.

²⁸ George F. Kennan, "George F. Kennan, on Washington's Reaction to the Afghan Crisis," *New York Times*, February 1, 1980. Kennan proudly noted in his diary that his long and very prominently placed op-ed had a "sensational" effect. Frank Costigliola, ed. *The Kennan Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 523.

by U.S. government officials and journalists. Their dehumanization of the Soviet leadership and exaggeration of its intentions obstructed the needed dialogue with the Kremlin. Kennan took heart, however, from the growing strength of an anti-nuclear-war movement in the United States and Europe, which he hoped would put irresistible pressure on Western governments to shift away from policies that were creating a high danger of nuclear war.²⁹

Kennan's spirited public speaking and writing helped to embolden and empower peace activists who lacked his expertise and prestige. One of those activists was the pediatrician Helen Caldicott, a founder of both Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament and Physicians for Social Responsibility, who visited Kennan in Princeton in January 1983 to seek his support.³⁰ Less famous but perhaps even more important was the philanthropist Catherine Menninger, who was "strongly influenced" for many years by Kennan's Dartmouth address. Inspired and guided by Kennan, she helped to initiate several American-Soviet exchanges, including meetings between Soviet and American journalists in both California and New England, dialogues between Soviet and American women, and a pioneering American-Soviet anti-alcoholism project. Kennan met with Menninger several times and corresponded frequently with her. After learning how warmly Mikhail Gorbachev greeted Kennan when he came to Washington to sign a nuclear arms reduction treaty in December 1987, Menninger wrote to Kennan: "The world should embrace you for what you have done over so long a time to point the way and to lead us to where we are now."³¹

Such activists founded groups like Peace Links, Beyond War, the Center for U.S.-USSR Initiatives, and Women for Meaningful Summits that organized large-scale exchanges in which Soviet citizens toured the United States and U.S. citizens travelled around the Soviet Union.³² Kennan repeatedly emphasized the importance of such travel and cultural, educational, scientific, and commercial exchanges. He urged the Reagan administration not only to allow their resumption but also to actively support them, which it did after 1984, with encouragement from Kennan Institute co-founder James Billington and art historian Suzanne

²⁹ Address by the Honorable George Kennan, Hanover, New Hampshire, November 16, 1981, Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament Papers, Smith College Special Collections. The *Boston Globe* adamantly endorsed Kennan's critique: "Knowing the Soviets" (editorial), *Boston Globe*, October 18, 1982. *Globe* editor Thomas Winship led a U.S. delegation that met with Soviet editors in an effort to overcome stereotypes and launch collaboration between journalists of the two countries. See Brad Pokorny, "N.E., Soviet editors find common concern," *Boston Globe*, September 5, 1982.

³⁰ Helen Broinowski Caldicott, *A Desperate Passion: An Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 275-6; *The Kennan Diaries*, 546.

³¹ Menninger to Kennan, March 7, 1987, and Christmas 1987, Kennan-Menninger Correspondence, Box 31, Folder 3-4, George F. Kennan Papers, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

³² David S. Foglesong, "When the Russians Really Were Coming: Citizen Diplomacy and the End of Cold War Enmity in America," *Cold War History*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2020), 419-440; idem, "How American and Soviet Women Transcended the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 46, Issue 3, June 2022, 527-548.

Massie.³³ By early 1989, Kennan observed with satisfaction that “cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts are proceeding briskly,” and he applauded their “usefulness as components of normal relations between two great peoples.”³⁴ When Kennan visited Moscow in 1990, after the end of the Cold War, he asked Alexander Yakovlev, who had overseen Soviet propaganda and people’s diplomacy (*narodnaia diplomatiia*), whether the exchanges that brought Soviet people to visit the United States had been useful. Yakovlev replied: “Very useful.”³⁵ What Yakovlev appears to have meant is that the unprecedentedly large-scale face-to-face encounters, widely covered in the mass media in both countries, had helped to dispel negative stereotypes and discredit hardline ideologues’ images of foreign threats.

None of this is to suggest that in his old age Kennan was omniscient, clairvoyant, or perfectly consistent. Moody, he sometimes succumbed to despair about the supposed futility of his efforts.³⁶ Not always fully informed, he exaggerated the setback to the peace movement from Reagan’s re-election in 1984.³⁷ But it also is not true that a “mystic,” soft-minded Kennan completely repudiated all aspects of his containment strategy and called for unilateral disarmament.³⁸ Instead, in the early 1980s, echoing Theodore Roosevelt, he favored “the carrying of a big stick while speaking softly,” and urged “a determined strengthening of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s conventional capabilities.”³⁹ As in the late 1940s, the purpose of such military strength, he explained, was not to create a perpetual military stand-off but to prepare the ground for political negotiation and accommodation. With the coming to power of a new generation in Europe and a new reformist wind blowing from the East after 1985, he argued, containment as he conceived it in 1946 became “almost entirely irrelevant to the problems” of U.S.-Soviet relations, which hinged above all on overcoming misunderstandings and reaching sensible compromises.⁴⁰

To sum up: the common view of Kennan as the architect of a containment

³³ Kennan, “A Risky U.S. Equation,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1981; Kennan, “Reducing Tensions,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1984; James Billington, “A Time of Danger, an Opening for Dialogue,” *Washington Post*, November 20, 1983; Robert C. McFarlane, Memorandum for the President (prepared by Jack Matlock), “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Toward Defining a Strategy,” February 18, 1984, RAC Box 25, Executive Secretariat, National Security Council: Country File, Folder USSR (1/23/1984), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Digital Library Collections; Suzanne Massie, *Trust But Verify: Reagan, Russia and Me* (Rockland, Maine: Maine Authors Publishing, 2013).

³⁴ Kennan, “After the Cold War,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1989.

³⁵ Conversation between Alexander Yakovlev and George Frost Kennan, 5 October 1990, Moscow, National Security Archive (nsarchive.gwu.edu).

³⁶ Entries for May 22, 1980, and January 10, 1982, *The Kennan Diaries*, 526, 538

³⁷ Kennan, “The Wrong Way to Treat Moscow,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1985.

³⁸ Paul Seabury, “George Kennan Vs. Mr. ‘X’: The great container springs a leak,” *New Republic*, December 16, 1981, 17-20. More recently, Patrick Iber has asserted that “in the latter phase of Kennan’s career, many of his views of the Soviet Union were unreliably mystical.” “George Kennan’s False Moves” (a review of Costigliola’s biography), *New Republic*, January 12, 2023.

³⁹ “George F. Kennan, on Washington’s Reaction to the Afghan Crisis,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1980; Kennan, “Denuclearization,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1981.

⁴⁰ “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Containment as a Prerequisite for Accommodation,” address at the fortieth-anniversary celebration of the Policy Planning Staff, Washington, DC, May 11, 1987, in Kennan, *At a Century’s Ending* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 138-140.

strategy that led to U.S. victory in the Cold War and caused the collapse of the Soviet Union is extremely narrow and badly misleading. It ignores how Kennan criticized an excessively militarized form of containment, how he believed that bellicose, confrontational policies had actually prolonged the Cold War, how he urged an alternative approach involving dialogue, negotiation, and people-to-people exchanges, and how that approach significantly contributed to the ending of the long superpower conflict, as more and more historians are coming to recognize.⁴¹ For more than four decades, fear, suspicion, and belief in a demonically threatening foreign enemy perpetuated Soviet-American hostility. The citizen exchanges that Kennan encouraged, which both Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev enthusiastically embraced, dramatically helped to lift the fear and counter the images of evil enemies.

If Kennan could speak from his grave in Princeton, New Jersey, twenty years after his death, what would he say about the three ambassadors' memoirs? I imagine that the elderly gentleman, who won a Pulitzer Prize for the first volume of his own memoirs, would graciously praise the ambitious efforts of the later diplomats. Yet I think it is likely that he also would lament that they, like so many others in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, focus too much on one brief phase in his long career and not enough on the wiser counsel he tried to provide in his last decades. Instead of being mythologized as the architect of the containment strategy, Kennan likely would prefer to be remembered as a man who did so much to help U.S. and Soviet citizens overcome the animosities of the Cold War.



⁴¹ See, for example, the forum, "Pursuit of Peace and Cooperation: Soviet Citizens and Foreign Friends during the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, Vo. 46, No. 3 (June 2022), 462-548, and Stephanie L. Freeman, *Dreams for a Decade: International Nuclear Abolitionism and the End of the Cold War*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. Earlier studies of transnational activism included David Cortright, *Peace Works: The Citizen's Role in Ending the Cold War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), and Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

