**Kennan’s Long Telegram**

In February 1946, the State Department cabled the US Moscow Embassy, and asked for an analysis of the Soviet position:

(1) Basic features of post-war Soviet outlook.

(2) Background of this outlook

(3) Its projection in practical policy on official level.

(4) Its projection on unofficial level.

(5) Practical deductions from standpoint of US policy.

In February 1946, the U.S. State Department received a long telegram back from Moscow that it quickly circulated to the highest officials in Washington causing quite a stir. The 8,000 word document was written by George Kennan, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Moscow, and it quickly established him as a leading expert on Soviet affairs. This has become known as 'the Long Telegram', and it said exactly what the American government wanted it to.  Years later in his memoirs, Kennan mocked his "sermon," saying he reread it with "horrified amusement." He also claimed that it sounded like "one of those primers put out by alarmed congressional committees or by the Daughters of the American Revolution." But in 1946, when he wrote it, he believed every word. Kennan hated Communism and the Soviet government.   However, he had lived in Moscow since 1933 and knew what he was talking about.   His telegram was re-written as a paper entitled: ***The Sources of Soviet Conduct,*** and read by many Americans.   It formed the basis of American policy towards Russia for the next quarter of a century. Historians such as John Lewis Gaddis support that Kennan’s ‘long telegram’ “became the basis for the United States strategy toward the Soviet Union throughout the rest of the Cold War.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Melvin P. Leffler also supports that American assessments of long-term intentions were transformed and spurred on by the ‘long telegram’ and it soon became commonplace for policymakers, military officials and intelligence analysts to state that “the ultimate aim of Soviet foreign policy was Russian domination of a Communist world.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The telegram warned Washington that, "The USSR still lives in antagonistic 'capitalist encirclement' with which there can be no permanent peaceful coexistence." He went on to say, "we have a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with [the] 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." Kennan argued that the solution to dealing with the Soviets was to contain them. Just six months after the USSR and America had fought on the same side in World War II, the telegram contributed to the chilling of relations between the two countries and the onset of the Cold War.

Kennan grew up in Milwaukee and in 1926 after graduating from Princeton, he entered the U.S. Foreign Service. He was posted to Moscow in 1933 where he remained until 1937. At the outset of World War II, the State Department transferred Kennan to Berlin. And when America entered the war, Kennan was interned by the Germans for a few months. In 1944 after an absence of seven years, Kennan returned to Moscow, this time in a position that made him a key advisor to the U.S. Ambassador.

In April 1947, after returning to the States, Kennan became chairman of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department. A few months later, he published a polished version of his policy of containment in an article for Foreign Affairs. In it he argued that to meet the Soviet threat the U.S. should employ "a long-term patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."

However, Kennan believed that the Soviet Union posed a political and not a military threat. And so he argued against a build up of nuclear arms, which he believed would only serve to fuel an extremely dangerous arms race. Kennan also opposed the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the decision to send UN forces across the 38th parallel during the Korean War. And after the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic device in August 1949, Kennan argued against a crash program in the United States to build a hydrogen bomb.

By the time Kennan left the Policy Planning Staff in late 1949, his views on the Soviet Union diverged widely from those of the Truman Administration. The Berlin blockade seemed to belie his insistence that the Soviet threat was primarily political, and both the public and Congress were calling for a more aggressive approach towards the USSR.

During the Eisenhower years, Kennan became an outspoken critic of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's policy towards the Soviet Union. He complained frequently that the U.S. had failed to take advantage of the liberalizing trend within the USSR following the death of the country's longtime leader Joseph Stalin. And Kennan was also a prominent critic of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Vietnam, he would say, "is not our business." He argued that the escalation of the war made a negotiated settlement much less likely.

Kennan has continued to write and lecture on foreign policy and the Soviet Union into the 1990s. In 1981 he was awarded the Albert Einstein Peace Prize for his efforts to improve U.S.-Soviet relations. That same year he urged Americans to recognize the Soviets as "another great people" and asked Americans to understand that the differences between the U.S. and the USSR are the product "not of any inherent iniquity but of the relentless discipline of history, tradition and national experience."

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Melvyn P. Leffler, David S. Painter, *Origins of the Cold War: An International History* (NY, 1994) p.26 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)