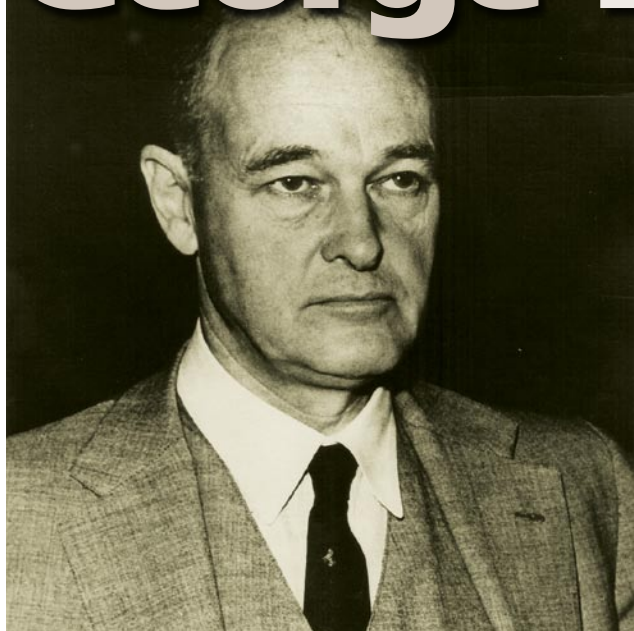


THE LEGEND OF

George F. Kennan

By PAUL B. THOMPSON



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A lone warrior, recently returned from his post in war-torn Moscow, sat reflectively at his solid oak desk in the northwest corner of Roosevelt Hall, set quill to parchment, and, with great deliberation, wrote concerning the “The Soviet Way of Thought and Its Effect on Foreign Policy.” Drawing on years of operational experience tempered by service as Deputy Commandant of the National War College, he explained the expansionist threat of the Soviet Union and suggested military-political measures to contain it. Over the next hour, he crafted a 5,000-word draft, which would

undergo at least 2 revisions. The date was January 24, 1947, and the essay was one of 17 works that prolific writer composed during a 7-month period at the National War College. A later version of that treatise was published in the July 1947 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, attributed to an anonymous Mr. X. That article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” propelled its author, the warrior and statesman George F. Kennan, to the center of the debate among policymakers concerning the Nation’s strategic course during the early Cold War. By then, Kennan had departed the National War College to rejoin the policy-making arena as the head of the new Office of Policy Planning at the Department of State, an assignment to be sought by future graduates of the college. For the next six decades, Kennan would remain intellectually engaged in the art and science of grand strategy, filling senior positions in government and academia

with great dedication, and steadfastly setting a noble course for future strategists.

The Next Mr. X

Since 1946, National War College student warriors have indeed pursued Kennan’s strategic trail, offering variations on the policies of ways to win the peace. Their essays have addressed such issues of the day as nationbuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian missions, multiple uses of the military, and ways to design interagency decisionmaking entities of the first order. If students have needed inspiration, a bronze plaque on the hallowed wall summarizes in short shrift the deeds of George F. Kennan. New students note it in passing and wonder if there really is anything new in their universe about which they can write as they consider the challenge of becoming the next Mr. X.

Sixty years of strategic thinking in peace and war is a long time in the life of a national security institution such as the National War College. Kennan was around for 59 of those years and remained influential until his death in 2005 at age 101. Because of his contributions to the strategic thinking of his time—to the concept of containment and the

Commander Paul B. Thompson, USN, is a Professor of National Security Studies at the National War College.

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Truman Doctrine—Kennan will always have a presence at the War College. He was there at the commencement of academics, helped design a relevant curriculum, and unilaterally set the standard for intellectual contribution. Writing in his 1967 memoirs, he described

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the original mission in 1946, when he and his colleagues prepared the curriculum for senior-level students of national policy: “We could, through our activities, contribute in a way that no previous institution could do to the thinking about problems of national policy that was going on all over Washington in that winter of transition and uncertainty.”¹

The work of those founders could have missed the mark in the open market of national security ideas following World War II, but it was a seminal moment in the history of the National War College, and Kennan envisioned a substantive role for the school in the national debate over strategy:

A strategic-political doctrine would have to be devised for this country which gave promise not simply of expanding the material and military power of a single nation but of making the strength of that nation a force for peace and stability in international affairs and helping, in particular, to avoid the catastrophe of atomic war.²

Kennan immediately sought to bring the appropriate measure of gravity to building a national security institute and was pleased with the progress, noting that “the program of that first experimental year moved forward . . . smartly, smoothly, and with great élan.”³ Based on the prodigious output of speeches and articles and the resulting curriculum, Kennan clearly led the charge into strategic territory. He concluded his association of that time by declaring, “All in all, I have never known a more enjoyable professional experience.”⁴

A significant development was that Kennan himself experienced an intellectual evolution, brought on by the curriculum he was creating. He thus bore witness to a remarkable aspect of the War College experience whereby the learning process applies to all who engage it, faculty as well as students. Indeed, he noted that the highly motivated students taught the faculty as well as the reverse.⁵ By his own account, Kennan arrived

at Roosevelt Hall with many operational experiences and a number of profound if unfocused thoughts and transitioned into the consummate strategist: “I realize now that it was at that time—in the background reading, in the attendance at lectures by distinguished

outsiders, in the agonizing over my own lectures—that some of the ideas were conceived that have been basic to my views on American policy ever since.”⁶

Newfound clarity enabled Kennan to articulate his thoughts on the topical issues of the day, which he did with great zeal. “The seven months of residence and work at the War College, from September 1946 to May 1947, were the occasion for a veritable outpouring of literary and forensic effort on my part. I look back today with a slightly horrified wonder on the energies this frenzy reflected.”⁷ He found that by immersing himself in the academic mix of the college, he could simultaneously contribute to it and benefit from it. The strategic atmosphere he created transformed him even as he was laying the foundation for others to do the same.

Since that exciting first year of intellectual synthesis, hundreds of distinguished students have partaken of the experience in strategic thinking. Modern warriors arrive as operators and leave as strategists 10 months later. They deal with the pressures of retaining operational and tactical expertise for their next assignment while seeking the intellectual foundation for the longer voyage to senior flag and ambassadorial rank. Their rise to the strategic level of thinking causes them to contemplate the state-building capacity of the United States, the future of the nation-state, and the nature of governance overall.

Following in His Footsteps

Kennan returned to the War College 46 years after he wrote the X article. Traveling by train from Princeton, arm in a sling, he appeared for the last time, taking the stage in Arnold Auditorium to celebrate the creation of an academic chair in his name and to state again what he considered one of the essential missions of the institution. His thoughts on that day, September 8, 1993, were characteristically direct, as he challenged others to

follow his footsteps in thinking about the nature of war and the role of the military instrument of statecraft.

There remained a significant role for the military, Kennan concluded, but its traditional use would no longer work. Interned for months by the Germans, then serving as the Charge d’Affaires in Moscow during World War II, he knew first-hand the power of that violent instrument of statecraft. It was his hope, even in 1946, that the War College would

become a major center for not just teaching alone but for wide-ranging, conceptual thinking about war itself as a feature of the international life of our time, about the role of the Armed Forces as institutions of our national life, and about the relationship of these forces, whether actively employed or only in being, in the national interest and to the remainder of our national life.⁸

After 46 years, the need was greater than ever to consider that “war itself, conducted under the concepts that have prevailed in the past, can no longer serve as a rational and useful alternative for anyone at all.”⁹

The Kennan Chair recognized the accomplishments of a statesman and scholar. But, more importantly, it represented Kennan’s commitment to going beyond mere teaching and learning by faculty and students alike. There was an implicit promise, which he clearly articulated on the stage in 1993, that the college would engage in conceptual thinking about war. He explained that

developments in . . . the nature of our international environment and in the qualities and potential uses of modern weaponry, have fundamentally altered the basis for much of the traditional thinking about the ways we can or cannot employ our Armed Forces and about the relationship of these forces to the problems of the remainder of our national life . . . there is now a lot of hard thinking to be done on these subjects. This thinking will of course have to go on in a great many places other than this one, but, for many of the aspects of it, I can think of no place more suitable than this college.¹⁰

But how does one maintain and cultivate an institution of strategic thinking? It takes an engaging faculty and a receptive student body, each with both an academic



Roosevelt Hall, site of the National War College

and operational mix. And it requires space for thinking beyond the strategic to the visionary level. It further requires students to think beyond how to use current instruments of statecraft in their next assignments and to write the next Mr. X strategic essay on using military capabilities, along with diplomatic, economic, informational, and legal means, to achieve homeland security and otherwise make a better world. Kennan would contain the temptation to revert to tactical or operational discussions and urge that practitioners do what he did: come from an operational experience directly relevant to the cause of the day and conceptualize those operational insights. For instance, envisioning initiatives against terrorism in the framework of their personal experiences, added to experiences and insights from peers and faculty, students must then make spe-

cific proposals to contain terrorism, attack it, and defeat it. And guardians of the current curriculum need to keep it on a trajectory to enable that level of strategic thinking.

Part of Kennan's distant yet abiding impact is that he did not overstay his tenure. He arrived a warrior, did intellectual battle, and left a strategist. He had an answer for his time and found a way to deliver it. That tactic should resonate well for any period, and his life achievements and legend should evoke varied responses. The contrast between Kennan's status as a War College founder and his potential relegation to obscurity is manifest in the fact that his chair, still symbolically located in that corner office but now next to a synthetic desk with a word processor, stands empty. Kennan's final words to the college were, "I can assure you that no one will

follow the further course of this innovation with higher hopes . . . than the man by whose name, deservedly or otherwise, the new Chair is to be known."¹¹ **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967), 308.

² *Ibid.*, 307.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ George F. Kennan, remarks at the National War College, September 8, 1993.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*