

**Remarks by the Director of National Intelligence  
Ambassador John D. Negroponte**

**George F. Kennan Award Ceremony  
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**AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

Thank you for that kind introduction, Paul [Volcker].

Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues and friends: It's a great honor to be with you this evening to receive the George F. Kennan Award for Distinguished Public Service.

I'm proud to join illustrious public servants like Cy Vance, Paul Volcker, Dick Holbrooke, and Hank Greenberg in accepting this award. At the outset of my career in the Foreign Service in 1960, I would never have dared to associate my name with George F. Kennan. Frankly, it's a challenge for me to express how grateful I am that the National Committee on American Foreign Policy has chosen to do so.

The National Committee has played a vital role in our public life for the past three decades. Your mission—to provide nonpartisan, thoughtful reflection on America's responsibilities in the world—is as essential today as on the day the National Committee was founded in 1974. Under the astute leadership of Bill Flynn and George Schwab, the Committee champions the kind of clear-eyed analysis we need to keep America and her friends safe and to defend the values we cherish most.

George Kennan, of course, was a National Committee on American Foreign Policy all by himself. He was the quintessential all-source analyst, a man of prodigious learning, bottomless curiosity, and absolute intellectual integrity. If I may, I'd like to talk a bit about Kennan and his times before turning to our own times, and that facet of governmental activity for which I am now responsible—national intelligence.

As Henry Kissinger once observed, Kennan came “as close to authoring the diplomatic doctrine of his era as any diplomat in our history.” The strategy of “containment”, described first in his 1946 Long Telegram and later in his famous X Article in *Foreign Affairs*, established the fundamental policy we followed throughout the Cold War until the Soviet Union succumbed to its own internal contradictions—just as Kennan predicted 45 years earlier.

How, we might well ask ourselves, did he foresee that outcome? In the aftermath of the Second World War, there certainly was little reason to believe things would turn out so well. We had fought two world wars in 30 years. We had witnessed unimaginable genocide at the hands of a fanatical ideology emerging in a country that had been, we believed, one of the most civilized and cultured states on earth. And no sooner had we defeated one adversary than we found

ourselves confronted by another global threat in the form of Stalinist Russia. As the wartime alliance between the Soviets and the West transitioned to a fragile peace, the choices facing policymakers in Washington appeared to be grim: appeasement or war.

One aspect of Kennan's genius was to propose a middle path that eschewed either/or thinking, sometimes referred to as the fallacy of the single alternative. His containment strategy held that the United States could stop the global spread of Communism by applying "counterforce" – diplomatic, economic, and political strength that could foil Soviet designs by means short of war. To do so, Washington needed to support its allies in vital areas of the world, like Europe and Asia, while strengthening its own society to provide a hopeful alternative to Soviet oppression. As Kennan wrote in 1947:

*"...Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.... (T)he main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies..."*

Another dimension of Kennan's genius was to recognize something that today we all acknowledge as a fundamental truth: good foreign policy is an outgrowth of good domestic policy, each lending the other strength. As he wrote in the Long Telegram:

*"Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale, and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués."*

Of course, over Kennan's 101 years, he saw his strategy go through many iterations – not all of which met with his liking. At times he felt that the containment doctrine had become overly militarized. American intervention in Vietnam was a case in point. But until the end, he remained a leading figure in American foreign affairs, influencing policy debates for decades. Along the way, he mastered 7 languages, wrote 17 books, and won two Pulitzer Prizes. It is not an exaggeration to say that he shaped generations of American diplomats and continues to do so through his intellectual legacy.

In particular, I'd highlight the lasting significance of three of Kennan's most admirable traits:

- First, as I noted earlier, his ability to synthesize information from many sources to produce a complete picture of the international scene;
- Second, his willingness to take intellectual risks and challenge conventional wisdom; and
- Third, his recognition of the limits of human understanding.

These traits, I would submit to you, are as relevant to America's intelligence enterprise as they are to its diplomacy.

Because of his great learning, Kennan understood that economic, political, and security factors were not the exclusive determinants of Soviet behavior. Deep-seated, often opaque, cultural and historical factors played an important role in Soviet policy as well. This provides, in part, an answer to the question I asked a few moments ago. How could Kennan have predicted the Soviet future? No doubt it helped that he had spent a lot of time studying the Russian past.

The intelligence challenges we face today require similarly capacious thinking. In this epoch of sophisticated denial and deception, we in the Intelligence Community have good reason to utilize technological means like overhead imagery and signals intelligence for much of our collection work. But it is worth remembering that Kennan came to his wisest conclusions by studying the life of Moscow's streets, talking with Russians in their own language, and studying Russian history, philosophy, and literature. To fully appreciate the deep roots of Russian behavior, he read not only contemporary economic and political articles on the Soviet state, but also Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy.

The lesson here is Kennan's ability to synthesize all these sources to create a holistic picture of the Soviet Union. By scrutinizing the state from a variety of angles, he gained profound insight into its inner-workings and intentions. Much as surveyors assess geography from many different vantage points, we in the Intelligence Community must strive to view the world from similarly diverse perspectives, for the lay of the land (both literally and metaphorically) can appear vastly different under varied lights.

This is why field reporting based on a broad frame of reference remains the critical backbone of intelligence analysis. The classic, but not exclusive, example of this kind of thinking are State Department cables like Kennan's Long Telegram, which are drawn from open source material, cultural research, and on-the-ground study by experts in country who know and interact with the society and – crucially – speak the language.

In addition to his sweeping intellect, Kennan possessed that second distinctive trait I have cited: intellectual daring. To put it bluntly, Kennan was going out on a limb when he wrote the Long Telegram in February 1946. At the time, the Treasury Department, which hoped for amiable postwar collaboration with Moscow, had grown perplexed by Moscow's reluctance to join the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, so the State Department asked the embassy in Moscow for an explanation. Why were the Soviets behaving this way? In response, Treasury and State got more than they asked for. Much more. Kennan's brilliant 8,000-word reply crystallized hitherto unspoken misgivings about continuing what had been the cordial American posture toward the Soviet Union during the war and advanced a new strategic doctrine in its stead. We all can be thankful for Kennan's determination to describe the facts as he saw them.

And that's exactly what we ask from our intelligence analysts today. We live in complex times, with intricate and overlapping challenges. To understand this era fully—whether the subject is violent extremism, political instability, or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—we must be willing to scrutinize basic assumptions and question preconceptions. This is why we are fostering alternative analysis, highlighting dissents, and methodically reviewing our most important analytic processes and products. We also are doing more than ever before to tap the

expertise of outside intellectuals, who can challenge the established orthodoxy and provide us with stronger intelligence as a result.

Finally, let me turn to Kennan's recognition of the limits of our understanding: As he told a Naval War College class in 1949: "It is simply not given to human beings to know the totality of truth."

In my current line of work, I find that both our customers and we in the Intelligence Community sometimes need reminding of this fact. Intelligence is no panacea. It is as much an art as a science. Yes, we can provide warning of threats and well-reasoned, well-documented scenarios of possible future developments for our policymakers, but intelligence is only one factor in the national security equation. By itself, intelligence cannot prevent fresh challenges from emerging around the globe. Yet this shouldn't daunt us any more than it daunted Kennan. We must still strive, as Kennan always did, to try to grasp the truth, even if we cannot always appreciate its entirety.

Kennan's talent for fusing all-source information; his intellectual risk taking; and his ability to reach for the "totality of truth" in spite of our inherent limits have been inspirations for me as a diplomat and now as head of our Intelligence Community. We have fully entered a new era. The Cold War conflict is gone and with it the bipolar dynamics of the struggle for peace, freedom, and prosperity. We live in a period of greater flux, marked by a plethora of dangerously empowered state and non-state actors, and confronted by the established fact that we can, if we are not united in our vigilance, be struck at home as well as overseas. Nonetheless, our times are just as susceptible to Kennan's wisdom and genius as his own. As he famously wrote in the X article:

*"To avoid destruction, the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation. Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than this."*

That observation, it seems to me, remains valid. To succeed in the face of the challenges of our day, we need only call upon the strength that carried our country through earlier eras – strengths of character and of mind – embodied, fittingly enough, by George Kennan.

It is in appreciation of Kennan's influence, and in recognition of his enduring example, that I proudly accept the award that carries his name.

Thank you very much.