

CONTAINMENT—AND AFTER

U. S. Foreign Policy Must Adjust to a New Balance of World Power

William Pfaff

We Americans of all people have been most aware of ourselves, most alive to our special character, our revolutionary tradition, our hospitality to human aspiration, our creation of a constitution and a manner of political life which, if it was not without precedent, is nonetheless unique in scope and in ambition. What we did in 1776 changed human affairs, and that will not be forgotten.

But let us consider what we have become. Powerful, to be sure. But important? That is something else. To be important—important not for the moment but important to human history—is not an inevitable result of power or size. To be important is a result of quality and of wisdom. It is in politics a matter of national actions founded in a real understanding of human affairs and directed to goals that are attainable and humane. It is to leave a stamp on history, a stamp of justice and of intelligence. But it must be added that the foreign policy of a country is only one element, a minor element, among all those factors that together define a nation. Foreign policy cannot make a state great; greatness lies in the character of civil life itself, in religion, in the arts and sciences, in intellectual and social accomplishment. Foreign policy is a mere tool, by which we may encourage those civil conditions in which true greatness may grow.

And that poses the first of the points which seem to me important to discuss. We have exaggerated foreign policy out of its true proportions. Faced with a situation in which powerful nations, governed by a megalomaniac and aggressive ideology, threaten the safety of the world, we have responded with courage and energy, but with something else, too. We have tried to make our foreign policy into a cure for the ills of man. Tocqueville once said of Americans, "Such men are prone to general ideas." We are. Believing that the ideas which govern our political affairs, and even our social and economic lives, are true and valuable, we have tended to generalize

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them so widely as to act as though the forms which these ideas take in our society are also universally valid. We tend even to believe that our experiences and intuitions and attitudes—the experiences and attitudes of a prosperous middle-class industrial society—are those of everyone everywhere.

Living sheltered and secure lives in a nation that since 1865 has never really known tragedy, we are unable to grasp what the actuality of life may be for others, or how inadequate our own experience is to guide us in dealing with their true condition. Take the Balkans. Milovan Djilas, the author of *The New Class*, a book which caused a world sensation in 1957, begins his autobiography of his youth in Montenegro in this way:

"Though the life of my family is not completely typical of my homeland, Montenegro, it is typical in one respect: the men of several generations have died at the hands of Montenegrins, men of the same faith and name. My father's grandfather, my own two grandfathers, my father, and my uncle were killed, as though a dread curse lay upon them. My father and his brother and my brothers were killed, even though all of them yearned to die peacefully in their beds beside their wives. Generation after generation, and the bloody chain was not broken. The inherited fear and hatred of feuding clans was mightier than the fear and hatred of the enemy, the Turks. It seems to me that I was born with blood on my eyes. My first sight was of blood. My first words were blood and bathed in blood."

There are parallels to this kind of thing in the United States. Bloody Kansas, perhaps; the Appalachian mountaineer clans; a few of the old rooted communities in the deep South where violence is still a convention. But for most of us Americans this kind of life is simply incomprehensible. Yet Milovan Djilas was not from the poorest of the poor peasant families; his father was an army officer. And Djilas, who was one of the partisan leaders who created Communist Yugoslavia, although he was subsequently imprisoned for speaking out on issues of justice, is today only forty-nine years old.

Anyone of you who may have visited India and had beggars thrust their mutilated limbs before you, or push their wounded faces into yours; or who may have traveled through white, baked Arab villages, mazes of mud walls with the women hidden in veils

and the men plowing with sticks, knows a part of the incomprehensibility of the non-American world. But the opposite side of these things—even more incomprehensible to us, perhaps—is that these beggars, these villagers, are not merely figures of horror, but men and women living in societies that are subtle and ancient, sophisticated, in some ways more accomplished than our own society. I say *are* not *were*. The civilizations of India and the Middle East may be stagnant compared to our own last three hundred years of technological and intellectual ferment, but they remain great civilizations, although impoverished ones. Indians, Egyptians—these are complicated and worldly people, adults, not children to be lectured to.

But Americans have, I believe, come too often to think that these people are children, that it is our vocation as a nation to lead them to a promised land. We tell them that we, with our economic aid and our political institutions, will save them from themselves. We sometimes are determined to save them whether they want to be saved or not. We tell them that they really have but two choices—to become Communists, or to become like us.

But this is a Marxist-Leninist idea. The Marxists say that they have unlocked the puzzle of history and that everyone everywhere is either Communist or pre-Communist, or doomed anti-Communist. That the Indians and Egyptians might be none of these, the Marxist-Leninist regards as a logical absurdity.

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We Americans, with our predilection for general ideas, often seem to agree with the Marxists. And our foreign policy often seems as determined as Communist policy to force the world to fit into one or the other of these categories. Yet this is a clear contradiction of all that we profess. For the essence of our system is that it is open—that it is not an ideology cutting history down to two or three simple categories. Democracy is a method of civil government. It is not a religion. It offers no explanation of human existence, or of the destiny of man, or of the rhythms of history. It foresees no millennium. Yet we have tended to make it narrow and ideological.

I have mentioned what Tocqueville said about us more than a hundred years ago. And in this century we may think of 1917, when we believed that there was a simple solution to the troubles of Europe, and of 1945, when we thought that to defeat Nazism was a way to defeat evil-itself and so to bring permanent tranquillity to the world. Both times we were disillusioned. But from these disillusionments we learned. In the period from 1945 to 1947 something very interesting happened. We acknowledged in our policies that complexity and evil are as permanent to history as they are to our private lives. We undertook in those years a foreign policy which was one of commitment around the world, which was designed

to frustrate a strong and aggressive state, but which was a policy aware of the facts that states grow and decline and change, and that in politics, as in most other human things, the truth is—as Eliot once put it—that “the best of a bad job is all that any of us make of it.”

In 1945 the Cold War had begun. Russia was the conqueror—the military conqueror—of all Eastern Europe, and her troops were on the Elbe. She menaced Western Europe. This truth was not easy to face, and in the United States we experienced a kind of moral crisis. But by 1947 we had surmounted our test; we acknowledged the reality of what had happened. We saw that World War II had ended with only we and the Russians still possessing the material power to act decisively on the world stage. Our recognition of our responsibility was gradual, but we may say that our new policy emerged in the spring of 1947. That was the spring in which the Truman Doctrine was proclaimed and military aid was guaranteed to Greece and Turkey; and it was the spring in which George Kennan published his famous article in *Foreign Affairs*, signed “X.” In that article Kennan formulated what came to be known as the policy of containment.

The Kennan article and the Truman Doctrine were landmarks; taken together, they defined the theory and practice of containment. They defined the policy that, for better or for worse, dominates American diplomacy to this day. For the remarkable fact is that 1947 was the last fluid period in the formulation of American policy. Since that time we have been faithful, in our fashion, to the strategy of containment.

Kennan’s was a conservative program, reflecting a sober turn of mind, little in sympathy with the extremes of zeal or sentimentality. He offered a program of “adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and manoeuvres of Soviet policy.” He saw Soviet intentions as determined by a warped ideological inheritance and a thirty-year history of implacable and unscrupulous hostility to all not of their camp—a projection of their own fears and misery. He saw Russian society worn by deprivation, terror and war, barren of real ideas. He saw the older generation destroyed as an intellectual force, and the new generation as unknown. He saw Soviet economic progress as sporadic and unbalanced, the nation—in his words—“economically . . . vulnerable, and in a certain sense . . . impotent . . . capable of exporting its enthusiasm and of radiating the strange charm of its primitive political vitality but unable to back up those articles of export by the real evidences of material power and prosperity.”

“The future of Soviet power,” Mr. Kennan argued, “may not be by any means as secure as Russian ca-

capacity for self-delusion would make it appear to the men in the Kremlin . . . If . . . anything were ever to occur to disrupt the unity and efficacy of the Party as a political instrument, Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies." So to Kennan, as to most observers of the Soviet Union in 1947, the question of power succession appeared the flaw most likely to shatter the convoluted apparatus of totalitarian control.

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Thus containment, as formulated in 1946-47, was a policy rooted in a series of definite assumptions about the nature of Soviet reality. They were reasonable, perhaps inspired assumptions. The policy was not one of vast muddling through—a political Micawberism founded in the easy and vain expectation that something would turn up. It recommended actions that would exploit Soviet weaknesses while blunting the strengths.

Most important, it was a policy with a climax: at some critical moment, the besieged Soviet giant would weaken; his ambitions and powers would be dulled; he would turn upon himself in frenzy or melancholy. Kennan chose the comparison with the Buddenbrooks in Thomas Mann's novel: "Human institutions often show the greatest outward brilliance at a moment when inner decay is in reality farthest advanced. . . ."

But the prophecy failed. Like families, societies may have incalculable powers of renewal, and Russia has proved itself tougher and more resourceful than we had thought.

Of the events which Kennan foresaw, some have come and gone—and been ignored—and some seem unlikely ever to come. Russia's economy remains unbalanced, but in those basic areas which fortify its military and political claims, the Soviet Union is a formidable power and continues to grow at rates which a decade ago would have seemed preposterous. Sputnik, Lunik and the ICBM have been launched, and Soviet men have been flung into space. Nor is the Russian economy quite so Spartan as it used to be. By the standards of Western Europe and North America, life for the Russian remains hard and unrewarding, but by the standards of Russia's past it is not a bad life, and there must for the first time in a generation be a national sense of economic progress and hope.

The leadership crisis has come and has been surmounted—although for such a state this, of course, is a permanent crisis. Yet through the permutations of collective leadership, oligarchy, dual monarchy and dictatorship, effective rule has been preserved. The Soviet governing apparatus has emerged with greater vitality and spontaneity than it ever possessed under Stalin's dark rule. Our error, Kennan's and others' as well, has been to mistake the absence

of legal forms of succession for an instability of the society itself. Nothing can have been wider of the mark: Soviet society had all unknown developed an inner dynamic.

What counts is whether the society is vital, whether the administrative and productive systems continue to function, and in the USSR they have. Mr. Khrushchev demonstrates a resourcefulness and vigor—to say nothing of a vivacity—which few of the world's other leaders can match. Whatever the prospect, it is plain that Russia today is effectively governed and that some daylight has pierced the darkness that a decade ago covered the Kremlin. So must we reassess the predictions Kennan made in 1947 and which we have hardened into a kind of dogma of our own. Kennan's predictions about Soviet society as distinct from the imperial system, simply have not come true.

More and more the Soviet Union takes on the look of a quasi-normal civilian state, rather than a police or military state. It exports revolutionary doctrine, but with complacency rather than with the zeal of the revolutionary brotherhood. Russia today is a *have* state, a conservative; the long-delayed Thermidorian reaction seems to have begun. China has assumed the revolutionary mantle. Indeed, the Soviet leaders seem both embarrassed and uneasy about China's aggressive and puritanical Communism, and they are likely to become more so.

This is not to deny the continuing irrationality and messianism in Soviet policy, nor the brutal ignorance with which the Soviets view history and politics. Pragmatism and madness are twisted tightly together in their view of the world, but this is a syndrome which historians have met before. Nothing could be less helpful to world peace than to accept the Soviet claim to uniqueness at face value. The Soviet Union, sprung from revolution, is a messianic state with an infinite goal: not only to convert the world but to transform it. There have been kindred states—the Moslem Caliphate of the seventh to tenth centuries was one, and for dynastic Europe, revolutionary France before Napoleon was another. Such states are aggressive and so long as their zeal lasts, it is impossible to bring them to terms; theirs are not material terms. No treaty will bind them. Like the crusader kings of Antioch and Jerusalem, they believe that an oath with the heathen is no oath at all.

However, there is some consolation in the fact that normality too is a powerful force. The demonic energy of the totalitarian state depends on unflinching maintenance of the fiction by which it accounts for history. When the ordinary, the practical, intrude into this psychotic world, as they seem to be doing in the Soviet Union, there is reason to hope that they may prevail. The states which confront Russia—which are its avowed enemies—do not, therefore, have a task which is necessarily easier, as we see in

Berlin; but they have one which is simpler. It is one thing to face a state whose policies defy reason. It is another to deal with, to check and to frustrate, a state whose goals are comprehensible, the traditional goals of power and wealth.

In the fourteen years since the formulation of containment the United States and its allies have, to an alarming degree, adopted the Marxist postulate of their struggle with Communism. The fatal dichotomy into what rhetoricians defined as "free world" and "slave" has been dumbly accepted, for "balance of power" has—like those other cardinal sins of international life, "power politics" and "secret diplomacy"—been put aside as obsolete. Perhaps it was our preference for grand struggles and political absolutes that led us, as a nation, to misread the meaning of an essentially impermanent state of affairs at the war's close. Dichotomy was a condition of international life at the end of World War II because all but two powers had been wrecked. It was not, however, a state of affairs that could be expected to endure, though in the decade that followed it persisted with the United States and the Soviet Union fostering the division of the world into two centralized power systems.

To a Communist historian the dichotomy was inevitable, for history has its truth and there is no balancing of it with untruth. And a Communist society is polarized, for truth admits no inconsistencies, past or present. But for the rest of the world, polarization is an abnormal condition.

The Western alliance was begun with the classical purpose of organizing mutual support. At the core were the democracies of Western Europe and America, states whose genius was to be plural and political, not ideological. Around that nucleus were grouped states that varied from that aberrant relic of the Western past, Spain, to new states which had boundaries but had not yet found their identities as modern nations. Beyond the alliance system itself, but enjoying its protection, were nations and communities more disparate still.

Fascinated with its role as protector of the West, the United States tried to mold these nations into a kind of counter-empire, its members possessing a certain veto but ultimately dependent upon Washington. The attempt to foster this centralized power system was understandable enough, a response, not wholly misguided, to the Soviet threat and the conditions of 1945. But to have continued with this effort into the second half of the 1950's, raising a tactical response to the level of dogma, was to misread what was happening, and must continue to happen, to alter the distribution of power in the world.

The fact that at the close of World War II only two states remained with the ability to take decisive

action on the international stage was the climax of a trend—the decline of the Great Powers—which set in at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1900 the roster of great nations included Imperial Russia, Ottoman Turkey, France, Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Germany and Japan. One by one they were reduced by the first and second world wars until in 1945 a new Russia and a United States, torn from isolation and self-conscious in its maturity, confronted one another over the ruins of the old empires. For the Soviets the lesson seemed plain: if only the United States stood against them, then Soviet energy and the Marxist logic of history must bring America's collapse and pass sole leadership to the men in Moscow.

But by the mid-century events had begun to pull against the Soviet-American effort to suspend political time. A new trend was evident. Where nations had sought or were compelled to accept the protection and patronage of the great powers when the Cold War began, they now sought roles outside the framework of Soviet-American competition. The beginnings of this reverse trend hardly date much before 1950. There was, of course, much sentimental and premature talk in Europe soon after the war of a third force. The conditions for such a pluralism were in the future, and the impulse behind the talk of the time was escapist, an emotional withdrawal from geography and history.

The genuine third force developed later, when Yugoslavia, some years after its expulsion from the Soviet bloc, consciously sought an independent role in world affairs, joining with India and ultimately with Egypt to formulate, out of certain shared experience and understood interests, a kind of ideology of polycentrism. They deliberately created for themselves a role that in its effect on the Soviet-American competition resembled remarkably the part taken by Great Britain in the days of European power balance. Their authority was negative—the ability to deny Soviet and American actions—but it was no less power for that. They commanded no great economic or military resources but their political influence extended throughout the backward southern hemisphere, and in this respect the third force—the neutralist force—was more powerful than either the United States or the USSR.

In 1956 came blows to both the Soviet and Western systems more significant than even then was recognized. Poland's success in claiming and winning limited autonomy within the Soviet system, and Hungary's desperate repudiation of Russian control, decisively weakened Soviet claims to universal domination. Eastern Europe could never again be the dark sullen occupation zone it was in Stalin's time, nor could Soviet messianic pretensions quite survive intact. Not only had Russia failed to gain control over any new possessions beyond those her armies

had seized in 1944 and 1945, it now was clear that she could not enforce total domination over even her old conquests.

During those same days of 1956 the Suez fiasco demonstrated that while Britain and France still lacked decisive power, they were determined to reassert independent roles for themselves. Suez was a defeat but it was not the paroxysm of dying empires, for since 1956 France and Great Britain have grown stronger, not weaker. Charles de Gaulle is far more capable of independent political and military action than was the premier of 1956, Guy Mollet. His atomic bomb, his magisterial indifference to NATO, his European policy and distinctive approaches to Khrushchev—above all, his triumph over France's old wounding civil war between right and left—contrast astonishingly with what was happening five years ago. France relatively is still not so strong as it once was, but it is growing in confidence and vitality. If de Gaulle's quest has sometimes seemed quixotic, he has had great successes, he has laid claim to grandeur, and he is not so far from capturing the imagination of the world.

Britain has consistently launched diplomatic initiatives which the United States has been compelled to follow, and Britain too is an evolving and flourishing economic power. China has made an authoritative entrance into world politics, and commands the attention of both East and West. Germany and Japan have the material resources for independent roles, and, while they hesitate now over the political complications, it would be rash indeed to expect them to remain in Western tutelage very much longer. The Japanese demonstrated as much to us last summer. The whole of Europe has a thriving economy; the movement toward integration is far from exhausted; as an integrated system Europe has the capacity to equal Russia and America, and when total intellectual resources are counted, to do rather more.

Technology, too, is altering the traditional foundations of economic and military power, from the classic iron and coal systems to new ones based in oil, electronics and chemistry, and eventually in nuclear power. The revolution in weapons alone has brought two quantum changes in our affairs, one of them often overlooked. While nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons have altered affairs by tending to render military power impotent to do those *political* things which have in the past given force its utility in the relations between nations, they also have offered small nations a potential parity with big ones. A small state with nuclear weapons might now ravage a big one. As gunpowder made the poor man the equal of the grandee and the monarch and ushered in the age of revolutions, so nuclear weapons provide potentially the means by which a minor

state could defy the greatest—at cataclysmic risk, to be sure. But men have been inclined to risk military cataclysm when they faced an alternative which they regarded as an equal cataclysm. Who will say that a Hungary which possessed nuclear weapons in 1956 would not have used them to prevent the Russian reconquest? Nor in a few years can the technology of rocket delivery systems be anything but commonplace.

For all the American predilection for symbolic treaties, it has been this heightened sense of integrity, and power, in both Western and Eastern Europe, as well as in Asia, which has done the most to deter Soviet expansion since 1950. The satellite system around Moscow is eroded, and China's communes and ideological innovations shake the Communist system more severely than American threats. The Communist age that ended with Stalin's death, whatever its claims, was essentially a Russian age. While Stalin did not dispose of the material power wielded today by Khrushchev, his writ ran one-third of the world—and no man dared gainsay him. Khrushchev, challenged by China, spurned by Yugoslavia, confronted with insolence even from Albania, cannot make that claim.

While Russia remains an extremely dangerous opponent, the blunt truth is that neither it nor China has made any demonstrable inroads on the world in more than a decade, except by military conquest. Korea, Tibet, Vietnam and Laos have been conquered or divided by war—the oldest tactic. None has fallen to an ideological offensive. And what has deterred Soviet expansion and blunted Chinese, has been nationalism. Not the Baghdad Pact, but Arab nationalism has dominated the Middle East, and Communism's role, where it can claim to have damaged the West, has been as eager second to nationalism. SEATO today has little more than paper existence, and the Baghdad Alliance is an historical fiction—rendered impotent not by Soviet machinations but by purely local events.

Nor has the Soviet Union itself escaped unscathed. There have been Soviet failures: in Syria, Iraq, the Congo, and within the Communist empire itself. For against the force of nationalism the Soviet system has proved hardly sturdier than any other. The reality of contemporary Soviet power is the very reverse of the reality which confronted the world at the war's end. Material evidences of power the USSR can adduce aplenty, but no longer can it radiate, in Kennan's phrase, "the strange charm of its primitive political vitality." Nor even in the contemporary world are its victories of a scale that are likely to prove enduring. Under the arch of the Soviet-American deterrent the geopolitics of the world has been transformed.