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## LOST IN TRANSLATION

“ On the principle of infallibility there rests the iron discipline of the Communist Party. In fact, the two concepts are mutually self-supporting. Perfect discipline requires recognition of infallibility.”
- George Kennan, “ The Sources of Soviet Conduct”
George Kennan wrote these prophetic words in 1946 as part of the famous “ Long Telegram,” a document that was made public in 1947 by Foreign Affairs magazine. Kennan’s treatise on the Soviet Union, the nature of Communism and the expected physical manifestations of that nature became the most impactful work on what would become the Cold War and the courses of action open to the United States. Kennan, a diplomat who had been on hand in the days following the Russian revolution, was the foremost expert on the Soviet Union and his opinions carried a level of prestige and credibility unmatched in the U. S. State Department. Noting that, as yet, the Soviets were considerably weaker than their American rivals, Kennan nevertheless predicted a dangerous stalemate and coined a term to describe his remedy: Containment.
Kennan clearly advocated a policy designed to thwart Soviet expansionism, and it was this theory with which other key political figures in post-war America, such as President Harry Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, would align American diplomatic and military posturing. This ethos informed American foreign policy, in one form or another, until the Reagan administration. Kennan wrote that “ Soviet society may well contain deficiencies which will eventually weaken its own total potential. This would of itself warrant the United States entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment” (Kennan, 1947). However, Kennan’s position was manipulated and misused by others who turned it into
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ideological rhetoric and a means for cynically earning political capital through saber-rattling and “ red-baiting.”
For Kennan, containment was only one part of the picture, not the only means to an end. In the paragraph after his use of the word “ containment,” he takes great care to point out that emphasis should be placed on other tactics as well. “ It is entirely possible for the United States to influence by its actions the internal developments, both within Russia and throughout the international Communist movement, by which Russian policy is largely determined” (Kennan, 1947). He foresaw a full-scale international informational campaign aimed at winning over potential Communist target countries to the American way of life. This would be at least as important as military containment, a strategy that others would mold into an offensive model under the guise of containment, or defense. Containment went hand in hand with the “ domino theory,” which held that if one nation within a given part of the world became Communist, then other countries in that region would likewise fall under Communist rule.
The theory of containment, which Kennan saw as one part of a larger strategy, came to dominate the policy of the Truman administration and of subsequent administrations for the next 30 years. In his memoirs, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson explains that containment became a way of forcing the Soviets to the negotiating table. “ What we expected to achieve by the creation of strength throughout the free world(was) to show the Soviet leaders by successful containment that they could not hope to expand their influence throughout the world and must modify their policies” (Acheson, 1969, 380). Only in this way, Acheson argues, was it possible to force the Soviets to negotiate – any other solution amounted to “ a search for miracle
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cures,” he contends (380).
Debate over the exact meaning of containment within this context has raged for more than half a century. For political conservatives, like John Foster Dulles, it came to symbolize operating from a position of strength that justified offensive military action by the United States and its allies. This rationale was used to justify overt American military intervention in Korea and Vietnam which, rather than impeding or discouraging the spread of aggression, actually escalated into wider conflicts. An aggressive policy of containment brought Communist China into direct conflict with the United States, a dangerous scenario that nearly forced a cataclysmic showdown between the U. S. and Soviet Union. America’s war in Vietnam, aside from being a logistical and strategic disaster, became a political albatross for the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, leading to an expansion into Laos and Cambodia in the war’s latter stages. Once again, American aggression in the guise of containment, a distortion of Kennan’s original idea, spread into an entire region. Based on Korea and Vietnam, one may well argue that containment came to mean something very different than originally intended.
As the Cold War progressed, many diplomats and policy experts came to agree that the philosophical basis for containment, i. e. George Kennan’s “ Long Telegram,” had been badly abused for political reasons by both conservatives and liberals. To be fair, Kennan’s doctrine is sometimes vague and ambiguous in its meaning. It is understandable that some would mistake Kennan’s language as promoting direct military force wherever and whenever it appeared that the Soviets sought to influence other states. “ Perhaps unwittingly, Kennan convinced a generation of American foreign policy elites that the United States had little choice but to
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symmetrically apply ‘ counterpressure’ to Soviet political and military aggression” (DiLeo, 1991, 200). However, terms like “ counterpressure” were frequently taken at face value and without regard for the wider meaning of Kennan’s article. Some argued that undermining Soviet influence through the spread of information and the aggressive promotion of the American way of life was quixotic, even “ Wilsonian” in its naivete. But the mere admission that Kennan’s strategy was more complex and nuanced than a call for widespread military brinksmanship offers proof that Kennan had much more in mind than engaging in “ police actions” wherever American politicians saw trouble.
In his biography of George Ball, Undersecretary of State under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, David DiLeo writes that Ball, one of the most fluent and objective voices among the U. S.’s “ cold warriors,” became increasingly critical of the government’s misrepresentation of Kennan. “ At the height of the Cold War, Ball questioned the validity of the domino theory and was virtually alone in challenging the idea that containment was an attainable or even desirable goal of American foreign policy” (DiLeo, 1991, 268). Ball, a veteran of the State Department, criticized both Kennedy and Johnson for “ spinning” the war in Vietnam out of context. Not only did Ball argue that both presidents overstated the importance of Vietnam, he complained that this application of containment would actually have the reverse effect. In other words, Ball strongly believed that American intervention in Vietnam would not only fail to “ contain” anything, it would quite likely contribute to the expansion of military action, which could flare well beyond Southeast Asia into outright global conflict between the superpowers.
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Thus, politics warped what Kennan had offered as an intelligent, sober and systematic examination of a looming geo-political problem. But more was at work in Korea and Vietnam, the lynch-pins of America’s containment policy, than political manipulation. The effects of American naivete, an outgrowth of “ Camelot” and the “ can-do” attitude of the Kennedy years, was also a contributing factor. In short, America’s hubristic confidence in its own self-efficacy led to misadventure in Vietnam. The misinterpretation of containment led to a “ tragic episode in American history during which well-meaning patriots grievously underestimated the capacities of their adversaries and displayed what, in retrospect, appears to have been a native reliance upon superior material resources” (DiLeo, 1991, xxii).
Another problem with containment in Vietnam was the misalignment of plans and expectations between America and its client, the Saigon government. Ball warned against this eventuality. American politicians had long assumed that its client states would be in step with American interests and policy, and that Saigon and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam would fall in line behind America, the self-appointed guarantor of sovereignty and defender against Communist aggression. This pre-supposed that nations like South Vietnam would be in philosophical agreement with the Americans in regard to the domino theory, and that the men who governed these states would act accordingly. America’s policy in Vietnam, which originally included an emphasis on “ Americanization,” grew increasingly militaristic in tone as American forces devoted more and more of their resources to rooting out and destroying an elusive and stubborn foe. Consequently, the abject failure of aggressive containment in Vietnam bore out Kennan’s assertion that “ the possibilities for American policy are by no means limited
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Another problem with the containment theory proceeded from the presumption of a monolithic world Communism: In other words, that the obstruction of expansionism by one Communist state had a collective significance. It did not take into account the fact that the Soviet Union and Communist China, ideologically aligned though they might be, might still be competitive in many parts of the world. It also overlooked the realism of global politics in the post-war world, in which the Soviets and Chinese could, and would, play the United States off against each other. This was a major hole in the theory of containment, and in the prosecution of America’s containment policy. Acheson, writing about the Korean conflict, argues that “ the Kremlin probably saw advantages to it in the U. S.-Chinese war flowing from the diversion, attrition, and containment of U. S. forces in an indecisive theater; the creation of conflict between the United States and her European allies and the obstruction of NATO plans; the disruption of UN unity against the original aggression in Korea, thus also aiding Communist objectives in Southeast Asia” (1969, 474).
When Kennan wrote the Long Telegram, his primary concern as an authority on the Soviet Union was the anticipated growth in Soviet power and that country’s expansionist designs throughout the world. As such, his conception of the Communist threat was as an ideologically unified threat based in Moscow. China was, at most, a peripheral thought for Kennan in 1947.
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The China-Soviet policy divide was a source of dissension and disunity within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. It caused factions within the government to take sides, with some choosing to focus on the Soviets, others on the Chinese. George Ball and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy represented an example of the kind of divide that typified policy experts at the highest level. DiLeo notes that “ the fact that Ball ‘ over-emphasized Europe’ and ‘ just put zero on the China factor,’ in Bundy’s view, ‘ rendered his analyses much less cogent than it might otherwise have been” (1991, 121). Indeed, the Johnson administration became so obsessed with the Soviets, who played such a prominent role as supplier and political supporter of the Viet Cong, that men like Ball were virtually forced to overlook the Chinese. Consequently, the Communist monolith fallacy played out in Vietnam as it had in Korea, with the Chinese gaining politically from elevated tensions between Washington and Moscow.
It was not until the Nixon administration that an American government sought to turn the diplomatic tables on the Communist powers. Nixon’s trip to China and divide-and-conquer diplomatic offensive helped open relations between the U. S. and China. And yet despite Nixon’s proactive approach concerning the Chinese, he remained convinced that containment in Vietnam was still possible given the application of sufficient military power; specifically, through a significantly stepped-up bombing campaign against Hanoi and, later, in Cambodia. It is remarkable to note that, though two previous administrations had failed to achieve victory in the field through military power, Nixon remained convinced that enough of a push would win the day, force the Viet Cong to the negotiating table and affirm the policy of containment.
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The notion that containment through military force could force the Communists to negotiate on unequal terms was not, specifically, a stated tactic in George Kennan’s document. Containment was put forth as just one aspect of diplomatic –military approaches that were meant to work in unison, one complementing and reinforcing the other. Kennan himself did not appear to believe that force alone would be sufficient. One would, he believed, have to reach out to the citizenry of the targeted nation by other means and thereby exhibit how the American way of life was superior to Communism. A cadre of international policy experts, presidents and Cabinet-level officials would choose to interpret Kennan as meaning that the U. S. should meet force with force wherever the Communists sought to exert themselves. The U. S. learned a hard lesson about relying on sheer force in a difficult and hostile environment in Vietnam, but it is debatable as to whether the government’s perspective on containment, having hardened over half a century, ever really changed.
Military power and diplomacy have long gone hand in hand. Some of the world’s greatest theorists and philosophers have considered military power a mere tool of statecraft. Many of the men who maneuvered the United States through the most dangerous days of the Cold War held that view. And yet this view of containment was an oversimplification of what George Kennan expressed, vague as he may seem to some. The domino theory implied that global preeminence was a matter of the Americans and Soviets going head-to-head, with the U. S. acting as a kind of international policeman seeking to interdict Soviet expansionism. For Kennan, this was a one-dimensional and insufficient view of a very complex political dynamic.
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