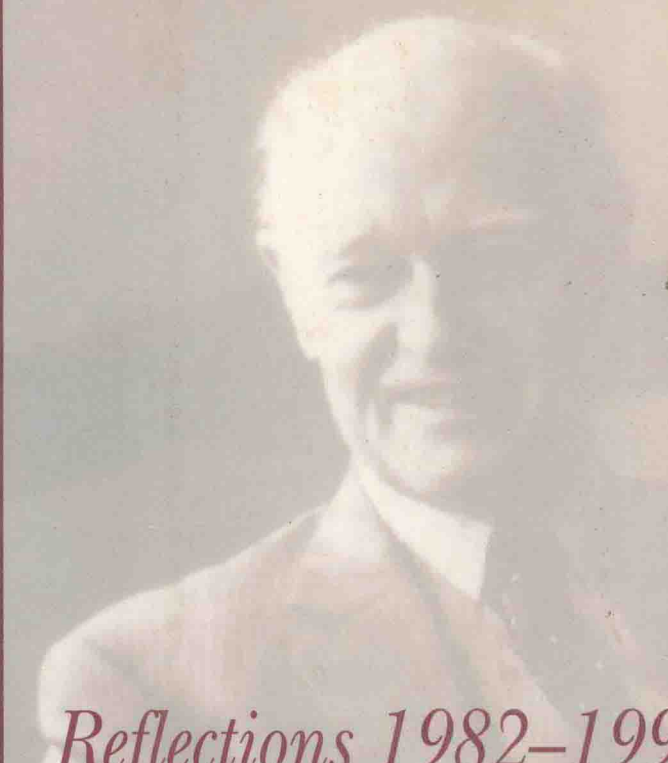
GEORGE F. KENNAN



Reflections 1982–1995

At A Century's Ending

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George F. Kennan

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Foreword

My friend John Lukacs recently wrote that while each of the last few centuries of European history seemed to have a certain specific character of its own, in no instance was a century neatly bounded by the years that formally defined it.[1] And he noted that the century now ending was one that really began in 1914 and ended in 1989. If this was a valid perception, then my own life, as a person old enough to have some awareness of what was happening on the larger scale around him, has embraced very neatly the dimensions of this twentieth century. (I was ten years old in 1914, and eighty-five in 1989.) It was out of my experience with this particular span of time, supported by whatever reading I was able to do about other periods and loci of history, that my own view of the modern age was shaped.

I view the twentieth century as a tragic one in the history of European (including American) civilization. The two world wars were, as Lukacs pointed out, the two great "mountain ranges" of the century. And the first of these two mountain ranges was not only in itself a tragedy of immeasurable dimensions, but one that lay at the heart of a great part of the subsequent misfortunes of the century. One has only to recall that it was out of this First World War, arising in fact in the midst of it, that the Bolshevik seizure of power occurred in Russia in 1917. This was a development destined to estrange Russia from the West and to place her outside the boundaries of any positive collabo-

[1]John Lukacs, *The End of the 20th Century: And the End of the Modern Age* (New York: Tichnor and Fields, 1993), pp. 1–3.

ration with any of the major Western powers for the remainder of the century. The Russian Revolution had a tragically paralyzing effect, sometimes dramatically visible, sometimes unfortunately obscured, on the efforts of the other great powers to cope successfully with most of the remaining unhappy legacies the 1914–18 war left in its train.

And legacies of this description there were—in abundance. The most dangerous of them had to do with the interwar years in Germany. It is easy, of course, and often useless to speculate on what might have been. Yet it is hard to imagine that Hitler's rise to power in Germany could have proceeded as it did if the Germany in question had not been marked by a number of the consequences of the First World War: by the punitive peace so foolishly imposed by the French and British on a struggling Weimar Republic whose leaders bore no responsibility for the origins of the war; by an economic depression flowing so largely from the strains of the recent armed conflict; and by the irresponsibility and extremism of the Moscow-dominated world-Communist movement, playing as it did, and particularly in Germany, directly into the hands of Hitler.

The Second World War was thus a consequence and in some respects a continuation of the First. And this second great orgy of wastage of human and material resources (for what else could major war between industrially and technologically advanced countries now be?) had its own consequences, quite different from but scarcely less tragic than those of its predecessor. One of these was the Cold War, destined to dominate much of international life over the remainder of the century. Another was the development, and introduction into national arsenals, of the nuclear weapon. A third was the sudden disintegration of the old European colonial empires without any institutional framework into which the pieces could be fitted.

The Cold War involved relatively few human sacrifices; and these fortunately, occurred rather at its edges. It did involve the political division of the European continent for some forty years; and it involved a further great wastage of material substance in the frantic competition in armaments by which it was accompanied. A great deal of this reflected exaggerated and unnecessary military fears on both sides—unnecessary because neither side wanted another major war, although each suspected the other of doing so. One of its worst effects, however, was to saddle both sides, once it was over, with enormously

bloated military and military-industrial establishments—establishments that had become in themselves vested interests and in a sense addictions, and the curtailment of which presented burdens no one on either side was prepared to assume in their entirety.

Closely connected with this last condition was the invention and production of the nuclear weapon. One of the first effects of this development was to throw great confusion into all established strategic thinking; for none of the previous theories of the relationship of war to political purpose had taken account of the possibility that the sheer destructiveness of weaponry might advance to a point where war could easily become suicidal, and the very concept of "victory" thus become devoid of meaning. The realization of these implications came slowly, however, to military minds taught to believe, as they had been over most of the twentieth century, that success in war depended precisely on the degree of destruction you could bring not only to the armed forces of an enemy country but to the civilian infrastructure as well. And the result of all this confusion was the accumulation in the hands of the two superpowers of fantastically redundant quantities of nuclear weaponry—a situation that had the ironic effect of first driving both of them to the very edge of unutterable disaster, but then of causing them both to pause at that brink. When the Cold War ended, the superpowers and others who were trying to play the nuclear game were thus left with huge stockpiles of poisonous nuclear wastes that they did not then know, and still do not know, how to dispose of safely. This situation is to be dumped upon our descendants, who will curse us for saddling them with so dangerous and almost insoluble a problem.

The sudden collapse of the great European colonial systems was also a development extensively influenced and expedited by the two world wars. The ways in which this occurred varied, of course, with the mother country in question, with the nature of its relationship to its colonies, and with the compulsions leading to this change. And it is not my intention to comment at this point on the general desirability or undesirability of this development as a whole. It did have the effect, however, of casting out onto the surface of international life a host of new and, for the most part, small communities that had had no previous experience with national independence. Practically all of these appear to have been accepted almost automatically, certainly without

much further inquiry, into membership into the United Nations. The number of participants in international organizations has increased from the twenty-nine initial members of the League of Nations to the nearly 200 members of the U.N. This has had a profound effect on the formal structure of the international community—an effect illustrated by the fact that the United Nations Assembly now includes a majority of members that had no separate identity at all at the outset of this century, and which, accordingly, are relatively new to both the experiences and the responsibilities of sovereign independence.

To understand the significance of this change, account must be taken of two further developments of the past century, very recent ones in fact, that impose strains on international organizations. Both are of global rather than national or even regional importance, in the sense that they demand of all mankind that it step outside the tribal, national, imperial, and religious conflicts that have traditionally divided it, and recognize that problems are now emerging that affect all branches of the human family alike. These are the problems of global environmental deterioration and overpopulation, of the fact, in short, that mankind is overstraining and exhausting those very natural resources that have made the planet so friendly and hospitable—so uniquely hospitable, in fact—a home to civilized life.

To confront these problems successfully is going to require decisions and actions of a global nature; and these, in turn, can be provided only by a structure of an international community sufficient to the task at hand. But neither of the two major international entities set up in the course of this past century, neither the League of Nations nor the United Nations Organization, was designed by people who had environmental decay or overpopulation in mind. Both were established primarily in the hope that they could promote the peace and stability of international life—that they could moderate, that is, the conflicts *among* human collectivities. They were not set up to mobilize and organize all these collectivities for the collaborative confrontation with problems that were common to all of them yet not in essence of the usual political kind.

The one of these two organizations that has survived into our time, the United Nations, ought to be, and could conceivably be, developed into something more suitable for the confronting of these global problems were it not for the fact that it suffers, as did its prede-

cessor, from one serious flaw of design. There was a fatal deficiency in the Wilsonian concept that underlay both these efforts of international organization: namely, the failure to recognize the essential difference between the *nation* and the *state* and the assumption, for purposes of international organization, that the two are identical. What constitutes a nation is a subjective sense of identity—a condition that can mark the small and weak collectivity as well as the great and powerful one, but says nothing about the capacity of a collectivity to bear the burdens of an unrestricted sovereignty and to contribute usefully, in the capacity of a state, to international life. The theory of *one nation = one state,* taking as it does no account of such differences, has led (as mentioned earlier) to the establishment within the U.N. Assembly of a majority of members in which the capacity for useful contribution is either entirely lacking or seriously limited. Full membership in the U.N., now regarded as the sole recognized status for independent participation in international life, leaves no place for the small national entity or the tiny insular community that recognizes its inability to meet the full requirements of an independent sovereignty but is reluctant to retain the status of a helpless minority within the confines of a greater country. And this situation prevails in an age when the theoretical status of unlimited sovereignty, even as an attribute of the larger and better-qualified state, is becoming more and more unreal and absurd. In the face of such deficiencies, the existing structure of the international community—a structure barely sufficient, if sufficient at all, for the purposes for which it was originally established—can hardly be expected to provide the formal framework for a successful confrontation with the global problems now threatening the intactness of our natural environment.

So here we are all stand—we of the Western world—at the end of this sad century: still partially crippled, genetically and morally, by the injuries we brought to ourselves in the two internecine wars of the earlier decades, and confronted now with emerging global problems for the solutions to which neither our ingrained habits nor our international institutions have prepared us.

The papers included in this book were all written in the final declining decades of the twentieth century. Slender as these contributions were, and constituting no more than responses to particular cir-

cumstances of the moment, they could not be expected to deal in depth with the century's broader issues. But the implications of these broader problems for those of the passing scene were never far from my mind at the time of writing.

The papers that dealt with Russian matters served, however (or so I thought), to bring out and to emphasize something of no small importance for the understanding of the great totalitarian tyrannies of the century. There was during the Cold War a fairly widespread belief in military and hard-line circles that the great dictatorships, supported as they were by modern, highly armed police establishments and by a total monopolization of the media of communication, had reduced entire peoples to a state of abject and cowering subordination, the endurance of which was effectively unlimited. Such a system, it was thought, was subject to no seriously disruptive *internal* forces. Barring overpowering hostile outside influences, it could be maintained indefinitely. It could be put to an end, in fact, only by massive military attack.

The strong premonitions of impending change in Russia that found expression in certain of the papers in this book served, in my view, as evidences of the incorrectness of that belief. What these premonitions bring to the fore is a perception of no small importance for the theory of politics and government: namely, that political systems supporting great personal tyrannies, such as those of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, share in the mortality of the tyrant himself. They become the victims of—in effect, the participants in—his illnesses, his aging, and his death. They cannot long survive his passing. The fact is that the aging dictator and his closest minions, concerned to stave off their own demise, often tend themselves to neglect or to destroy, in the interests of their own immediate safety, those tendencies or elements within the system that might, had they been encouraged, have given it greater chances for useful change and further survival.

These insights are not spelled out in the body of the papers; but they underlie some of the intimations, or premonitions, brought forward in them; and they suggest that a greater knowledge of the historical background of events, and a greater sensitivity to the actual conditions of Soviet society, might have served us better than did the essentially military preoccupations of the Cold War enthusiasts.

The papers not primarily concerned with Russia treat a variety of wider subjects. Here, one's views and reactions could only flit like fire-

flies around the edges of the great happenings and movements of the times. But each of them was designed to have its own small incandescence; and it was my hope (how many other authors have not had similar ones?) that they would leave a bit better illuminated than before each of the small niches and corners of reality into which they intruded. If, then, something like a broader view of this present disturbing age—of its dangers, its enigmas, and its possibilities—were to make its way, if only inadvertently, through the variety of smaller vistas, so much the better. But this is something of which the reader will be a better judge than the author.

G. F. K.
Princeton, N.J.
January 1995

Part One

BACKGROUND