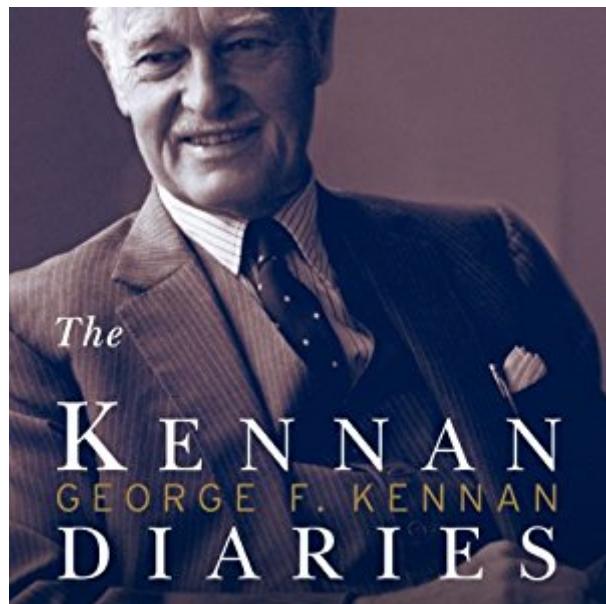


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The Kennan Diaries



Synopsis

A landmark collection, spanning 90 years of U.S. history, of the never-before-published diaries of George F. Kennan, America's most famous diplomat. On a hot July afternoon in 1953, George F. Kennan descended the steps of the State Department building as a newly retired man. His career had been tumultuous: early postings in eastern Europe followed by Berlin in 1940-41 and Moscow in the last year of World War II. In 1946, the 42-year-old Kennan authored the "Long Telegram", a 5,500-word indictment of the Kremlin that became mandatory reading in Washington. A year later, in an article in Foreign Affairs, he outlined "containment", America's guiding strategy in the Cold War. Yet what should have been the pinnacle of his career - an ambassadorship in Moscow in 1952 - was sabotaged by Kennan himself, deeply frustrated at his failure to ease the Cold War that he had helped launch. Yet, if it wasn't the pinnacle, neither was it the capstone; over the next 50 years, Kennan would become the most respected foreign policy thinker of the 20th century, giving influential lectures, advising presidents, and authoring 20 books, winning two Pulitzer prizes and two National Book awards in the process. Through it all, Kennan kept a diary. Spanning a staggering 88 years and totaling over 8,000 pages, his journals brim with keen political and moral insights, philosophical ruminations, poetry, and vivid descriptions. In these pages, we see Kennan rambling through 1920s Europe as a college student, despairing for capitalism in the midst of the Depression, agonizing over the dilemmas of sex and marriage, becoming enchanted and then horrified by Soviet Russia, and developing into America's foremost Soviet analyst. But it is the second half of this near-century-long record - the blossoming of Kennan the gifted author, wise counselor, and biting critic of the Vietnam and Iraq wars - that showcases this remarkable man at the height of his singular analytic and expressive powers, before giving way, heartbreakingly, to some of his most human moments, as his energy, memory, and finally his ability to write fade away. Masterfully selected and annotated by historian Frank Costigliola, the result is a landmark work of profound intellectual and emotional power. These diaries tell the complete narrative of Kennan's life in his own intimate and unflinching words and, through him, the arc of world events in the 20th century.

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Customer Reviews

George F. Kennan is on the very short list of those famous as diplomats and equally well-known as historians. His name is permanently linked to the Cold War strategy of "containment." And yet, he saw himself as a failure as a diplomat, his writing as a poor alternative to the public influence he sought, and the renown of the containment doctrine itself as based on a disastrous misunderstanding. The Kennan Diaries, edited by Frank Costigliola, is a belated masterpiece of a Calvinist genre, the examination of actions and intentions for evidence of personal worth. It contains accounts of Kennan's careers, his diplomatic postings about Europe, most notably in what was then the Soviet Union, his advisory roles, formal and informal, to the high officials and the Presidents of the day, his books and lectures. However, the great bulk of the diaries, and, arguably, their significance, is in the often daily, occasionally hourly, examination of that delicate mechanism, the conscience of George F. Kennan. The story of Kennan's outer life can be easily summarized. Born in Milwaukee in 1904 of what he would call "old American stock," that is, the descendants of eighteenth-century British immigrants, he attended Princeton University, joined the Foreign Service, married the Norwegian Annelise Sorensen, with whom he had four children, retired from the Foreign Service in 1953 after serving as Ambassador to the Soviet Union, took a position at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, wrote and lectured, and died in 2005, still a member of the First Presbyterian Church in Princeton. Kennan had a life-long love affair with Russia (as distinguished from the Soviet Union), with the Russian people, their language, culture and land. His love for Russia had an erotic charge absent from his relationships with women, other than his mother, who died when Kennan was an infant, but who, ghost-like, visited him in dreams. It was the frustration of his desire for intimate relations with Russian society by the restrictions placed on diplomats by Stalin that underlay the otherwise inexplicable outburst that led to his being declared persona non grata as Ambassador. And one of the few moments of pure

happiness in the diaries is the account of his last visit to Russia, during the time of Gorbachev, when he was received with great honors and even allowed into the rooms of the Central Committee itself, for Kennan a hitherto undreamed of level of intimacy with Russia. Again and again in the diaries Kennan conducts a dialogue with himself about his outer life, on the one hand, and his inner life, on the other. Many of his accounts of his speeches, lectures and conversations focus on their inadequacy or on what can only be called the sinfulness of his performance. Egotism, the desire for fame, talking too much. Again and again he judges himself in matters great and small, finds himself wanting, resolves not to sin again. This is quite extraordinary to read in pages written, for the most part, in the second half of the twentieth century. One recalls Edmund Wilson's comment about John Jay Chapman: "Perhaps our most vivid impression . . . is that we have encountered a personality who does not belong in his time and place and who by contrast makes us aware of the commonness, the provinciality and the timidity of most of his contemporaries." Kennan felt, as did Edmund Wilson, as it happens, that America was a country that had lost its way, sacrificing the ideals of the eighteenth century for the waste and vanity of consumer capitalism. This is epitomized in the diaries by observations about the automobile, the waste of resources, especially oil, that it required, the way that it made the landscape ugly with badly designed highways, strip malls, noise and noxious fumes. Kennan, being Kennan, linked this with an analysis of how the combination of the automobile and petroleum industries had the effect of making the United States dependent on the antithetical societies of the Middle East. The legendary "long telegram" from Moscow analyzed the structures of the Soviet government in the context of Russian history. He concluded, in a Russianism he often used, that "no good would come of it." While acknowledging that Stalin would take advantage of such opportunities that arose, Kennan thought that Stalin would pursue the same goals after the Second World War as before: to re-establish the borders of the Empire as they were in 1905, with a collection of small buffer states beyond them. Kennan thought that Soviet power was a temporary phenomenon, as it was, and that the proper policy to be followed by the government of the United States was to wait it out. He used the word "containment." The policy actually adopted by the American government, although it was also called containment, was its virtual opposite: the attempt to utilize military power, and, in particular, the possession of atomic weapons, to "roll back" Soviet influence, first from the Eastern European buffer states and then in the post-colonial world. Kennan thought this policy was mistaken, in principle, and in practice, with its

reliance on nuclear weapons, something that could well lead to the end of civilization itself. This policy, and the irony of its association with his name, caused Kennan anguish and increasing apprehension during much of the second half of his adult life. Kennan, as he knew all too well, was not without flaws. Rather surprisingly, one of those flaws was a sexual promiscuity in thought if not in practice, which he knew was hurtful to his wife. Another was the habit of thinking of people as national, ethnic and racial collectives. This now reads almost always as deprecatory. It is not clear that Kennan always meant it so, but he sometimes did. He valued his own group, that old American stock, above others, and lamented its diminishing role in American life. The Kennan Diaries, carefully edited by University of Connecticut historian Frank Costigliola from 8,000 typed and handwritten pages, gives us a selection of the private thoughts of a man who tried both to do and to be good. He failed, as he knew that he had, but the attempt, and what he actually in fact did accomplish, provide us with an illustration of an exemplary life.

Reading this alone may not do the man justice. I suggest the biography "George F Kennan" by Geddis and "The Hawk and the Dove" by Thompson. His diaries hold little back and point to a more troubled person than I had previously understood and may not portray his stronger side. I was surprised by his almost Jeffersonian view of the country and his self doubt. But if the man had been listened to and acted upon by our otherwise militaristic leadership, the so called "Cold War" would probably have been shorter and far less contentious.

The great classic chronicling the life and works of the author of the "containment" doctrine that constituted U.S. policy toward the "Soviet Union". This is especially significant today as witness the recent events in Ukraine. Kennan was AGHAST at the U.S. policy that led to the war in Vietnam. We somehow avoided a direct clash with the U.S.S. R., particularly dangerous after The Soviets exploded their own a bomb in 1949. Kennan warned against an over militarization of U.S. policy toward the U.S.S. R. because he felt that his words in the long telegram were misconstrued. This is a vitally important book that will help us understand U.S. policy and the cold war and why it remained cold!

This is an unvarnished insight into the thinking and being of a remarkable man, who lived 101 years, and was an expert on Russia, but more importantly, a macroview thinker whose advice was too seldom followed. Many observations of 20th century leaders too.

Fascinating read. Career diplomat & author of the US. "Cold War strategy" kept a personal diary from the time he was 11 years old till he died at 104. Saw almost all of the 20th Century unfold. Unceasing commentary and criticism of American policies & American society. Kennan was personally acquainted with every President from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton.

This is an interesting book to read in conjunction with Gaddis' magnum opus on George Kennan. Highly recommended!

He has always been a very complex personality - and, while ambassador in Washington, I did meet him a few times. Admirable but difficult to approach - WISE but full of self doubt.

A good read to give some perspective on the Putin and the Ukrainian crisis.

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