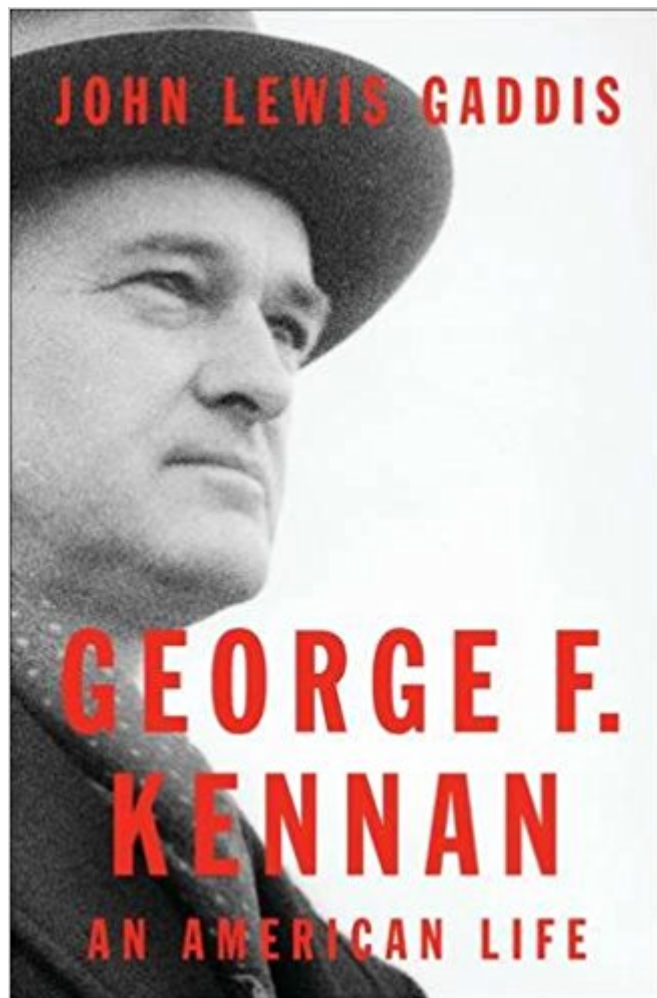


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George F. Kennan: An American Life



Synopsis

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award Selected by The New York Times Book Review as a Notable Book of the Year Drawing on extensive interviews with George Kennan and exclusive access to his archives, an eminent scholar of the Cold War delivers a revelatory biography of its troubled mastermind. In the late 1940s, George Kennan wrote two documents, the "Long Telegram" and the "X Article," which set forward the strategy of containment that would define U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union for the next four decades. This achievement alone would qualify him as the most influential American diplomat of the Cold War era. But he was also an architect of the Marshall Plan, a prizewinning historian, and would become one of the most outspoken critics of American diplomacy, politics, and culture during the last half of the twentieth century. Now the full scope of Kennan's long life and vast influence is revealed by one of today's most important Cold War scholars. Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis began this magisterial history almost thirty years ago, interviewing Kennan frequently and gaining complete access to his voluminous diaries and other personal papers. So frank and detailed were these materials that Kennan and Gaddis agreed that the book would not appear until after Kennan's death. It was well worth the wait: the journals give this book a breathtaking candor and intimacy that match its century-long sweep. We see Kennan's insecurity as a Midwesterner among elites at Princeton, his budding dissatisfaction with authority and the status quo, his struggles with depression, his gift for satire, and his sharp insights on the policies and people he encountered. Kennan turned these sharp analytical gifts upon himself, even to the point of regularly recording dreams. The result is a remarkably revealing view of how this greatest of Cold War strategists came to doubt his strategy and always doubted himself. This is a landmark work of history and biography that reveals the vast influence and rich inner landscape of a life that both mirrored and shaped the century it spanned.

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Customer Reviews

We can be grateful to John Lewis Gaddis for bringing Kennan back to us, thoughtful, human, self-centred, contradictory, inspirational - a permanent spur as consciences are wont to be. Masterfully researched, exhaustively documented, Gaddis's moving work gives us a figure with whom, however one might differ on details, it was a privilege to be a contemporary. -- Henry A. Kissinger New York Times Book Review Kennan's life maps right onto twentieth-century political history, and no one is better qualified than Gaddis to lead the way through it ... Gaddis has written with care and elegance, and he has produced a biography whose fineness is worthy of its subject. -- Louis Menand New Yorker Well worth the wait. George F. Kennan: An American Life works brilliantly as a piece of intellectual history, and as a biography of a fascinating and complex man. Fortunately, both Gaddis and Kennan write beautifully. -- Gideon Rachman Financial Times

John Lewis Gaddis (born 1941 in Cotulla, Texas, U.S.) is a noted historian of the Cold War and grand strategy, who has been hailed as the "Dean of Cold War Historians" by the New York Times. Cold War (Allen Lane, 2006) was Waterstone's Book of the Month. He is the Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale University.

With how large the Federal government has grown since the New Deal and World War II, it has become very rare for any bureaucrat working in that system to be able to make any kind of significant impact on policy without credit being taken by more senior officials or work being lost in the milieu of democratic and bureaucratic politics. George Kennan, with his years of service in Russia with the State Department's Foreign Service, his legendary Long Telegram and "Mr. X" article in Foreign Affairs, and his creation of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, is one of those few legendary figures. But Mr. Kennan could also be incredibly inconsistent and self-flagellating over the years, making it difficult to get at the heart of what he truly believed. Thus, any biography on Mr. Kennan would be difficult under the best circumstances. However, Mr. Gaddis does an impeccable job of weaving Mr. Kennan's life, career, writings, and thoughts together. But the best thing about this biography is that Mr. Gaddis never divorces Mr. Kennan from his historical

and personal context. For example, Mr. Kennan was notoriously declared persona non grata as American Ambassador to the Soviet Union by the Kremlin in 1952 due to some incredibly bone-headed remarks he gave about life in Russia while visiting Berlin. Many of Kennan's contemporaries had no idea why he would say something so outrageous and others may have dismissed it as a public relations snafu. But Mr. Gaddis shows how Mr. Kennan's brief and frustrating tenure as ambassador opened the door for such remarks and how it was more where he said it than what he said that irritated the Kremlin. This is just one small example of how Mr. Gaddis weaves Mr. Kennan's life with his historical & personal context. This is probably due to the fact that Mr. Gaddis had access to Mr. Kennan, his papers, diaries, letters, and family members for such a long period of time before the subject's death and the book's publication (He became Kennan's biographer in 1981, Kennan died in 2005, and this book was first published in 2011). One interesting oversight(?) though is in regards to Kennan's infidelities. It is clear from this book that one of Mr. Kennan's weaknesses was a wandering eye towards the opposite sex, a fact that Mr. Kennan flogged himself over throughout his life. And it does seem clear that Mr. Kennan had at least one affair, but Mr. Gaddis never goes into details about it, nor does he dig any deeper into other potential affairs Mr. Kennan might have had. In a day and age where there seems to be no shame about uncovering the intimate details about a person's life (ex. we now know Presidents Harding and Johnson had nicknames for their penises), this is rather unusual and, dare I say, refreshing. After all, not everything needs to be exposed to the light of day. In short, this is a fine biography that deftly weaves its way through the life, work, and thoughts of a most complicated, but important, public figure in American history.

It would be next to impossible to read about the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union without George Kennan's name appearing. The man's containment argument carried the day in Washington D.C., helped our nation avoid war with the U.S.S.R., and, therefore, prevented needless deaths on both sides. For about three decades, I've always wondered why this guy? Sure, Mr. Kennan was acknowledged as a very smart person when it came to Russian history, but it's difficult to believe he was the only big brain kicking around D.C. that had a firm grasp of the Russian mindset as well as Bolshevism. Mr. Gaddis does an excellent job in, not only explaining Mr. Kennan's importance and how he became indispensable, but also the full measure of the man. Warts and all. The author rightly had concerns about taking on a biography about such a thin-skinned man while the dude was still alive. Mr. Gaddis explains the conditions which were put in place for him to attempt the biography. His intimate access to Mr. Kennan's boatloads of written

arguments; the man's family, friends and foes; and most importantly exclusive use of Mr. Kennan's life-long personal diary culminates into not a gushy lovefest but a very balanced, absorbing biography. Mr. Gaddis's book certainly deserved the Pulitzer Prize. Like everyone else, Kennan had qualities that were admirable and other aspects of his personality that were either annoying or made him a good candidate for being hit on the side of the head with an iron skillet. The story is about a brilliant wonk whose ability to right cogent, poetic assessments that influenced policy makers is what separated him from the other bright bureaucrats. Man oh man, the guy rubbed elbows with the big guys; Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Bush 41, and Clinton as well as General MacArthur, Secretary of States George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and George Shultz. Then there's Robert Oppenheimer, Mikhail Gorbachev... look, my fingers are getting tired in listing all the power brokers. You get the picture. Also, his love of Russian history and culture and ability to speak perfect Russian made him a cut above the rest. At his core, Mr. Kennan had an oddly wonkish heart and the unstable emotions of your stereotypical artist. The man was completely, laughably clueless about contemporary American culture. In the week I was reading "George F. Kennan," not one person who asked me had any idea who he was. That's a shame. Mr. Kennan strongly believed that style was as important as substance. He joined the two and made himself into a valuable asset. Mr. Gaddis seems to have taken the same attitude while writing his Kennan biography and the result is an outstanding work which deserves a wide readership.

Gaddis portrays Kennan in great detail, as a statesman, and educator and a man also absorbed in his family, over many decades of public service, high honors, and frustration. Some of the story is fairly familiar -- Kennan's remarkable insights into the systemic weaknesses of the Soviet system that led him to propose "containment" (though he came to detest the word as applied to his writings) and measured counter-force until the adversary's system collapsed from its own internal contradictions. Aspects of Kennan's personal life are less familiar, but treated with great attention to detail --- the importance of his relationship with his wife Annelise, his devotion to his older sister and her role as a confidante, and his somewhat tenuous relationships with his children. Kennan's human failings are also aired and dissected, above all his vanity and his sensitivity to any criticism or contestation. Gaddis has written the definitive (and the only authorized) biography of one of the most influential American thinkers about foreign relations of the 20th century.

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