George F. Kennan, The Long Telegram (1946)

In February 1946, George F. Kennan, U.S. charge d'affaires in Moscow, sent an 8,000-word telegram to the U.S. State Department warning Washington of Soviet foreign policy and the threat it represented to U.S. security. Kennan claimed that the Soviet government would do anything in its power to undermine the capitalist system of Western democracies in an effort to strengthen the power of the U.S.S.R. He argued that the only way to deal with the Soviet government and its communist policies was through a policy that came to be known as "containment."

We have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent modus vivendi, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure. This political force has complete power of disposition over energies of one of world's greatest peoples and resources of world's richest national territory, and is borne along by deep and powerful currents of Russian nationalism. In addition, it has an elaborate and far flung apparatus for exertion of its influence in other countries, an apparatus of amazing flexibility and versatility, managed by people whose experience and skill in underground methods are presumably without parallel in history. . . . This is admittedly not a pleasant picture. Problem of how to cope with this force in its undoubtedly greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced and probably greatest it will ever have to face. It should be point of departure from which our political general staff work at present juncture should proceed. It should be approached with same thoroughness and care as solution of major strategic problem in war, and if necessary, with no smaller outlay in planning effort. I cannot attempt to suggest all answers here. But I would like to record my conviction that problem is within our power to solve--and that without recourse to any general military conflict. And in support of this conviction there are certain observations of a more encouraging nature I should like to make:

(1) Soviet power, unlike that of Hitlerite Germany, is neither schematic nor adventuristic. It does not work by fixed plans. It does not take unnecessary risks. Impervious to logic of reason, and it is highly sensitive to logic of force. For this reason it can easily withdraw--and usually does--when strong resistance is encountered at any point. Thus, if the adversary has sufficient force and makes clear his readiness to use it, he rarely has to do so. If situations are properly handled there need be no prestige-engaging showdowns.

(2) Gauged against Western World as a whole, Soviets are still by far the weaker force. Thus, their success will really depend on degree of cohesion, firmness and vigor which Western World can muster. And this is factor which it is within our power to influence.

(3) Success of Soviet system, as form of internal power, is not yet finally proven. It has yet to be demonstrated that it can survive supreme test of successive transfer of power from one individual or group to another. Lenin's death was first such transfer, and its effects wracked Soviet state for 15 years. After Stalin's death or retirement will be second. But even this will not be final test. Soviet internal system will now be subjected, by virtue of recent territorial expansions, to series of additional strains which once proved
severe tax on Tsardom. We here are convinced that never since termination of civil war
have mass of Russian people been emotionally farther removed from doctrines of
Communist Party than they are today. In Russia, party has now become a great and--for
the moment--highly successful apparatus of dictatorial administration, but it has ceased to
be a source of emotional inspiration. Thus, internal soundness and permanence of
movement need not yet be regarded as assured.

(4) All Soviet propaganda beyond Soviet security sphere is basically negative and
destructive. It should therefore be relatively easy to combat it by any intelligent and
really constructive program.

For these reasons I think we may approach calmly and with good heart problem of how to
deal with Russia. As to how this approach should be made, I only wish to advance, by
way of conclusion, following comments:

(1) Our first step must be to apprehend, and recognize for what it is, the nature of the
movement with which we are dealing. We must study it with same courage, detachment,
objectivity, and same determination not to be emotionally provoked or unseated by it,
with which doctor studies unruly and unreasonable individual.

(2) We must see that our public is educated to realities of Russian situation. I cannot
over-emphasize importance of this. Press cannot do this alone. It must be done mainly by
Government, which is necessarily more experienced and better informed on practical
problems involved. In this we need not be deterred by [ugliness?] of picture. I am
convinced that there would be far less hysterical anti-Sovietism in our country today if
realities of this situation were better understood by our people. There is nothing as
dangerous or as terrifying as the unknown. It may also be argued that to reveal more
information on our difficulties with Russia would reflect unfavorably on Russian-
American relations. I feel that if there is any real risk here involved, it is one which we
should have courage to face, and sooner the better. But I cannot see what we would be
risking. Our stake in this country, even coming on heels of tremendous demonstrations of
our friendship for Russian people, is remarkably small. We have here no investments to
guard, no actual trade to lose, virtually no citizens to protect, few cultural contacts to
preserve. Our only stake lies in what we hope rather than what we have; and I am
convinced we have better chance of realizing those hopes if our public is enlightened and
if our dealings with Russians are placed entirely on realistic and matter-of-fact basis.

(3) Much depends on health and vigor of our own society. World communism is like
malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is point at which domestic
and foreign policies meet. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal
problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and
community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a
thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués. If we cannot abandon fatalism and
indifference in face of deficiencies of our own society, Moscow will profit-Moscow
cannot help profiting by them in its foreign policies.

(4) We must formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and
constructive picture of sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security. They are seeking guidance rather than responsibilities. We should be better able than Russians to give them this. And unless we do, Russians certainly will.

(5) Finally we must have courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism, is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping.