

## George F. Kennan Replies

I stand, as I see, exposed. With merciless scalpel, and with abundant use of scraps of language from my writings, Mr. Wright has stripped me of my own pretenses and has revealed me as the disguised militarist he considers me to be. Whether, in his view, there ever was such a thing as a Stalinist *political*, as distinct from *military*, threat to the liberties and independence of other peoples is unclear from his paper; but that there never was, and never could have been, a purely political response to such a threat—that all talk of the containment of Stalinist communism by other than military means was a lot of humbug—that what those who talked of such containment really had in mind was the intimidation and bullying of Russia by superior military force: all this, it seems to me, emerges with reasonable clarity from Mr. Wright's paper. "Don't let the wily Kennan deceive you," Mr. Wright appears to be saying to his readers, "into believing that he was a man of peace. Nothing of the sort. At heart, he was no better than all those other militaristic American policy makers who, as we of this generation know, tried to force an innocent Russia to her knees in those years of 1945–47 by military blackmail, and thus made themselves responsible for the Cold War." Or do I misread him?

I can, in any case, respond only with a partial confession. In the period in question I was indeed opposed, let me admit it, to the further extension of Soviet power in Europe. I was prepared to accept, as a tragic consequence of the military operations of the final phase of the war, the Soviet hegemony over those areas that lay behind the high water mark of their final military penetration into Eastern and Central Europe (to accept it, that is, in the sense of rejecting any idea of challenging it by force of arms); but I thought that nine countries, with some ninety million people, absorbed into the Soviet empire in this way, was price enough for us to pay for Soviet help against Hitler, and that to permit this hegemony to be further extended into Western Europe would have real dangers for our security. I thought it important that the peoples of Western Europe should retain both their national independence and their political liberties; and I thought that peoples in other areas such as Greece and Turkey, faced with the danger of seizure of power in their countries by Communist minorities, should not yield to these pressures just for lack of such moral and political support as we could suitably give them.

That all this had its military implications, particularly in the field of conventional armed strength (I am a bit surprised to find myself charged with advocating *atomic* diplomacy), I would not for a moment deny. It is true,

shocking as this may sound to some, today, that in view of the failure of the Soviet Union to demobilize any great proportion of its own armed forces at the end of the war, I was opposed to the rapid demobilization of our own, and considered that we ought, in the postwar period, to maintain in being at all times forces moderate in size but highly alert, mobile, and potentially effective, particularly on limited theaters of operation. I held this view in the light of my own belief, expressed on many occasions, that armed forces are important not just for their potential use but for the effect of the shadows they cast, and that a complete or virtual absence of them on our part could, in the uncertain conditions of the immediate posthostilities period, have a highly destabilizing effect, not in the interests of world peace.

All of this, for better or for worse, I believed; and if this be treason in the eyes of another generation, there is no use my summoning Mr. Wright to make the most of it; he has already done so.

I would, however, like to make one comment of a different nature on Mr. Wright's paper. In a number of instances he has done me the favor to quote one or more whole sentences from things I have said or written. But in a far greater number of instances he has taken isolated words or phrases out of the sentences in which I used them and has inserted them, in quotes, into his own. In some cases, this practice is unexceptionable. In others, it invites questions. I shall leave aside the instances in which the only visible reason to put the word in quotes was to distance the writer from it and to convey an unmistakable hint of ridicule. More serious are the actual distortions of meaning.

There were a number of places in Mr. Wright's paper where I found myself startled by the quoted phrases and the inferences conveyed by the way they were used, for they seemed extremely, almost grotesquely, out of accord with what I have always thought to be my own views. I took occasion, therefore, to check up on three of these (and only three) where the discordance seemed particularly striking.

The first of these was the following sentence, purporting to summarize my views on the subject in question (the quoted phrases are from my language):

If the "technical skills" of a united Germany were ever "combined with the physical resources of Russia" or if "the total war-making potential" of the Soviet Union began to develop "at a rate considerably faster than that of ourselves," then the United States might have to consider preventive war.

I read this passage with utter astonishment; for if there is any one dominant theme that has pervaded my writings for a quarter of a century,

it is—as Mr. Wright, who has read so many of those writings, must know—the profound conviction that our differences with the Soviet Union are not to be solved by war. So I looked up the source: a lecture given, in part extemporaneously, at the Air War College, in 1947. There I found, indeed, the passage from which Mr. Wright quoted; but note, if you will, how the key sentence (spoken, incidentally, in reply to a question and not in the lecture itself) actually reads:

“Now that combination [of the technical skills of the Germans with the physical resources of Russia] is going to be a hard one to work out, but if it ever should be worked out, then we would really have to watch our step, because then there would have come into existence an aggregate of economic and military-industrial power which ought to make every one of us sit up and take notice damn fast.”

I fail to find in this sentence the faintest mention of such a thing as preventive war. It is, I suppose, possible that launching one's country into the adventure of a preventive war against Russia might be Mr. Wright's concept of watching one's step; but I find it difficult to believe that it was, and I am unable, therefore, to understand how he could possibly have put this interpretation on the words in question.

The other two instances were ones in which the combination of quoted passages with Mr. Wright's own language carried the very clear inference that I had favored, or at least toyed sympathetically with the idea of, the dispatch of American forces to Greece during the Greek-Turkish crisis of 1947. In one, I was shown as suggesting that the United States should give (the quotes come from Mr. Wright, and suggest that the language was mine) “very careful consideration to the idea of sending American troops to Greece.” The other, brought forward in a footnote, depicted me as wondering whether it would be (and again, the quotes are Mr. Wright's) “feasible to throw a cordon of foreign troops right across Northern Greece.” These phrases were cited by Mr. Wright to buttress his assertion that I had fully understood and accepted the military implications of our aid to Greece.

My own recollection, and a vivid one at that, being that I had vehemently opposed the use of American troops in Greece, I turned with much curiosity to the source for these quotations. It turned out to be the memorandum (published in the series: *Foreign Relations of the United States*) of a discussion that took place in the Department of State among a number of senior American officials, military and civilian, in late December 1947—at a time, that is, when it looked as though the effort to keep Greece from falling to the Communists might be failing. The question was indeed discussed at this meeting whether, in the event things should become still worse, American troops should be sent to assist the regular Greek forces.

Now the language of this memorandum was (though Mr. Wright's readers would scarcely guess it) not my own; the document was drafted by one of the others present. I might have seen it; I do not recall doing so.

The passage about throwing a cordon of foreign troops across northern Greece was lifted from a paragraph that clearly had reference not to American troops but to a possible United Nations force; and the sentence from which the quoted language was drawn was actually a question, put by me to one of the military persons present, as to whether such a cordon would be a feasible expedient. This, obviously, was only one of the several factors to be taken into account in reaching a decision on this question; and the mere solicitation of expert opinion on this point would not in any way have constituted the expression by me of a final view on the desirability of the expedient being examined, even had the question concerned the dispatch of American forces, which it did not.

The other statement, to the effect that I had suggested we should give very careful consideration to the idea of sending American combat troops to Greece, was drawn from another paragraph in the same document where attention was indeed given to the possibility of sending American forces. The language, I reiterate, was not my own but that of the man who wrote the report of the meeting. This language, as is quite evident from that which immediately followed, was poorly chosen: for what the *rapporteur* obviously meant to say was that Kennan said we should think very carefully before committing ourselves to the idea of sending American troops to Greece in any contingency. Let me again give, as Mr. Wright did not do, the entire sentence: "Mr. Kennan suggested that we should give very careful consideration to the idea of sending American combat troops to Greece, especially if they were to go as part of a mixed United Nations force; we might find ourselves in a difficult position from which it would be hard to withdraw and equally hard to keep other nations from withdrawing the contingents they contributed." As will readily be seen, the argument was *against* sending American forces to Greece, even as part of a United Nations contingent. Would the reader have gathered this from Mr. Wright's citations? I think not.

Now there is one more point I would like to add here, for it is one which is, I think, often missed by historians who have had no experience in the policy-making process of government. Not every official in a governmental apparatus may expect to have his own views prevail all the time (mine certainly did not); yet unless he is prepared to abandon his job and his usefulness then and there, he often has to try to make himself useful within the framework of a policy of which he personally disapproves. The discussion mentioned above was, actually, an inconclusive one at which no decision was reached. But the general sense of the meeting, including the opinions of people

in positions more highly placed than my own, seemed to be running in favor of *considering* the dispatch of American forces if, as was still not certain, the situation should show marked further deterioration. I was not in favor of that inclination; and the questions I put were designed to bring out and make clear the disadvantages and dangers which such a course involved. But had such a decision been taken, I would still have done what I could to make it successful; and I have no doubt that I might then have said many things, in the private discussions of the Department, which thirty years later, viewed out of context, could be interpreted as favoring, or accepting, it. The contributions of a government official, speaking in a governmental context, are not always indicative, in other words, of his own personal preferences.

The examples cited above concerned three uses of fragments of my own language out of more than 150 such uses that occurred in this one article. I am not going to trouble to burrow any further into my papers to see whether there are others. These three, the first that I stumbled upon, seem to me to be sufficient to raise the question as to how much confidence one could have in the remainder of the document, unless he were inclined to take the trouble to check a hundred or so other passages where my words or phrases have been fitted to the author's sentences.

And I would like to close with a warning against this practice—common, as it seems to me, to a growing number of younger American scholars—of building the phrases of others into one's own syntax. I can understand the attraction of it, particularly for use in academic polemic. Affording, as it does, the possibility of combining a show of erudition with the delicate ridiculing of the opponent and the bending of his language to one's own purposes, it presents, no doubt, a powerful temptation for the younger scholar. But his mentors and his reviewers should warn him against it. It is too easy. Good history is not written in that way.