

TO THE EDITOR:

With respect to the Comment published in the June 1976 issue of the *Slavic Review* under the title of "A Reply to George F. Kennan," I should like to submit the following observations.

First, there is the question of the interpretation of Mr. Kennan's views on preventive war and sending American troops to Greece. Textual exegesis might seem less to the point than the speaker's own views of what he was saying, even after the passage of some time. True, Mr. Kennan's remarks as quoted do justify the conclusion of Mr. Wright that he "entertained" the notion of preventive war (if only under desperate and, on his own showing, highly unlikely circumstances) and that he "toyed" with the idea of sending American troops to Greece. The entertainment was, admittedly, scarcely lavish, and one toys with many ideas without advocating them, indeed often as part of the process of attacking them. But to one reader, at least, re-reading the original article reinforces the conviction that the author is indeed a practicing revisionist.

Now, Ambassador Kennan needs no defense from me, or anyone else, and Mr. Wright's scholarly conscience is his own business. "A falcon towering in her pride of place/Was by a mousing owl hawked at"—but not killed. Not even scratched, on my reading.

One may perhaps be permitted to wonder, however, that Mr. Wright's parting shot occasions no astonishment; I would not wish it to remain unanswered.

"I find it difficult to believe that anyone at this 1947 meeting meant for a U.N. force to be anything but a cover for U.S. involvement (as later, in Korea)."

Mr. Wright's credence problems, like his conscience, are his own affair. However, historians (if an aging economist may be permitted to address them) would, I think, be well advised to make some attempt to ascertain the facts about the beliefs, as well as the words, of those whose deeds they treat. My colleagues in the Foreign Service during the period in question—say, 1950–65—did, really, believe that they were helping the United States to lead the Free World in its efforts, through the United Nations and otherwise, to remain free. We thought the danger was real, we thought it should be met, and we thought it should be met together. We did not seek gratuitously "involvement" (which evidently is now a dirty word) in the affairs of others; we did believe that we should not (again) try to resign from the human race, nor flinch at the burdens our membership in it, as we saw it, entailed.

It is of course perfectly legitimate for anyone to argue that we were mistaken; it is not, I think, either proved or self-evident that we were either intellectually or morally blind. Am I getting a bit fed up with having the assumption that we were thrown in my face!

WILLIAM N. TURPIN

United States Foreign Service Officer (Retired)

Professor Wright does not feel that a response is necessary.

TO THE EDITOR:

Professor C. Ben Wright has spent a great deal of time and effort in trying to scrutinize George Kennan's responsibility for the military aspects of the Cold War. It seems to me, however, that the result of his labors, "Mr. X and Containment" (*Slavic Review*, March 1976), suffers from two shortcomings. It is not quite fair to Kennan since it fails to highlight the changing military aspects of the American-Soviet alliance, which provided the background for Kennan's enunciations. Even more

important, it detracts from a crucial negative element of the containment policy for which—in my judgment at least—Kennan bears a major responsibility.

Wright's study focuses on the years 1944–47 when, as he writes, "Kennan first formulated his idea of containment and began using the word itself." But Kennan's political commentaries from 1944 on can only be adequately appraised if we go back to the years, when a Soviet defeat seemed likely, and the subsequent period, when a Soviet-German separate peace was considered a real possibility. It is only human to deprecate the impact of the perception of danger once it has passed. There is sufficient evidence, however, that this consideration played a significant role in President Roosevelt's political estimates and influenced his public pronouncements and related actions. The "war romanticism" which showed the Soviet ally in a heroic light was a necessary concomitant to Roosevelt's policy of unlimited economic support for Russia.

Whether this pro-Soviet climate resulted from the efforts of Communist fellow travelers, dupes, or clever manipulators of public opinion—uncomfortable at the thought of the still missing second front—is actually not important. But it is important that the concept of containment emerged when the dangers of a Soviet defeat and of a separate peace had passed and "war romanticism" was still rampant. The irresponsible permissiveness which subsequently promoted the disintegration of the American army actually accentuated the need for a new policy.

Kennan never presented his case more clearly than when he wrote: "The Soviet Union does not take unnecessary risks. Impervious to logic or reason it is highly sensitive to force. For this reason it can easily withdraw and usually does when strong resistance is encountered at any point. Consequently, 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 showdown." The statement, as valid today as thirty years ago, presupposes a promptly committable military force without which containment would be nonsensical. Kennan ought not to be held responsible when President Truman and some of his successors later transformed a fundamentally sound concept into a hazardous anti-Communist crusade.

But, on the other hand, he does seem responsible for the negative aspect of containment, namely the unwillingness to proceed actively on the diplomatic front while demonstrating a concurrent national resolve to use force if necessary. This negative element came first to the fore in May 1945 when Kennan advised against participating in a "Soviet-ridden" regime in Vienna. It was again implied when he suggested that "Russian rulers sought security only in patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power never in compacts and compromises with it." And it was reiterated when he referred to possible cooperation with the Soviet Union in Germany as "mere pipe-dreams." The failure of the crucial Moscow Foreign Ministers Conference in March–April 1947 was a direct result of this negative posture.

It is not surprising then that the negative element of containment was promptly challenged by Walter Lippmann: "for a diplomat to think that rival and unfriendly powers cannot be brought to a settlement is to forget what diplomacy is all about. There would be little for diplomats to do if the world consisted of partners enjoying political intimacy and responding to common appeals." To my knowledge, a persuasive rejoinder from George Kennan is still outstanding.

JOHN H. BACKER
*Former Military Government Officer
on the Staff of General Lucius Clay*