

Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena

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Professors or Pundits?

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University of Notre Dame Press

Notre Dame, Indiana

Published by the University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556
www.undpress.nd.edu
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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

*∞This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992
(Permanence of Paper).*

chapter one

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS,
REALISM, AND PUBLIC
INTELLECTUALS IN
AMERICAN SOCIETY

JEREMI SURI

Few public intellectuals in the United States have thought of themselves as historians, but most have chosen to make their arguments in historical terms. From Jefferson to Emerson to Lincoln to Dewey, America's most influential thinkers have described their society as a modern manifestation of the ancient republics, a New Jerusalem, a union of Athenian democracy and Roman power, and a progressive embodiment of British common law and industrial capitalism. *Liberty*, *democracy*, and *nation*—the keywords of American history—have all found voice as forward-looking claims planted upon the fertile seedbed of past experience.

In this sense, the “old world” has been the historical “other” that allows American public intellectuals of every generation to point ahead and describe how their country can improve upon a relevant and not-too-distant past. The concrete manifestations of this mind-set are evident in the ubiquitous monuments to Greece, to Rome, to Britain, and

to God that Americans of nearly every community and era have constructed precisely when they confront new challenges and opportunities. Each generation of American public intellectuals has written of Athens, Rome, and Britain as inspirations and as warnings. Each generation of American public intellectuals has used familiar images of the past to interrogate, and often undermine, popular assumptions about the present.

Are we losing our way? How can Americans return to their historical virtues? How can Americans avoid historical degeneracy? Paul Kennedy, John Mearsheimer, Robert Kagan, and Fareed Zakaria are only four of the most recent authors to diagnose the historical tendency toward a “rise and fall” in national power. Like all American public intellectuals, they do not believe history is destiny.¹

They devote much of their energy, in fact, to showing how Americans can renew

rather than decline. Nonetheless, the presumption of a historical arc to the flow of power—what some have described as the strong “cycles” of history—dominate predictions and advice about the future of the United States.² To think forward in American society is indeed to look back.

AMERICAN HISTORICAL EXCEPTIONALISM

The American model is hinged on historical narrative—stories about the growth of ideas, peoples, and a special place. The arrival of immigrants is a story of exodus to the promised land. The frontier is a story of struggle to build the New Jerusalem from barren soil. The American Revolution is a story of resistance to foreign tyrants. The Civil War, of course, is a story of bloody battle to expunge an inherited sin.

The two greatest speeches in American history are about these recurring narratives. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address invokes a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” who came from abroad, settled the frontier, and made a revolution.³ Lincoln’s Second Inaugural used this history to justify the Civil War as a moment of repentance for what he called the “offense” of slavery that threatened the union and required that “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by an-

other drawn with the sword."⁴ The American narrative made sense because it embodied a compelling and vivid historical logic.⁵

More than many other societies, simple narratives play an especially powerful role in American society. They provide a common home for a population that shares few other common attributes. For citizens born to non-American families, standard narratives define belonging and acceptance. For wealthy and highly educated Americans, standard narratives explain their accomplishments and legitimize their position in a very unequal society. For poor and less well educated Americans, standard narratives offer hope for mobility and assurance that they are still fortunate citizens of the greatest land.

The standard American narratives prove largely unfalsifiable, despite repeated attacks, because they are about identity formation, not evidence or truthfulness. The standard American narratives construct a national faith, a civil religion. They define American society as the heir to a long tradition of human achievement and the best embodiment of future human hopes. They justify a powerful and prosperous American society based on its indispensable historical role. American greatness, in this narrative framework, is the contemporary wellspring of human greatness.

As anyone who runs for political office in the United States knows, it is perilous to define any daylight between the power of the United States and the interests of humanity as a whole. The national historical consciousness assumes that they are inherently compatible. To say otherwise is to challenge foundational narratives, and therefore to sound heretical or unintelligible. This means that the space for debate about the goodness of American power is very narrow in the United States. Most of the debate centers on specific uses of power, not its overall beneficence.

THE AMERICANIZATION OF OTHER PEOPLES' HISTORY

The retelling of American historical narratives dominates public intellectual discussions in the United States. Just visit a bookstore (if there are any left!), a library, or an online bookseller. The titles of the standard American histories (written as epics, period studies, or biographies)

dwarf most competitors in nonfiction, and much of fiction too. In contrast, note the dearth of titles on contemporary foreign societies. When was the last time someone published a widely selling book on present-day Brazil or India or even America's closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico?

When foreign competitors like China draw attention, as they intermittently do, they are described in comparison to the assumed American historical experience. American narratives are the norm—the representative social portrait—against which other exotic abstractions are compared and judged. The most widely read recent books about China—especially Henry Kissinger's *On China*—are precisely in this genre of comparison to an American norm that fails to question whether American narratives are even the correct place to begin.⁶

There is a presumption of permanence and progress built into accounts of American democracy that make other societies seem not only backward but also historically contingent. It is not that the Chinese or the Brazilians or the Mexicans are doomed to different lives, according to standard American accounts, but that they are stuck in a set of historical experiences that require change, often with American assistance. The emphasis on historical development in American thinking rejects explanations about culture and environment that defy easy historical redirection, even by the most powerful, self-righteous nation. The pasts of other societies must be moveable for Americans, because history must offer viable routes to a present that approximates American-style governance and economy.

Writers in other societies (Germany, France, India, and Australia, for some examples) do not assume that their history has any relevance for understanding a place as distant as China, or the United States. Such historical modesty is unthinkable in the United States, even for sophisticated American thinkers. Such comparative open-mindedness is impossible, even for America's most open-minded comparativists. Americans have always studied what they define as their past better than they have studied other present-day societies.

The American historical consciousness is hegemonic and highly selective. Even when studying foreign societies, American writers have drawn on a consistent repertoire of remembered experiences, images,

and words that are predictable. Greece and Rome captured the imaginations of every generation, as did Renaissance Italy, and the British, French, and Spanish empires before the creation of the United States. All of these historical references have pointed to powerful and prosperous societies that emerged from the ingenuity and freedom of their citizens. These societies all declined, in the eyes of successive generations of Americans, because the central governments grew too strong and too repressive of the freedoms that allowed for initial prosperity.

The repeated historical references of American thinkers are, therefore, double-sided. The past is inspiration for freedom, democratic governance, and a benevolent nation, at home and abroad. The past is also a warning against repressions of freedom, corrupt governance, and imperial nations that defy historical change. Inspired by Hegel, Emerson flagged this fundamental dualism between democracy and degeneracy in American historical thought. Lincoln found the same dualism in Shakespeare and in scripture before he gave it new voice in his speeches.⁷

HISTORY AND IRONY

The history of other “great” societies was the legitimizing foundation for all American claims to greatness. The United States could do what its contemporary societies could not do because it was truer to the traditions of Greece, Rome, Renaissance Italy, Britain, France, and Spain in their years of greatest glory. America was the best of the past, and that was why Tories, Confederates, and communists who questioned this claim were so threatening and had to be eliminated, at almost all costs. This was the historical destiny that Lincoln defined, also in his Second Inaugural, as “God’s will.”

Repeated reflection on the historical genesis of American greatness has justified striking intolerance to dissident historiographies, from Lincoln’s time to our own. This was an observation that Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz made in the middle of the twentieth century, when they lamented the narrowness of the American political tradition. Hartz, in particular, believed that a simple version of Lockean liberalism that emphasized individual rights, personal property, and representative

government crowded out other creative alternatives for governance in the United States. As good historians, Hofstadter and Hartz recognized that Americans had never fully lived in Locke's image—slavery, was a notable deviation—but they explained that the image of a Lockean past prevented serious discussion of alternative pathways. The Lockean narrative limited fuller understandings of a more complex historical reality.⁸

The narrowness of popular American historical thought, as diagnosed by Hofstadter and Hartz, answered the important question about American exceptionalism raised by the German socialist Werner Sombart. In the early twentieth century, virtually all the major developing countries of Europe, Asia, and Latin America experimented with forms of collectivism, socialism, and communism. Why, Sombart asked, was the United States so immune to these experiments? “Why was there no socialism in the United States?”⁹

There was no room in the public American historical consciousness for Marx or for Lenin. The country's historical frame of reference was too different, too narrow, too intolerant. Socialism had its influence on American labor, municipal governance, and eventually the New Deal, but it could not enter the lexicon of American politics. “Anti-Bolshevism,” especially after the Russian Revolution, and anticommunism had an inherent legitimacy as historically sensible acts of defense against dangerous threats to Lockean rights and protections.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great mid-century American theologian, was neither an apologist for socialism nor a critic of tradition. Quite the contrary, he sought to promote the wisdom of traditional American liberalism, while also working to remove its naïve, narrow, and self-defeating elements. For Niebuhr, the modern world required Americans to acknowledge their imperfections and abandon self-righteousness. These qualities, he believed, made Americans too slow to react to the rise of fascism and other threatening political ideologies. Americans had criticized these regimes, but they had done too little, according to Niebuhr, to offer relevant, persuasive, and attractive alternative global leadership. Repeating the same old historical narratives was not enough. It did not prepare Americans for new challenges.

Niebuhr called for Americans to see the irony in their own history: the unpredictable twists and turns, the deviations from expectations, the

necessary gap between words and realities. Niebuhr was not rejecting standard historical narratives, only saying they were too simple. What the American historical consciousness needed, according to Niebuhr, was attention to the limits of its standard narratives. Americans knew some things, but not all things for all times. They were, in Niebuhr's account, too certain of the teleology that led to their democratic society, too confident that they had the correct answers, too assured that their destiny was secure in the full realization of their basic principles. There was little space for doubt, for adjustment, for difficult compromise in Niebuhr's diagnosis of the American mind.¹⁰

Idealism and the assertion of perfection were, for Niebuhr, profound sins with destructive international consequences. He advised Americans to abandon the pursuit of perfection, carefully weigh alternatives, and accept lesser evils for higher moral purposes. This sophisticated thinking about war and peace, and allies and adversaries, required a more mixed historical self-understanding than was common in the United States. Americans needed to grapple with the dilemmas of imperfect humanity and corrupting power in the pursuit of worthwhile goals.

For Niebuhr, the presence of sin and fallibility in the American experience could not be ignored. He was a critic of simple American exceptionalism, but he also believed that the United States was different from other countries—that it had a different role to play as a democratic leader in the twentieth century. Niebuhr saw irony as a mechanism for focusing Americans on their shortcomings, encouraging more humility and care in the uses of power. Instead of a simple and shallow historical understanding of itself as a nation, a more globally engaged United States needed an intellectual framework for the difficult trade-offs that came with balancing security with democracy, and national interests with global principles. The United States had to do good in the world, but it had to accept that doing good sometimes meant doing bad, and at other times meant doing nothing at all.¹¹

Choosing the correct battles, with the right purposes and the right limits, that was the “tough-minded” moral-strategic work of policymaking for Niebuhr. It was the fundamental challenge of the Cold War, as Niebuhr and many of his contemporaries perceived their predicament of reconstructing the global capitalist system, containing communist power,

and protecting American democracy. The prominent theologian called upon public intellectuals to instruct American citizens on the presence of tragedy in the world and the complex duties of governance in that context. Niebuhr demanded a merger of principle and power that would force a rethinking of simple historical explanations for American greatness. The standard historical understanding, according to Niebuhr, dangerously encouraged too much American moral self-righteousness and too little reflection on the dilemmas of managing power across the globe. A wider historical lens, Niebuhr hoped, would temper these tendencies, just as irony tempers certainty and self-regard.¹²

Some scholars, including Andrew Bacevich, argue that Niebuhr went too far in his willingness to justify the use of power against perceived foes, the Soviet Union in particular. Other scholars, including Gilles Andréani, see a broader set of efforts among diplomats and thinkers in Europe, and in the United States, to match moral ideals with difficult military and political realities in an era of intense international competition. For Niebuhr, there was no formula for the correct mix of power and restraint, or the appropriate balance of freedom and security. His argument was for a constant reevaluation of these trade-offs and for a deep historical discussion about policy purposes that escaped the false simplicities of standard historical narratives. The role of the public intellectual, as exemplified by Niebuhr, was to encourage more complex and relevant historical debates, inspiring the critical thinking of citizens and policymakers. Historical irony was much more useful than complacent historical self-regard.¹³

For Niebuhr, the American experiment was a faith that justified difficult uses of power and moral compromises for a higher purpose. To sacrifice short-term purity for the sake of the national interest was a necessity, especially in a threatening world. To require a razor-sharp focus on core values was, simultaneously, the highest responsibility. Niebuhr's model for the public intellectual was a powerful and engaged conscience that helped citizens navigate as moral men in an immoral world. Niebuhr was not only the most widely read public intellectual of the early Cold War, but he also articulated a model for the public intellectual that deeply influenced contemporary figures.¹⁴

REALISM, INTELLECTUALS, AND POLICYMAKING

Niebuhr called himself a “Christian realist.” Many of the postwar public intellectuals who worked in foreign policy also called themselves “realists.” Realism included a focus on the ironies at the center of Niebuhr’s writing: the need to recognize the gap between expectations and experience, the requirement for adjustment and adaptation in the face of unpredictable circumstances, and, above all, the imperative to accept lesser evils. Cold War realists, like Niebuhr, believed that the United States had a special international role as a protector of democratic “civilization,” but they also believed that the United States had to recognize the limits of its power and prepare itself for difficult trade-offs. Realism required often unidealistic uses of power for idealistic purposes.

Realism also assumed that the standard narratives of American history were not sufficient to explain or design U.S. foreign policy. The stories of freedom and national greatness left Americans unprepared for negotiations with communists, alliance politics, and nuclear deterrence. Following Niebuhr, realists believed that they had to enact new policies and educate Americans to accept the legitimacy of foreign activities that deviated from expectations. Americans needed a new historical understanding of themselves that replaced benevolence and self-centeredness with mixed motives and a multilateral landscape of legitimate actors.

More than any other two figures in postwar America, George Kennan and Henry Kissinger made this case. Kennan began as a policymaker and then devoted the second half of his long life to educating the public about foreign policy. His writings were deeply historical. Kissinger began as an intellectual, writing history. He combined his scholarly work with efforts, at first informal, to advise policymakers in the 1960s. Kissinger’s appeal to policymakers was his historical perspective on key Cold War issues. Kissinger became the prime architect of American foreign policy (with Presidents Nixon and Ford) in the 1970s, and then returned to his role as a now famous public intellectual and sometime advisor to presidents.

Kennan and Kissinger used their experiences as policymakers to buttress their work as public intellectuals. They wrote history from the

perspective of those who have to make day-to-day decisions about war and peace. Kennan and Kissinger both agreed with Niebuhr: a realist foreign policy required a more ironic public understanding of history. In their long careers as prominent commentators, Kennan and Kissinger embodied the ironies of American history.

Other intellectuals joined Kennan and Kissinger in this endeavor. They were not unique in their thinking or their ambitions. In the second half of the twentieth century, a large cohort of Cold War realists contributed to the emergence of a diverse but coherent canon of literature that was intellectually rigorous and accessible for policymakers. This literature challenged standard historical narratives and demanded the careful exercise of American power. Realists defended American greatness, but they did not believe that the United States was an exception to the ironies of history.¹⁵

KENNAN

George Kennan was probably the most influential Cold War public intellectual who took inspiration from Reinhold Niebuhr and his historical criticism. Kennan was a career foreign service officer with extensive experience in Germany and Russia. Kennan was also an introspective, lonely man who, according to his biographer, consistently worried about the degeneracy of American society. John Lewis Gaddis describes Kennan's cultural pessimism: "Kennan had begun to doubt whether what he thought of as 'western civilization' could survive the challenges posed to it by its external adversaries and its internal contradictions. He was never wholly reassured that it would."¹⁶

At the height of his policy influence—in the months between the wide circulation of his February 1946 "Long Telegram" on the need for a foreign policy of Soviet containment and the July 1947 publication of his famous "X" article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"—Kennan returned to his cultural pessimism. Reflecting on conditions in the United States at the dawn of the Cold War, Kennan wrote:

At work it is certainly admirable. At play, it could hardly be worse. Its liberal intellectuals are in large part below criticism. Its emotional

strength lies largely in the smaller and quieter communities, where intellectual life is least developed. I have no doubt that as a people we have tremendous latent power of every sort. But it is buried behind so much immaturity, such formidable artificialities in manner of living, such universal lack of humility and discipline, and such strange prejudices about the organization of human society that I am not sure whether it can be applied . . . successfully in another crisis, as it was in this last.¹⁷

Kennan wrote these words in a letter to his half brother as he lectured to American military leaders and diplomats at the National War College in late 1946. Kennan would go on to serve a short but highly significant period as chairman of the State Department's newly created Policy Planning Staff (1947–50), an even shorter period as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union (1952), and two years as U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia (1961–63). In 1946, however, Kennan already realized that he was more intellectual than diplomat, more committed (and inspired) to influence public thought rather than internal government deliberations. "I might really be able to do something more worthwhile in scholarship than in diplomacy," he predicted.¹⁸

Kennan was frustrated, often sickened, by the bureaucratic wrangles and political disputes that dominated daily policymaking. He felt there was little space for serious thought in the organs of government, which reacted to problems more than they planned and evaluated interests. He turned to "scholarship," however, not because he sought to make original research contributions to knowledge, to teach eager undergraduates, or to attain respect within academic circles. He never pursued any of those things. Instead, Kennan believed—like Niebuhr and other contemporaries—that democratic citizens in the United States needed a better education about the "realities" of power. He believed that naïveté and principle—what he called "legalistic-moralistic thinking"—had left Americans ill-prepared for the power they had to exercise and the purposes they had to defend after World War II.

Kennan turned, as most realist public intellectuals do, to history. He devoted more than half of his life, from roughly 1950 to 2005, to writing about how the history of modern diplomacy in the United States and

Europe could better inform American thinking about foreign policy in the Cold War. Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton became his full-time occupation. Kennan published a range of books and articles that covered topics from the Monroe Doctrine to Bismarck's Europe to the Russian Revolution and the origins of the Cold War.¹⁹ Kennan also penned two of the most widely read volumes of memoirs, probing the changes in American society and policymaking from the early twentieth century, when he entered the small U.S. Foreign Service, to the early days of the Vietnam War, when the United States had become a massive international presence.²⁰

Kennan's writings were not policy memos. He disdained the impenetrable jargon and technical obsessions that characterized ideas coming out of traditional planning bureaucracies and new think tanks, like RAND. Kennan never worked closely with the "security specialists" who came to dominate the strategic debates about overseas bases, weapons systems, and military targeting. These were really issues of tactics for Kennan. They were ahistorical assessments of "options" that did not match with the actual practice and purpose of policymaking.

Foreign policy, according to Kennan, was fundamentally about human society. The key questions he sought to address in his writing were Niebuhrian: What were the purposes of American foreign policy? How could the United States use its power to protect its core values? How could policymakers make the correct trade-offs between security and morality for the maximization of both in an anarchic world?

American Diplomacy

Kennan's most enduring historical analysis came from a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago in April 1951. Published five months later as a thin volume (approximately 100 pages) titled *American Diplomacy*, this was Kennan's first book. It remains in print more than sixty years later. It is a frequent staple in undergraduate and graduate courses within the United States, and it is still widely read in other parts of the world. Kennan's biographer reports that *American Diplomacy* "sold better than anything else he ever wrote." It became his "long telegram' to the American academy."²¹

Kennan opens *American Diplomacy* with the observation that although U.S. policy was made, since the late nineteenth century, by “men of exceptional intelligence and education, deeply respected for their integrity of character and breadth of experience,” they suffered from “the deficiencies of America’s understanding of her own relationship to the rest of the globe.” Kennan called this the problem of a “national consciousness” that was rooted in impatient absolutes rather than long-term processes.²²

Americans, according to Kennan, had faith in an idealistic world of democracies. They avoided long-term diplomatic and military commitments that resembled traditional empires and alliances. When Americans found that their ideals were threatened, as they always were, they lashed out and fought excessive wars to eliminate “evil” enemies and restart politics. Too often, Kennan claimed, Americans wanted a world of ideals *or* power, when they really needed to pursue both at the same time.

The simple historical assumptions of Americans prohibited a sophisticated and relevant understanding of their society, and its role in the world. According to Kennan’s narrative in *American Diplomacy*, U.S. leaders were more reactive than strategic, more erratic and undisciplined than consistent and focused. Kennan’s most famous and widely cited passage deploys a memorable metaphor to make this point:

A democracy is peace-loving. It does not like to go to war. It is slow to rise to provocation. When it has once been provoked to the point where it must grasp the sword, it does not easily forgive its adversary for having produced this situation. The fact of the provocation then becomes itself the issue. . . . I sometimes wonder whether in this respect a democracy is not uncomfortably similar to one of those prehistoric monsters with a body so long as this room and a brain the size of a pin: he lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath—in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but, once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversary but largely wrecks his native habitat.²³

Kennan builds his historical narrative of U.S. foreign policy from the 1890s to the 1940s around this metaphor. Americans were latecomers to East Asia, latecomers to World War I, and latecomers to World War II. In each case, they were slow to understand the dynamics of rival foreign actors and the imbalances of power around China and Germany. In each case, Americans underrated their interests in developments abroad. They were “too proud to fight,” in Woodrow Wilson’s phrase.

When Americans finally became convinced that conflict over access to China, control of the European continent, or the global spread of fascist power threatened the United States, then citizens turned to war and the pursuit of “total victory,” according to Kennan. The “prehistoric monster” was now stirred and anxious to annihilate a perceived aggressor. This meant excessive deployments of force, overextended military occupations, and demands for “unconditional surrender.”²⁴

Kennan told this history not because he had any original research insights or unique interpretations. His account in *American Diplomacy* is simple, traditional, and clearly written. The power of the book is the ability of the narrative to explain contemporary affairs, which Kennan rarely addresses directly in the six chapters, starting with “The War with Spain” and ending with “Diplomacy in the Modern World.” Kennan’s method is to describe American rigidity and self-righteousness in both war and peace, showing how these qualities undermined national interests. This is a recurring pattern that he sees reaching from the past into the present.

Kennan recounts, at the start of *American Diplomacy*, how Secretary of State John Hay’s famous Open Door Notes of 1899 and 1900 represented a “high-minded and idealistic” program that was, in fact, inapplicable to the rivalries of foreign countries, including the United States, around China.²⁵ Kennan makes similar arguments about Wilson’s effort, after abandoning neutrality for war, to pursue a total victory in the name of democracy. Describing the Treaty of Versailles, Kennan writes:

Truly, this was a peace which had the tragedies of the future written into it as by the devil’s own hand. It was a peace . . . which was too mild for the hardships it contained. And this was the sort of peace you got when you allowed war hysteria and impractical idealism to lie down together in your mind, like the lion and the lamb; when you in-

dulged yourself in the colossal conceit of thinking that you could suddenly make international life over into what you believed to be your own image; when you dismissed the past with contempt, rejected the relevance of the past to the future, and refused to occupy yourself with the real problems that a study of the past would suggest.²⁶

American Diplomacy offers a similar assessment of misguided idealism after the United States entered World War II: “The fact remains that it was a war poorly understood by the peoples who fought it on the democratic side, and particularly ourselves; and I am sure that this lack of understanding of what was involved in the conflict itself has much to do with the great bewilderment and trouble we seem now to be experiencing in our attempts to adjust ourselves to the situation it left in its train.”²⁷ During World War II and the early years of the Cold War, Americans thought they were fighting for democracy, when in reality, according to Kennan, they were fighting to preserve a balance of power in light of German, Japanese, and Soviet power.

Kennan’s history pointed to the failures of idealism and self-confidence untempered by realism and humility. He showed how Americans had a tradition of ignoring the necessary trade-offs between power and principle, and also the difficult compromises that could bring the two into an effective and morally rich relationship. Americans conceived of their past as a string of victories for their ideals, but Kennan wanted them to see it as a warning against assuming they could do so much. American foreign policy had a mission to preserve an international balance of power and help protect the nation’s closest friends. U.S. foreign policy could not do much more, according to Kennan. Like Niebuhr, Kennan had large ambitions, but he recognized severe limits on America’s capabilities.

FROM KENNAN TO KISSINGER, AND OTHER LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY REALISTS

In his long career as a retired diplomat and public intellectual, Kennan made similar arguments about diverse policy issues. His arguments were

almost always historical, and they analyzed how simplistic readings of that past undermined the conduct of foreign affairs. In particular, Kennan criticized the Cold War division of Europe through NATO and other alliance institutions, he opposed U.S. entry into the Vietnamese civil war, he condemned President Reagan's nuclear buildup in the early 1980s, and he disdained the U.S. invasion of Iraq—and the broader “war on terror.”²⁸ Other prominent realists—including Walter Lippmann, Hans Morgenthau, and John Mearsheimer—joined Kennan in many of these positions.

Kissinger, the most recognized realist in postwar American society, often disagreed with Kennan. It is, in fact, striking that the two men had very little direct contact during their long and overlapping careers. Their differences were greatest concerning Kissinger's expansive uses of American power outside Europe—particularly in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Kennan believed these “adventures” were misguided and harmful to core American interests in Europe and Japan.²⁹

Kissinger and Kennan found common ground on the need for a longer historical view that did not falsely assume American power and democratic ideas could create permanent solutions to inherited problems. There was not an “end of history,” they both contended, in the rise of capitalism and liberal democracy. Both Kissinger and Kennan advocated less of the American ideological utopianism that encouraged a schizophrenic alternation between self-satisfaction and self-flagellation from one decade to the next. They called, instead, for more balance and perspective, expressed through consistent international diplomacy and centralized commitment of U.S. resources to long-term interests.³⁰

Both men had a strong pessimistic streak, but they rejected inclinations to accept perceived American “decline” on the political Left. They also dismissed urges to find a rapid Cold War “victory” on the political Right. The two realists agreed on the need for strong leaders who were insulated from public opinion, and therefore freed to participate in negotiations with adversaries that focused on international peace and basic principles, not ideological dogmas. They also advocated self-imposed limits on the possibilities for reforming undemocratic societies. They meditated on the limits of American power and principles as much as their possibilities.³¹

Kissinger and Kennan both wrote dense works of history that set the American experience in a long and global setting, showing how this nation—though exceptional—was not capable of fundamentally altering the course of human societies. The American mission, for realists like Kissinger and Kennan, was much more modest than popular conceptions of the country's triumphant history allowed. The American mission was also contingent, they believed, on clear-sighted strategic leaders. They favored intellect over character, historical sensibility over technical expertise.

Realism had many diverse American advocates in the second half of the twentieth century. In many ways, it was the default position for what Arthur Schlesinger called "tough-minded" Cold War public intellectuals.³² Kennan set a standard for "big think" in this area that others, including Kissinger, followed. Kennan drew on direct policymaking experience, but he relied primarily on a deep, albeit selective, reading of history to explain the strengths and weaknesses of American national efforts. He used history to try to break his readers out of a worldview that assumed the simple righteousness of American power and principles. Above all, Kennan and other realists tried to educate citizens about the complex, unintended, and uncontrolled consequences of pursuing moral goodness and national greatness in a world filled with unavoidable Niebuhrian sin.

The irony of the realist intellectuals is that they were skeptical of public opinion, but yet they focused their efforts on persuading the public. Kissinger was the exception, especially after he entered the Nixon administration. All of the other major realist thinkers followed Kennan's model and did their most important thinking outside of government. They resided—like Kennan, Niebuhr, Morgenthau, Kennedy, and Mearsheimer—in quasi-academic institutions where they were free to interrogate difficult foreign policy questions without easy solutions or politically attractive remedies. They wrote thick articles and long books that they knew policymakers would never read but hoped could reach a learned and influential public. Most of all, they looked back into history to articulate the limitations, trade-offs, and ironies that Americans needed to recognize if they were to avoid disappointment—and even disaster.

The most successful public statements of Cold War realism fit perfectly in this framework. They did not include data or difficult theory. They were works of history written by foreign policy intellectuals for general readers. Kennan's *American Diplomacy*, Niebuhr's *Irony of American History*, Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, and Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* were all widely read and enduring statements about why history required Americans to contemplate lesser evils in the use of power and the defense of core principles. Or, as Kennan put it at the end of *American Diplomacy*: "I am frank to say that I think there is no more dangerous delusion, none that has done us a greater disservice in the past or that threatens to do us a greater disservice in the future, than the concept of total victory."

Instead of total victories and absolute principles, Kennan called for what all of his fellow realists demanded: a change in the American public consciousness to embrace the length, complexity, and unpredictability of historical change:

It will mean that we will have the modesty to admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding—and the courage to recognize that if our own purposes and undertakings here at home are decent ones, unsullied by arrogance or hostility toward other people or delusions of superiority, then the pursuit of our national interest can never fail to be conducive to a better world. This concept is less ambitious and less inviting in its immediate prospects than those to which we have so often inclined, and less pleasing to our image of ourselves. To many it may seem to smack of cynicism and reaction. I cannot share these doubts. Whatever is realistic in concept, and founded in an endeavor to see both ourselves and others as we really are, cannot be illiberal.³³

IMPACT

If Kennan's vision accurately defines a "realistic" historical consciousness, he and other public intellectuals failed in their efforts to persuade policymakers and the American public alike. Kissinger has commanded sig-

nificant policy influence since the early 1970s, but his attempts to shift American thinking away from liberal ideals also showed limited results. Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Americans found it very difficult to think clearly about the necessary trade-offs among contradictory interests, capabilities, and limitations. Americans remained rooted in a view of international change on their own terms—what President Clinton called “democratic enlargement.”³⁴

During the Cold War, the United States adopted a wide array of unprecedented international commitments. The leaders of the nation showed a repeated willingness to prioritize security over democratic preferences. In fact, many historians have criticized U.S. policymakers for going too far in their efforts to combat perceived communist evils, neglecting the core values that the Cold War was allegedly all about.³⁵ Kennan himself joined these criticisms, excoriating his successors in government for exaggerating Soviet threats, overextending U.S. commitments (especially military deployments), and undermining freedom and decency as guiding principles for policy at home and abroad.³⁶

At the same time that the United States succumbed to excessive fear and militarism in the Cold War, it pursued an ambitious ideological agenda. Inspired by the successes of the postwar Marshall Plan in Western Europe (that Kennan helped to design), successive policymakers committed the United States to expensive, dangerous, and often self-defeating efforts at “development” and “democratization” in distant places. Washington spent billions of dollars on hydroelectric dams, new agriculture, and industrial capital throughout Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The United States also invested heavily in constitution-writing, elections, and counterinsurgency efforts to protect perceived paths to democracy. This was all part of a larger, historical American nation-building effort that far exceeded the limits on power diagnosed by realists and the prudent focus on core values close to home, emphasized by Kennan in particular.³⁷

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, leaders in Washington displayed a combination of power obsessions and idealistic fetishisms that drew on both vectors from the Cold War. This was, in many ways, Kennan’s nightmare. An existential and diabolical challenge elicited an overwhelming and narcissistic response.³⁸

The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the larger “war on terror” were, predictably, opposed by the most consistent realists in the United States. Nonetheless, President George W. Bush and his successor, President Obama, drew effectively on a simple American historical memory to justify their actions. They proclaimed that the United States was indeed on the right side of history, that it had a mission to spread democracy, and that it had succeeded most when it had acted for the highest, noblest purposes. Efforts by public intellectuals to tell a more complex and humbling history had little influence on policy. Especially when threatened, Americans had little tolerance for irony. The shock of 9/11 contributed to an overdetermined emphasis on limitless power and self-righteous ideals in the American self-understanding of history.³⁹

THE PROMISE AND TRAGEDY OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL LIFE

The promise of public intellectual life in the United States is that history really matters. Citizens deeply believe that their nation must live up to its historical purpose, especially in foreign affairs. This historical faith opens avenues for figures like Niebuhr, Kennan, and Kissinger to command attention as prophetic voices, steeped in the wisdom of study and experience. America’s oracles are the thinkers who can connect the present to the story of a longer past that also points to the future.

The tragedy of public intellectual life in the United States is that the nation’s powerful historical consciousness is stubbornly shallow and self-referential. American citizens know a great deal about a few parts of their history, and not much more. They know even less about other societies. This limited historical knowledge is not surprising, and it resists the complicating plot lines and evidence presented by those—like Niebuhr, Kennan, and Kissinger—who see less virtue in inherited power and revered principle than the standard historical narratives allow. Like most Americans, these realist public intellectuals affirm the many achievements of the United States, but they also see limits, warnings, and dilemmas. Those limits, warnings, and dilemmas are consistently ignored by citizens and decision-makers in moments of great potential change—

when the challenges are daunting and the opportunities are simultaneously alluring.

Even with new communications technologies in the twenty-first century, the dynamic between and among historical consciousness, realism, and public intellectual life in the United States remains consistent. What has changed, perhaps, is the willingness of leading thinkers to wade into these difficult waters. American society has become more professionalized, and in this setting success is often identified with specialization of study and audience. Internet communities seem to reinforce this academic trend. More than ever, the leading thinkers in the United States—especially social scientists and humanists—need to recognize the very real promise of public intellectual contributions, while also remaining mindful of the potential tragedy that accompanies this work.

American society is unlikely to escape the limits of its historical consciousness anytime soon, but that flawed foundation is still a solid rock on which to build valuable policy edifices. That is, perhaps, the lasting irony in the careers of Niebuhr, Kennan, Kissinger, and other realists: they failed to convince Americans, but they still had enormous impact on how their nation redefined its power, principles, and mission. Although the record is mixed, America's decisive transition from a largely regional setting to an overwhelming global presence in the course of the last century is, in part, a consequence of the ideas realist public intellectuals promoted. Niebuhr's prophecies, Kennan's complaints, and Kissinger's ruminations are central to the history of our contemporary world.

NOTES

1. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Knopf, 2012); Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

2. See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

3. See Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp (accessed July 28, 2013).

4. See Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp (accessed July 28, 2013).

5. On this point about Lincoln's compelling historical logic, see James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

6. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

7. See Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Compensation," 1841, reprinted in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Digireads .com, 2009).

8. See Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

9. Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (New York: Macmillan, 1976); originally published in German in 1906.

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1952).

11. See Andrew Bacevich's excellent introduction to a recent reprint of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

12. The best overview of Niebuhr's life and thought remains Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

13. See the excellent chapters in this volume by Andrew Bacevich and Gilles Andréani.

14. For Niebuhr's most impressive and authoritative statement of the moral difficulties of an immoral world, and the vital role of intellectual life, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's 1932).

15. On the history of realist thought in the United States, see Nicolas Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

16. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 66.

17. Kennan to his half brother, Kent Wheeler Kennan, December 31, 1946, quoted in Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 248.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Among many other publications by George F. Kennan, see Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956); Kennan, *The Decision to Intervene* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958);

Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

20. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), and Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950–1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

21. Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 434, 436.

22. Original foreword to George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1951]), li.

23. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 70.

24. The historian Robert A. Divine made a similar point, inspired by Kennan, in his book *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000).

25. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 39.

26. *Ibid.*, 73–74.

27. *Ibid.*, 79.

28. See Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 506–692.

29. On the striking absence of direct contacts between Kissinger and Kennan, see Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

30. On this point, see *ibid.*, 138–96.

31. *Ibid.*

32. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).

33. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 109. For an extended analysis of the illiberal consequences of American liberal ideals in foreign policy, see Michael C. Desch, “America’s Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 32 (Winter 2007–2008), 7–43.

34. On this point, see Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

35. See Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

36. For one of Kennan’s angriest and most extended attacks on U.S. foreign policy, see George F. Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

37. See David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Jeremi Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

38. This is the central point of Fred Kaplan's very insightful book; see Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (New York: John Wiley, 2008). See also Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qaeda since 9/11* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

39 On this point, see Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy," *Diplomatic History* 37 (April 2013), 190–216.