PS1 for 4/6/89 # George Kennan – An Elitist Without Faith in America

The **Atlantic Monthly** has apparently decided to anoint as a sort of secular saint an 85-year-old man named George Kennan. The April cover article labels him “The Last Wise Man” and showers him with superlatives.

You can get the drift from **Atlantic’s** choice of words: “Diplomat, scholar, write or rare literary gifts… one of the most remarkable Americans of this century… the greatest analyst and maker of foreign policy since John Quincy Adams… our foremost expert on the Soviet Union… clairvoyant… prophet… farsighted – almost a seer… impossibly learned yet commonsensical.”

The occasion for these accolades is the forthcoming publication by Pantheon of selections from Kenna’s **Diaries**, a sort of a sequel to his **Memoirs**. **Atlantic** has conveniently given us a selection from Kennan’s own selections.

Since Kennan is virtually unknown to the current generation outside of his little coterie of disciples, a brief resume is in order. He graduated from Princeton University in 1925, joined the U.S. Foreign Service and rose steadily until he became Ambassador to the U.S.S.R. Upon his retirement after 25 years, he settled at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton.

All his life, Kennan has enjoyed the lifestyle, the creature comforts and deference, the job security and protocol pleasantries of the diplomatic corps and academia, all paid for by tax dollars or donated dollars. In that cloistered environment, men get to thinking they know better how to make important decisions of state than those Americans whose days are consumed with the mundane challenges of making a living and keeping their jobs.

The pages from **Diaries** published in **Atlantic** reveal no state secrets or new information about any of the many truly historic events in which Kennan was a player or first-hand observer. They are just “dear diary” observations written while he was traveling, from 1931 to 1988.

But the Diaries do flesh out more about the character of a man who had a profound influence on U.S. foreign policy in pre-Reagan years. In the 1940s, Kennan was the architect of the theory of “containment” of the Soviet Empire, and in the 1960s he was the theoretician of the advocates of unilateral nuclear disarmament whose bizarre notions were implemented by Robert S. McNamara during the seven years of his regime as Secretary of Defense.

Kennan is a prolific writer and a skilled craftsman with words. His writings and speeches show that, since 1957, he has had no faith that America can survive in any competition with the Soviet Union, and that he does not think anything is worth fighting and dying for. The Diaries confirm our previous impressions, and also that he is an insufferable elitist.

In the Diaries, Kennan reveals his annoyance at being seated at Secretary of State George Shultz’ December 1987 luncheon for Mikhail Gorbachev next to the wife of a prominent politician “from somewhere in the Southwest,” who was ignorant of Kennan’s identity. It was difficult for Kennan to endure such an indignity!

Kennan's Diaries provide no evidence to dispel earlier indications that he is not a believer in God. The only reference to anything divine is this curiously phrased comment after visiting his father's grave: "May the God in whom he believed so desperately give him grace and respite."

Kennan's Diaries provide no evidence to dispel earlier indications that no passion leaps in his breast for "my own, my native land." A thoroughgoing internationalist, Kennan describes his "home" as "the whole great arc of the northern and western world, from Moscow across Scandinavia and the British Isles to Wisconsin."

He calls himself "a sort of Nordic cosmopolitan" and admits in his Diaries that, "if I really had my pick of places to live in, I would probably choose Norway." Only one who fails to appreciate American liberty could prefer to live in the shadow of the Soviet Union.

Kennan admits that one can read his Diaries and conclude that he sees in America "only ugliness, vulgarity, and deterioration." The only good things he can find about America are "the magnificence of those purely natural beauties that have not yet fallen victim to commercial development" and "the personalities of many fellow citizens I have been privileged to know."

How sad that he doesn't credit the greatness and uniqueness of our precious religious, intellectual, political, and economic freedoms. Other countries have spectacular natural beauties, but no other country has the liberty we enjoy or the wealth which liberty produces.

A 1988 entry in Kennan's Diaries reveals his bitterness that "the dominant political forces" of this country do not defer to what he calls our "intellectual and artistic intelligentsia." We can be glad they don't, and that is because Ronald Reagan ushered in a new era of leaders who have faith in America.