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GEORGE KENNAN: APOSTLE OF HOPELESSNESS

The journal Policy Review has performed a public service by an article in the Summer issue analyzing the ambivalent statements of one of the most influential intellectuals of our times, George Kennan. Professor Paul Hollander of the University of Massachusetts does a long-needed task of collecting some of Kennan's more outrageous remarks.

Hollander asks, What changed the U.S.'s premier Kremlinologist from critic of the Soviet Union, when he wrote his "Mr. X" article in Foreign Affairs in 1947, to apologist for the Soviet Union today?

Professor Hollander's perceptive question deserves continuing discussion and debate because Kennan was the theoretician of the policies of unilateral nuclear disarmament carried out by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara from 1961 to 1968. I'll give my answer and suggest that other students of Kennanism do their own probing.

George Kennan and a handful of others in the establishment elite were dramatically changed by the Soviets' launching of Sputnik, which the whole world saw on October 4, 1957, followed by the Gaither Report which was completed one month later, but was classified Top Secret for 15 years while its key portions were selectively leaked to groups such as the Council on Foreign Relations and Cyrus Eaton's "Pugwash" scientists.

The leaked parts forecast the horrendous specter of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union, and then painted a picture of black despair of our ability to build the strength necessary to meet that threat. It convinced those who read it that, in a long-run arms race, the United States could not successfully compete with the highly disciplined Soviets, who had the advantage of a dictatorial government.

The Gaither Report injected these elite intellectuals with a paralyzing dread of death by nuclear incineration. They concluded that accommodation of the Soviets, even preemptive surrender, was the only way to avoid this fate, and that they must never permit patriotic American citizens to thwart their plans.

By 1959 Kennan had started his program of comparing the United States with the Soviet

Union in such a way as always to downgrade our side and upgrade the Communist side. To achieve this objective, he didn't hesitate to read God's mind, declaring, "We must concede the possibility that there might be some areas involved in this cold war which a Divine Power could contemplate only with a sense of pity and disgust for both parties, and others in which he might even consider us wrong."

In October 1959 Kennan shared his loss of faith in America with the Women's National Democratic Club. His speech revealed his disdain for U.S. institutions and his defeatism in the face of the Soviet threat.

"If you ask me," Kennan said, "whether a country in the state this country is in today: with no highly developed sense of national purpose, with the overwhelming accent of life on personal comfort and amusement, with a dearth of public services and a surfeit of privately sold gadgetry, with a chaotic transportation system, with an educational system where quality has been extensively sacrificed to quantity -- if you ask me whether such a country has, over the long run, good chances of competing with a purposeful, serious and disciplined society such as that of the Soviet Union, I must say that the answer is 'no.'"

In February 1965, Kennan shared his loss of hope in the future with a New York audience of 2,000 in these words: "I plea for something resembling a new act of faith in the ultimate humanity and sobriety of the people on the other side. ... Our sole hope lies in the possibility that the adversary, too, has learned something from the sterility of past conflict; that some reliance can be placed, in the adjustment of mutual differences, on his readiness to abstain, voluntarily and in self-interest, from the wildest and most senseless acts of physical destruction. If this possibility fails us, we have little to fall back on."

Here is a chief architect of the pre-Reagan foreign policy pleading for an "act of faith" in the "humanity" of the Soviets, who have proved time and again, from Katyn Forest to Budapest to Afghanistan, that they have no humanity, and telling us that "our sole hope" in the future lies (not in our own abilities but) in the willingness of the Soviets to "abstain" from using the weapons they have built.

The answer to the professor's question about why Kennan changed is that he is a man without faith in America or hope in the future, and so he has let a cloak of despair isolate him from reality. Fortunately, nobody important is listening to him any more.