



BIOGRAPHY

George F. Kennan

“Russia has been my life for sixty years,” declared diplomat and scholar George F. Kennan in 1989. Out of his lifelong study of that nation, Kennan developed the policy of containment, a cornerstone of American foreign policy.

As you read the passage below, think about how George F. Kennan’s life prepared him for his important role in American foreign affairs.

George Kennan came by his lasting interest in Russia quite naturally. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1904, he was named for his uncle, who was a leading expert on Siberia and Russia under the czars. Young George enjoyed listening to his uncle’s tales of Russian customs and society. After graduating from military school, George attended Princeton University, where he majored in history.

After his graduation in 1925, Kennan entered the American Foreign Service, serving first in Switzerland and then in Germany. By 1928, however, he was dissatisfied with foreign service life and returned to Washington, D.C., intending to resign. The State Department had other plans for him, however. “I was offered . . . an appointment as the first officer to receive special training for service in Russia,” he later reported. “This assignment I happily accepted.” (The United States did not maintain official relations with the Soviet Union at that time.) For the next several years, he studied the Russian language as well as Russian history and literature at the University of Berlin. In 1933, the United States reopened its embassy in Moscow, and Kennan began his first term of service there.

When the United States entered World War II, Kennan was serving in the Berlin Embassy. For the next five months, he was interned by the Nazis as an enemy alien. After his release, he served in

neutral Portugal, but moved back to Moscow in 1944. Here he began his thoughtful analyses of Soviet aims and tactics that would eventually result in the July 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs* by “Mr. X.” In this article, Kennan first set forth the policy of containment. The State Department insisted that Kennan’s name not be used in connection with the article, and for years Kennan neither confirmed nor denied that he had written it.

By 1947, Kennan was, in the words of one observer, “America’s global planner,” charged with spotting trends in world affairs and suggesting ways to deal with them. Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State, once observed that “Kennan came as close to authoring the diplomatic doctrine of this era as any diplomat in history.”

After leaving the State Department, Kennan continued his career as a scholar and a writer. His book *Russia Leaves the War*, published in 1956, won the Pulitzer Prize. In later years, he sometimes disagreed publicly with American policy in world affairs. For example, in 1981, he recommended that both the United States and the Soviet Union drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals. He was also an early opponent of American involvement in Vietnam. Throughout his distinguished career, however, George Kennan remained an undisputed authority on the topic that has intrigued him since childhood—Russia.

Questions to Think About

1. What first stirred Kennan’s interest in Russia? How did he build up his knowledge of that nation?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why was Kennan uniquely qualified to become “America’s global planner” in the years following World War II?