

“The Sources of Terrorist Conduct”

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George Kennan, the dean of American diplomats, celebrated his 100th birthday a few weeks ago. We put on a full-day conference at Princeton commemorating his life and legacy. Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered the keynote address.

Discussion among panelists centered, naturally, on the strategy of containment, with which Kennan’s name is so inextricably linked, and which defined an era in American diplomacy. The conference was a wonderful commemoration, but I have been thinking ever since that the most fitting tribute to Kennan’s huge legacy would have been to apply his seminal strategic contribution to the problems of our present age. With utmost humility, that is what I would like to try to do tonight.

The strategy of containment was laid out in the so-called “Long Telegram” that Kennan sent from Moscow in 1946 and which was unveiled to the public, in abbreviated form, in an article under the pseudonym “X” in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in 1947. The “X-Article” was entitled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” so the natural counterpart for today’s world is the title of my lecture this evening: “The Sources of Terrorist Conduct.”

The differences between the two undertakings are apparent at once. Kennan was dealing with the behavior of a sovereign state with defined borders, an established populace, recognized government, and official ideology. Terrorism, by contrast, does not operate within boundaries, nor play by any rules of diplomatic conduct. Thus “containment” is not likely to prove an appropriate strategy for dealing with such an elusive adversary. But neither, I would venture to say, is “war” a fully adequate concept for addressing terrorism as a long-term strategic challenge. Terror is the tactic, not the adversary itself. To deal with terrorism over the longer term, we have to focus on underlying causes.

Indeed, what *does* apply from Kennan's strategic thought is precisely the imperative to go beyond manifestations of a problem and get at its sources, to go from consequences to causes. So I will try to apply this basic intellectual construct, making adjustments as they seem warranted. (And if you are asking yourself whether this speaker is incapable of improving through his own insights on the thinking of a diplomat retired for half a century, and whether he must look back to Kennan for inspiration and instruction, the answer is yes.)

The X-Article

Let me begin by sketching Kennan's argument. This will take a few minutes, but they will be minutes well spent.

In the X-article, Kennan argued that Soviet power was the product of both ideology and circumstances. "There can be few tasks in psychological analysis," he wrote, "more difficult than to try to trace the interaction of these two forces and the relative role of each in the determination of... Soviet conduct. Yet the attempt must be made if that conduct is to be understood and effectively countered."

Substitute "terrorist conduct" for "Soviet conduct" and you have the task before us tonight. What is the ideology that motivates terrorist behavior, what are the circumstances that give rise to it, and how can it be countered?

Kennan traced the historical evolution of Soviet ideology and its relation to what we might call the "pathology of power" for its adherents. He described an "innate antagonism between capitalism and socialism," which meant that the United States was facing a long-term strategic challenge. Believing in the infallibility of their belief system and the certainty of its ultimate triumph, our adversaries were therefore in no hurry to achieve their goals. But he added, importantly, that we should not assume that they were necessarily embarked on a "do-or-die" struggle to the end.

The American response to this challenge, Kennan argued, must be a long-term and patient strategy of containment – the application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographic and political points. Kennan later lamented that containment came to be seen in almost exclusively militaristic terms; what he had in mind was a multi-form application of counter-force through all the means at our disposal.

Kennan did not see containment as a permanent holding operation but rather as a means of addressing root causes. Taking the longer view, he held out hope in the younger generation. He did not assume that the ideology was so powerful that it could not be overcome, or that the zealotry of the present generation of leaders would necessarily be passed to the next. He saw the intrinsic weakness of the Soviet system and concluded that “the future of Soviet power may not be by any means as secure as Russian capacity for self-delusion would make it appear to the men of the Kremlin.” Russia, he reminded us, “is still by far the weaker party,” so the United States could proceed with reasonable confidence that we would ultimately prevail.

Remember that Kennan was writing in 1947! If only *we* could muster such foresight!

The possibilities, Kennan concluded, “are by no means limited to holding the line and hoping for the best.” Rather, “it is entirely possible for the United States to influence by its actions the internal developments... by which Russian policy is largely determined.” The key question was whether “the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country... which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time... for the palsied decrepitude of the capitalist world is the keystone of Communist philosophy.”

If the Western powers could maintain their vigilance over a period of, say, 10-15 years, Kennan believed, the Soviet system would inevitably have to turn inward upon itself to deal with its inherent vulnerabilities. As Kennan put it, “No mystical, Messianic movement... can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs.” Of course, the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union took much longer than Kennan’s 10-15 years, but already within that notional time frame the more brutal aspects of Stalinism had been repudiated and “peaceful coexistence” introduced into the official ideology.

“X” and Counterterrorism

The relevance of Kennan’s masterful words should by now be apparent. Let me tick off what seem to be the salient lessons:

- We need to go beyond manifestations to plumb both the ideology and the circumstances of the threat.
- We should see this as a protracted and difficult struggle but not necessarily a fight to the finish.
- The challenge is not only, or even principally, a military one.
- Our adversaries are the weaker party, and we are the stronger – not only in military terms but also in the basic vitality of our belief system over that of theocratic terror.
- We should proceed with patience and also with confidence, looking to the next generation and not accepting that we are fated to a permanent clash of civilizations.

Kennan was by no means “soft” on Soviet communism, any more than our leadership today should be soft on international terrorism. The terrorist acts that have been committed against our country are intolerable – not to be excused by the injustices that faraway peoples suffer. However imperfect we may be as a nation, we did not bring this on ourselves. We did not deserve this, and we have every right to defend ourselves.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, we have made great progress in combating international terrorism. We have disrupted many plots at home and abroad. Al-Qa’ida is in disarray, with more than two-thirds of its senior leaders dead or in custody. But al-Qa’ida and other terrorist organizations remain active and fully capable of mounting large scale and deadly attacks, as we saw in Madrid last week. The terrorists we face are patient, resilient, and sophisticated. For the sake of our security and the kind of world we want to live in, we must be as well.

But waging war on this elusive foe named “terrorism” is not enough, as Kennan’s counsel suggests. If this is a war, it is not one that can be won in any final sense, so long as we conceive of “terrorism” as our enemy. Our challenge as a nation is to understand the sources of this conflict and address those even as we are countering its perverse manifestations.

The Ideology of Terrorism

Before turning to the ideology of Islamic extremism, let me stress that international terrorism is not confined to Islam. Not so long ago we were preoccupied with Leftist terrorism from such groups as the Red Brigades and Bader-Meinhof gang in Europe and Marxist guerrillas in Latin America and elsewhere. But for the purposes of our discussion tonight, I will focus on Islamic extremism and on Al-Qa'ida in particular, for these are the sources of terrorism that most concern us today.

To get at the pathology of Radical Islam, let me begin with the grand historical irony that Arab transmittal of the works of Aristotle to Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries was critical to preparing the Renaissance in the West. Indeed, Aristotle and many other progenitors of Western civilization might have been lost to us forever had it not been for Arab scholars under the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, who were avid commentators on Aristotle.

When Europe under Charlemagne was just emerging from its Dark Ages (ca. 800), the court of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad had no rival for its patronage of the arts, philosophy, and literature. And there was considerable harmony and mutual respect between the West and the seat of the Islamic world – which should serve to remind us that a clash between these two great civilizations is not inevitable.

The Mongol sacking of Baghdad in 1258 brought to an end the multi-ethnic, urbane Islamic civilization that had flourished since the 9th century – an era of Islamic globalization, if you will – and gave prominence to the idea of *jihad* that has been passed down to today's terrorists. In traditional, or classical, Islam, jihad was primarily a spiritual struggle to purify Islam and a physical struggle to defend Islam against its enemies. Because Islam was held by definition to be perfect, the destruction of the caliphate could only be explained, in the thinking of Islamic theologians like Ibn Taymiya (1263-1328), to be imperfections in Islamic practice or to foreign – non-Islamic – corruption of Islamic society. It is from this puritanical form of Islam that al-Qa'ida's ideology descends.

Another wellspring of al-Qa'ida ideology is *Wahhabism*, a movement that emerged on the Arabian peninsula in response to the infiltration of non-Islamic ideas and practices. The 18th century Saudi cleric Muhammad Abd

al-Wahhab denounced as blasphemous all deviation from the original precepts and practices described in the Koran. Wahhab's contribution might have been fleeting but for his alliance with the Saudi shayks who ultimately triumphed in their struggle for power, when Ibn Saud consolidated control of the Arabian peninsula in 1932.

Salafism is a related movement that began in the 19th century and harks back to the principles of the first generation of Muslims known as *the salaf al-saliheen* – literally, the “pious ancestors.” Both Wahhabism and Salafism, though not terrorist in their origins, have developed radical tendencies and spawned violent offshoots.

The Context of Contemporary Terrorism

This brings us from consideration of the underlying ideology to the particular *circumstances* that have given rise to Islamic extremism in our own time.

Political Islam has had its current salience since the Iranian revolution of 1979. The changing shape over the past half century of the discourse of political opposition in the Middle East, passing through secular Arab nationalist and leftist phases before giving way to its currently dominant Islamic coloration, suggests the potential for further evolution. There is good reason to believe, however, that the current coloration will be longer lasting. Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism was the product of a particular post-colonial moment, and the leftists were the legatees of the now-discredited Marxist experiment. Modern political Islam actually is a product of 13 centuries of evolution. The core concept of the radical Salafi brand of political Islam, as we have seen, is a return to earlier roots.

There were other circumstances that combined with these trends to produce a particularly virulent strain of Islamic extremism. First, the decade-long anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan served both as a training ground for terrorists and as a model of the successful expulsion of a foreign occupier. Then the presence of U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf War of 1990-91 gave the Jihadists a rallying cry for expelling “the Infidel” from Muslim holy lands. And now, of course, while Muslims had no affinity for the secular despotism of Saddam Hussein, they now are deeply affronted by the Western occupation of the historic seat of Abbasid glory in Baghdad. And of course there was the behavior of authoritarian regimes in

many Muslim countries, their cynical use of Islam over the years to enhance their legitimacy, their failure to pursue economic and political reforms, and their unwillingness liberalize their educational systems or offer alternatives to the message of radical Islam.

Finally, there is the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the history is complex and beyond the scope of this lecture, the Palestinian struggle has come to be seen as a – perhaps *the* – symbol of Muslim humiliation and therefore has resonated not only in the Arab world but also among Muslims far beyond. It is portrayed by Islamic extremists as a manifestation of a “Zionist-Crusader Alliance” directed against Islam.

The Politics of Alienation

Such are the circumstances of the pathology of Islamic terrorism today. But let me conclude this part of the story with an observation that may surprise you: much of Al-Qa’ida’s pathology has nothing to do with Islam.

Al-Qa’ida is, to a large extent, a cipher of social dislocation. All traditional societies are disrupted by more powerful, more modern ones when those two societies meet. The more modern and dynamic society undermines the traditional society’s values, practices, and allegiances. Yet as the traditional order is threatened, the new one remains alien and often inaccessible.

For many, the dislocations become existential, as their sense of identity is threatened. A surge in millenarian beliefs is a recurring response to an existential crisis. An inclination toward nihilistic violence frequently accompanies this crisis of faith. Identification with an idealized, purified, and largely imaginary original culture frequently occurs among groups cut off from their cultural heritage, particularly when that culture seems to be under assault. And as we have seen in countless struggles before, terrorism is the quintessential weapon of the weak against the strong.

As Tom Friedman has pointed out, the “contrast between Islam’s self-perception as the most ideal” and the “conditions of poverty, repression, and underdevelopment in which most Muslims live today” leads to a “poverty of dignity” and a corresponding “rage.” Many Muslims interpret this set of circumstances as the denial by outside forces of the rightful opportunity of Muslims to live with honor and dignity.

Yet these conditions need not be permanent or irremediable. As we think about the terrorist challenge over the longer term – about the sources of future terrorism over the next 20-25 years – remember that we are talking in some cases about individuals who are not yet born. Surely we are not condemned to be mortal enemies with them, too!

A Strategy of Engagement

It is worth recalling that Kennan made a sharp distinction between the Soviet leaders and the Russian people. His strategy of containment was aimed at the regime, whose aggressive impulses needed to be countered. But he also argued for a strategy of engagement with the Russian people, whom he refused to see as our permanent enemies. Hard as it may be to get beyond the anti-American sentiment so prevalent in the Muslim world today, it is important for us to undertake a similar strategy of engagement – and to do so with reasonable hopes of finding a meeting place.

The latest Pew Research survey of attitudes around the world revealed sharply rising anti-Americanism, especially in the Muslim world, but it also found that people in Muslim countries place a high value on such democratic values as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, multiparty political systems, and equal treatment under the law. Large majorities in almost every Muslim country favor free market economic systems and believe that Western-style democracy can work in their own country.

As President Bush put it in a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy last November,

It should be clear to all that Islam – the faith of one-fifth of humanity – is consistent with democratic rule.... More than half of all the Muslims in the world live in freedom under democratically constituted governments. They succeed in democratic societies, not despite their faith, but because of it. A religion that demands individual moral accountability... is fully compatible the rights and responsibilities of self-government.

Taking note of hopeful signs of reform in Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan, the President stressed that “modernization is not the same as Westernization. Representative governments in the Middle East will reflect their own cultures. They will not, and should not, look like us.”

What these countries and peoples need from us is not a “Made in USA” blueprint but rather encouragement and support for initiatives coming out of the region itself, as was the agenda of the U.S.-Muslim World Forum in Doha, Qatar, this January. The last two UN Arab Human Development Reports also provide an authentic agenda for change written by prominent Arab scholars, policy analysts, and government officials. Such efforts can help produce a set of core principles, consistent with democratic aspirations and universal human rights yet also authentic and in harmony with Muslim faith. This should include reaching out not only to pro-reform elites within governments but also to nongovernmental activists and civil society leaders.

This strategy of engagement also needs an economic component, for the alienation of many Muslims is fueled by the failure of their countries to reap significant economic gains from globalization. The Middle East Partnership Initiative, announced by Secretary of State Colin Powell in December 2002, aims to help extend those benefits to this regions, as does President Bush’s initiative (May 2003) to create a U.S.-Middle East Free Trade Zone. We need to recognize, however, that the problem is not just one of poverty but the legacy of closed, state-dominated political and economic systems that breed apathy, alienation, and anger. Overcoming those legacies is not the work of a few years but of a generation or longer.

There is also a need to help build a regional security framework. NATO can potentially play an important role here, through a deepening and broadening of its Mediterranean Dialogue with North African states. What is needed over the longer term, however, is something analogous to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe – a region-wide framework that was created in the 1970s and helped pave the way for the end of the Cold War. It was, in a sense, the logical culmination of Kennan’s strategy for Europe, and it could be applied with profit to the Middle East as well.

Finally, again borrowing from Kennan, we need to build cross-cultural contacts – not in the sense of a p.r. campaign to “sell” our policies, but as part of a longer-term effort. Just as our cultural and exchange programs in Europe after World War II helped overcome old animosities, a new wave of programs needs to be put in place as an investment in the future of our interaction with the Muslim world.

Conclusion

That brings me to my core conclusion: we should not assume that “we” and “they” have nothing in common. Usama bin Laden and his followers deplore what they perceive as the depravity and vacuity of modernity. So do many in the West. Terrorists and their supporters rage against the inequities and degradation brought on by globalization. So do many thoughtful critics who would not dream of resorting to terrorism to achieve their goals.

Many of the grievances that terrorists express and exploit – economic disadvantage, alienation brought on by globalization, a sense of cultural humiliation, and others – are remediable, at least potentially. It was one of the core failings of Communist ideology that Marx failed to see that many of the class antagonisms he identified could be – and were – overcome by peaceful means rather than the class struggle he took to be inevitable. (I learned this at the feet of the late Lewis Feuer right here on this campus.)

Our frame of mind – even as we are waging a resolute campaign against international terrorism – should be that we are not engaged in a fight to the finish with radical Islam. This is not a clash of civilizations but rather a defense of our shared humanity and a search to find common ground, however implausible that may seem now. Such an effort is no more possible with Usama bin Laden than it was with Stalin back when Kennan was writing, and it will be an elusive goal for years to come, but we have reason to be optimistic if we take the longer view, as Kennan did.

Let me conclude, as I began, by citing the X-Article:

The issue... is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.

If these words sound somewhat melodramatic, I ask you to remember how vulnerable, uncertain, and fearful we felt as a nation on September 11, 2001. We have come a long way since then, but we still have a long way to go before we can recover the security and tranquility that was so brutally shattered that bright morning two and a half years ago.

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