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Scott Lucas and Kaeten Mistry. "Illusions of Coherence: George F. Kennan, U.S. Strategy, and Political Warfare in the Early Cold War, 1946-1950." *Diplomatic History* 33: 1 (January 2009): 39-66. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00746.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00746.x>.

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Reviewed by **Robert Jervis**, Columbia University

Scott Lucas and Kaeten Mistry start their engaging article by quoting Marshall Shulman's reminder that scholars "often tend to impose on the objects of their inquiry a pattern and a sense of design that were not there" (39). Surely correct, but this poses a dilemma for historians and, even more, political scientists, since they seek common threads, patterns, and explanations that do more than reproduce confusing if not mind-numbing details. Our job is to bring order out of chaos without doing injustice to the actors' behaviors and beliefs. At times perhaps we can understand better than they do what they were doing and why they were doing it. But it is all too easy to overlook inconsistencies and contradictions.

In this I agree with the basic argument of Lucas and Mistry, although their own treatment is itself (perhaps fittingly) less than completely coherent, being partly a discussion of Kennan's ideas, partly a treatment of the wider set of policy papers produced in the early Cold War, and, at the end, a brief rumination on the nature of American foreign policy. Throughout, the focus is much more on ideas about policy than policy as represented by actions, and the links between the two, let alone between them and what other countries did, are put aside. Although less than satisfactory as a way to approach American foreign policy, it has some justification here because one might expect the greatest coherence to be found in policy papers in general and those by one person in particular, especially when he was a noted and careful thinker. If Kennan could not think through a coherent policy, how could one expect the U.S. to follow one?

Perhaps we should not be surprised. People are filled with contradictions and driven by contradictory impulses. Seeking incompatible goals is perhaps as common in individuals as it is in governments divided into separate and competing bureaucracies: Spiro Agnew

both sought continued public life and accepted brides; Lyndon Johnson humiliated people whose loyalty and even affection he sought; Bill Clinton's self-destructive behavior was apparent even before he became president. But people not only expect others to be consistent, they want to be consistent themselves, and this produces some degree of coherence in their behavior. Thus Deborah Larson shows that a central reason why the behavior of the Truman administration became more consistent over time was that he and his colleagues developed beliefs and rationales to describe and justify what they had done, and these ideas guided their subsequent behavior.¹

Lucas and Mistry show that Kennan tried to achieve coherence through the idea of "political warfare," which he defined as "the employment of all means at a nation's command short of war to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert" (39). Given the fragmented nature of policy and policy-making, this was a useful approach. But it embodied several tensions if not contradictions that limited the degree of coherence that could be achieved.

First and perhaps most importantly, there was a disproportion between means and ends. Lucas and Mistry recount the familiar story of the difficulty in defining what it was that the U.S. sought in terms that were general enough to encompass the situation but sufficiently specific to guide policy. Despite the difficulties, there was widespread agreement that American security required not only containing the Soviet Union, but the retraction of Soviet power. The U.S. was seen as being in a struggle that was total in the sense that eventually only Western capitalism or Soviet communism would remain standing. In this way, it resembled World War II, and indeed the whole analysis was shaped by the struggle against fascism. But a shooting war had to be avoided. This meant that while instruments had to be melded, as the notion of political warfare implied, there were limits on how hard the U.S. and its allies could press. More importantly, it generated the central contradiction that if political warfare succeeded too well and entrenched on vital Soviet interests, war would become unacceptably likely (56). Thus the ends and the means clashed not only in that the latter were not likely to be sufficient to reach the former, but in the more profound sense that if they did, they would lead to disaster. It was all well and good for Kennan to define political warfare as involving all instruments "short of war," but the decision to fight did not lie in American hands alone, something Kennan sometimes was slow to realize.²

Second and relatedly, Lucas and Mistry stress the contradiction in Kennan's thinking and American policy dealing with Europe, the heart of the Cold War. What exactly was the relationship between the need to shore up non-Communist regimes in West Europe and the desire to limit Soviet control of Eastern Europe (61, 64-65)? The questions here are so many and complex that they are beyond the purview of the Lucas and Mistry article and

¹ Deborah Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, NJ, 1985).

² Jeffrey Frieden, "Why Kennan Failed: Containment and the Analysis of International Relations," (unpublished MS).

my comment, but a few words are in order. Logically, it is not clear why protecting West Europe required opposing the USSR in Eastern Europe – indeed, the Cold War eventually proceeded on the basis of a de facto division into hard spheres of influence, and in retrospect this seems like the safest way to reach the primary goals of Americans and West Europeans despite the fact that that it sentenced those in the East to a lifetime of punishment. Why were policy-makers so slow to grasp this? Why did they think that the fact that the Soviets imposed subservient and tyrannical regimes in the areas they liberated indicated the intention or even the desire to expand further? What theory of threat perception was at work? Or were Soviet actions in East Europe merely the excuse to mount anti-Soviet policies? A related question is an empirical one: did at least some American policy-makers seek a division of Europe as a way to peacefully manage Soviet-American relations and accept that Eastern Europe would be under Soviet control.³

The open acknowledgment and acceptance of spheres of influence might have produced a more coherent if less ambitious policy, but even a self-styled realist like Kennan could not bring himself to fully embrace it. Indeed, as Lucas and Mistry note, Kennan was one of the leading advocates of covert action in Eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union.⁴ This aspect of Kennan's career, by now known to specialists but still a surprise to most others, produced an incoherence not only in American policy, but in Kennan's thinking. Although he stressed that overt and covert means had to be harmonized, it is far from clear how much the U.S. could expect to change the situation in Eastern Europe, especially as long as safety was a priority. What a member of the Psychological Strategy Board said about NSC 68 could apply to much of the earlier policy as well: "an offensive concept of psycho-strategy requires less an official change of policy than a frank recognition of what is really implicit in our existing policy objectives, i.e.: abandoning 'containment' and openly espousing 'liberation'" (64-65). Indeed, the Eisenhower administration suffered from the other side of this incoherence in that while it came to power urging rollback, it soon saw that this goal was too dangerous to seek as it implied running a high risk of war if not launching a preventive war. Thus Secretary of State Dulles responded this way to the demand from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he live up to his earlier bluster: "He...indicated that he could not help but have some sympathy for the general view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in favor of greater dynamism in the American attitude toward the Soviet Union and Communist China. After all, during the course of the 1952 campaign he had himself called for a more dynamic U.S. policy vis-à-vis Communism. However, experience indicated that it was not easy to go very much

³ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: the Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).

⁴ The best study is Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca, NY, 2000); also see W. Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: the U.S. Crusade Against the Soviet Union, 1945-1956* (New York, 1999); Sarah-Jane Corke, *U.S. Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare, and the C.I.A., 1945-1953* (London, 2007); Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America's Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York, 2000).

beyond the point that this Administration had reached in translating a dynamic policy into courses of action....”⁵

There then is much to what Lucas and Mistry have to say. But of course there are problems and limitations as well. As they acknowledge (63, note 92), one cannot equate Kennan’s thinking and writings with American foreign policy. They draw heavily on Wilson Miscamble’s excellent study of Kennan’s influence,⁶ but they still shift uneasily between what Kennan wrote and what American policy was. Second and relatedly, they pretty much put aside the world in which the U.S. was acting and the events that bore in on decision-makers. This is very much history from the inside out, which is appropriate for an account of whether American policy was coherent but limits its ability to explain American policy. Indeed, partly as a result of centering their attention on Washington, the authors ignore a major source of policy incoherence in this and almost every period – the fact that policies can never be implemented exactly as the top leaders want and expect. When during the Cuban missile crisis President Kennedy learned that a U-2 weather plane had strayed off course into Soviet airspace, he laughed and said “There is always some [SOB] who doesn’t gets the word.”⁷ He was right, and the problem is compounded because some leaders fail to understand this. Wallace Thies shows how President Johnson’s attempts to use force and diplomacy together in Vietnam did not factor in the operational difficulties in the field that would hopelessly muddy his message.⁸ (This is not to imply that the policy might have otherwise succeeded; it is now clear if it was not at the time that the North would not accept any outcome that did not guarantee unification of the country.)

The focus on Washington to the exclusion of other countries also means that Lucas and Mistry cannot address the question of whether alternative policies, coherent or not, might have produced a less costly and dangerous outcome. For that, we must know much more about the actual and possible responses of the West Europeans and, above all, of Stalin. Since Kennan was a Soviet expert it would have been particularly interesting for the authors to have discussed how his views of the Soviet system and behavior corresponded to the evidence available at the time and to what scholars now believe.

Because Lucas and Mistry look only at the U.S., they also cannot explore whether American foreign policies at the start of the Cold War or more generally are less coherent than those followed by other countries. My own thoughts here are ambivalent. On the one hand, by virtue of having separation of powers, strong interest groups, and a public that rarely places foreign policy issues at the top of the agenda, American policy is

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, II.: 833.

⁶ Wilson Miscamble, *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).

⁷ Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY, 1967), 221.

⁸ Wallace Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1968* (Berkeley, CA, 1980).

particularly likely to be incoherent as domestic and bureaucratic politics exert strong, changing, and decentralizing influences. As Charles De Gaulle said when talking to Britain's Prime Minister Harold Macmillan about some puzzling American behavior: "it seemed that the United States was a very difficult country to govern."⁹ Indeed it is, but do other countries follow consistent policies? Britain in the 1930s? Stalin at the start of the Cold War? Academic theorists like consistency both because it permits parsimonious explanations and because they implicitly equate consistency with effective policy. But national leaders are moved more by events, many of which are beyond their control. Furthermore, judgments about consistency are strongly influenced by the scale of our own observations. The more we look at fine-grained detail, the less consistency we are likely to find. But if we step back and look at the broad sweep of policy, there may be more coherence than Lucas and Mistry and my comments imply. If we accept John Gaddis's claim,¹⁰ do we see inconsistency because the U.S. alternated between two kinds of containment, or are we more struck by the continuities of the overall approach? Indeed, there is much to Melvyn Leffler's view that the basic contours of American foreign policy were set in 1940 when the U.S. decided that peace and prosperity required that no country dominate Europe and that the international economic system be as open as possible.¹¹

Finally, it is worth noting that some of our most important and provocative histories gain a good deal of their power by imposing what may be excessive consistency on people and events.¹² By asking how we could explain the world if leaders were following, if not a fully-developed plan, then at least a good idea of where they wanted to go and how they could get there, we can develop powerful arguments that order many strands of behavior. Especially in the international arena when actors often conceal their motives, hopes, and fears and think in terms of complicated chains of strategic interactions and second-order effects, looking behind or beneath confusing behavior for a unifying theme can be quite productive. Lucas and Mistry claim that this approach characterizes postrevisionism (p. 41), but I think it is much more true of revisionism, which in many of its formulations saw the drive of capitalist economics as lying behind many diverse American policies and made them seem remarkably well thought-out. Even those of us who find this picture implausible have gained by grappling with it, and perhaps it is worth forcing the history a bit to find its main strands.

⁹ Quoted in Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, 244.

¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Post War American National Security Policy*, rev.ed. (New York, 2005).

¹¹ Melvyn Leffler, "American Grand Strategy from World War to Cold," in Paul Kennedy and William Hitchcock, eds., *From War to Peace: Altered Strategic Landscapes in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, 2000), 55-78.

¹² See, for example, Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven, 2008); Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ, 2006), esp. ch. 4; A. J. P. Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies* (London, 1938); and, in a quite different vein, Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, 1998).

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