

C. BEN WRIGHT

A Reply to George F. Kennan

In his response to my article “Mr. ‘X’ and Containment” (*Slavic Review*, March 1976), George Kennan has raised serious questions about my motives and my methodology, shifting the focus of the debate from “containment” to my scholarship. Apparently convinced that I am out to get him, he implies that what I have written may qualify as “academic polemic” but not as “good history.” Fortunately, the final verdict belongs with the readers of *Slavic Review*, whom I invite to determine for themselves whether I have distorted the record.

Mr. Kennan has taken specific exception to my interpretation of two documents. The first is the transcript of a lecture-discussion at the Air War College, dated April 10, 1947. The issue here is whether, under certain circumstances, George Kennan could entertain the idea of “preventive war.” Mr. Kennan doubts that he ever used the term “preventive war,” and he has reproduced one sentence from his lecture (*not* from the question and answer session, as he asserts) to show how I have misled the reader. True, this sentence contains no mention of “preventive war”; but if Mr. Kennan had read further in the document, he would have discovered that this was not the only “key sentence” from which I was quoting. Permit me to cite a passage from the question and answer session following the lecture. This was George Kennan’s reply to a direct question:

If we see the total war-making potential of Russia developing at a rate considerably faster than that of ourselves, I think we would be justified in considering a *preventive war*, but if we do not see that, I don’t think we are justified in considering it. . . . I really don’t want to see us go into a war unnecessarily with Russia. I think it would be a very difficult one for us to fight with any profit to this country. If we have to do it some day, perhaps we have to. When that day comes, I would say that the best way to conduct that war is *to smash the war-making potential of Russia to hell*; but, until that day is really upon us, I think we should play this for a peaceful solution, and I think there is a good chance to achieve it. [Emphases mine.]¹

1. “Question and Answer Period” following lecture by Mr. George Kennan to Air War College, Maxwell Field, Alabama, April 10, 1947, p. 14, George F. Kennan Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.

Clearly, George Kennan was not advocating preventive war; but, then, I never said that he was. In rereading my summary of his remarks at the Air War College, I am satisfied that I represented his views fairly and accurately.

The second document in dispute is a memorandum of a conversation dated December 26, 1947, composed by John D. Jernegan, acting chief of the State Department's Division of Greek, Turkish, and Iranian Affairs. Here Mr. Kennan has a legitimate complaint. I should have indicated that I was not quoting him directly. This was a careless error which I regret. If Mr. Kennan was misquoted by Jernegan, so be it—Jernegan got it wrong. Then there would be no dispute. But Mr. Kennan does not take this way out (though he does seem to chide Jernegan for poor reporting). Instead, he again suggests that I have misinterpreted a document to the point of distortion.

The question is whether George Kennan “toyed” with the idea of sending American troops to Greece during the Greek Civil War. His recollection is that he “vehemently opposed” any such notion, and once again he cites a complete sentence from the document to make his case. Let me quote two paragraphs from the Jernegan memorandum so that we can see this sentence in context. Although the language is, admittedly, somewhat ambiguous, I fail to see how Mr. Kennan can contend that he was “obviously” arguing *against* the dispatch of United States forces to Greece.

Mr. Kennan asked General [William G.] Livesay whether the introduction of a United Nations force to occupy strategic points in Greece would be effective in enabling the Greek forces to clean up the guerrillas. General Livesay said that a foreign force would have a good morale effect under present conditions but might be ineffective if the pressure on Greece were increased. *Mr. Kennan* asked if it would *not* be feasible to throw a cordon of foreign troops right across Northern Greece. General Livesay said that this would be feasible and effective provided the troops were allowed to fight, to protect the areas assigned to them. He and General [A. V.] Arnold both said that they thought it would be unwise for American troops to go into Greece with the instructions in force for the British troops now there, that is, that they were to fight only in case they themselves should be directly attacked. Mr. [Robert] Lovett indicated his agreement with this view.

General Arnold suggested that an American Corps of two Divisions in Greek Thrace would have an excellent effect on the general situation. He and Mr. Lovett agreed that Thrace would be the best location because of its strategic importance in relation to Bulgaria, the difficulty which the Greek Army is having in defending it, and the fact that a force there could easily be supplied and supported from the sea. *Mr. Kennan* suggested that we should give very careful consideration to the idea of sending American combat troops to Greece, especially if they were to go as

part of a mixed United Nations force; we might find ourselves in a difficult position from which it would be hard to withdraw and equally hard to keep other nations from withdrawing the contingents they contributed. He also thought an area in southern Greece, such as the Peloponnesus, might be easier to defend and therefore a better place for our troops from a strategic point of view. [Emphases mine.]²

Note carefully the very last sentence, which Mr. Kennan neglected to mention in his response to my article. As in his Air War College address, George Kennan was certainly a voice urging caution and restraint, but he was also ready, at least so it appears to me, to flirt with the idea of military intervention, in southern Greece if not northern. As for Mr. Kennan's insistence that the issue in the first paragraph was a United Nations force rather than an American force, I find it difficult to believe that anyone at this 1947 meeting meant for a U.N. force to be anything but a cover for U.S. involvement (as later, in Korea).

Just a brief word about methodology. No scholar, young or old, can escape the problem of selectivity. The real issue is not whether one quotes sentence fragments, complete sentences, or entire paragraphs, or relies on one's own words alone, but whether, on balance, he or she represents the sources honestly. This I believe I have done.

2. John D. Jernegan, Memorandum of Conversation, December 26, 1947, cited in U.S., Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1947*, vol. 5 (Washington, D.C., 1971), pp. 468–69.