

The Capital Times

Madison, Wisconsin

16 Feb 2006

"Diplomat would have much to say to U.S."

By Thomas J. Raleigh

NEW YORK—Today is the birthday of the late George Kennan, who was born in Milwaukee in 1904 and became one of Wisconsin's most eminent sons.

The "father" of the Cold War doctrine of containment, Kennan was a distinguished diplomat, a farsighted political scientist, an insightful historian, and a prolific writer. Upon his death last year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke of her admiration for him as "one of the greatest strategists in the history of American foreign policy."

On this day, it may be instructive to reflect on our country's behavior using Kennan's observations and writings as a guide. Were he still alive, Kennan would likely offer to our national leaders, and to his fellow citizens, the following advice:

To Treasury Secretary John Snow on the need for fiscal good health, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on defense spending: "A country that has budgetary deficit and an adverse trade balance both so fantastically high that it is rapidly changing from a major creditor to a major debtor on the world's exchanges, ... a country that has permitted its military expenditures to grow so badly out of relationship to the other needs of its economy and so extensively out of reach of political control that "defense" has developed into a national addiction — a country that, in short order, that is so obviously living beyond its means and confesses itself unable to live otherwise — is simply not in a position to make the most effective use of its own resources on the international scene, because they are so largely out of its control."

To the neo-conservatives and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on America's role in the world: "I am wholly rejecting any and all messianic concepts of America's role in the world: rejecting the illusions of unique and superior virtue on our part, the prattle about our Manifest Destiny or the 'American Century'"

"If there were any qualities that lie within our ability to cultivate that might set us off from the rest of the world, these would be the virtues of modesty and humility; and of these we have never exhibited any exceptional abundance."

To John Bolton, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations: "The disappearance of the Cold War, with the extreme bipolarity and other distortions that accompanied it, should bring an enhancement rather than a reduction of the importance of the UN as a factor, generally, in world affairs."

To Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte on intelligence: "The involvement of our government in the acquisition of secret intelligence, by espionage and other unavowed processes, while perhaps occasionally unavoidable, has had ascribed to it a degree of importance far greater than it deserves. This judgment has rested on my long-standing belief that well over nine-tenths of all that our government needs to know about life beyond our borders, even in military matters, can be better and more safely obtained by the scholarly scrutiny of information already available to us in legitimate ways than by the most elaborate efforts of espionage, secrecy, and concealment."

And finally, to the American citizen on patriotism: “One might say that nationalistic reactions fall into two categories.... The first, which I call natural and legitimate nationalism, could also be called patriotism.... An outstanding feature of it is ... a genuine affection for the country in question.”

“The other of the two possible attitudes of the citizen towards his nation is something decidedly different.

“... Where the normal nationalist, the proper patriot, sees the absurdities of his society, as well as the strengths, the chauvinist only sees the latter. Where the view of the former combines the pride with the pity, the chauvinist experiences only the pride, and this in exaggerated form.”

“Hence many facets of his behavior. Hence the frequent demonstrational quality of his patriotism: the flag-waving, the sententious oratory, the endless reminders of the country’s greatness. ... Hence the extreme national touchiness, the preoccupation with the outward symbols of national honor, the truculent sensitivity to the view of others. Hence, finally and more serious than all the rest, the fondness for seeing the country’s superiority made manifest and confirmed by military posture or, if possible on the field of battle.”

George Kennan believed that America can best promote the virtues of liberal democracy, market economies, the rule of law, and respect for human rights by her own example. Were he alive today, Kennan would surely suggest, with characteristic wisdom, thoughtfulness and humility, and with a deep affection for his country, that we could do better.

Thomas Raleigh, a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel, served as a military advisor to the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna. He works in New York City.
His email is thomasraleigh@nycap.rr.com.

NOTE: The quotes are taken from two of Kennan’s final books;
“Around Cragged Hill” (ACH) W.W Norton 1993,
and “At Century’s End” (ACE) W.W. Norton 1996.

CONTACT INFO:
Thomas J. Raleigh
Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army (Retired)
Cell: 518.701.8362 / Home: 518.395.3207
2300 Nelson Drive, Niskayuna, New York 12309
thomasraleigh@nycap.rr.com