



Fredrik Logevall, “A Critique of Containment” (Bernath Lecture), *Diplomatic History* 28:4 (September 2004): 473-499.

Commentary by **Erin Black**, PhD Candidate, University of Toronto (Department of History), Canada-US Fulbright Fellow, 2004-2005

Published by H-Diplo on 24 September 2005

When one thinks of hallmarks of the Cold War, especially from an American perspective, the doctrine of containment readily comes to mind. The ideas presented in George Kennan’s Long Telegram and then in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in attempts to explain Soviet behavior were readily adopted by the Truman administration and, with the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine, became a core element in American Cold War thinking. Containment is also well known because Kennan himself came to be critical of how his ideas were expanded upon and interpreted. Containment thus provides an appropriate theme for Fredrik Logevall’s 2004 Stuart L. Bernath lecture. In this instance, however, Logevall is less than enthusiastic about what containment meant for America in the early years of the Cold War.

At the foundation of Logevall’s critique of containment is the premise that containment, at least as articulated in the famous “X” article, essentially closed the door on the necessity of negotiating; that is to say, maintaining an open dialogue with the Soviet Union was viewed as pointless. As Logevall sums up: “Kennan seemed to be saying, diplomacy was a waste of time. Soviet hostility to the West was irrational, justified neither by America’s wartime policies or its earlier actions, and thus Moscow leaders could not be reasoned with; negotiations, in other words, would not ease or eliminate the hostility and end the Soviet-American confrontation.” While Logevall concedes that containment succeeded in its goal of obstructing Soviet expansion without provoking a nuclear confrontation and without destroying civil society in the United States itself, he feels that the school of thought represented by Walter Lippmann might well have done better if followed. Lippmann, of course, while no fan of the Soviets, believed “a more forthcoming American posture on negotiations would likely have made a difference.” To some, such a sentiment merely raises the counter-factual eyebrow. For others, however, the notions that *meaningful* negotiations were possible in the immediate post-1945 period or, for that matter, at any time prior to the beginning of sustained dialogue between the US and USSR in the early 1960s, is a what-if worth asking in light of existing teleological analyses of the origins of the Cold War. Logevall is not playing the counter-factual game per se. What he is doing is suggesting that with their own arguments for the inevitability of the Cold War, orthodox and even revisionist schools have missed the larger point.

Containment has, of course, been studied a fair amount. Critics of aspects of containment have been given some due as well, although far less than they deserve, as Logevall points out. What is interesting in this analysis of containment is the focus on the implications of the doctrine for direct negotiations between the US and USSR. “Diplomatic history” comes under fire in some circles as being too old-school, despite the breadth of the field and the many innovative

analytical approaches adopted by its practitioners. Though this is not his key purpose, Logevall's article serves to remind us that even something as seemingly old-school as the study of diplomacy itself, narrowly defined by him as "dialogue between independent states," does not merely encompass a bunch of old white men sitting around a table hammering out treaties and so forth in detached settings. Factored into this study are cultural considerations concerning differing ways to think about diplomacy, the impact of domestic politics, and the very nature of a nation's identity. One of Logevall's core arguments here is that Americans viewed diplomacy with a moralistic suspicion. Thus, "whereas for Europeans diplomacy was a natural first recourse, for Americans it was not." Quite cleverly, Logevall takes the issue of American exceptionalism and flips it on its head; Americans might not be superior in their differences but they are different.

The beauty of this article is that, beyond its specific conclusions, it offers so much to so many different aspects of America's Cold War history. First (and not reflective of any desire to rank these contributions) Logevall offers a solid comparison between European and American thinking during the formative years of the Cold War. Even though the United States' role here is spectacularly large, we must not forget that the Cold War involved others as well. The study of American foreign relations over the past decade has become increasingly international in outlook and in this article we find justification for the need to continue to think more broadly. More than that, however, we find an example of how comparing American outlooks to international outlooks can improve our understanding of America itself.

Second, the relationship between the domestic and the foreign is highlighted here, wherein the domestic includes not just the period under question but America's larger historical experience as well. Thus, this second offering also contributes to identity studies and the type of work undertaken by those such as John Fousek in *To Lead the Free World*. It is axiomatic that America's domestic climate affects its foreign relations and so too for other countries. Too often foreign policies studies underplay this, however. Logevall offers us a solid example to follow. For him, the power of US domestic politics is one of the keys to understanding America's failure to seek negotiations with the Soviet Union in the beginning years of the Cold War. Lippmann may have been vocal and his critique may have been powerfully reasoned, but even Lippmann's name was not enough to override basic American distrust of the Soviets. In asking why policy-makers failed to even really consider negotiations, Logevall feels "that a key part of the answer...lies at home in the United States." His analysis of the domestic reality of the United States during the early Cold War is not restricted to that era, however. It rests on examining the separate historical experiences of American and Europe. Through this discussion Logevall is able to set up his main argument regarding American attitudes towards negotiations and then apply that attitude to the period in question here. Thus, while his discussion of geographic separateness or American exceptionalism may not be new, the application is noteworthy.

Third, Logevall reminds us that even if a consensus was achieved in the early Cold War, it was not unanimous. His discussion of Lippmann's criticism of containment is proof positive of this. Anyone who studies the collapse of the Cold War consensus on the 1960s would do well to realize this. Indeed, the similarity in ideas between the dissenters of the 1940s and those of the 1960s—men such as J. William Fulbright (the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) who came to view containment as an evil leading America down paths it did not

need to go and bankrupting America's power both physically and morally in the process—is startling. With this in mind, hopefully scholarship focusing on dissent in any stage of the Cold War will prosper and benefit.

Despite offering so much, there is something to consider here. The discussion of America's views on diplomacy in comparison to Europe's views might also take into account that Europeans had a greater perceived need to keep East-West negotiations open. They were, after all, at the center of a likely battleground between American and the Soviet Union if it came to that. In the early years of the Cold War, American could rely on its nuclear monopoly and even after the Soviets acquired the bomb, America had greater strategic capability. Is it coincidence that it is not until this superiority comes under question that American leaders considered sitting down with Soviet leaders? In addition to Europe lacking an immediate source of security, such as its own nuclear weapons, is there not a degree of selfishness as well—once great powers who are now lesser powers and unhappy about it? Consider Churchill's desire not to preside over the collapse of the British Empire and De Gaulle's plan to resurrect France's authority and reject American authority over Europe. This is not to criticize Logevall's discussion of European thinking about negotiations as inadequate or incomplete; it is merely to suggest that in addition to the deeper beliefs about negotiations raised here, we might also consider the relationship between this ideational base and the more tangible top-layer of European interests.

In returning to American thinking about diplomacy and negotiations, though, let me offer the following quotation: “The ability of the United States to negotiate with Communist governments is of great importance, even though new agreements are likely to be few and far between...The opportunities for American diplomacy are circumscribed to a large extent by the depth of conflict and restricted common interest between the United States and the principal Communist powers, as well as by the manner in which communist governments tend to conduct their diplomacy.” So wrote Fred Charles Ikle, head of the Social Science Department at the RAND Corporation, in a 1970 memorandum titled *American Shortcomings in Negotiating with Communist Powers* and prepared at the request of the Senate Committee on Government Operations. This at a time when the United States had been engaged in negotiations with the Soviet Union. Indeed, a Senate Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations held a series of hearings and commissioned a series of memoranda on the theme of international negotiations because of this engagement. Even though these hearings advocated the continued need for pursuing talks with Communist powers, and even though they took place in a rather different world than that of the late 1940s and early 1950s, their assessment of potential opportunities rings true with the analysis of containment's flaws offered by Logevall. That this is so testifies to the strength of Logevall's critique.

Copyright © 2005 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
