

X's Predictions: How They Were Right, With Limitations

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George Kennan's 1947 "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," written under the pseudonym "X," foresaw the decline of the Soviet Union due to internal, already sprouting "seeds of decay." Just as proponents of Marxism-Leninism saw capitalism as an inherently flawed system doomed to collapse in on itself under the pressure of the proletariat, so too did Kennan propose that Soviet-style communism of the immediate postwar period, i.e. Stalinism, was doomed to fail from within. As such, he proposed that a policy of "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies"¹ could prevent Soviet aggression until the system brought itself down. This claim, at the broadest level, appears to be accurate. With the benefit of almost seven decades of added history, the present-day historian can corroborate – with certain provisos, historical corrections, and addenda regarding Soviet intent and timing – Kennan's claims as they applied to the immediate postwar geopolitical environment and also as they predicted the fall of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. His notion of seeds of decay planted by the Stalinist system was prescient, even though he slightly misunderstands Stalin's motivations and his timeline is skewed by a lack of knowledge of the coming de-Stalinization reforms and the oil shock of seventies.

The central claim of Kennan's paper and core motivation for adopting a policy of containment is summarized in this passage:

[W]ho can say with assurance that the strong light still cast by the Kremlin on the dissatisfied peoples of the western world is not the powerful afterglow of a constellation which is in actuality on the wane? This cannot be proved. And it cannot be disproved. But the possibility remains (and in the opinion of this writer it is a strong one) that Soviet power, like the capitalist world of its conception, bears within in the seeds of its own decay, and that the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced.²

Kennan's position is that *Soviet* communism, not communism more broadly considered, will necessarily fail. He writes: "Lenin, had he lived, might have proved a great enough man to reconcile these conflicting forces to the ultimate

¹ George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1987 (republished from 1947), 861, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20043098>.

² *Ibid.*, 866.

benefit of Russian society,”³ to create a viable communist regime without resorting to Stalinist tactics if given the opportunity. However he does qualify this as being “questionable.”⁴ Kennan is not convinced of the merits of a Marxist system, but he is not ready or able to tackle that issue in this essay. His focus is, rather, on how Marxism-Leninism became Stalinism and how this planted the seeds of Soviet collapse. He writes:

Of the original ideology, nothing has been officially junked. . . . But stress has come to be laid primarily on those concepts which relate most specifically to the Soviet regime itself: to its position as the sole truly Socialist regime in a dark and misguided world, and to the relationships of power within it.⁵

His argument addresses those specifically Soviet concepts. He views Marxism and the project of the pre-WWI Bolsheviks as “for the most part nebulous, visionary, and impractical.”⁶ He viewed the general theory as being bound for destruction. However he does recognize, in congruence with later scholars such as Peter Holquist,⁷ that it was “The circumstances of the immediate post-revolution period” that “made the establishment of dictatorial power a necessity” and thereby determined the nature of Soviet Marxism going forward. Moreover, he sees Lenin’s successors as being controlled by their extreme senses of insecurity and a “particular brand of fanaticism, unmodified by any of the Anglo-Saxon traditions or compromise, [that] was too fierce and too jealous to envisage any permanent sharing of power,” yielding a system of absolute Party rule.⁸ In ascribing such a focus on “doctrinaire ‘rightness’” to Lenin’s successors, he ignores pre-Revolution Bolshevik ideology which had insisted on the rule of a vanguard. Indeed, he ignores that Lenin, who he suggests is a compromiser who might have been able to avoid Stalin’s violent absolutism, refused to join in a pan-socialist alliance and also refused to accept the election results to the Constituent Assembly. But Kennan is generally right in his claim that it was Lenin’s successors who actually ensured the rigid absolutism that came to define Soviet socialism.

Kennan continues by saying that the post-Lenin Soviet rulers, i.e. those of the Stalinist era, “have continued to be predominantly absorbed in the struggle to secure and make absolute the power which they seized in November 1917.”⁹ This endeavor was “primarily against forces at home,

³ Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 854

⁴ *Ibid.*, 854.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 858.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 854.

⁷ Cf. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 2002).

⁸ Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 853-854.

⁹ Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 855.

within Soviet Society itself” but also “against the outside world.”¹⁰ This observation of pre-war Stalinism is true. As Stalin continued to attack what he viewed as the increasingly intransigent and resistant class enemies of the proletariat at home, his stated fear of “capitalist encirclement” and the West’s hostility toward socialism also raged. Even when capitalism was dead within Russia, Kennan argues, this stated fear of foreign intervention and aggression was extreme and vital to the legitimization of the “organs of suppression” within the Soviet Union. Kennan succinctly states that “it became necessary to justify the retention of the dictatorship by stressing the menace of capitalism abroad.”¹¹

Stalin’s regime coopted fear of Western encroachment on the socialist project to affect change, especially mass industrialization, within the Soviet Union. Stalin’s industrial buildup prior to the Second World War – the collectivization efforts, the export of grain to fund industrial infrastructure and capital investment, and the use of forced labor to those ends – was clearly motivated in part a Bolshevik anti-agrarian desire to create a functioning proletariat-based system. But a greater animus lay in the fear the imperialist West and its hostile aims. The regime was deeply concerned by those “great centers of military power, notably the Nazi regime in Germany and the Japanese Government of the late 1930s, which did indeed have aggressive designs against the Soviet Union.”¹²

Kennan, however, rejects this fear as a primary motive, stating that “there is ample evidence that the stress laid in Moscow on the menace confronting Soviet society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home.”¹³ He says that the Soviets do harbor a powerful and visceral antagonism toward the capitalist nations of the world. Indeed, he argues later in the paper that the antagonism is a key element of Soviet foreign policy, but he rejects the notion that the West posed a realistic or direct threat. He instead posits that the “innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism” which animated the Soviet side of the Cold War was ideological, not based in realistic security concerns.¹⁴ Here, Kennan’s position is too reductionist.

He essentially underestimates Stalin’s insecurities and fails to recognize the thread in Russian-turned-Soviet history of the fear of foreign antagonism and invasion. Stalin was deeply xenophobic. In a sense, his xenophobia was particular to him, but it was, broadly speaking, characteristic

¹⁰ Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 855.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 859.

¹² *Ibid.*, 857.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 857.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 858.

of the Russian and Soviet psyche throughout history.¹⁵ He was deeply insecure about Russia's historical place in the world. He saw it as a historically bullied entity and the victim of relative backwardness. Now that Russia was the Soviet Union, he saw the world ready to gang up on his nascent socialist empire. This paranoia of the foreign and Western was result of a dark and suspicious cynicism, the same cynicism which "led him astray by ascribing to Western governments the same capacity for conspiring that he attributed to himself and his regime."¹⁶ Kennan's argument that Stalin's regime was irrationally anti-West was true, but not for the stated reasons. Stalin's personality, not just his ideology, played into the regime's distrust of the West. Indeed, even his successors would demonstrate anxiety regarding Western intentions.¹⁷

Thus, Kennan's imagination of the Soviet Union was faulty. He perceived the Soviet Union as a nation that was driven by the leadership's self-righteous drive to establish communism when, in reality it was also driven by a very Russian fear of Western encroachment and invasion. Nonetheless, his position that absolutism and violence fundamentally changed the character of the Soviet Union and created a system that would collapse in on itself was correct, evidenced by the creation of an economic system that simply failed to improve the lives of the proletariat it served.

The Soviets thought that their grand economic growth of the postwar period would serve their people and interests as long as popular interest lay in the establishment of a successful socialist state. Kennan, however, saw Soviet postwar industrial buildup as potentially the "powerful afterglow of a constellation which is in actuality on the wane."¹⁸ He concedes that the position could not be proved, but since he puts it forward as a strong possibility, it merits some discussion.

The present-day critic of Kennan might argue that this analysis was premature. Could a simple afterglow beat the United States into space, develop thermonuclear weapons, create one of the world's most impressive metallurgical and heavy industrial systems, and continue to project its influence well into Europe and the increasingly important "global south"? These *ex post facto* objections do not discredit the perceived reality at the time, for Kennan did not yet know about the Space Race or the full extent of the Cold War. Nor do they prove that the Soviet Union was not declining and simply burning through its last reserves of fuel. These achievements do not discredit the position that the U.S.S.R. was just the afterglow of its former

¹⁵ Vladislav Zubok and Constatine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1996), 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ Note, by means of anecdotal evidence, that Andropov was so fearful of Western invasion that he ordered spies to observe London government buildings at night to discern whether or not an invasion was imminent.

¹⁸ Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 866.

glory by 1947. Indeed, one could see the achievements of the Soviet Union just as one sees the spectacular light of an exploded star—as a spectacle which is really just the visual phenomenon that accompanies the actual death and decay, a grandiose *rigor mortis*. As Kennan notes: “This cannot be proved. And it cannot be disproved.”¹⁹ But an analysis of the Soviet industrial system does indicate that the postwar buildup was not a sign of vitality but of short-run state power. It is likely that without the oil windfall of the 1970s, the timeline would look more favorable to Kennan’s argument that the seeds of decay were already well-advanced and that the Soviet system was already on the wane.

Kennan concedes that the Soviets had impressive industrial capabilities and an impressive ability to rebuild in the aftermath of World War II. “The Kremlin,” he says, “has also proved able to accomplish its purpose of building up in Russia...an industrial foundation of heavy metallurgy, which is...continuing to grow and is approaching those of the other major industrial countries.”²⁰ Kennan had not even yet reached the 1950s, “the best decade of postwar Soviet growth...[which] witnessed the most rapid expansion of the Soviet epoch – national income growth reached 7.2% annually.”²¹

But his concession is not that the Soviet Union was on the rise or in the midst of sustainable viability. Rather, he makes the point that Soviet economic gains were the prime example of how the socialist empire was continuing to use and deplete finite political, social, and economic capital. Here, Kennan appreciates potential more than he does achievements. He sees that what fueled the Soviet recovery was a deteriorating inertia that was bound to die. That is, rather than supporting the Russian claim that such a buildup proved the superiority of socialism in mobilization and industrialization, the buildup’s sapping of morale and resources would be devastating to the system. The economic growth was, in his view, likely a hollow indicator of former greatness and a last great push encouraged by the inertia of a world power yielding despotic abilities to coerce labor. It was not one that could not last, especially without the institutions, popular support, and infrastructure required to undergird such an industrial complex. He summarizes his doubts of the Soviet economic system stating:

...Soviet economic development, while it can list certain formidable achievements, has been precariously spotty and uneven. Russian Communists who speak of the “uneven development of capitalism” should blush at the contemplation of their own national economy...Here is a nation striving to become in a short period one

¹⁹ Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 866.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 863.

²¹ Mark Harrison, “Soviet Economic Growth Since 1928: The Alternative Statistics of G.I. Khanin,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 1993, pp. 146, <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/mharrison/public/eas93.pdf>.

of the great industrial nations of the world while it still has no highway network worthy of the name and only a relatively primitive network of railways...But maintenance is still a crying deficiency of all Soviet economy. Construction is hasty and poor in quality. Depreciation must be enormous.²²

The incomplete success of the postwar economic surge, and its human toll, is exemplified by Magnitogorsk, as discussed by Stephen Kotkin in *Magnetic Mountain*.²³ Kotkin argues that Magnitogorsk, considered particularly illustrative of Soviet industry more broadly, was a masterful example of the quantity- and output-focused industrial machine. To that extent, it was a bright spot in the Soviet mission to prove that socialism could muster the resources of a country to produce fantastic results. However, it also proves Kennan's points that "the building of heavy industry...has been carried out a terrible cost in human life and in human hopes and energies" and that it "involved the neglect or abuse of other phases of Soviet economic life, particularly agriculture, consumers' goods production, housing, and transportation."²⁴ Magnitogorsk pumped out a fantastic amount of steel, but a large portion of its workers lived in tents, far from their places of work and at high cost to morale. Additionally, such success stories as Magnitogorsk were marked by the use of forced labor from the Gulag system.²⁵

Given the violence and coercion that Stalin paired with economic mobilization, it is not unreasonable to think that the miserable conditions would have been cause for serious unhappiness. Robert C. Tucker describes the postwar period as one of "mass disenchantment."²⁶ He comments "In a society founded on the presumption of belief, that [disenchantment] signified the beginning of a crisis."²⁷ Kennan and Tucker, and indeed many others, concur that Stalin ruled by fear rather than belief and that "a widespread failure of belief was both a part of and a cause of the crisis bequeathed by Stalin to Soviet society."²⁸ Robert Service posits that most people were more interested in focusing on eking out their harsh existences, not communist

²² Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 864.

²³ Magnitogorsk is a city in Russia that was the site of a large mining and industrial complex. For an in-depth analysis of Magnitogorsk and the Stalinist society that it exemplifies, see Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (U. of California Press, 1997).

²⁴ Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 863.

²⁵ "...a segment of the labour-force used for the construction consisted of Gulag prisoners" (Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2009), 191).

²⁶ Robert C. Tucker, *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev* (Wheatsheaf Books, 1987), 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

doctrine.²⁹ Service claims that while they were not dissidents, they were no enthusiastic communists either. Between the system's failure to deliver the level of material well-being that it promised and its brutalization of the populace, support for it was certainly lower than what the Soviet leaders would have hoped. In a realization that the Soviets' "economic destiny" was predicated upon the degree of "Russian unity, discipline, and patience,"³⁰ Khrushchev tried to improve the system for the common man. He put an end to the brutal tactics of Stalin and the Gulag. He also promised in 1958: "We shall overtake and outstrip the USA, in per capita production of meat, milk and butter!"³¹

It may be argued that Kennan overestimates the degree to which unhappiness was actually an element of the society. "Russian unity, discipline, and patience" were not yet at critically low levels, and they would not be in the near future. After all, the society did not fracture under an impatient desire to increase its economic well-being outside the bounds of the socialist system in the "ten to fifteen years" that Kennan expects.³² Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain* implies that unhappiness and unrest did not dominate society as completely as Kennan understands, but that people learned to live within it. Perhaps more importantly, the liberalizing reforms of Khrushchev, though not entirely effective, eliminated some of the demoralizing factors Kennan points to and thereby delayed the social upheaval foreseen in "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." It was likely because of the reforms that some people remained convinced that socialism was the proper way well into the last years of the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, according to Kotkin, "most people simply wanted the Soviet regime to live up to its promises," and "A strong allegiance to socialism – understood as a state responsibility for the general welfare and social justice – remained very much a part of ordinary people's worldview."³³ Even as late as Gorbachev's ascendancy in the 1980s, "The Soviet Union was not in turmoil."³⁴ The population was, for the most part, willing to accept the economic situation, for employment was high. Dissidence was manageably low, and "Soviet patriotism was very strong."³⁵

Post-Stalinist reforms were instrumental to the resurrection of faith in socialism among the Soviet population and the forestallment of the social crisis that Kennan foresees. In 1947, the Soviet people were still in the shadow of Stalin's violent absolutism, yet to see the relative light of Khrushchev and subsequent leaders. As such, Kennan's view of the coming

²⁹ Service, 199.

³⁰ Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 862.

³¹ Tucker, *Political Culture and Leadership*, 122.

³² Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 862.

³³ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970 – 2000* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2008), 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 27.

popular upheaval would take a longer time than he realized. Considering the inextricable tie between the population's happiness and its economic well-being, it is likely that de-Stalinization, in conjunction with the relative economic success of the 1970s, helped stave off extreme social distress. Stalinist industrial policies planted the seeds of popular discontent, but they remained dormant thanks to Stalin's repression of dissidence and then post-Stalin efforts to alleviate the plight of the people.

The centrally planned industrial sector of the Stalinist years also planted the seeds of industrial and economic decay. These projects, despite their initial success, were ultimately doomed to failure in the long-run. The centrally planned economy, without proper price indicators or incentives, could not adapt properly to the demands of production or the changing world.³⁶ As Kotkin writes in *Armageddon Averted*, Soviet industry's obsession with quantity of output rather than quality of production yielded a highly inefficient and energy-guzzling system which produced steel that had little practical use and poor-quality consumer goods. When factories were judged simply by output tonnage, their managers were not incentivized to create materials that were useful for the economy. Orders from the center – that broken, power-hungry political arena apparently devoid of economic sense – compelled producers to produce in a ridiculous manner. The Soviet Union sought strength and legitimacy in these factories,³⁷ using heavy industry to focus on manufactures for the military but not for consumer goods.³⁸ This is the singular focus on industry that Kennan criticizes as unsustainable and unreasonable, for it fails to address the needs of the country.

The only factor that seems to have sustained the Soviet economy through the 1970s and '80s was the oil windfall of the '70s. As early as the '50s, the United States recognized that oil was the keystone of the Soviet economy; without it, Russian industry could not function.³⁹ Its gas-guzzling industrial sector needed oil badly, especially because inefficiency necessitated even more raw material and energy than similar industries elsewhere in the world. A lucky combination of the identification of oil fields in Siberia and the spike of oil prices (due to the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Arab oil embargo) provided much needed fuel for Soviet industry and income via oil exports.⁴⁰ Oil acted much as grain did in Imperial and Stalinist Russia: its exportation financed industry and the government. But just as Tsar Nicholas II and Stalin exported grain despite domestic need, late Soviet Russia exported oil despite domestic industrial needs, creating shortages. And just as Russia had gotten lucky in the 70s, it got unlucky in the '80s when both oil production and oil prices started decreasing, thereby simultaneously decreasing export-

³⁶ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁸ Service, 304.

³⁹ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

derived revenue and directly hampering industry, the sector with the highest production of the Soviet economy. So, as Kotkin says, oil “merely delayed the inevitable.”⁴¹

The concurrently vulnerable yet immovable nature of the Soviet economy points to the fact that despite Khrushchev’s claims to the contrary, the U.S.S.R. was never really in a position to outstrip the U.S. or achieve the economic greatness that would have legitimized socialism. Kennan writes:

It is difficult to see how these deficiencies can be corrected at an early date by a tired and dispirited population working largely under the shadow of fear and compulsion. And so long as they are not overcome, Russia will remain economically a vulnerable, and in a certain sense impotent, nation, capable of exporting its enthusiasm and of radiating the strange charm of its primitive political vitality but unable to back up those articles of export by the real evidences of material power and prosperity.⁴²

Although the Soviet population may not have been as dispirited as Kennan claims, at least not after the end of Stalinism,⁴³ the Soviets did indeed fail to achieve substantial economic reform necessary to strengthen their system. The centralized planning encouraged inefficiency. It may have built an unparalleled system of heavy industry,⁴⁴ but when the system became obsolete it “proved very bad at taking its rust belt down.”⁴⁵ Western, market-based economies, on the other hand, proved much more adept at handling transitioning away from heavy industry.⁴⁶ So by the late years of the Soviet Union, just as the American economy was reinvigorated and shedding its own malaise, the Soviet system was sinking deeper into obsolescence. It was inundated with decades-old, out-of-date technology and unable to transfer assets to other, more dynamic sectors.⁴⁷ With this failure to overcome capitalism, the Soviet Union lost legitimacy by its own metric. Kotkin argues: “From its inception, the Soviet Union had claimed to be an experiment in socialism, a superior alternative to capitalism, for the entire world. If socialism was not superior to capitalism, its existence could not be justified.”⁴⁸

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 864.

⁴³ At the very least, the population was no longer subjected to the same “shadow of fear and compulsion” after Khrushchev’s reforms.

⁴⁴ The Soviet economy, which was 70 percent heavy industry, was more reliant on heavy industry than any other country in the world (Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 17).

⁴⁵ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷ N.B. The Soviet Union’s efforts at creating a high-tech sector were less than spectacular.

⁴⁸ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 19

Although the failure to create a viable economic system made military competition with the United States entirely unviable, the Soviets kept up the competition. Kennan notes that matters of prestige were very important to the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Perhaps this explains why the leadership was so willing to spend so much on an arms race with the United States. According to Vladislav Zubok's *A Failed Empire*, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov argued that "there was too much inefficiency and too many costly mammoth projects and a suicidal penchant to pursue the United States in the arms race."⁵⁰ Along the lines of Kennan's postulation, the combination of Western pressure and Soviet considerations of prestige trapped the Soviet Union "in a position where it [could not] afford to yield even though this might [have been] dictated by its sense of realism."⁵¹ While the arms race and Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative may not be as important as some Westerners like to claim, the West really did force the Soviet Union to spend more than it could afford. Some Soviet leaders were evidently aware of that, calling for WWII-style mobilization of the populace to support the arms race. During WWII and the years surrounding it, Stalin employed great force, or at least the threat of it. He also held the threat of being sent to the Gulag to extract taxes and resources. Zubok, as if he were trying to prove Kennan's point that the populace could not be mobilized in such a manner for all eternity, writes:

New realities discouraged the return to the old methods of mobilization. The society had irrevocably changed since the 1940s. The huge human resources Stalin had mobilized and squandered, those millions of the collectivized peasantry, young workers, and enthusiastic party cadres, were no longer available. There was little idealism among the elite educated youth; frustrated consumerism, cynicism, and pleasure-seeking took its place.⁵²

In a system that could not provide the material happiness to instill enthusiasm, even within the young intellectuals that once composed part of the core of support, the only way to mobilize the populace was by force. But not since Stalin had the Soviet system had the ability to use such coercive violence.

With the failure of the Soviet economic system came the failure of the ideological system too. The ideology could not provide what it claimed to provide or demonstrate its teleological claim to superiority over capitalism. The Soviet people, subjected to hardship, were unmotivated. Gorbachev was compelled to pursue reforms in the eighties to save socialism, for Stalinism,

⁴⁹ "While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige." (Kennan, 861)

⁵⁰ Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 2007), 277.

⁵¹ Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 861.

⁵² Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 277.

especially its absolutist centralization, had created an economic crisis that undermined the ideology. Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*, often cited as the policies that brought the Soviet Union to its knees, were efforts to fix the decades-old broken elements of the Soviet Union. They were attempts to address these seeds of decay, the sprouting of which was certainly well advanced by the 1980s. Gorbachev's reforms in the late '80s were an effort to clear out the sprouting seeds, to replace the seeds of decay with those of prosperity and vitality. Instead, the policies simply killed the weeds which had been preventing the seeds from blossoming and allowed them to achieve full maturity.

Containment, then, seems to have been an appropriate response to the Soviet Union, especially as compared to the roll-back strategy that would have involved massive military engagements. Although Kennan's timeline proposed in "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" is not consistent with the historical reality and although miscalculates Soviet intentions, his predictions of Soviet weak spots are accurate. Like the capitalism of the Soviets' imaginations, the Soviet socialism of Kennan's writing was deeply flawed in its long-term viability and its ability to maintain order among the proletariat that it failed to appease.