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Decline of the West? George Kennan and His Critics

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for performing the very tedious job of sorting through the endless stream of parroted formulations that takes the place of political discussion in the Soviet Union. (The uninitiated may not be aware of the fact that following a year's worth of political tracts from the newspaper *Pravda* would be less interesting than reading a collection of Vatican speeches on abortion. What one watches for are variations in emphasis, changes in footnotes, renumberings of priorities. This does not make for very exciting reading, although we must all grant that it is quite essential reading if we want civilization to survive in a Western World.)

The problem Gibert faced was how to make a readable and convincing book. That is a considerable challenge, for not only is the original material tedious, but American readers tend not to believe standard Soviet statements. They seem to take the position that Comrade Marshal, two-time winner of the Order of Lenin, Central Committee Member Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov does not really mean what he says about the need to eliminate the American threat. The process by which the American reader comes to that conclusion is never clear. Nor is it ever clear what Comrade Marshal Ivanov means if he did not mean what he said. Why, one wonders, is it more comforting to the American intellectual to deal with a world in which no one means what he says? How, one wonders, does the American think that the Soviets organize their vast country so that everyone repeats the same tedious formulations that indeed no one means?

Gibert's technique for dealing with these problems was to open with some pretty big and frightening guns. He recalled the failures of perception about the Japanese, the Sino-Soviet split, the Cuban situation, the Yom Kippur war and so on. The point is well made, therefore, that we should not trust our judgments and should be wary of our preconceptions.

The reader naturally hopes that Gibert will put the problem of perceptions in some reasonable order. However that hope is soon dashed when he writes:

With regard to Russian perceptions, however, it may be possible to affect those views which do not lie at the core of their national self image, and are not fundamental to the Marxist-Leninist belief system. And of course, as some people are more receptive to religious teachings than others, so also can it be assumed that convictions about communism and its apocalyptic view of the future vary among Soviet leaders.

How could Gibert, who, in preparing this book, must have steeped himself in little beyond war, revolution and death—60 of the cruelist years in history—propose such a bland formulation? Or is that his terrifying message? That there is nothing else to do but to try to trim around the edges?

Gibert's cullings of materials from the Soviet press is quite useful. The book is indeed "very valuable and informative," fulfilling the hope expressed for it by Richard Foster in his introduction. Methodologically, however, it does not help us to assess the degree to which the Soviets are serious about what they say. Perhaps that is an effort that Foster, the Stanford Research Institute, and Gibert will undertake next. We can hope so.

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Herz, Martin F., ed. *Decline of the West? George Kennan And His Critics*. Washington Ethics and Public Policy Center, Georgetown University, 1978. 173pp.

If you want a place in history, scribble! This rule has been upheld as valid back in time through Machiavelli to Thucydides at least—both statesmen and commanders out of power, left to

write about it. The silent statesman bows to the articulate scribe. Historical scholarship is built with documentary bricks and the art of the chronicler. He who writes history determines it; and ideas reshape facts.

So it has been with George F. Kennan. His contribution to the world has been his writing, not his accomplishment in action as a diplomatist. His has been a great contribution, not least because of his genius with words. There is an old story told in the State Department to the effect that Dean Acheson used to take George Kennan's memoranda on policy and assign them to an aide for rewriting. Supposedly the aide was instructed to paraphrase them into standard, pedestrian State Department prose and then return them to Acheson for consideration of the recommendations. Acheson did not wish to be seduced or beguiled by Kennan's eloquence as he considered the substance of Kennan's thought.

If you have the ability to coin an epigram, or write a truly memorable phrase, you had better be careful which way your gun is pointed. After successfully articulating the rationale of U.S. policy in the cold war, Kennan has spent the past 30 years trying to undo his handiwork and curb the onrushing enthusiasm of his disciples. The result has been that Kennan has moved from advocacy of "firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world," to the following position: "Let us divest ourselves of this (nuclear) weapon altogether; let us stake our safety on God's grace and our own good consciences and on that measure of common sense and humanity which even our adversaries possess . . ."

So George Kennan has become a neoisolationist, willing even to say: "Rather red than dead." But such is his eminence and eloquence, that dis-

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tinguished scholars have made careers on interpreting and reinterpreting his thought. The little book under review is just such a reinterpretation.

Point by point, Kennan's opponents appear to have the better of the argument. This is largely due to Kennan's self-assurance in taking incautious positions. For example, Kennan says: "I don't believe in the ability of the Russians to control Western Europe. They just would not know how. They are too crude and clumsy for any such exploits." Having been in Prague myself in 1948, when the Communists took power there, and having seen how Soviet planes and tanks restored Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia in 1968, I am skeptical of Kennan's assertion. Czechoslovakia is an advanced nation, too.

If the foregoing is true, however, it becomes all the more worthwhile to find and savor Kennan's insights as he has much to say to all of us, as always. He speaks wisely of the limits of power. As Eugene Rostow says, "Kennan is an impressionist, a poet, not an earthling."

The book is derivative, consisting of reprints from a variety of sources. Martin F. Herz, the editor, contributes only six pages of his own to the text. That is a pity as Herz also writes well.

But the book is worth reading. It deals with the central foreign policy question of our times. Kennan's thought has dominated our intellectual perception of the Russian-American relationship for 30 years. His shadow will extend far into the future. Those who wish to understand recent history and ponder the prospects ahead must contend with George Kennan, one way or another.

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Johnson, David. *Napoleon's Cavalry and its Leaders*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978. 191pp.

If you are interested in fascinating details about the French Imperial