

George Kennan Memorial Speech

By

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I have the honor of addressing some comments on the last 50 years of George Kennan and his family's life in Princeton.

At a memorial service for George's friend, Margaret Setton, in 1987, he said the following: "Friendship in our fast-moving peripatetic Princeton life has a peculiar quality. We have our friends. We know the kinds of support for which we can depend on them. And we're grateful for it. But we come and go. We're here today and gone tomorrow. It's not like living in a village. We see these friends infrequently. We see them in a sense from a distance. And only when one of them is finally gone, do we realize how extensively we've come to take one another for granted. How little we have penetrated the mystery. How often we have passed each other like ships in the night, taking comfort from the momentary proximity, but settling back then each on his own course."

I've thought about these words a lot in the last couple of days, as I have thought about the mystery of George Kennan and of the 25 years or more that Elaine and I have had the privilege of knowing him and Annelise.

We first met when I became a trustee of the Institute of Advanced Study, when Dick Dilworth gave a dinner on the night before the Board meeting, as is the custom of the Institute, and very nervously we came to the Institute knowing that we were going to meet all these giants of intellect, and I had a background of a rather poor academic experience, and was an investment banker of all things, and wasn't quite sure why I was going to be there.

I took the trouble to read the article in Foreign Affairs so that if I met George Kennan I would at least be able to acknowledge the fact that I had read it and that I could hold my end up with him as I hoped that I would be able to do when I knew that with those that were talking about string theory and about astrophysics that there would be very little that I could say.

I was nervous then, as I was every time I met George, for fear that this great intellect would find out the many inadequacies of my knowledge and my experience. Annelise was wonderful. She took me by the hand, helping

me to keep my composure, and that started a friendship which lasted for all these recent years.

I decided, knowing that I was going to be speaking today, that I should, in fact, prepare myself in case, as I'm sure George is looking down, and that I would be able to penetrate this mystery of George Kennan.

I decided that I should get a few wonderful quotes that I could give you to show my knowledge of his work.

And then the trouble started. And I shared this with Chris yesterday, because I started reading a lot of George Kennan. And unfortunately, I have now been up 'til two and three in the morning, because it's impossible to take a quote from George Kennan. You just get trapped by his writing.

These last couple of nights, when I have been trying to understand this remarkable man, I have read a letter to a Russian friend in New York, a 1938 letter on Germany, from Sketches From a Life, as fresh today as they were when written, even extracts from students of the Democratic left, morality and foreign policy and foreign affairs, nuclear weapons in the Atlantic alignment.

And in autumn of 1986, the discourse, which took me an hour and a half last night, on the mysterious Monsieur de Scion, the Russian surgeon and physiologist, who later became a spy in Paris and ended his life in poverty. And then his comments on the environment in his first perhaps one of the first articles in Foreign Affairs on environmental issues which concerned him very much.

I understood what I learned from Dean Acheson, who apparently was so impressed by George Kennan's writing and so tempted by it, that he insisted on one occasion that the State Department translate one of his lessons and letters into "officialese" of the State Department so that he wouldn't be seduced by the argument.

Subsequently, in his life at the Institute for Advanced Study, George Kennan produced not just these articles, because as I think you know--22 books for which he received two Pulitzer prizes, and countless articles and observations. And this started in 1950, when Robert Oppenheimer decided that he would invite George Kennan to the Institute as a Visitor, and again in 1953 to return there as a Member, and then amazingly in 1956 as a permanent Professor.

I say amazingly because he came in the context of Einstein, von Neumann, Oppenheimer, Gödel, Panofsky, all people of huge academic background, and George himself wrote in his memoirs that he was greatly appreciative of the Institute for Advanced Study, "which took me, already a middle-aged man, devoid of academic credentials, substantially on faith, gambling on the existence of scholarly qualities that remain to be demonstrated."

I was thrilled because, as we look now for professors, we are tremendously careful, and here was a man with a B.A. from Princeton, who turned out to be one of the most luminous people in our history.

As Isaiah Berlin wrote, one of our many-time visitors, that there are two kinds of freedom--the "freedom to" and the "freedom from."

George Kennan sought and found at the Institute for Advanced Study a degree of "freedom from" some of the relentless pressures and demands of public life and from being a professor of a much sought after public voice.

But even more important, he found the "freedom to" become a scholar, to be able to spend all the time the subject required in the way of patient investigation, reading, research, discussion and writing.

But also at the Institute it was important that he deal with the Members, the couple hundred or so that come each year, and George took this tremendously seriously. I asked Jack Matlock what his experience was with George Kennan. Jack told me that at 97, George met with five Members working with Jack. Before the meeting, when they were having tea, George asked Jack if he would give him a synthesis of what the Members were doing, their names, and their background. And at 97 years-old, he came into the tea and one by one, without a note, went to each of the Members, talked to them about their work, and made suggestions to each of what they should do.

George Kennan joins Einstein, von Neumann, and the other luminaries at the Institute, and he gave us such pleasure in these last years of his life. I remember we celebrated when he was 85, and the standing ovation he got at the Foreign Relations Committee. And then, on his 90th birthday, I had the privilege, with many of my colleagues here, of joining Warren Christopher at the State Department when Secretary Christopher and I reintroduced George Kennan back to the State Department.

And to close, let me just read you some of the remarks that he made.

It was a graceful and elegant exposition of the similarities between diplomacy and scholarship, which he presented as kindred professions. Just as many of the finest achievements of the diplomat are often invisible or barely visible, George noted, the true scholar often works in loneliness, compelled to find his reward primarily in the awareness that he has made valuable and sometimes even beautiful contributions to the great cumulative structure of human knowledge and civilization, whether anyone knows it at the time or not.

And then with characteristic modesty, he concluded his views of the Institute and his work. He said, "My personal relationship to the Institute during these years has, in fact, been that of the fly in one of the Russian fables--the fly who rode all day on the oxen's nose, while the oxen was working in the field. And then when they returned to the village in the evening, he, still comfortable, ensconced on the beast's nose, bowed right and left to the villagers and said, 'We've been plowing.'"

George Kennan was a man of brilliance, a warm man to his friends, a soul that he concluded in his speech to Margaret Setton as follows:

"If the soul is immortal, and it is my own profound conviction that it is, that immortality, whatever other forms it may take, would surely be diminished and made less meaningful if it were not supported by affectionate memory and by the enduring power of example amongst those left alive."

George Kennan's memory is supported by wonderment, affection, and love. And let me add that his example has enduring power not only for those of us who are left behind, but for our children and for generations to come.