

Kennan on Vietnam



George Frost Kennan (1904-2005) was an American diplomat and political scientist. In 1946-1947, his articles on Soviet expansionism inspired the US policy of containment. Kennan's American diplomacy, first published in 1951, has become a classic. The 1984 expanded edition encompasses the Vietnam war. As usual, Kennan was trying to understand the flaws of the US foreign policy and to learn the lessons taught by history.

(...) Let me turn to the other great involvement of this country in Far Eastern affairs in the postwar period, one that lasted twenty-five years instead of only three¹: the Vietnam War. I must assume here that all of you have some memories or some knowledge of that prolonged, expensive, unsuccessful, and in every way unfortunate effort on our part to defeat what we saw as the
5 Vietnamese communists (they were really primarily nationalists) and to install some sort of anti-communist government in that country. This effort was obviously tragically misconceived. It is clearly recognizable today as a tremendous blunder of American policy and it raises two great historical questions to which we today ought to give the most careful attention. The first is how we got into the mess in the first place. And the second is why, since it was evident almost from the start
10 that the effort could not be successful. We persisted in it for more than a decade.

In each case the reasons were complex: I do not want to oversimplify a complicated situation, But I might just say this: among the reasons for getting into this tangle in the first place, an important part was played by the belief in Washington that the Russians, as part of their design for world domination, were bent on the military-political conquest of Asia, and that the effort of
15 the Vietnamese communists to establish their power in Southeast Asia was a part of this supposed “design”.

Essential to this scenario we had created for ourselves was the belief that Ho Chi Minh and his followers were only puppets of the Russians, and that therefore a takeover by them in Vietnam would be equivalent to a Soviet conquest. There was general disbelief in Washington that these Viet-
20 nameese Marxists could be more strongly motivated by nationalistic impulses than by their Marxist ideological views.

Both these assumptions were wrong, The Soviet leadership had no preconceived design for world conquest. Its psychology was primarily defensive, Moscow had little, if anything, to do with Ho Chi Minh's efforts to take power in Vietnam at that time. We know today that Soviet connections
25 with the communists in Southeast Asia were at that time actually distant and rudimentary. Ho Chi Minh was indeed primarily a nationalist who, despite his communist ideological rhetoric, would probably have been glad to keep a certain balance in his relations with the Communist world and with us, had we encouraged him to do so. Several of our best experts tried vainly to tell us this.

Let me expand a bit on this tendency of ours to insist on seeing as blind puppets of some other
30 great power weaker or smaller factions or regimes whose relations with that great power are actually much more complicated and much less sinister than that. There seems to be a curious American tendency to search, at all times, for a single external center of evil, to which all our troubles can be attributed, rather than to recognize that there might be multiple sources of resistance to our purposes and undertakings, and that these sources might be relatively independent of each other.

George F. KENNAN, *American Diplomacy*, Chicago University Press, 1984, pages 161-162.

1. Kennan had just dealt with the Korean war.