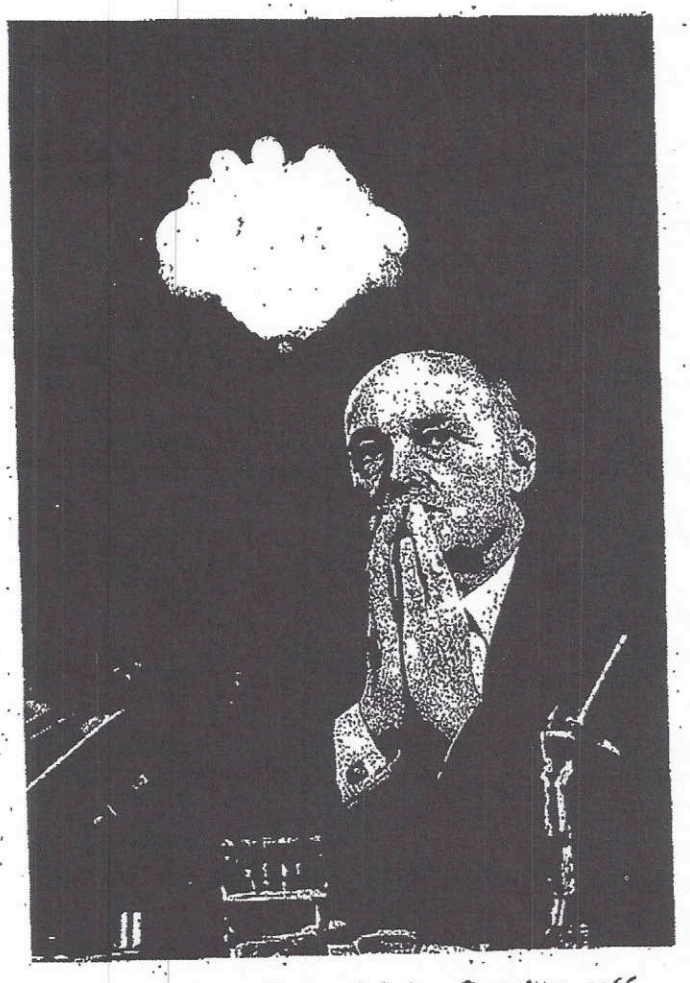
IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

The Quest for CONCEPT

George F. Kennan



Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1966

WHEN ONE GLANCES back at the past, one occasionally sees clear and coherent elements of concept in the thinking of the Federalist statesmen, and fairly clear elements in the thinking of some of their successors down through the middle of the 19th century. The rounding out of the territory of the United States on the North American continent—just or unjust, moral or immoral—was at least a clear and rational concept. And the Monroe Doctrine, in itself more of a principle than a purpose, answered to the same description. These concepts had their foundation in evident and concrete interests of our society. They bore a rational relationship both to the needs of our society's internal life and to the circumstances of its external environment. They were directed to obvious considerations of national security.

Obscurity—obscurantism, if you will—began to creep in, it seems to me, towards the end of the century, as the task of rounding out our territory on this continent was completed, as the frontier disappeared, as those dangers of new European activity in the New World that had attended the Napoleonic wars and their aftermath receded into the past.

With that great transition, there crept into the ideas of Americans about foreign policy something that had not been there in the earlier days. It was a histrionic note—a note of self-consciousness, or pretension. There was a desire not just to *be* something but to *appear* as something: to appear as something greater

perhaps than one actually was. There was a desire to play a role for the sake of playing a role, and to be seen by others as playing it, a desire to compel others to associate themselves with the ritual of self-esteem and self-glorification that was becoming a regular feature of the rhetoric of American public life.

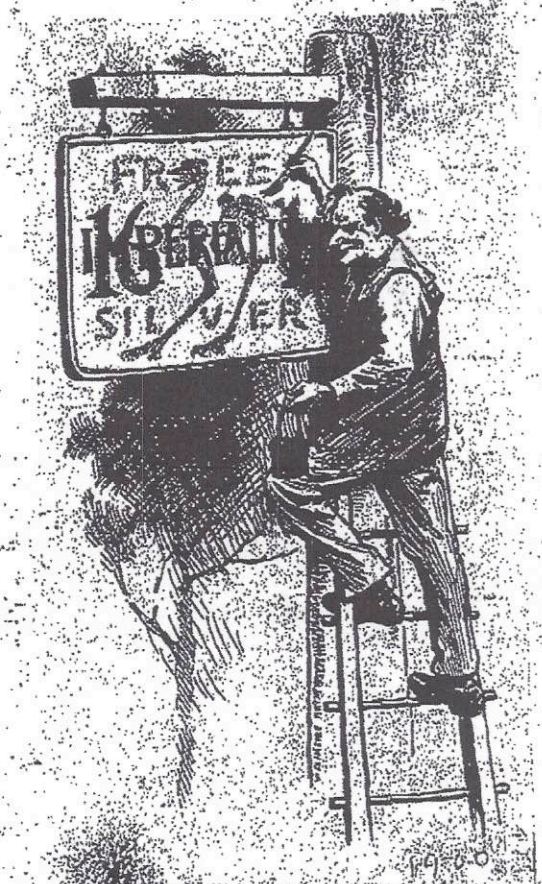
This manifested itself in the imperialism of the turn of the century, in the wave of expansionist fervor that carried us into possession of Hawaii and the Philippines, Puerto Rico and the Canal Zone—all places not contiguous to our national territory. It manifested itself also, strangely enough, in the growth among many Americans of a peculiar emotional and sentimental preoccupation with China and the Asian mainland,—a preoccupation quite divorced from considerations of real national interest.

And it manifested itself as well in a curious enthusiasm for the establishment of legalistic criteria for the solution of international problems. The essence of this enthusiasm was an attempt to transplant to the plane of international life the principles of legality on the basis of which (as the people of that time fondly thought) violence had been successfully banished from our own national life. If, it was thought, legal norms and procedures could be agreed upon in advance to govern the adjudication and settlement of international disputes, then there would be something to which you could take appeal. The sordid substance of international conflict—the specific issues and bones of contention—would have to yield to principle and procedure.

The Needless Treaties

To what extent this outlook came to dominate the mind of American statesmanship will become evident if we recall that just in the thirty-five years from 1898 to 1933 the United States government negotiated, signed and ratified a total of 97 international agreements (most of them bilateral) providing for the settlement of international disputes by arbitration and conciliation. This enormous diplomatic effort occupied much of the time of such eminent Secretaries of State as John Hay, Elihu Root, William Jennings Bryan, and Henry Stimson. Yet the number of disputes actually arbitrated in subsequent years in connection with these treaties was exactly two, and for these acts of arbitration, the treaties themselves were in no way necessary.

All this, too, was concept, if you will, but it was concept founded on a rather childish view of world realities, founded also, I suspect, on a certain gratification of our self-esteem. We saw ourselves as high-mindedly devoted to the enthronement, in international affairs, of the principles of law and orderly behavior. We saw the powers of Europe as wicked; we saw them as bent on intrigue and aggrandizement. This concept had, as an ideal for the future, its attractive, its appealing, sides. But intervening events have demonstrated, if they have demonstrated anything at all, that it was and is wholly inadequate



TRYING TO PAINT OUT THE OLD SIGN.

Bryan-lampooned, 1900.

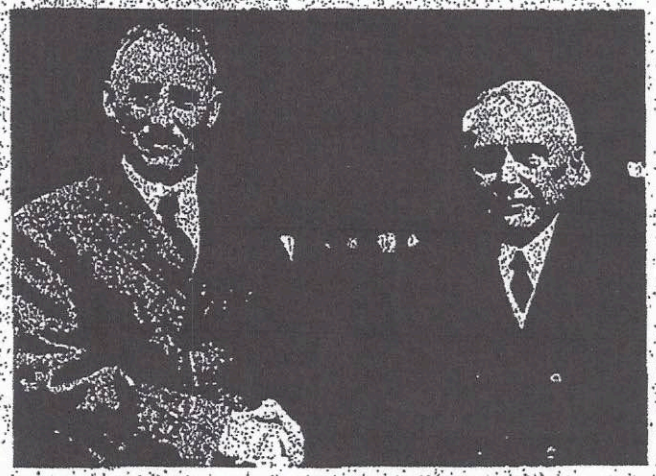
as an approach to the great problems of twentieth-century international life.

Major tests of our ability to create policy on the basis of rational concept came with the two World Wars. In neither case could it be said, I think, that our response had much of concept in it. In neither case did we enter the war as a result of any sober calculation of our own interests. In each case we had to be kicked into it. In the case of World War II we did not enter until the Japanese attacked us and the Germans declared war on us. In each case, before entering the war we saw in its issues nothing that would justify our participation.

Having entered, albeit involuntarily, we at once discovered that the issues were of positively apocalyptic importance. It was inconceivable that any war in which we were involved could be less than momentous and decisive for the entire future of humanity. And out of this grew, then, the characteristic emotionalism of militancy—an emotionalism to which the democratic society, with its incorrigible tendency to self-love, is particularly prone: a state of collective hysteria in which you see your own side as the repository of all virtue and the adversary as the embodiment of all that is evil and inhuman.

I do not mean to overdo this. There were, in both wars, sensible people in this country who saw and tried to hold in mind the real implications for our national security. At the time of World War I, for example, some people saw clearly the stake we had in preserving Britain as a major factor in European and world affairs, and therefore favored our participation. But such considerations did not figure strongly in our total national reaction. And they seemed, in each case, too modest, too earthy, too disillusioned and old-fashioned, to serve as considerations on which to found our approach to the problems of the peace. As each war ended, and it became necessary to talk about the world political future, we took appeal to universalistic, utopian ideals, related not to the specifics of national interest, but to legalistic and moralistic concepts that seemed better to accord with the pretentious significance we had attached to our war effort.

It was inevitable, of course, that these unreal ideals should be frustrated by postwar realities. Faced with



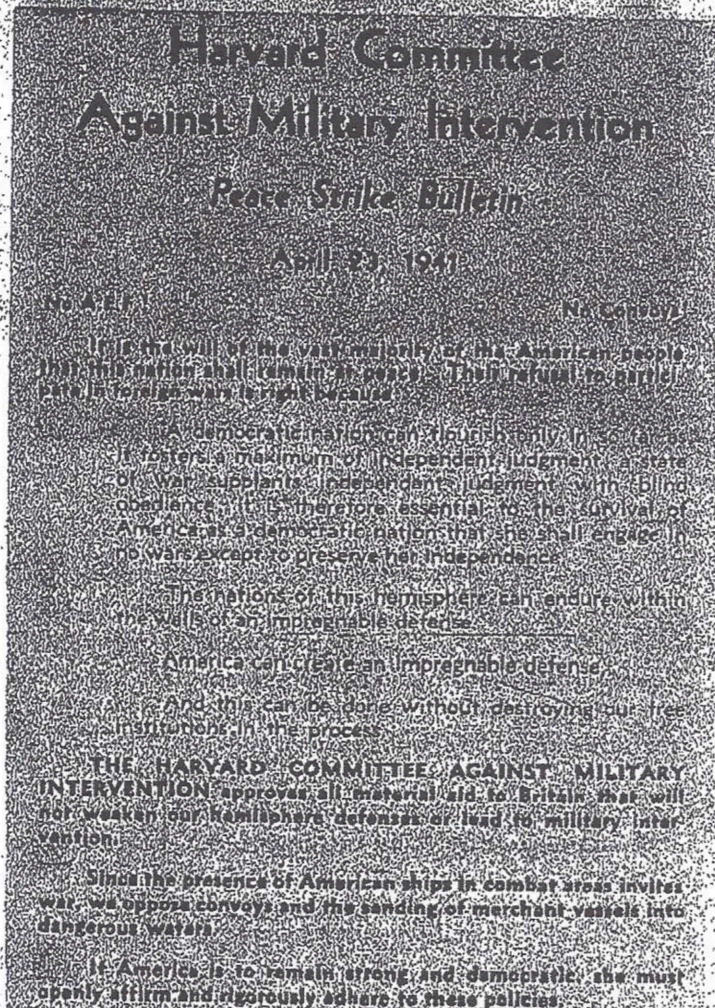
Henry L. Stimson takes over at State. Welcomer: incumbent Frank B. Kellogg (the Kellogg Pact "to outlaw war", 1929.)

this frustration after World War I we were able to retire rapidly into the dreary isolationism of the 1920's. After World War II this was not possible. It was clear that our immediate retirement from involvement in Europe could lead to disasters scarcely smaller than those we had fought to avert.

We had not fought Hitler only to enthrone Stalin as the dictator of Europe. We felt obliged to remain in Europe to resist. But in the name of what ideas were we to mount this resistance? We were not officially at war with Russia. Wartime emotionalism, as we had just experienced it, could not be switched quickly from an ex-enemy to an ostensible ally. Yet legal and moral norms would not do either. The communists could not be appealed to on this basis; nor was what they were doing susceptible to easy classification under any of the established categories

---

After a long and distinguished career in diplomacy, including the directorship of policy planning for the State Department and the ambassadorship to the U.S.S.R., George F. Kennan is now professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and University Fellow, Harvard. This last, a unique position, resembles in many respects a University Professorship. His essay is an abbreviated version of an address at Harvard in the Spring, delivered under the auspices of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History.



Harvard Committee Against Military Intervention

Peace Strike Bulletin

April 23, 1941

No A.E.F.! No Convoys!

It is the will of the vast majority of the American people that this nation shall remain at peace. Their refusal to participate in foreign wars is right because:

A democratic nation can flourish only in so far as it fosters a maximum of independent judgment; a state of war supplants independent judgment with blind obedience. It is therefore essential to the survival of America as a democratic nation that she shall engage in no wars except to preserve her independence.

The nations of this hemisphere can endure within the walls of an impregnable defense.

America can create an impregnable defense.

And this can be done without destroying our free institutions in the process.

THE HARVARD COMMITTEE AGAINST MILITARY INTERVENTION approves all material aid to Britain that will not weaken our hemisphere defenses or lead to military intervention.

Since the presence of American ships in combat areas invites war, we oppose convoys and the sending of merchant vessels into dangerous waters.

If America is to remain strong and democratic, she must openly affirm and rigorously adhere to these policies.

of propriety or legality. Soviet-controlled communism was, for us, a new sort of challenge; and it called for a new way of looking at things.

It was in these circumstances that the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State, of which I was the first director, was established exactly twenty years ago this past April; and it was to the filling of the need for a new rationale of foreign policy that the Staff was obliged to direct its efforts over the three years that I held the position.

What came of our effort was something that came to be popularly talked about as the "doctrine of containment"; but that was just one of those semantic vulgarizations to which our mass media are prone when they lack the patience and the inclination to look at things carefully. What we really tried to do in the Policy Planning Staff was to evolve a workable concept of American foreign policy in the given conditions. With one possible exception — that of Colonel House's so-called "Inquiry" of 1918, designed to help Woodrow Wilson in his confrontation with the problems of the peace conference — our labor constituted, I suppose, the first consistent effort of this nature ever conducted over a prolonged period of time by a single group of responsible people within government.

Now the concept we evolved in the Planning Staff at that time would not be fully valid today. It was directed, as every workable and realistic concept must be, to the situation of the moment. Besides, it had, no doubt, its faults and limitations, as every human intellectual effort must. But it may serve as an illustration — a model, if you prefer — of what a concept of foreign policy might look like. I can summarize here only those elements that related to major aspects of national security.

Disbalance of Power

The concept was addressed primarily to the great disbalance in world power with which the World War had ended and the danger this presented to our security. It recognized that there were, by and large, four areas of the globe, aside from our own country, where industrial potential existed in sufficient strength to produce the sinews of modern war. One was Britain; a second was Germany, with the contiguous industrial centers of the Rhine valley; a third was the Soviet Union; a fourth was Japan. These were the areas whose fate was vitally important to us. China did not figure. The mainland of Asia, in fact, did not figure. There was no place on the mainland of Asia where industrial strength could be developed on a scale large enough to do us significant harm.

At the time we undertook our work, only one of those four areas, namely the Soviet Union, was in hands that had to be regarded as hostile. What seemed to us essential to American security was that none of the other three — but particularly not the contiguous ones of Germany and Japan — should fall under Soviet influence as well and thus become associated with Soviet industrial and military potential.

We did not see any appreciable danger of this occurring as a result of an outright Soviet military attack. We saw no evidence that such an attack entered into the pattern of Soviet outlooks and intentions. We saw very strong evidence that it did not. We did see a danger that further industrial areas might fall under Soviet control by virtue of internal political changes—as a result, that is, of the seizure of power by communist minorities. We observed the intensive efforts that were being made by various communist parties, with Moscow's encouragement and support, in just this direction, particularly in Western Europe. It was our judgment that these efforts, if successful, would jeopardize American strategic and political interests. And it was to this, primarily, that we addressed our attention.

Precisely because we did not attempt to judge these things legalistically or moralistically, we were in a position to discriminate geographically in assessing the degree of danger these communist efforts presented for us. We were at liberty to regard the possibility of a communist take-over in one of the world's great industrial countries as more dangerous to us than a similar take-over in a small weak country whose resources could scarcely play an important part in the power balance. We were at liberty, in areas that seemed to us important, to concentrate on the Communist threat, or, in areas that did not, to react less decisively or even to ignore it.

And just as we did not see the danger of the spread of communism as a danger of military attack across borders, so we did not see the answer to it in military intervention on our part. We thought that the dispatch of American forces to any of these threatened areas would, in fact, be self-defeating. The idea of strategic bombing as a weapon against communist infiltration and subversion would have been strange to us. What seemed to us desirable was to stimulate and encourage the rise of indigenous political resistance to communist pressures in the threatened countries. We believed that unless the people and governments of those countries operating through their own political systems, could be induced to pick up the great burden of this load, success was not likely. For us to attempt to carry that burden would have effects—such as the paralysis of local initiative and responsibility, or the negative impact which a great foreign presence inevitably has on the natives of a country—which would tend to defeat the purpose of the undertaking.

It was largely for this reason that we insisted, in the Marshall Plan, that the Europeans come up with their own ideas, that they set up their own program and their own organization and take full responsibility for them, that we ourselves not be a part of the program or the organization, but only the friend and supporter of both.

It was for the same reason that later, when the problems of NATO and European unification came up for consideration, I myself at any rate (I shall not speak for all the Staff here) opposed the so-called Atlantic approach—the integral association, that is, of the United States with the countries of Western Europe in a common alliance or a common effort of political union. To me, as to General de Gaulle today, this seemed to suggest a role for the United States in European affairs too preponderant for the good of the objectives at stake. I believed that the United

"A policy might reasonably be expected to have a reason—or, since there can never be a single reason for something so complex as a foreign policy, then a bundle of reasons, coherently inter-related, which we might call in their entirety a rationale," Mr. Kennan believes. "What I am talking about, in other words, is the guiding motivation of foreign policy at any given time: what people think they are doing when they create it; what purposes they think they are serving; to what principles they believe themselves to be conforming."

"There have been statesmen full of purpose, but quite unprincipled; and there have been statesmen firm in principle but quite devoid of purpose. The one extreme is usually characteristic of an over-active policy, the other—of an over-passive one. If one has to choose between the two, I think I prefer the emphasis to be on principle; but this is a common prejudice of the professional diplomat. It is best, unquestionably, to have a bit of both. And it is the combination of the two that I have in mind when I speak of concept."

States could stimulate effective resistance to communist pressures elsewhere only to the extent that it observed a certain prudent detachment, endeavoring to release useful energies and impulses in others, not trying to create them or to insert our own in their place.

Not Only Resisting Communism

It seemed, furthermore, to us in the Planning Staff, that if our efforts of assistance to others, particularly economic assistance, were to be effective, they must not be directed, or appear to be directed, only or even primarily to the negative objective of resisting communism. This would merely give the recipient peoples the impression that they were being made pawns in a great-power rivalry. It would undermine their sense of self-interest. Aid had to be directed—not just appear to be directed, but really be directed—to positive, constructive purposes, as in the Marshall Plan. The political effects would have to be indirect, not direct. People could be successfully encouraged to resist communism only to the extent they could be shown a higher, more lasting, and more constructive purpose than mere political defense.

In short, we in the Planning Staff were concerned to restore an adequate balance of power in Europe and eventually in Asia. We thought that once such a balance had been restored, we would negotiate a military and political Soviet retirement from Central Europe in return for a similar retirement on our part. We saw no virtue in keeping our military forces nose to nose with those of Russia. We welcomed the prospect of the emergence, between Russia and ourselves, of a Europe that would be neither an extension of Soviet military power nor of our own. We thought all this could be achieved by indirect, political means. It was our hope that if we could make progress along the lines I have described, there would be a good chance that the world would be carried successfully through the immediate crisis of instability flowing from the defeat of Germany and Japan. New vistas might later open up—vistas not visible at that time—for the employment of our great national strength to constructive and hopeful ends.

This concept was never fully understood by those who had the power of decision in matters of American policy. To the extent that it was understood, it was rarely accepted or implemented. The Marshall Plan was the only measure of policy entirely in accord with it. Its erosion, as a guide to policy, began almost before it was completely formulated. One by one, its essential elements were abandoned over the coming years. Some became casualties to a more military concept of the cold war; some to a desire on the part of leading political figures for more pretentious and impressive formulas of American objectives; some to a sentimental belief in the great destiny of America on the mainland of Asia; some to the domestic-political interests of favored allies.

Containment and Vietnam

The Vietnam involvement, as you know, marches under the same semantic banner as that under which our Planning Staff marched just twenty years ago this spring—namely, the banner of "containment." So similar is the stated purpose that I sometimes find myself being asked the puzzled question: "But you are the author of the doctrine: why are you not enthusiastic about Vietnam?"

The answer will be readily apparent, I think, to anyone who glances at the official rationale and methodology of our Vietnam policy and compares it with the concept I have just exposed to you. Point for point, there is no correspondence.

Now there might be some among you who would argue that the official rationale of our Vietnam involvement also represents concept; that the Administration's view might be the right one, and our view of 1947 the wrong one. Theoretically, this is quite possible. Actually, I think it is not so. Everyone knows that our entry into the Vietnam involvement did not come as a result of rational reflection—that it was rather the result of a long exercise in national inadvertence, of a long series of partial decisions, none of them taken with any clear comprehension of the depths of involvement to which they were bringing us. Decisions were inspired by what you will—by offended pride, by illusions of omnipotence, by personal commitment to the effectiveness of certain forms of weaponry, by attachment to the idea of universal

GIVE THIS DOVE A CHANCE.
DOVE OF PEACE TO THE AMERICAN EAGLE: "Excuse me for interrupting, but would you mind counting off the perch?"
From the Tribune (Minneapolis).

c. 1918

legal and moral norms, by sentimental enthusiasm about Asia and America's role in Asia, by an over-militarist view of the cold war, by lack of discrimination with regard to the evolution of world communism.

I do not know — none of us can know — whether our involvement in Vietnam is going to end in such a way as to permit us to have another chance to construct foreign policy on the basis of concept. It is difficult to conceive, personally, of any outcome of our present efforts and approaches that would be less than disastrous.

But I have seen too much of international affairs to suppose that just because no favorable solution to a problem is visible or conceivable at a given moment, none will ever be found; and I am too well aware of my own tendency to pessimism to place full trust in my poor powers of analysis. We must continue to hope that this conflict will find its termination in some way that permits us to resume constructive conceptual thinking, and we must be prepared for that eventuality if it does come.

It would be wrong, of course, to exaggerate the role that concept could play in the formulation of American policy, even in those happy circumstances. Inevitably, in our democracy, the process of decision is a confused one, involving the interaction of a great many people each of whom has his own ideas, his own outlooks, his own motives — each of whom appears only episodically, often briefly, on the scene of governmental responsibility. In such a political system, concept can never play the same commanding disciplinary role that it might play in a general staff in wartime.

But to say that the role of concept is necessarily limited in such a system is not to say that it can be dispensed with altogether. Even if it does not find expression in any formalized and authoritative way, it is something that can exist and ought to exist in individual minds. These minds ought to be enriched, and to the maximum extent united, or at least placed into effective communication with each other, by a common set of appreciations and assumptions and principles in this field. It is here that education comes in. It is here that the university has its place. It is here that serious public discussion, reasonable argument and debate, are indispensable.

It remains my hope that if the Vietnam situation takes a turn that permits us once again to conduct our affairs on the basis of deliberate intentions rather than just yielding ourselves to be whip-sawed by the dynamics of a situation beyond our control, we will take up once more the quest for concept as a basis for national policy. And I hope that when we do, what we will try to evolve is concept based on a modest unsparing view of ourselves; on a careful examination of our national interest, devoid of all utopian and universalistic pretensions; and upon a sober, discriminating view of the world beyond our borders — a view that takes account of the element of relativity in all antagonisms and friendships, that sees in others neither angels nor devils, neither heroes nor blackguards; a concept, finally, which accepts it as our purpose not to abolish all violence and injustice from the workings of international society but to confine those inevitable concomitants of the human predicament to levels of intensity that do not threaten the very existence of civilization.

If concept could be based on these principles, if we could apply to its creation the enormous resources of intelligence and ingenuity and sincerity that do exist in this country, and if we could refine it and popularize it through those traditional processes of rational discussion and debate on the efficacy of which, in reality, our whole political tradition is predicated, then I could see this country some day making, as it has never made to date, a contribution to world stability and to human progress commensurate with its commanding physical power.