

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

GEORGE FROST KENNAN

Oral History Project

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THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

PATRICIA H. LABALME
Secretary of the Corporation

PREFACE

The following manuscript contains the edited transcript of the second of two interviews with George F. Kennan. This interview was recorded at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, on February 27, 1990, and conducted by Patricia H. Labalme.

George Kennan was born in 1904 in Wisconsin. He received his B.A. from Princeton University in 1925 and entered the diplomatic service, serving in Geneva, Hamburg, Berlin, Moscow, Vienna, Prague and Lisbon. He was ambassador to the Soviet Union (1952) and to Yugoslavia (1961-63). He was the founder and first Director of the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State (1947) and was Counselor of the Department of State in 1949.

In 1950, George Kennan came to the Institute for Advanced Study as a visiting member, and in 1951 he was appointed a long-term member of the Institute. In 1956, he became a Professor in the School of Historical Studies and Professor Emeritus in 1974. He has taught at Princeton and Yale Universities and served as a fellow in the Department of History and Slavic Civilizations at Harvard University. He was the George Eastman Visiting Professor at Balliol College, the University of Oxford in 1957-58, and a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College in 1969. In 1967 he served as President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 1975 he founded The Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in Washington, D.C.

Among his books are American Diplomacy (1951), Russia Leaves the War (1956), Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin (1961), Memoirs (Vol. I in 1967, Vol. II in 1972), The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy (1977), The Decline of Bismarck's European Order (1979), The Nuclear Delusion (1982), The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War (1984), and Sketches from a Life (1989).

The reader should be aware that the following is a transcript of the spoken word, that it attempts to preserve the spontaneity and informality of the original tape, and that the views expressed therein are those of the narrator.

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George F. Kennan
SIGNATURE OF NARRATOR

Patricia H. Labaline
SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWER

Date:

CONTENTS:

Tapes (2 cassettes) and transcript of interview on February 27, 1990

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CONTENTS:

Tapes and transcript of interview on August 30, 1989

From The Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton NJ USA
Oral History Project, Box 8, Kennan, George Frost-Interview

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE F. KENNAN

(This is the first of two interviews)

Date: August 30, 1989
Place: Princeton, New Jersey
Interviewer: Patricia H. Labalme

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE:

LABALME: I haven't seen this letter to Marty Segal.¹

KENNAN: Well, this was a very serious letter about the Institute, its organization, its possibilities, and ought to be available to you.

LABALME: Good.

KENNAN: I can't remember who Mr. Segal was.

LABALME: Well, he's still a Trustee. Martin Segal.

KENNAN: Ah! That was it.

LABALME: And he was Chairman of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. But he also chaired the Review Committee in 1976, too, in that connection.

KENNAN: Well, it was no doubt in this respect that I wrote this to him. However it is the most serious thing that I ever wrote about the Institute, and what I suggested for how it might be improved and so forth.

LABALME: I'd love to look this over but I won't address it right now since I haven't had a chance to read it. Can we begin with the beginning? You came in 1950?

KENNAN: I did.

¹A copy of Professor Kennan's letter to Martin Segal is attached to the transcript.

LABALME: What brought you to the Institute?

KENNAN: Of course, I'm going to try to avoid saying the things that I already said in my Memoirs which I gather you've read.

LABALME: I've read them.

KENNAN: As you know from the Memoirs I met Robert Oppenheimer for the first time when I was in charge of the political or non-military instruction at the National War College in the first year of its existence, and he came there to lecture. So I knew him from that time on. I think he remembered me from coming over there to lecture. Then the next year--or no, not the next year, four years later, I think early in the 1950s--I probably met him even earlier than 1950. Probably in 1948 or '49 as head of the Planning Staff. I can't remember all of the meetings within Government that took place within those years. My poor memory, I am sure. But I do recall being involved with him in early 1950 in the question of whether to go ahead with the hydrogen bomb. I wrote at that time, and I am sure I showed it to him, a paper for Mr. [Dean] Acheson. It was a personal paper because I retired from my position as head of the planning staff on the last day of 1949 and remained only as Counselor of the State Department, which is a position in which you had no institutional staff for you at all. (It was purely a personal position.) It was in that capacity that I wrote this paper for Mr. Acheson which I regard in retrospect as one of the most important I ever wrote. I was quite disappointed recently that Mac [McGeorge] Bundy hardly mentioned it in his history.

LABALME: Is it published anywhere? Is it available?

KENNAN: In the foreign relation series, a portion of it is published.

LABALME: Right.

KENNAN: But in any case that pertained to a problem with which Robert Oppenheimer was so very much involved at that time from a different point of view. We, I know, discussed it. We were almost alone in opposing the intention of our Government--and its decisions--to go ahead and develop the hydrogen bomb. So far as I know no one paid any attention to us. But that brought us together. Then I have a vague memory that there was, at some time in the late winter or spring of 1950, a conference up here at Princeton. I can't remember what it was, but both Oppenheimer and I attended it. I'm not sure that he did not chair it. But I do remember coming up here to attend it. I stayed at his house by his invitation, and he got me fearfully drunk on one these monstrous martini cocktails that he used to--[Laughter]

LABALME: Did he really?

KENNAN: --prepare himself. (Of course, everybody's always to blame for his own actions). At any rate, I stayed there and I got to know him.² I enjoyed his company and enjoyed being his guest, despite the cocktail. And it was not the last time, as I recall it. I was there many times for evenings later, with him and with Kitty. And even on that first occasion we enjoyed each other's company and I think he respected my mind if not my experience, because I hadn't had very much at that time, and I knew nothing about science. So when I finally decided that year--I can't

²Kennan's letter of thanks to Oppenheimer for this visit is dated January 9, 1950.

remember whether it was before or after the conference--to ask for a long leave of absence from the State Department because felt I had exhausted my usefulness there at the time, and when I had received the permission for it, he himself, as I recall it, asked me whether I would not be interested in coming as a temporary Member to the Institute.³ This was indeed, for me, a wonderful opportunity, because I didn't know what else I would have done with this year except to go out to our farm and try to write or something out there. But this was far better and I accepted it. I might interject at that point that it was not the first time--neither at the conference nor when I came--not the first time I had seen the Institute; because I came here once before (I cannot remember, I think it was in connection with the 200th anniversary of the University in 1946). I believe that on that occasion, it must have been, I came out and called on Dr. Aydelotte who was then the Director. I have a very slight memory of this. I called on him at his home over there. I have very little recollection even of what he looked like. I found him a mild, tolerant, relaxed scholar in the humanities as I remember it--of the older generation such as I might have met here in Princeton 25 years before--or whatever it was--when I graduated. I had a pleasant conversation with him, but I don't think that at that time we discussed any possibility of my coming here.

LABALME: Had you been aware of the Institute as a place, as a entity?

³Telegram to George Kennan from Robert Oppenheimer, dated February 16, 1950, reads: "Formal letter of appointment in the mails."

KENNAN: Hardly at all. And how I came to come to call on him I can't remember. It may have been through Ed Earle, who took an interest in my work, I think, even before I left government, and had a lot to do with encouraging Oppenheimer, I'm sure, to invite me here.

LABALME: Yes.

KENNAN: Earle, as I think you may remember, had written a book on American strategy, together, if I remember correctly, with Gordon Craig at the University; and that was probably what brought me. I had read his book⁴, incidentally, and it may have been that I wanted to call on him when I was here, and he suggested that I see Aydelotte. In other words, there had been contact with the Institute before Oppenheimer approached me--presumably through Ed Earle. I'm sorry to be so vague about this.

LABALME: That's all right.

KENNAN: This is the way memories are at this distance.

LABALME: It's a while ago.

KENNAN: So that the time I came up for the conference was presumably the time at which I stayed at the Oppenheimer's house. I'm afraid that the clearest memories I have of that occasion were the hangover I had the next day, but in any case, that was not the first time I had been here.

LABALME: Once you came, it seems to me from what I've read in the files, there was a very warm relationship between Oppenheimer and you.

KENNAN: Yes, although we had not known each other extensively at all, we were drawn to each other--I, through great admiration for him for his

⁴Makers of Modern Strategy

extraordinary mind and all of his qualities which I talked about in the Memoirs, and I think he perhaps was relieved to find someone in government that he thought was more open to general intellectual discourse.

LABALME: And you had in common this commitment to public service.

KENNAN: That is correct, and we both understood that. This was not so uncommon even at that date, in the years right after the war. The young men who wrote the book called The Wise Men seemed to be astounded that we were devoted to the public interest (which is more of a commentary on their time than on ours).

LABALME: Isn't it? It's so true. But Oppenheimer was very supportive over the years of your struggle between these two worlds.

KENNAN: Yes, he was. He understood it, and I owe everything to him. You see, it was at the end of that period of long leave of absence, after only a year and a quarter of it, that I was asked to go as ambassador to Russia. I was still a member of the American Foreign Service, only on leave of absence. And the idea would have been strange to me not to accept an appointment given to me by the President. Had I already been a private person it might have been somewhat different. But in any case, as I say, I was still a member of the Foreign Service; and I regarded it as a matter of course that being asked to take this position I had to go and do it. I think that Oppenheimer understood that. However, as you know, it lasted very briefly. I was back here in this country before I knew it. And then when I came back, arrangements were made for the support of my work at the Institute by the Rockefeller Foundation and by the Institute itself. Robert Oppenheimer arranged that and invited me to come back here

under those arrangements. I was, of course, not a member of the Faculty. This was a rather long-term invitation which was also unusual, but it was offered to me. And I regard this, in retrospect, as an absolutely crucial turning point in my life. I had no academic credentials. No university would have taken me on their faculty. I'd never written anything in particular for publication, except the X article and a couple of others. I had been here, of course, the first time, when I was on leave of absence in 1950. I had arrived here in August of that year, I think. At that time, incidentally, we were put up in what was called the dog kennel.

LABALME: What was that?

KENNAN: It was a little building which had been used for some such purpose on the terrain right where, as you go around the circle and turn off to go on Maxwell Lane. There was no through road there at that time. The little building lay in the meadow. It was given to us, at first, to live in. I then settled down to work, and I will tell you about that a little later if I may revert to it. But to hold my line of reminiscence here: it was then later that year, around December, that I was reminded by the University of Chicago Press that I had lightheartedly, when still in government, accepted an invitation to go out there and deliver six lectures in the spring of 1951. I had accepted it very frivolously, and had even forgotten that they said that they had the right to publish the lectures. So as the time for this approached, I did have to work on these lectures. They were to be on American diplomacy, some comments on American diplomacy over the first half of this century. So that I did while here at the Institute; and I went out and did deliver them. That is

recounted also, I think, in the Memoirs. These lectures proved to be extraordinarily successful. They began in a student lounge with students sitting around on all four sides, on the floor. But the next day they had to move them into a large place, and they ended up in the great hall for, I don't know, a thousand or so people. I lost, incidentally, as soon as I had to talk in a place like that, the direct contact with my listeners I had had at the outset.

LABALME: Yes, it became formal.

KENNAN: Yes, but in any case, they did get published. The University of Chicago was horrified to find that I hadn't written all of them out. The last one was dictated in the offices of the publishing company, with a thousand typewriters going around me, on the morning of its delivery. They got me down there by the scruff of the neck and said: you've got to produce this before you deliver the lectures. Well, these lectures proved to be the most successful thing I ever published. I received just yesterday a royalty of \$2,300 still on these lectures. They're still being assigned as supplementary reading to students.

LABALME: On American diplomacy?

KENNAN: On American diplomacy, because they were more informal. Somehow or other, there wasn't anything quite like them. They're dated in many ways now. They had thus been already given at the time when I was asked to go as ambassador to Russia. They had been published; and they had been, as I recall it, well reviewed. (I'd have to check on the dates of this.) So that Oppenheimer, in asking me to come back here after my

tour of duty in Moscow, had something more to go on, in the scholarly sense, than he had had before.

LABALME: How did the colleagues--well, they weren't yet professorial colleagues, but you surely knew them, and you mentioned Ed Earle--feel?

KENNAN: Ed Earle was strongly supportive all the way through. When I was preparing to give these lectures, I became suddenly aware of my ignorance about these things. And because one of them dealt with World War I and Wilson's diplomacy, and so forth, and here was Arthur Link right in town, I did, with Earle's encouragement ask some people to come together here from various parts of the country and to join me in critically going over this terrain that I expected to cover.

LABALME: A kind of a seminar.

KENNAN: Yes. It took place down there in the E Building, in their little conference room there. Earle was there, of course. I think he chaired it. There were various others, diplomatic historians: Dick Leopold from Northwestern University; I think probably Herbert Feis, and so forth. And these people did take me to pieces gently and very usefully. I think that generally they were encouraged with the results. This, I suppose, got back to Oppenheimer; and it was the appearance of the book, of course, plus that conference here that had been held in preparation for it, that probably gave him the academic foundation he needed for offering me a longer term appointment.

LABALME: And then when you came back, what did you engage yourself in?

KENNAN: Oh, you know, the X article had made its way and I was pursued by the usual importunities and pressures for other such contributions.

And, very foolishly I yielded to some of those. One was to go on to become a member of the initial Board of Trustees of the Ford Foundation. Paul Hoffman, the first head of the Foundation, had great ideas of assuring world peace through this agency. I was just inexperienced enough to believe all that, and I immediately got caught in this activity.

[There were] other pressures--very, very intense and very difficult to cope with for anyone as inexperienced as I was; and I began to feel the tension between these pressures and what I wanted to do as a scholar here.

LABALME: That tension really has followed you all long.

KENNAN: All my life and down to the present day, really. When I first came here before my ambassadorship in 1950, Oppenheimer said to me, "I would recommend that you don't start to try to write anything, that you sit down and do some basic reading"--because I was very poorly educated--"and take these months to do this." I foolishly didn't and have always regretted it. He was absolutely right. I was a damn fool not to listen to him.

LABALME: It's turned out all right. There's something in the Memoirs that intrigues me. The first day you describe how you went to the University book store and you picked out Calvin's Institutes and you read in it.

KENNAN: Well I loved it. I was just ripe for all this. I had had experience in government. I was now more mature. I just ate this stuff up. When I went to the National War College to lecture to these officers, I began to read up on the theoretical works on strategy which I found in Ed Earle's book. I was absolutely fascinated by this--I was open for

all this. It was the right time in my life, and my experience permitted me to relate to it. I should have done, of course, what Oppenheimer said. I certainly did--except for those Chicago lectures--misuse a lot of my time.

LABALME: I mention Calvin because Calvin had a great sense that resonates with what you talked about, of being led through so many turnabouts in life. He never expected to be a religious leader, and I wondered if you sensed some affinity with him.

KENNAN: Well, although I had of course been brought up a Presbyterian, I never felt very close to the Calvinists ideologically or religiously. But I was entranced with the mode of thought of a man of Calvin's time.

LABALME: And the clarity of expression.

KENNAN: Yes, and how much of it was relevant to the present day. Well, when I came back here, I remembered the follies of my first months here, before my brief ambassadorship in Russia, when I had gotten involved in too many other things. And although I continued to fumble with this problem even after I got back, nevertheless I came back resolved that I would now do some serious studying and would try to do some serious academic writing. And that was origin of the two volumes on the early period of Soviet-American relations. This was something I considered myself competent to write through my own experience, and the languages I knew, and so forth. The two books were successful beyond my expectations. The first did get the Pulitzer prize and several others. It was supported by my colleagues here. I told of the encouragement that Eka¹ gave me. I can't remember when Ed Earle died. I'm not sure that he--.

1. Ernst Kantorowicz

LABALME: '54.

KENNAN: Yes, I think he died just about the time that it appeared, but anyway Oppenheimer always encouraged it.

LABALME: Do you remember what Eka contributed? You say that he read the manuscript.

KENNAN: Well, he criticized the manuscript from the professional historical standpoint: when a historian could or couldn't use the first person, and that sort of tricks of the trade. There were parts, I can't remember what they were, of the draft that he read which he thought sounded unprofessional and which he would have put in a little different way.

LABALME: Yes.

KENNAN: And I was very happy to have these suggestions; I learned from them; they registered; I saw right away that he was right. I loved to have this kind of criticism. I don't think that the draft was shown to [E.L.] Woodward. I'm not sure that Woodward was here at that time. I don't know what he would have said to it; he was a very severe critic.

LABALME: You speak at one point, I think it's in a letter to Oppenheimer, of the loneliness of a historian.

KENNAN: Well, this is something that has always impressed me, especially in connection with the subjects I've worked on. This particular one, for example. There was, at that time, almost no one else working on it. And the same thing later with the Franco-Russian alliance. In working on that subject, I was totally alone in this country. There was nobody at the Institute with whom I could talk these things over, never has been.

LABALME: Or at the University?

KENNAN: Or at the University. It would have been nicer, and I'm sure that it would have been good for me, if I'd been working somewhere where other people were working on these things. I just received and have been looking today at a bundle of articles from an East German lady professor who has been working on this same period, who had read my first volume but never dared try to communicate, and who now sent me reprints of things she had written. It just shows you how far apart people were who worked in this field.

LABALME: Yes. This is on the Franco-Russian treaty?

KENNAN: Yes.

LABALME: How did you come to that, because the earlier topics were American diplomacy 1917-1918?

KENNAN: Well, I'll tell you. The work on the earlier topic drove into my awareness what a tremendous disaster World War I had been. It had been a disaster for all the participants. I had observed how people had been thrilled when it broke out, and thought it was going to be a great event. And then I reflected to myself: look what this meant--for the Czar's government, total disaster for the entire generation that had been connected with it; and for the French government: a really terrible defeat, for nothing in the peace settlement could make good what the French had lost in that war, and then--only to be confronted fifteen years later with Hitler. And I thought, how could men have made so great a miscalculation as they went into this first world war with high hopes. And I thought: I will look at this and see whether I can find, by looking

at what was in their minds at the time--they concluded this treaty [in 1895]--why men make certain kinds of mistakes. And then I discovered that there was very little good literature on this alliance. Only one book existed. That was in French, didn't carry the story very far, and treated purely the diplomatic side of it. It didn't go into the psychological side, or motivations of people, or anything like that. So I thought, I have to do this myself. Well, then I discovered that before the negotiations ever began, there was a long history of the development of European diplomacy in the '70s and in the '80s that led to this relationship, led to the very possibility of such an alliance. And I found that so much was mysterious and unknown about all that, that I wrote the first fat volume just on that background. All of this was, if you will, dilettante history.

LABALME: Why do you call it dilettante history?

KENNAN: Because I hadn't been a teacher in history, you see.

LABALME: That doesn't make you a dilettante.

KENNAN: I know, but the Institute is one of the few places where that sort of writing could have been done. I don't think that there was any other place where this sort of writing could have been done. I was pressed very strongly a little later on, in the '60s, to take appointments both at Harvard and at Yale. Great temptations lay in my path. But on reflection--well, of course, there are other personal reasons too: I didn't want Annelise to be moved again; she'd had to move about thirteen times in the foreign service, and I thought what a tremendous sacrifice that was, and I recognized her need for a permanent home. But I also

realized that given the sort of thing I did, and the never-ending struggle against all these other pressures, if I'd had to go through that together with a teaching career, I could never have been productive as a scholar. That's why I stayed here. And that's a commentary on the Institute, of course.

LABALME: Indeed, it is.

KENNAN: Well then, I had written those two books on Soviet-American relations. They appeared; they were reviewed; and one had the reactions of the scholarly community to them. It was on that basis, I assume, that in 1956-57, when I was at Oxford, Oppenheimer told me that my colleagues here had offered me a permanent faculty position.⁵ But, said he, I want you to know that the only doubts that were expressed among them related to the question of whether you intended to be a scholar for the remainder of your life. And if you don't, I want to say to you that I don't think you should accept the offer. That seemed to me fair enough. And I had to examine myself very carefully.

LABALME: That letter's not in the files.⁶

KENNAN: It must be in my files.

⁵George Kennan was elected a professor November 15, 1955, his professorship to begin January 1, 1956.

⁶There is a letter of 4 December 1962 in which Oppenheimer wrote Kennan while Kennan was still ambassador to Yugoslavia and deciding on whether to return to the Institute or accept an appointment at Harvard or Yale: "It is...clear that no man would have reason to accept a professorship at the Institute unless he had a serious and continuing interest in advanced study. There is no presumption that the subject of study, or the style, will be the same after a man has been here a while as it was to start with, and important changes have indeed occurred in the intellectual development of many members of our faculty" [ed.].

LABALME: That would be interesting, because what I've read sounded so supportive of anything you should choose to do.

KENNAN: Yes. Well he left it to me. But I thought he was absolutely right to tell me about this and to force me to face this before I accepted the professorship. I'm still full of amazement that the position was ever offered to me by these colleagues. They could be very, very difficult people and especially about professorial appointments.

LABALME: Indeed. But you came and then later, of course, you did go to Yugoslavia.

KENNAN: Yes, I did that. I think Oppenheimer understood that very well too, because, you see, both of us had been the victims not of McCarthyism, not in its direct form, but of the atmosphere that surrounded it. I mean, he had faced--at the same time--all of these same difficulties. This was really why Foster Dulles had let me out of the Foreign Service. And he had done so unjustly. I hadn't done anything to merit that. Oppenheimer was aware of this, and he was aware that he too had been treated unjustly. And when Kennedy came and took a different attitude toward him, and also toward me, and offered me an appointment either in Yugoslavia or in Poland, I was well aware, and so was Oppenheimer, that he did this thinking that this was to make amends for the way the government had treated me in 1953. So I thought I ought to take it--that I shouldn't rebuff the President here. And I don't think it was bad for me that I accepted it, even from the standpoint of the Institute.

LABALME: Well, it enlarged your scholarly writings.

KENNAN: It enlarged them. And actually, I got interested in the history of that area. In order to encourage the other officers of the embassy, I even wrote a little history of medieval Serbia for them. We were going to try to prepare a conglomerate history of Yugoslavia. Because nobody could write the whole thing. You'd have had to have ten or twelve languages to do that. This is why I accepted the appointment, and why I was happy to come back here afterwards. Oppenheimer let me go for that time. I must say he was very broadminded, and he showed great confidence in me.

LABALME: I think he felt a kindred spirit in you.

KENNAN: Yes, well, in many ways we were very different people, of course.

LABALME: Tell me a bit about him as you have before, beyond the Memoirs. You mentioned once in a conversation that he was a poet.

KENNAN: He had a very deep interest in and understanding for poetry. I remember once at his request, when sitting there in the evening, reading aloud to him Robert Lowell's translation of Akhmatova's poem called "Requiem," about the disappearance and purge of her son, and at the end of it I found him weeping. He was a very--at heart, he had a very sentimental temperament. He was very thirsty, really, for friendship, but for friendship particularly on an intellectual basis--on the basis of intellectual and aesthetic understanding. I think, as I've said in the Memoirs, or may have said, that it was a disappointment to him, (I don't think I explained it quite as I'm doing now), a disappointment to him that there was not more real mutual reverence and friendship among the great scholars here at the Institute. He really revered great intellectual capabilities. This--to see how Bohr's mind worked-- was the basis for his

relationship to Niels Bohr, whom he deeply loved. This was, to him, something that attracted a real form of love and affection: to see the scrupulousness and the effort that Bohr put in to what he was doing. And so it was with all of us. One of the moving things about Robert was this great feeling that he had for high scholarship and also, I think, for the literary arts. I'm not sure that he had very much interest in the visual arts or even the musical. I think it was primarily the literary arts.

LABALME: Did you discuss literature together? Had he read in Russian literature for example?

KENNAN: Yes, we did discuss literature. Kitty, with all her problems, was in that respect supportive, interested, and encouraged him to encourage others this way. Her unhappy qualities didn't come out so much in this. When I was living here already in Princeton and was at the Institute, I must have been on numbers of occasions at their home in the evening; and on these occasions, avoiding his cocktails, I greatly enjoyed the rest of the evening.

LABALME: Did he hold his liquor well?

KENNAN: Yes, this was it, he could toss these things down. It didn't bother him at all. Kitty, of course, would get really high and violent in her opinions and all that, and it got worse and worse with time. But he could handle this very well. And he was a delightful companion in conversation. Everything was elevated by the immense quickness and sharpness and reflectiveness of his mind.

LABALME: So many people seem to have had that impression of him.

END OF CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE TWO:

KENNAN: Also there's one thing I might interject here, too. He [Oppenheimer] used to attend the meetings of the Historical School, and I think even in effect to chair them. And he was an excellent administrator. Many people might think of him as an intellectual with his head in the skies. Not at all. He was a very quick, rapid, incisive, and decisive administrator; and he helped us dispose of the problems of our School more rapidly and effectively in my opinion, than we would have been able to do without his presence.

LABALME: Did he, as Director, attend all the School meetings?

KENNAN: I expect he did.

LABALME: That's interesting.

KENNAN: And my colleagues don't seem to have resented it. In the first place, he was informed about our problems. He had really read all the documentation. He was interested. And he came in a helpful spirit, never antagonistically, but throwing himself in and seeing how he could be helpful to us in examining these questions: who should come here and why. And of course his comments were always very good, because he had the same reverence for high scholarship in the humanities that he had for other forms of scholarship. So that was a part of his personality that is not generally appreciated. I never could understand the source of his difficulties with the mathematicians and the others here. I still don't know what they were arguing about or why it didn't work out.

LABALME: That was where there was antagonism, you think?

KENNAN: I have a recollection of being told that they objected to--well, they were a difficult bunch of men in my opinion. We're talking, of course, about people thirty or forty years ago. But they never could get on with any Director here.

LABALME: That's true. When he had his difficulties in Washington, was there support for him here in the Institute community?

KENNAN: Oh, yes! Very strongly so. I went down and testified before the Gray Commission Committee on his behalf. He was, of course, deeply hurt by all this. You know the situation. It was painful in the "nth" degree, with Strauss being simultaneously the Chairman of the Board of the Institute and the man who was hounding him out of his position in Washington. I never inquired about his relation with Strauss or anything like that. I could see that I could embarrass him by asking him to discuss that with anybody here on the Faculty, and so I never did. I could never understand the government's position about the matters in connection with which he was under investigation. They had known all of these things years and years before. They had nevertheless seen him through as director of the whole great Los Alamos project, and had let him be the chairman of the General Advisory Committee for all these years. To come back ten years later and say that you should have reported to the police what somebody once said as a guest in your house--this seemed to be a sign of the most dreadful sort of McCarthyite confusion of the time.

LABALME: Did Oppenheimer talk about these things to anyone here that you knew of, or was he closed with Kitty?

KENNAN: I can't remember that there was anybody else here on the Faculty with whom he discussed these things. Poor man, he had had at that time, as I recall, already secret police people sitting in his office and looking at everything that came in and everybody that came in. An awful situation there, as though he were highly suspect.

LABALME: And did it change his behavior afterward? Because he remained Director until 1966; that's another decade really.

KENNAN: Let's see, how long was that? I can't remember when these hearings took place.

LABALME: I think it was '52, '53, around then.

KENNAN: I thought it was a little later.⁷ Mac Bundy's book has something about this.⁸ A very fine book that Mac has written. But in any case, I don't know, there may have been people either here or on the University faculty who were interested in physics and in the nuclear problem with whom he discussed some of these things, but I think he felt pretty lonely in it and abandoned.

LABALME: You mentioned that it was for him a great source of pain afterward, that he could not serve the government.

KENNAN: Yes, it was. He felt he had something to offer. He felt that he had proven it in his years of government service. When you look back on all this today and read Mac Bundy's book, you see very clearly, I think, that the government would have done well to listen to him. And his

⁷ The hearings took place in April, 1954.

⁸McGeorge Bundy, Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years (1988).

awareness of the fact that he did have things to offer heightened his unhappiness. He was, after all, in many ways the brightest of the lot, and devoted to the government's interest. Also, he was quite far-seeing. For one thing, I remember that when I first came here (this was way back in the period 1953-54-55) he always tried to persuade me that complete openness was the only answer in all these nuclear problems. He felt that we should have no secrets, that nothing would be lost by taking the Russians into confidence. I was then skeptical. I had come through the war with the government. I was used to governmental security and all that sort of thing. I myself--today I see the error of it--I had written, when it first became known that we had this bomb, but before I knew what it was, to the State Department and had said: "For God's sake, don't frivolously go and tell the Russians everything about this." Because of course this was the Stalin era, and I had no confidence in those people at all. But today I see that he was quite right, there was nothing to be lost. The Cold War might not have taken the forms it did if we had known what the other people were really doing instead of acting on the basis of our own worst fears. And I've become convinced that our government is not a government in which things should be done in secret, for better or for worse. If that's a limitation, it's a limitation that comes from the nature of our society. So I have a lot of respect, looking back on it, retrospectively, for what Oppie was then saying and felt.

There is one curious thing I would like to say about Oppenheimer which was only touched on in the book. It is in connection with his lecture at the War College. Marvelous as he was in conversation or even,

for instance, in his interview with Ed Murrow--wonderful as were the insights and phrases that he could get off--when he had to address a large gathering of people, something awful happened. He put himself in a sort of stratosphere, high above their capacities for reception, and was totally ineffective. I would like, if I had the time, to get out his Reith lectures, which fell absolutely into this category, and look at them again.

LABALME: The BBC series.

KENNAN: Yes, the BBC lectures. I gave those lectures the year before, I think. I would like to read them and to see if I could now understand them. But at the time, nobody did.

LABALME: Why do you think he did that?

KENNAN: I don't know. He simply was incapable of communicating very well with the larger public in these matters. He could do it in conversation most marvelously, but when he tried to put these things together--. He must have written out the lectures; they were published later. I have seen them since, and it seemed to me, glancing at them, that they were as obtuse, obscure in print as they were when they were heard. But, in any case, he was quite ineffective in that way.

LABALME: Were they understood by the cognoscenti, by those people--?

KENNAN: I really don't know. It would be interesting to see whether they were. I must look--we have here a volume of Solly Zuckerman's memoirs. He would have been a person greatly interested, and he was an English scientist. I would like to find out what he thought. I knew him, Zuckerman. But there we were, and this was a peculiarity of Robert

Oppenheimer's. Somehow or other, from that sort of a platform he could not talk down to people. I can say, without arrogance I think, that it was quite the opposite with my own lectures. They were exceptionally widely listened to and understood by people. But one thing I think he did not understand is that in a lecture like that, or a talk, you can hope to put only two or three thoughts across, and these you have to elaborate in such a way that they are driven home. My lectures at Oxford were back to back with those of Isaiah Berlin, so I often attended his lectures in the same hall. They were the most popular lectures in Oxford at that time, and I learned a lot from Isaiah.

LABALME: But his style is not always comprehensible, because I've heard him lecture.

KENNAN: Well, of course, he talks so fast.

LABALME: That's right. Looking off into a corner.

KENNAN: I know. He would always fix his eye on that corner. And his students knew this, so they would all sit on that side. But in any case, he did usually get his points across. He phrased them all different ways. It always reminded me of someone polishing a billiard ball, someone who turned it around and polished every side of it. But Oppenheimer did not know how to do this. That was unfortunate because he had a lot to offer which never really got across.

LABALME: I'd like to go to a somewhat different topic. You had in the earlier years here a group of younger people.

KENNAN: Yes. I'm glad you mentioned that. At the time of the Marshall Plan in government, I had tried to persuade the government, in the paper

that we produced in the planning staff, that it was high time that we took a look at our natural resources and measured them up against our ideas of the future of this country: what we could do, what we couldn't, what were going to be our needs, what were going to be the pressing things we would have to have in mind some years hence. That recommendation was not understood in Washington at all, and was all messed up by the Truman administration which did the wrong things, in the belief that they were doing what I had talked about. But what they did had no relation to it, really. And so I thought, when I got here, that I would call together-- and I proposed this to him, to Oppenheimer--a small group of people, three or four, people we could work together with, and try to find out what were the sort of material prerequisites of American foreign policy, what we had to know about our own country, that is, in order to design policy correctly, and particularly about what was happening to our natural resources. What we had to have in mind as we did these things. And that was it: it did get started. Two or three papers were produced about it. But it had to be cancelled when I was given the appointment to Russia; the project had to be wound up. I'd gotten money for it, I think from one of the foundations. It may have been a clumsy idea. I'm not sure that it was. I think if it had been carried through the way I conceived it might have been a useful study.

LABALME: Later, were you not able to gather them again?

KENNAN: No, and I don't think I wanted to. When I came back I realized that I now had to do some real independent work. I didn't want to be

involved with other people anymore. This proved to be more time consuming than I had thought.

LABALME: Well, you've been involved with other people in a non-scholarly sphere.

KENNAN: Well, I meant right here at the Institute. It was out of the line of the Institute. I think I shouldn't have recommended it or asked for permission to do it.

LABALME: But other scholars here have gathered coteries around them.

KENNAN: Yes they have, I know. Well, this is what I had had in mind. But I don't think it was really right for this Institute somehow or other. I think it got too close to contemporary things.

LABALME: You mention special funding for this original group. Has that been a concern?

KENNAN: No, I think it came from the Ford Foundation at that time.

LABALME: Given the pressures that you've had, though, with the demands of the outside world, you've needed more secretarial assistance at times.

KENNAN: I did. Well, I think at that time--as soon as I became a professor, there was no problem about this. Up to that time I think it was done with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Institute.

LABALME: And the Director--Directors I should say because you've been through a series--have been sympathetic?

KENNAN: Yes, I didn't demand so much in that line after I became a professor. I tried to stick more to what would have been here regarded as traditional scholarship. And I've tried ever since to do that. I

mentioned in the Memoirs what one of my secretaries, Janet Smith, once said to me about this.

LABALME: Say it again.

KENNAN: Well, in effect, she said, you run around complaining about all of these outside pressures. You should stop complaining and realize that if people value you as a historical scholar, it is because they think you have had some experience in diplomacy, in real life, and if, on the other hand, they value you as a commentator on current problems of international affairs, it's because they think there's some historical background to your views, that these views are of particular value to them because they see that you are a scholar; so these two things are really complementary, and you--this is what she said in effect--you should quit bellyaching about it and accept this as your lot in life. This was a lesson to me, and bless her heart for this insight.

LABALME: Yes. You would say then the tension you speak of, at times you have even called intolerable, was fruitful in this way.

KENNAN: I think it was, really. I think it was. I think really that through the Chicago lectures, especially through the book on Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin, and in the Memoirs there were--well all of these things were attempts to fructify each of the sides of this tension through the other, if you see what I mean, both the scholarly side through contact with contemporary problems, but also the contemporary problems through scholarship. And as I mentioned in the Memoirs, it made a deep impression on me one time when this English lady scholar here, I've forgotten her name--.

LABALME: Victoria Wedgewood.

KENNAN: Yes. A fine British historian. When she said to me you mustn't let your pursuit of history deprive you of your interest in contemporary things.

LABALME: How wonderfully understanding of her to make that statement.

KENNAN: I also realized that people in England who were in similar situations accepted it as being quite natural. Harold Nicholson was a man whose work had a strong exemplary importance for my own, made a strong impression on me, and was very important to the development of my own work. He was the first really interesting and highly literary scholar in the field of diplomatic history, yet he was at one time a member of Parliament and was in current affairs very strongly. I just was reading, incidentally (this was much more of the British tradition)--I was reading up in Maine where we recently were, a book on Byzantine history written by a man--I didn't know who he was and was going to write to Dmitri Obolensky to find out who he was, because this was the first of a planned three-volume history of Byzantium.⁹ Then I discovered he's a Lord, he's a member of the House of Lords. I found this out from an article I read in Encounter.

LABALME: This is quite different from the United States, you think?

KENNAN: Yes, the British expect their scholars to take a part--you look at A. J. P. Taylor and those people. They're prominent people in the discussion of contemporary events and yet they've managed to combine that

⁹John Julius Norwich, Byzantium: The Early Centuries (1989).

with a respectable amount of real scholarship. I think it's just a little harder to do in this country, because there are so few of us, and the pressures are very severe and sometimes give you the feeling that you have no right to resist them. This is a country in which, as I've always said, the position of a person, let's say a scholar, who gets involved in contemporary affairs, is like that of a girl at her first ball--either everybody wants to dance with her or nobody does. Either can be embarrassing.

LABALME: Yes, and very difficult. George, we're nearly done, I could go on and on. But is there some question I haven't asked you that you would like to address?

KENNAN: Well, I think about my thoughts about the Institute itself as they've developed over the years. They are given and I won't repeat them in this letter--

LABALME: Of 1976 to Martin Segal?

KENNAN: As they were then in 1976, and I think that all of this stands up so that there you have them. There's only one other thing I might have added to this, I see. I'm not sure it was in my mind at that time. And that is this: I feel that at least in the humanities and in the School of Social Sciences, the professors should be encouraged by the Institute (I'm not saying obliged, but encouraged) to give one lecture for the whole Institute community, preferably on a subject that is not too highly specialized, one that could be expected to be understood and appreciated by the Institute community in general. Some of us have done that. John

Elliott recently gave an excellent lecture.¹⁰ A model of this kind of a lecture. Others of us--I have on occasions also, a lecture connected with my own scholarly work but trying to bring out the interest that it should hold for a wider intelligent public. Some of the members of the Historical School, Cherniss I think, maybe Clagett, I can't remember, were strongly against this, didn't want to do it, themselves didn't think anybody else should be asked to do it. I don't think they approved of it when any of us did it.

LABALME: Was it ever discussed in the School?

KENNAN: Not that I know of. Well, it has been, evidently. I gather since I left it has been: I haven't attended those School meetings. I was too intimidated by these elder scholars to push this. I could only do it by example, and I did.

LABALME: You know, it is going to be done this year by the Historical Studies Faculty. Everyone is giving a public lecture.

KENNAN: Oh, well, good. That's my idea, and I talked to them individually about it. But this was something that was lacking in earlier years. Some of the temporary members complained that when they went back to their home institutions and people said to them: oh, what a marvelous experience this must have been, and you must have heard so-and-so lecture and so forth, he had to admit he never met so-and-so or even heard him speak.

LABALME: But what is its deeper rationale apart from that?

¹⁰"Two Seventeenth-Century Statemen: Richelieu and Olivares," October 21, 1983.

KENNAN: Well, the rest I think is in here [the letter to Martin Segal]. It relates primarily to the Faculty here. I think the problems of the Institute have been overwhelmingly problems relating to the Faculty, not to the temporary membership. I think this place has worked most marvelously for the temporary members. The principles have been correct: you bring these people here, you don't put competing pressures on them; you leave them alone to do their own work. That is just fine. But I am not convinced that the concept of the Faculty, as it now exists, is entirely sound. I feel, and this is stated in this paper, that the faculty positions here ought to go really for older, renowned scholars who have completed most--not all, but most--of their own great creative work and who need a place where they can reside in dignity and comfort and keep up the ties with their discipline, give encouragement to younger people and continue to do such work as they are capable of doing. This was the way it was with Einstein, with von Neumann, but also with people in our field. It was the way it was with a number of others I could think of, with Eka, with Panofsky, with Woodward. These were all great figures in their own field; and this was a proper place for them. They needed to be in a place that had an academic setting, where they had an office, where they had help, where they could have their libraries around them, where people could come without always having to invade their homes, and so forth. And that's fine. But when you come to younger scholars, I'm not sure that a life without obligation like this is always good for them. They may be fine scholars, and perhaps if you asked in a School meeting, well, who is the best person in this or that field, someone would be named

who is 40 or 45. But it is not to be assumed that this is going to be the best way for him to spend the rest of his life. Four or five years here? Yes, I think this can be extremely fruitful, and can enable him to do writing which can be of great value. But most of them ought then to go back to teaching, at least for a time.

LABALME: And you feel that a public lecture is a kind of reminder?

KENNAN: That is right. I think these things hold together. But I've seen people that I thought should not have come here for life. They might better (better for them) have been brought here for a time, in a position somewhat different from those of the regular scholars who come here to do nothing but their own work. Do you see what I mean?

LABALME: Yes.

KENNAN: But it shouldn't be a life sentence.

LABALME: And did you feel that the public aspect of a professorship would serve this harmony that Oppenheimer wanted? Do you also see that as a goal? The communication?

KENNAN: Not really, because the differences between the exact sciences, the natural sciences, and the humanities are really so great that the possibilities of intercommunication are not greater than they are between people generally in life. I was here at the same time as Einstein, but, as I said in the Memoirs, I never went to see him because I felt he was besieged by visitors, they were consuming all his time, and I had nothing serious to see him about. I couldn't contribute to anything in his field, and I knew it; he couldn't contribute very much in mine, but I fear, didn't know it. Yes, of course, if he'd had more leisure, if he were not

under the pressures he was under, I would have liked to have been able to talk with him. But in general, no. When I have talked with some of my colleagues in the other Schools here, I didn't find much profit in it for me or for them. Here you had the great mathematical logician here, Gödel, a great man I have no doubt; but if you tried to talk to him about a problem of the present age or even a faculty problem, the man was childish beyond belief.

LABALME: Really?

KENNAN: You see, this is a whole different thing. It's like being a great chess player or possibly a great musician. I mean, look at Mozart with his incredible music, but then his also equally incredibly vulgar and childish letters to his family.

LABALME: Well, I guess these things are they way they are.

KENNAN: Well, they are. But on the other hand I think there should be a large amount of intercommunication between the historians and the social scientists. I think that is absolutely needed. I think we historians should be interested in that sort of communication, and should try to contribute to it.

LABALME: Well, I think there's been a fair amount.

KENNAN: Yes, I think this is much better now.

END OF SIDE TWO, CASSETTE ONE

END OF FIRST INTERVIEW

Copies of Martin Segal's Letter to George Kenman
on behalf of the Review Committee (1975-76)
and Professor Kenman's Response 15 January 1976

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

December 30, 1975

Dear Professor Kennan,

The Board of Trustees of The Institute for Advanced Study has undertaken a review of the structure and functions of the Institute in connection with the end of the term of service of the present Director and the need to choose a new one. A Review Committee has been appointed to study the activities of the Institute, its position in the academic world, and its financial prospects, and to make recommendations to the Board about future policy.

It would be useful to the Review Committee in its deliberations to know how the Institute is viewed within the scholarly community. Because of your membership on the Institute Faculty, we feel your views would be particularly helpful to us. (As you may know, we are also sending a questionnaire to all former members of the Institute.) We will be most grateful if you will share with us your observations in response to the following questions:

What special role has the Institute played in the development of your field to which its own particular mode of operation has contributed?

How would you assess the Institute's past and present role in relation to leading academic departments and research institutions in the world?

What is your perception of the likely evolution of your field of scholarship in general that will bear on the Institute's future?

Please feel free to comment on both the long-range contribution of the Institute to your discipline and the details of the work and research atmosphere at the Institute.

If convenient to you, we will appreciate your reply within two weeks. Kindly address your response to me as indicated below my signature. I will send a copy of your reply to all members of the Review Committee. Their names and affiliations are indicated on the attached list, for your information.

With many thanks for your assistance in the Review Committee's deliberations,

Sincerely yours,

Martin E. Segal

Martin E. Segal
Chairman - Review Committee
Fuld Hall 415
The Institute for Advanced Study
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

Professor Emeritus George Kennan
School of Historical Studies
The Institute for Advanced Study
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MES:bz
Att.

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

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* Member of the Board of Directors of The Institute for Advanced Study

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

SCHOOL OF HISTORICAL STUDIES

15 January 1976

Dear Mr. Segal:

In response to your letter of December 20 enquiring my views on the various aspects of the structure and activity of the Institute for Advanced Study, I would like to say the following:

1. Let me first make it clear that I regard the Institute, after a quarter of a century of association with it, as an institution of immense importance--one of the truly great centers of higher scholarship in the contemporary world. Its value to those who use its facilities, and the value of the work they do here to scholarship the world over, would be hard to overestimate. Among American institutions of higher learning, it is unique and irreplaceable. It would be little short of tragic if anything were to prevent it from continuing to serve the function it has served so well for these past forty years.

I would like, in this connection, to pay my own personal tribute to Mr. Morgan and the administrative staff of the Institute, as well as to the librarians. I have spent long periods as a visiting scholar at other institutions; and I think I am safe in saying that the facilities accorded to our members and professors for the pursuit of their own scholarly work here are unsurpassed anywhere in the world. The sort of service that has made this possible has been rendered consistently with a modesty, patience and courtesy that have, I think, too often been taken for granted by the beneficiaries.

2. There are three sets of problems that impress themselves on me at the end of my active participation in the work of the Institute.

Of these, the first concerns the roles of the Faculty and the Director, respectively. Here, I believe my views are already known to the Board of Trustees. While fully agreeing that the Faculty should have the deciding voice in matters of current academic policy, and especially the choice of members and professors, I have never been able to develop any enthusiasm for the involvement of the Faculty in purely administrative, financial, and physical-developmental problems. Not only is it too cumbersome a body to act effectively in such matters, but not all of its members are prepared by experience or temperament for dealing with them; the attempt to do so takes up too much of their own time; and there is a certain unsoundness, to my mind, in professors attempting to exercise authority in areas where the Trustees have a clear personal responsibility (which they really have no right to delegate) before the law and the courts.

I consider that Mr. Aydelot's principle was correct; namely, that whereas the Director should not be bound to sponsor and recommend to the Trustees every nomination for a professorship that comes from the Faculty, it should be understood that he would not sponsor and recommend any nomination that does not have majority support in the Faculty.

In opposition to a number of my colleagues, I do not think that the responsibility for making individual nominations should be exercised by the whole Faculty. I believe in decentralizing this responsibility to the respective schools, members of the other schools being given the privilege of commenting, as has been done in recent years, but not of voting on the nomination.

3. The second problem which I see in the present functioning of the Institute is that of the nature and length of the professorial terms. Here, I can speak only to the needs of the Historical School.

I am not sure that appointments of indefinite duration, on complete tenure, are necessarily the best answer for all members of the faculty. That they are the best answer in some cases, I can well believe, but not in all. Among those who are qualified to occupy chairs at the Institute, there are some for whom, however suitable this might be for a limited time, it is not the best arrangement for the entire remainder of a professional and personal life. For this reason, I think there should be provision for greater flexibility and variation in this respect. The permanent appointments, it seems to me, might best be reserved as a rule for older men of high distinction who have in effect completed their teaching careers, who need the greater freedom and privacy the Institute is able to give them for the final years of creative scholarship, and whose presence can be of exceptional value to visiting members. For certain of the younger candidates for Faculty status, the best answer might be a fixed, limited term, long enough to permit them to make a serious contribution in a professorial status to the work of the Institute, but not so long as to preclude their return to work at other institutions. This would accord with the experience of scholars in all ages, which seems to show that occasional changes of scene and intellectual environment are needed, if the necessary stimulus and variety of association are to be achieved.

Should provision be made for limited appointments as well as indefinite ones, I would suppose that the permanent faculty would eventually settle down at a somewhat smaller level, numerically, than is the case today, the total faculty being, perhaps, somewhat larger.

4. Finally, there is the problem of the arrangement of association and responsibility within the general area of the humanities.

It is my impression that the practice of including all historical studies, except the strictly economic and sociological ones, within a single school, while entirely logical on the face of it, has not worked out as well as one might have hoped. The fields of classics and ancient and mediaeval history seem to be separated from the field of modern history by a whole series of differences, having to do with the type of work, the sources of support, the

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uses made of the work accomplished, etc. I have always considered that the classicists, in the light of the more esoteric nature of their concerns and their greater remoteness from the present scene, have had a special need for just the sort of facilities this Institute is able to give them; and for this reason I was always happy, during my years of active work here, to support the acceptance of the many excellent candidates who have applied for work in this field. The same is true for the history of art. I would not like to see any changes that would detract from the extraordinary vigor and distinction which these fields of study at the Institute have achieved.

But it is perhaps the reverse side of this coin that there has not been as much room for modern historical studies, at both faculty and membership levels, as I could have wished. Not only that, but there has been, as it seems to me, a certain loneliness on the part of the relatively few people who come to work on modern history. They do not seem to have the same sort of fruitful intellectual association with other members that we see in some of the other fields. Very often, their interests draw them closer to those who are working in the School of Social Science than to those who are working on earlier periods within the Historical School. Finally, it seems to me that the present arrangement leads to the neglect of certain fields of modern historical scholarship--notably literary and economic--which seem to fall somewhere between the areas of interest of the two schools.

One must bear in mind, in this connection, the fact that in recent years and decades scholarship in modern history has come to concentrate much more extensively on the history--social, economic, and cultural--of large masses or bodies of people than on the doings of individual historical figures, and has thus tended to approach the work of the social scientists.

All these considerations lead me to wonder whether the present arrangement, which groups all forms of what is called "history" in a single school, is really the best one, after all. I can see two possibilities for alternative arrangements which, it seems to me, might be considered.

The first would be that one has two schools under the general heading of the humanities: a School of Classics, embracing mediaeval Western history as well as the history of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, and also the history of art; and a separate School of Modern History and Social Science.

The other alternative would be that you have a single School of Humane Studies, to be broken down into three autonomous sub-sections: Classics (with Ancient History), the History of Art, and Modern Political and Social History.

Something along the lines of either of these possibilities would seem to me to be a more hopeful approach than what we have today. That there would be strong opposition to both of these alternatives within the present Faculty, I have no doubt. I can see no reason, however, why one or the other

Mr. Martin E. Segal

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of them could not be tried, on--say--a five-year basis, as an experiment. There would be no reason why one could not revert, at the end of that time, to the present arrangement, if the others seemed even less satisfactory.

Very sincerely yours,


George Kennan

From The Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton NJ USA
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INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE F. KENNAN

(This is the second of two interviews)

Date: February 27, 1990

Place: Princeton, New Jersey

Interviewer: Patricia H. Labalme

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE:

LABALME: All right George, let's continue. Was there anything in reading over that transcript [of the first interview] that you wanted to alter or amend?

KENNAN: Not beyond what I had marked in the lines or in the margins. I don't think there was. There was only a question in many sentences of clarifying what I was trying to say, because when you see it written, you see the possibilities for improving whatever you've said.

LABALME: What I'd like to talk about today with you is Carl Kaysen's time.

KENNAN: Yes. Do you recall offhand when Carl came here and when he left?

LABALME: It was from 1966 to '76.

KENNAN: To '76. Well, I was here most of that time, not in '74-'75, but otherwise yes. Now let me see, from 1974 on I was in retirement and was not taking an active part in Faculty affairs or in Institute affairs. But otherwise, yes, I was here. I had done a good deal of traveling in the early 1970s through Harold Hochschild's help. Trips to Africa and

so forth. So I wasn't here all the time, but through much of it, yes.

LABALME: What was your relationship with Carl, compared to that close friendship you seem to have had with Oppenheimer?

KENNAN: It was certainly not as close and warm as it was with Robert Oppenheimer. Not that we ever had any serious differences at all. It was always a pleasant relationship with Carl. And as a matter of fact, I felt that I was one of perhaps only a few of the Faculty who did preserve as cordial and pleasant a relationship with him as I had. I had known him only slightly, again in government, not as well as I had Robert Oppenheimer before I came here, but I had seen him there. I thought that it was not a bad appointment, although I did not think that he had the really elevated and deeply motivated understanding for higher scholarship that Robert Oppenheimer had. He was, as I recall it, an economist who had been involved with strategic problems in Washington. That's my recollection. I may be wrong about that. And I must say, looking back on it, these questions have never been asked of me before, so I haven't reflected much on it. But I think that the Board of Trustees could have looked for someone who was more profoundly a scholar with interests in the wider fields of scholarship than was the case with Carl Kaysen.

LABALME: Was the Faculty consulted at all at the time that he was chosen?

KENNAN: I cannot remember that they were. At least I wasn't.

LABALME: There was some controversy later as things became difficult, involving Faculty claims that they hadn't been sufficiently informed.

KENNAN: Well, all I can say is that I have no recollection of having been consulted by them. And I have no doubt that it was regrettable that there was not greater consultation with the Faculty, although I had my differences, too, in those years, with a great part of the Faculty over the role that the Faculty should play in the Institute's affairs. I felt that it was not their task to be interesting themselves in the financial affairs of the Institute as long as they received their salaries. I felt that the Trustees had a legal obligation to handle these matters according to their own judgement. They were responsible before the courts, as I understood it, for their decisions in these matters, and I did not think they had the right to say someday to a court: "Well, we believed that this was not in the best interest of the Institute, but we thought that we had to defer to the Faculty." I did not think that they had any right to say that. The bite was on them, they had the fiduciary responsibility for this as an institution. That responsibility they had was more of an enduring nature than that of individual Faculty members. The Board of Trustees was something that survived the individual tours of duty of professors here.

LABALME: Could other Faculty members appreciate that point of view which seems logical?

KENNAN: I thought they were very confused about this. It may have come from the fact that, at many teaching institutions around the country, the faculty were deferred to very greatly. I suppose particularly that must have been the case at some of the state universities because, while the state was of course in charge, nevertheless there was great uncertainty about what a faculty was, what position it played. I have also always had great doubts about the soundness of the American concepts of tenure at a university. Initially, as I understood it (and I may have understood it imperfectly because my early career was not in scholarship or in academic life) tenure was devised in order to prevent a professor's being dismissed or ruled out in some way or other or prevented from teaching because people above him disagreed with his views about the particular subject that he was teaching. I think that was fair enough. Probably there was need for some protection for the freedom of thought and the freedom of teaching on the part of the professor, or, in general, the university teacher. But I did not think that could be carried to a point where people could be kept at institutions regardless of their behavior in other respects; and there are a number of other respects in which excesses occur here and at other institutions, too. If someone is really a disruptive force in a faculty, a

source of division and tension and all that, I think an institution has a perfect right to say to him: "We would prefer it if you went somewhere else."

LABALME: It happens in other kinds of organizations.

KENNAN: Of course it does. And this quite aside from the content of his teaching. And yet, despite all of that, it seems to me that the concept of tenure that has now become rooted in American academic institutions means that nobody can be fired for anything.

LABALME: In the case of Carl Kaysen's relationship with the Faculty, from the records I have the feeling that right from the start, there seemed to have been bones of contention.

KENNAN: Yes. I don't recall what those were, because a lot of them came up, I think, with the other groups of the Faculty here at the Institute, other than the historians. But I recall faintly conflicts over the Institute budget and the amount of fund raising they were doing and that sort of thing. And it was my view that was really not the Faculty's responsibility.

LABALME: Evidently in the very beginning, according to what Carl Kaysen said, he announced that he had been hired to explore a fourth School, so that the idea of a School of Social Science was in the cards, but there was some resistance to it.

KENNAN: Well, I am sure there was. There were very difficult people on the Faculty and even on the Historical Faculty,

particularly there. And some of them, I have no doubt, thought that what was called Social Science, anthropology and so forth--that a number of these, especially Social Science, was not really a discipline, was not really a science, and they were reluctant to see us go along that path.

LABALME: So that when the problem of the nomination of [REDACTED] came along, it entered into a situation that was not entirely calm?

KENNAN: That is correct. I think there had been negative feelings about the setting up of a fourth School on the part of a number of people, from the very beginning. I don't know how true that was among the mathematicians and the physicists, but I think there was some feeling about that among the historians. My memories are dim about this, but I can well see from what I knew of them that they would have been skeptical.

LABALME: Well, the natural scientists in the end went along with the idea of a School, or a program in Social Science.

KENNAN: Yes. I think there was less objection there than anywhere else. On the part of the mathematicians, I'm not sure that it was really an objection in principle to the idea of such a School. It may have been, but that's not my impression. I can't quite remember what the source of their great discontent was. Some of it certainly was centered on the qualities of [REDACTED] as a candidate for a professorship here;

and with those I sympathized, because what he had written at that date and what we knew about him did not, in my opinion, justify a professorship at this Institute. I think it was a mistake on the part of Geertz or whoever did it to put him up for that.

LABALME: You mentioned at one point in your own writings that everyone had made mistakes, though.

KENNAN: Well, everyone did in my opinion. First, the School made a mistake in putting up a man whose qualities--it was a sensitive matter; this was the second appointment, as I recall it, in that School.

LABALME: And there wasn't a School at that time.

KENNAN: There wasn't a School so you couldn't have the usual Faculty passing on it. There was only one man. And I think at that time (I'm not sure, it seems to me they did this later when they came to the other appointment) they should have had a search committee of outsiders.

LABALME: They did have outsiders, but it was a mixed report from that committee.

KENNAN: They did, did they?--well, that should have been a warning to them then and there. But in any case, I do feel that the decision to put forward [REDACTED] for this position was an unwise one from the standpoint of the School itself--I don't know what you call it, the School of Social Sciences.

LABALME: "Program" it was called at that time. It was just Cliff Geertz and Carl Kaysen.

KENNAN: Program, yes. But then, having been put forward and rejected by the Faculty, or not approved, I thought the Director was at fault in appointing him over the head of the Faculty. Simply that it was unwise and was bound to stir up very deep issues here. Again, I reiterate, I do not think that the Faculty should be the sole voice in who is to come to this institution. If you go back to the origins of it, it certainly was not. I mean, people were picked by Flexner and Aydelotte and others who were already Trustees here, and I think that they felt perfectly justified in doing this. I think that the Trustees are entrusted with the money that was given to set up this institution, with the shaping of the institution and with the guidance of it. In my opinion, this gives them a very strong say in who should or should not come here as a Professor. It's not exclusively the right of the Faculty to determine that. But I think it would be very undesirable for the Trustees to insist on someone against strong objections in the Faculty.

LABALME: Which is what happened with [REDACTED]

KENNAN: Which is what happened. And I believe that Aydelotte, in something that he wrote at the time when he was here, professed exactly my opinion, namely that the Trustees (I can't remember quite how he phrased it) should not make an appointment without consulting the Faculty and without strong support in the Faculty.

LABALME: Why did the Board, at this point, go ahead with the appointment?

KENNAN: I have no idea why they did that.

LABALME: You never talked to Dick Dilworth?--I will be interviewing Dick Dilworth about that.

KENNAN: Yes, I did at the time talk with Dick, but I can't remember what Dick said about it. I think they probably felt they had to support the Director, having appointed him. But there was opportunity at that point for them to enter in and say "No, in view of the feelings that have arisen among the Faculty and the doubts that exist, we don't think we could approve this appointment." I think they should have had the final say. On the other hand, they were unwise to exercise that option without strong support in the Faculty. Now this is, if you will, a fuzzy formulation, but so are these situations, and they have to be resolved partly on the basis of common sense and a feeling for what people can stand and what they can't stand, what they support, what they're not apt to support. I don't think that Kaysen was very good at talking with people here. They may have, in fact, offended him in the beginning and given him the feeling that he had to be on his guard in talking to them, I think.

LABALME: Well, during this period there was talk in the Faculty of a committee for relationships between the Director and the Faculty, so there seems to have been a sense of division.

KENNAN: Well, there was. And even, if my memory is correct, even before the whole conflict over the [REDACTED] appointment, there had been demands in the Faculty here that their role in the governance of the Institute should be formally stated in some sort of a written document. I was against this, because I think there's always a danger in trying to strap these things down in writing. You get later cases that don't fit exactly the language you used. And then there's a lot of squabbling about it. I think that an institution of this sort is really better handled on the basis of tact and feeling by the Director and the Faculty. And perhaps that was the greatest fault in the selection of Carl Kaysen, that this was not the way he did it. Oppenheimer, although he had his difficulties too, was much quicker and more sensitive to the feelings of people on the Faculty.

LABALME: I remember in your diary when you heard that the Board had approved the appointment your phrase was, "Now all Hell will break loose." And you'd think they would have anticipated that themselves.

KENNAN: You'd think they might have. And, you know, there have been such celebrated cases of this sort in the past. In preparing for the talk I had to give on Toynbee, I was

amazed to be confronted with the circumstances of this classic conflict with the people who gave the money for his professorship at Kings College, a bunch of Greek businessmen who had founded this professorship for classical studies and appointed Toynbee as, I think, its first incumbent. He, then, had gone off to the Middle East and written about the Greek-Turkish crisis and had favored the Turks. And then all these people who had given the money were up in arms and wanted him removed from the professorship. And Kings College got into the act and said, well, we can't remove him!

LABALME: It's true. It happens with some frequency. But what do you remember of the tension of those months from that year?

KENNAN: Well, I do only recall this: that the Faculty meetings were so unpleasant that I couldn't eat lunch after one of these, there'd been such tension that everybody was strapped up inside. I did feel it to be unfortunate that some of the Faculty took this the way they did; I mean that they threw themselves into it with an emotionalism that was absolutely extraordinary. And besides, some of them, well, one of them in particular, that was, of course, Weil, had a facility for creating tension and for setting everybody's nerves on end. I don't know whether he really meant to do this, but he did. He was tactless and often offensive. Others were just sharp, unfeeling, rigorous. This was the case especially with Borel. Not a bad man, but no sense, no feeling for

what was involved here. He was the sort that wanted everything written down precisely in a sort of constitution for the Institute and then would have been willing to argue about every case in the light of every clause in it. A real sort of lawyer psychology. That was unfortunate, too.

LABALME: Was your own role as a kind of diplomat?

KENNAN: Well, that's it, you see. That's the great difference. We, in government, were used to seeking solutions to problems by a rather sensitive sort of accommodation, recognizing that the positions taken by other people might not always be logical or ones for which there was any proof that this was the only way you could look at things. And yet this is the way some of our colleagues were. On the other hand, here you had among the older colleagues people who had only the highest and purest concept of historical scholarship, and couldn't stand anything else than this. They really did value their appointments for life here and thought it was nobody's business what they did with them. They didn't want the purity of the Institute invaded by any appointments that they did not think were of the great quality that belonged in this place. They were very difficult in Faculty meetings, some of the best of them. I think that even the great art historian here--

LABALME: Panofsky?

KENNAN: Panofsky--marvelous man as he was, in his lectures and in his work and in his conversation, could be very difficult as

a Faculty member. These people brought with them certain European ideas of high scholarship which were good, yes, and I respected them very highly too, and respected all of them as scholars, and yet they were not always easy people to deal with in the Faculty. Precisely for this reason, because great scholarship seemed often to be connected with a certain impractical angularity in any real administrative or financial problem or anything like that, it was necessary, I thought, that you keep things flexible: make clear the principles on which such an institution was to be conducted, but not try to write everything down into binding categories and rules. And as a matter of fact, that, too, seemed to me to be an invasion of the prerogatives of the Board of Trustees, because they would then also become strapped up in these rules; and they had no right to let themselves be strapped up.

LABALME: There was for several years the work of a committee on the rules for governance.

KENNAN: That's what I was talking about, and at that time I opposed drawing up such rules. I felt: let the Institute develop more by the love of the science to which we are devoted here, and by the feeling for the place of such an institution in the framework of our own time, which was bound to change over the course of the years. Those things can't really be written down.

LABALME: As you said in one of your papers about writing things down, one ends up arguing over hypothetical problems.

KENNAN: That's right. One does. And it's not the way the world works. And for this particular institution which has so highly delicate and sensitive a commitment, quite different from that of a business concern or even a teaching institution, simply a commitment really to the ideal of great scholarship, scholarship that's great in its integrity but also in its imagination--this is not the sort of place in which you can have all those things written down. A number of the matters (I'm just repeating myself here) that were to be treated in this sort of a constitution were matters which again were the responsibility, the ultimate responsibility, of the Trustees to decide. And this was not just their personal responsibility, but their juridical responsibility as custodians of the money that had been committed to this place.

LABALME: Why is it that faculties probably elsewhere as well as here can't see where their responsibility ends and that of the Trustees begins?

KENNAN: All I can say is that a great deal of confusion has been allowed to prevail in this respect all through the American institutions. Faculties are terribly difficult people. I was for a year a fellow of the body known as the Master and Fellows of Balliol College. I attended one meeting of the Master and Fellows, and I never went again. I said, this is

no place for me! I've never seen such backbiting, such fury, such factions in my life. It was evident there, and it's evident in the Faculty here, that problems which even we in government with all our faults, with all the bureaucracy and so forth, really would have settled in a few moments, could go on here for weeks of tense and furious argument, with hurt feelings and friendships ruined, and all that. I'd put it this way, if I may: I think people, primarily the male sex (but I'm sure this is true of a lot of the female sex too) have a certain need for combat in life. They want to establish their own egos by triumphing in conflicts with other people. In business and in government they got that sort of satisfaction in the normal course of things. They learned to take all this with a sense of humor and to make their compromises. They learned that they couldn't have everything their own way. And this trend in people, ambition and what you want, was satisfied some way or other in the other professions in a way in which it was not satisfied among the scholars. They had so few occasions to have organizational conflicts with other people, and when they had one, they were enormously excited and exaggerated it out of all proportion.

LABALME: They have scholarly conflicts, of course, over their work.

KENNAN: Well, that's a different thing. If it was a question of the substance of what you were writing and somebody thought differently of it, that's a different thing. But the moment

they're up against these administrative questions or financial questions, they become as helpless as children and they get all excited and allow themselves to be emotionally upset. You know, people in business, yes, in every great organization, anywhere in the world, whether it's business or government or what, are full of intrigue and fighting for position and all of that. But there, and precisely because in most of those places there's a hierarchy, you do fight for your position. And this partly absorbs the natural aggressiveness of people. But scholars are not trained for that; and when they are presented with something of this sort, they lose all balance and measure, and humor, I may say, too.

LABALME: You think it's a kind of childishness?

KENNAN: Yes, it is. Something is undeveloped in them which in many other walks of life is developed. And therefore when they're confronted with such conflicts, they are rather like children. They build things way out of proportion, exaggerate the importance of small issues.

LABALME: It must have been a very painful period for everyone.

KENNAN: Well, I've never seen such tension among people in my life. I didn't feel that way about the issues. These were things, my goodness, that reasonable men should have been able to come to agreement about. But to see the agony with which these people pushed these problems! I only suffered because I saw all of them suffering.

LABALME: Even after it was decided, and of course it had that tragic issue--well, the suicide of [REDACTED] daughter wasn't directly connected, but it brought to an end his own particular role--did you feel in the year or two afterwards that this went on, these tensions which had been generated?

KENNAN: No. I was not here very much after this, I think. When was it resolved?

LABALME: By the end of April of '73 he'd withdrawn.

KENNAN: I left at the end of that academic year and went to Washington for a year or two to found this Institute.¹ So I think the excitement subsided as such things normally do once you cease bringing the Faculty together and asking them to confront the situation. Then everybody, I suppose, was secretly relieved to have it out of their minds for a time. You know, I'm sure, that when they finally decided to make a new appointment, they asked me to chair the meeting, because they were afraid that if Kaysen chaired it all these things would pop out again.

LABALME: Indeed, there was a possibility at some point of your being provisional Director during those years.

KENNAN: Yes.

LABALME: That must have been a thought.

¹The Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, part now of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C..

LABALME: Well, it would have been very, very difficult, I must say, for anybody. And that has to be borne in mind when one judges Kaysen. For the reasons I've given you, I don't think that he was the ideal appointment. I think they could have done better here. But that says nothing against his character or his other qualities in life at all. For each one of us there are always many things for which you wouldn't be suitable. I can name you ten things for which I would not be suitable, but the fact that I am not suitable for everything should not be a sign of weakness of character or something of that sort. You see what I mean? So it was with Kaysen, he was just a peg that was not entirely suited to the hole into which it was put.

LABALME: Awkward for him, of course.

KENNAN: Awkward for him, and I felt sorry for him and for his wife. I was glad to be able to give them a certain amount of support at this time.

LABALME: I'm sure he appreciated it.

KENNAN: I think he did.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO:

KENNAN: Because I've not been active on the Faculty for so long, I don't know whatever became of that sort of constitution that they drew up for the Institute. It still exists, I suppose.

LABALME: It evolved into what I think is called "Procedures for the Academic Governance of the Institute."

KENNAN: Well, if it's for the academic governance and if it recognizes the ultimate responsibility of the Trustees, I have nothing against this, although even then I deplore the loss of flexibility that occurs when you feel that everything ought to be put down.

LABALME: Well, it seems to be working for the time being. The relationships.

KENNAN: Yes. Well, I must say, I think that some of the personalities which were the most difficult ones at that time are no longer prominent in the picture, and that makes a lot of difference, too.

LABALME: Yes. Let's move on to a different topic--something I mentioned in my letter to you, the relationship with the University. Your own sense of the connection between the Institute and Princeton University.

KENNAN: Yes. That question came up when I first came here, and I'm trying to think of the way in which it came up. I think there was a question of a joint appointment for myself.

LABALME: There was.

KENNAN: At the University and at the Institute.

LABALME: Yes. Dodds was interested.

KENNAN: Dodds was interested, and I think that Robert Oppenheimer saw difficulties in this. I suspect not so much from his own standpoint but from the standpoint of the Trustees and

the Faculty over here. And if my memory is correct, he said "No, I think it better not to do it." I remember that either he or I talked to Dodds about this, and Dodds, who was a wonderful man, was perfectly relaxed and said: "Oh well, if you think that that's the way it would be, let's let it go, we'll work it out some other way."

LABALME: And you gave some lectures.

KENNAN: I gave the Stafford Little lectures, and I once gave some other sort of prestige lecture over at the University in the big hall there. But later (and this must have been during the sixties I think), I gave regular academic lecture series two or three times. I took two regular courses, I know, one an undergraduate and graduate course, and another was a purely undergraduate course in history, on diplomatic history since 1870, I think it was, up to World War I. Those I did as a volunteer. I didn't take any money for them. But they were, in the University's view, valid courses and I had to give grades.

LABALME: Did you enjoy that?

KENNAN: I did enjoy that very much. It was a form of slavery, of course. I thought it was good for me. The first course, I think, was a lecture course plus a seminar. The second was just a seminar. And I found that in the purely undergraduate course I had better student response than in the one which included post-graduates. Post-graduates were, in some way or other beaten down and cautious and unwilling

to commit themselves before other people. They were always thinking, or at least this is the way I diagnosed it, they were always thinking, "What's he going to say about me? About what I said here?" There was no spontaneity with them. The undergraduates were better and some of them were very smart. But I must say in both of these courses I did give them grades as well as I could, but in both of them I had to write to the University afterward and say: "I simply do not understand how a man who cannot write better English than this ever got to be a graduate student at Princeton University, or a senior for that matter."

LABALME: It's discouraging, isn't it?

KENNAN: Yes. But I enjoyed it. They were good, they were bright enough. Simply poorly prepared linguistically.

LABALME: Outside your own experience, do you feel it's worked pretty well, the juxtaposition of the Institute and the University?

KENNAN: Yes, and I thought that Oppenheimer was wise in the way he handled it. He wouldn't let us ask anybody in the University to come onto the Faculty over here because he said: "We should be concerned for the richness, intellectually and personally, of the entire academic community in Princeton and we're neither enriching it nor impoverishing it when we just take someone from one part of town and put him in another part of town. If we've got an appointment to be made, we should be concerned to bring somebody here who's going to add something to the whole

community." I thought that was a large and proper view. I think he and Dodd had a very good understanding about all this, and that was fine. I've never been conscious, really, of any serious conflicts; maybe some have occurred that I haven't known anything about, but it has seemed to me that the University and Institute have supplemented each other very usefully.

LABALME: At the time of Jack Milnor's appointment, there was some tension.

KENNAN: Well, he was coming from the University, wasn't he? You see, Oppenheimer would have opposed that. To my mind, the more closely these two institutions can work together at the faculty level, the better. We all have a common commitment, but we have to pursue it in different ways, partly.

LABALME: You sometimes mention your isolation here from other modern historians. Was the University a resource in this way?

KENNAN: It was much more in the early years, I think, of my work here. When I was working on the period just after the Russian revolution, the very early period of Soviet-American relations, I had Arthur Link here with his Wilson scholarship. Initially I had Ed Earle, I had others who could help me; and some of the older scholars here took an interest in what I was doing. I told you, I am sure, about Kantorowicz, Eka, helping me with the first volume here. In a sense these scholars here taught me most of what I know about historical scholarship in the professional sense.

LABALME: And Woodward too.

KENNAN: And Woodward too. And I had great respect for all these people. In fact I had a little--not too much--of an inferiority complex toward them, I think. They sometimes overpowered me on these problems. In Faculty meetings, I was afraid really to take a strong stand for fear they would say, well, who the hell are you, you come into this at the age of 49--. Well, I hadn't initially, of course, proven myself in a wide way in scholarship.

LABALME: The role of diplomatic history at the Institute is something you cared about.

KENNAN: Yes, it was. This was a tradition that, of course, was started here by Ed Earle. It was supported when they brought Herbert Feis here. It was, of course, then greatly supported when Woodward came onto the Faculty. I would regret to see it disappear altogether from the Institute's agenda. On the other hand, I've been impressed with how unwise it is to let professors name their own successors.

LABALME: Yes, that's always been a problem. Not always, but it certainly shows up.

KENNAN: It's something to be warned against. It's not always bad, but there are great dangers in it. I think that one should always insist on having a new look at the quality of those whom people want to have around them and not just leave it to the professor.

LABALME: Do you think there are scholar diplomats out there in the world today, without naming any names?

KENNAN: There are, no doubt. I don't know what they have in England at the present time. They had some excellent people. They had one (and I believe we tried to bring him here) who is a scholar, who really is in this sense almost a diplomatic historian, that's Michael Howard. I think he's now out at Stanford. Very fine man. There are one or two that I've known about in Germany who are fine scholars more or less in this field. And there is one--I don't mind naming him--one younger diplomatic historian in this country who is my official biographer, that's John Gaddis, who is absolutely first rate. I've told him, "You know, John, you shouldn't be wasting your time writing a biography of me. You can do more important things." But he wants to do it, nevertheless. But he is a fine historian and a very fine person. On the other hand, his field, like that of many (it's perfectly natural) American historians, is American diplomatic history, not European diplomatic history; whereas that has seldom been the case for me. The first two volumes, yes, on Russia Leaves the War and The Decision to Intervene, they were works in American diplomatic history, but always with Russia on the other side. And the same thing now with the ones I've done more recently, they were French and European diplomatic history, but always with Russia as the focus. After all, what was interesting about

American diplomatic history is most of all what's been happening in this century. I can get a little bored with some of the American nineteenth century diplomatic history. It seems not terribly significant.

LABALME: Are there any career diplomats like yourself who have also written history?

KENNAN: Of course the great example was Harold Nicolson in England.

LABALME: But I mean contemporary.

KENNAN: I know. Now? I'm afraid not.

LABALME: Is it the product of the times?

KENNAN: I think the Department of State has never encouraged this sort of thinking. You know, in my own case it began one time because we unearthed in Moscow, as I can recall it, the Russian documents on the sale of Alaska by Russia in 1867; and I, being intrigued with these, wrote up a monograph of the history of this episode which I enjoyed doing. It was the first thing I had ever written like this. (What happened was I submitted it to the State Department which sent it over to the National Archives; and a man there who wanted to make this his specialty simply pirated it and published a paper in which he used mine from top to bottom.)

LABALME: I didn't remember this as part of your bibliography!

KENNAN: No, it wasn't. But I enjoyed it from the word go. I'm just trying to think if I can resurrect the names. I look up there at my books to think whether there was anybody in the Foreign Service who's done much of this, and I really can't

think that there were. There is a man by the name of George Morgan who is a good scholar, but I don't think he has written much diplomatic history. There was a Hungarian-born man by the name of Klay who has written something on early relations between Hungary and the United States. But I can't think of any major ones.

LABALME: Well, I ask because it's interesting to think at one time you weren't sure you should come to the Institute. I think it was when you were in Yugoslavia, wondering whether you should return, given your commitment to public life, and yet you weren't sure whether it would be right for you or right for the Institute. In the end you came.

KENNAN: Yes.

LABALME: It hasn't been wrong for the Institute.

KENNAN: There has always been, you see, this tension between the partial prominence that I've had in current political life, especially in connection with foreign affairs, on the one hand, and my commitment as a scholar here, on the other. I think I've told you that I was once reproached by my secretary here, Janet Smith, for not realizing that these two things were complementary, not really in conflict. But I've been content to let the Trustees of the Institute and the Directors here be the judge of this. I also told you that Oppenheimer wrote me when the professorship was offered and said that this was the only doubt voiced in the Faculty - "whether you really intend to be a scholar for the rest of

your life and, if you don't, you shouldn't take it." And I thought about this very carefully, and I must say, that while I've been here all this time and I've fought this battle with myself, which is a never-ending one, all these years, I have tried to keep my nose to the grindstone of scholarship, and there are, after all, eighteen volumes of things I have succeeded in writing.

LABALME: I should say that that validates the decision. Oppenheimer and Woodward both thought it was important to have somebody with a breath of the contemporary world.

KENNAN: Well, I'm glad Woodward felt that way.

LABALME: Yes he did.

KENNAN: He was a man who was very chary of praise, but increasingly as time went on I got closer to him. He had the reserve about him of a tough old Englishman, you know. I'm glad to hear that. I never knew whether he thought that I did belong here. And I think there had been some other colleagues who were skeptical. Alföldi considered that I was a communist and shouldn't be here.

LABALME: I didn't know that.

KENNAN: Yes, he told people this. Although we had pleasant enough relations. But I think there must have been skepticism among some of the others.

LABALME: There were two times when you thought of running, once for Congress and once for Senate?

KENNAN: Yes, that is quite true. The time with Congress was made very difficult for me. This was shortly after I had left government and before I became a Professor here. It was, I think, in 1951 that this occurred, or '54.

LABALME: '54.

KENNAN: Was it '54? Was it really? Well, that was before I became a Professor. And I was moved by this, because what happened is that one night out of the blue, without any warning, there arrived at our front door (I had fortunately just gotten back from Washington that afternoon) a young farmer and his wife from out near the village which is adjacent to our farm out in Pennsylvania. He said that he and some of the other fellows were not satisfied with the prospects for the candidacy for the Democratic nomination for the House of Representatives from that area; and he had come to ask me whether I would consider running for Congress. I was very much moved by this, because this is a way I think politics ought to work. Nobody should go gladly to the government; it should be done only as a matter of duty, and only under pressure from other people who want you to do it. And this fitted so much with my thoughts as to how government should be that I didn't feel that I could just say no. I called up an attorney out there (actually a Republican one--he was Eisenhower's attorney but a good friend of mine) and said, "Is this serious? I'd be glad to consider it." "Well, then," he said, "You come out on next Sunday and come to my

office on Sunday afternoon and I'll get the political people from around this part of the state and you can confront them directly, hear from them what they want." So I did, and I appeared there and so did a lot of them (all but the ones from the big city of York who boycotted it for some reason or other) and they discussed me in front of me as though I was not there, and it was a lovely session and I was delighted. I loved every minute of this. One of them said, "Why he ain't even registered as a Democrat over there in Gettysburg." Another one said, "Yeah, but his wife is." And then they asked me what I would say to people if I were to go out on a campaign and have to talk to people in this district, what I would have to say to them. And I said, well, I would have to ask them what their views were about their problems instead of trying to tell them. Why, hell, says one of them, we could run him for the Senate! But I really loved this.

And so I came back here. I told Robert Oppenheimer what had happened, and I told the Rockefeller Foundation people who were supporting my term what had happened. Glum silence from both of them. But they had a chance to object. And then I did go out there and register as a candidate. I was taken up by the local county or township man in a car, and we went up to Harrisburg and I registered and I learned later that the only competitor there would have dropped out

that day, or the same day, had I not done so, but what happened was, coming back on the train from out there I read the election laws, both the federal and the state laws, as to how much money you could properly take. I don't think anybody else paid any attention to them, but I was disturbed about them. I had two children in college, and my only income was what I was getting here. You see, even if I had been nominated, this was in April of the year before, it was the primaries. It would have been nine months before I would take over in the House of Representatives and begin to receive any salary there. So I asked the barber in the village: "What would you do?" Why, he says, you get in touch with some of the big dairy owners around here and see whether they wouldn't support you. Well, having seen what the big dairy owners were doing to our little farm, I was not going to take this way out.

LABALME: What were they doing?

KENNAN: They were trying to drive out the small milk producers. They made us build, I think, three different milk houses in some two or three years. This was all legislation put in by the big dairy owners to make it difficult for these people to sell their milk. Anyway, when I came back here then I was told that neither could the Institute support me anymore if I became a candidate nor would the Foundation do it, and there I just had to make up my mind. I went right out and withdrew, because I thought there was no possibility of

doing this without going into debt very deeply, and that's no way to start a political career. I have no doubt that I would have been elected. And I would have enjoyed it. I liked the people out there. I had a certain fondness for them, and I think they understood it too.

LABALME: A different career.

KENNAN: I know. I think it was a good thing for me that it didn't work out.

LABALME: And later on the Senate, there was a possibility.

KENNAN: Yes. It was Adlai Stevenson's campaign.

LABALME: That '56--you ran the New Jersey Committee for Stevenson.

KENNAN: I did. That's right. And later [1959] there was a question (I can't remember even who it was to replace) but somebody was retiring from the Senate and--would I run for the Democrats? I saw some of the people around here, but again thought that this probably was not the time for me to do it at all. And here the lack of experience, I thought, would have been more telling. I would have had to come to terms with all these different parts of New Jersey: the New York suburbs, the Philadelphia suburbs, the Atlantic coast, and the agricultural parts up there. And I think it's probably a good thing that I didn't do it. Many other people can do that sort of thing. Not many of them can do the sort of thing that I've done here. And when I think today that the way I'm ending up, I think that I've been able to play a

more useful role in our society generally as a writer than I could have played as a legislator.

LABALME: As a writer and occasional speaker, because your voice was still heard.

KENNAN: An occasional speaker. Because at times, where I have put my word in, well, it's always like shooting at a bell with a slingshot. Sometimes you hit it, sometimes you don't. If you don't hit it there's total silence, if you do hit it, it rings loudly. But occasionally I have hit it and that, I suppose, has been more useful than had I been a regular politician.

LABALME: Yes. Would you give advice to a young scholar-diplomat such as yourself?

KENNAN: Yes, I would. Go into politics but only if you have financial backing that makes you absolutely independent. I've seen this through my own son, Christopher. He'd be a pretty good politician. He's bright, and he's got a good mind. He knows how to talk at gatherings, and he puts himself forward very well. Besides, he is a decent and fine person. But he, too, has realized that this is nothing to get into if you haven't got the backing. Most of these people who go in for politics are lawyers, and their law firms, hoping to profit by it, hold them over the periods when they're unsuccessful in elected office. They go back to the law firm. But then the law firm is always pleased if

they want to run again because they have somebody up there they can appeal to. But if you haven't got that sort of backing--

LABALME: It's very difficult.

KENNAN: And that's precisely what I didn't have here. And no academic person has, because you usually have to give up your tenure and everything else if you go in for this. You certainly do for the Senate, but I think normally for the House of Representatives too.

LABALME: Coming back to some of the personalities of the Institute, among the Trustees, I know you were friendly with Harold [Hochschild] and Dick [Dilworth]. Did you get to know others in any way?

KENNAN: I've known very well Don Straus and value him very highly as a friend. He is an entirely honorable and decent person. I've never discussed Institute affairs very much with him because I didn't want to ask him to talk out of school, so to speak. The same with Dick.

LABALME: I was going to ask you about that. Were there more friendships between Faculty and Trustees?

KENNAN: I'm sure there must have been. I think at one time Margaret Henry's husband, Buz Henry, was also on the Faculty here.

LABALME: No, he was a Trustee.

KENNAN: Trustee, I mean. Yes, on the Board of Trustees. And I knew him well. But I always laid off talking about the Institute with these friends for fear that I would put them in the

difficult position of being asked to say things to me that they wouldn't want to say to the Faculty in general.

LABALME: Yes. I'm not sure everybody else would use such forbearance.

KENNAN: I know, but I felt that they had the right to the confidentiality of their discussions with the other Trustees and that I shouldn't invade that.

LABALME: When Harold established what is now the Herodotus Fund, which I know is an anonymous fund, but I think I'm right that he set that up, were you involved in that decision?

KENNAN: Not that I can recall. Not before it was set up.

LABALME: You were involved in trying to decide what to do with that money which was \$70,000.

KENNAN: Yes. I was. Although I can't remember what the solution was.

LABALME: Well, for a while you and Oppenheimer, I forget who else was on that little committee, talked about using it for younger scholars who hadn't a track record yet.

KENNAN: Yes. That is correct. And that was done, wasn't it, at that time?

LABALME: I'm not sure how effective that suggestion proved.

KENNAN: No.

LABALME: You were thinking of calling them junior fellows or--

KENNAN: Yes. I can't remember that that ever matured and I don't know what was done with the money.

LABALME: Now it's folded into the budget.

KENNAN:

It's folded into the rest. Of course that brings up something which we have discussed, I think, on other occasions, I'm not sure for this record. But I might as well reiterate it now--I'll do it very briefly, just to make sure we have it included--that I think the greatest problems of this Institution in the years that I've known it have been ones centered on the Faculty and not on the temporary members. I think the place has worked marvelously for the temporary members, that the arrangements are basically sound, and immensely constructive in the contribution that we make to scholarship here and elsewhere. I'm not sure that the arrangements for Faculty appointments are all that sound. I'm not sure that everyone who might be qualified otherwise intellectually as a Professor at this place can stand the strains of unlimited freedom that it implies. I'm not sure it's good for everyone. I'm not sure it's good for the country that anyone should be permitted to have this freedom even if he felt that he could stand the strains. I realize the problems involved here. What I would like ideally to see would be that people somewhat below the level of what we would call great scholarship, widely acknowledged across the world, somewhat below that but still absolutely first-rate scholars, could be brought here for limited periods--I should think five years might be a good time. Most of them have things they would like to write, and they could use this time very well, and they could contribute to

the Institute here. But they should not then be given life appointments. Now this of course is difficult because it involves usually an arrangement with the academic institutions where they are normally functioning. I'm not convinced that in some instances these institutions could not be persuaded to permit this sort of an arrangement. It might have to come before their Boards of Trustees, but I think that would be a better way, and that the lifelong scholarships here should go mostly for what people like to think of as the grand old men or old women of competence and of distinction in their fields. I can think of such people, of course, among the mathematicians here, such as Einstein and von Neumann. You don't get people like that every day. You also had it with Panofsky in the field of the history of art. And there have been others. I'm sure there must have been five or six others who have sort of responded to this requirement. I think that was the original idea of the Institute, and I think it would be better to limit the lifetime appointments to people of that stature who can use the facilities of the Institute really very well.

LABALME: The difference, of course, would be for the younger group. How do you see this as important for them?

KENNAN: I think the ability to be relieved of teaching for that length of time, not for life, but for enough time to permit them to do one major scholarly work, which often takes more than a year or two. I think that would be very good for

them. I think that perhaps the association with the other ones here at the Institute would be helpful, and would allow a certain flexibility in their lives over this period of time. That would not preclude their returning here later in their careers. I'm thinking of people really in their forty to fifty-five period.

LABALME: Would you feel it would be better for them as well as the Institute not to have--

KENNAN: Not to have this total freedom for all the rest of their lives.

LABALME: Yes.

KENNAN: Because I do have the feeling that not everybody can bear this sort of freedom. It's so easy (and I know this as a retired person) to let yourself be consumed by the trivia of life in any place where you normally reside. And the only thing that has saved many scholars from that has been the rigors of the teaching load which hauls them away from their homes every day, prevents them from spending half the morning reading the New York Times in their living room and puts them to work.

LABALME: You mention that in your letter to Segal. Another point you made there was a thought about restructuring humanistic studies, possibly recombining the fields in some way so that modern politics and economic history could be better nurtured.

KENNAN: I must look at that again. What I had in mind there.

LABALME: Well, you suggested two possible divisions in the humanistic fields. One would be classics and history of art and then a school of modern history and social science.

KENNAN: Yes. Oh yes, I know what you mean exactly. Well, I have been impressed with what some of the people in the social science field have been able to contribute here, and with the fact that the people who did contribute in that matter are the ones who had a great deal of historical depth in their approach to their own subjects. I think particularly of Geertz, in this respect, who is as much a historian as he is a sociologist in several respects. And that's the way I think it ought to be. I have a distrust of the fields, the ones you find designated in so many university catalogues, of politics and social science, because to my mind there is no field of knowledge concerned with the lives, the development of people themselves, which can be studied apart from the historical dimension. You see these "-ologies" like sociology, anthropology and so forth, to the extent that they deny that they are historical, assume a present moment in their writing. But there is no present moment. There is only an infinitesimal space in time between the past and the future. And I see history really as going right up to the present, depending on the way that it's written, and acknowledging that the closer you get to the present, the skimpier the materials you've got to go on. Many of them are not yet open or available. But there are

also the limitations on your own view of things. So, as a historian, I'm afraid of treading on the heels of current events. On the other hand, I do think that the sort of work I have done here on the period a hundred years ago or the period sixty years ago was history, and that by writing it at the time that I did, I was able to make a contribution. I can well understand that a hundred years later somebody may come along and say: this whole field deserves to be looked at again, now from a different perspective, with different sets of documentary sources. That's all right. I think history can go right up to the present. And I just simply fail to see how you can write about economics or sociology, even anthropology, I suppose--without taking into account the historical dimension.

LABALME: Should one restructure the Schools in some way so as to allow this category? Do you think it would be beneficial to the pursuits of these subjects?

KENNAN: I think it would.

LABALME: It would also help to give allies to modern history.

KENNAN: Yes. That's right. And I feel some disagreement both with the economists and the writers on political matters who claim that they're not historians or can get by without being historians on the one hand, but also people like some of my older colleagues here at the Institute in earlier years, who felt that these subjects were not a part of history. Of course they were a part of history.

LABALME: Yes. Ed Earle begged to have the word "politics" included in the new name of the School. He wanted it the School of--

KENNAN: Oh, he did? He wanted it the School of History and Politics?

LABALME: Yes. In any combination because he said it will help to preserve--

KENNAN: Yes. Well, I see the people in the politics department over there at the University-- [Interruption of telephone].

END OF CASSETTE ONE, SIDE TWO

CASSETTE TWO, SIDE ONE:

KENNAN: Well, we've gone over a lot here.

LABALME: Yes, and I don't want to keep you much longer. Let's see, what time is it.

KENNAN: 3:30.

LABALME: We could stop now if you'd like. Or we could continue for a little bit. Let me read you a few questions and see if there's anything you'd like to comment on. I was going to ask you how you have seen the Institute change. I was going to ask you about a typical day of yours at the Institute. Or whether there was something I hadn't ask you that you particularly wanted to say. Is there any of those or none you wish to comment on, without keeping you more than a few minutes.

KENNAN: First, as to how the Institute has changed. I'm sure that my view of the way that it's changed is very deficient

because I haven't been close enough to it in these last fifteen years, really, to see the whole thing.

LABALME: Do you feel as an emeritus quite detached?

KENNAN: Well, too much detached to give a good answer to that question. I do think it's become bigger, a bit more bureaucratic than it used to be, as is the tendency of all institutions. I rather deplore it. If it feels financial distress, I would rather see it remain smaller than to see it overexpand and have to go out cap in hand and push around to get money. That's one change I see. I think I see really an improvement in one way, in our historical school. I think I see a greater flexibility and openness to different forms of historical writing than existed in the older days. I don't see quite the same number of really great and revered older scholars that seemed to be around when I first came here. Of course, we owed a lot of those to Hitler and to Stalin who pushed them out into our society. They were really great European scholars. There are not so many of those, it seems to me, in this country. Perhaps it says something about the conditions of life and work and scholarship in this country that ought to be thought through. But those are the main changes that I see here. I don't think there are many more. Now, your second question?

LABALME: Is there anything more that you think that you would like to say for the record about the Institute?

KENNAN: If there is let me come and talk with you another time.

LABALME: All right.

KENNAN: I will think about that.

LABALME: And when you've seen the transcript it may trigger some other thoughts.

KENNAN: I have far less negative feelings about this institution than I have about American society generally.

LABALME: That's good.

KENNAN: I think it has resisted better than many of the others some of the trends of the times. I hope that it never relaxes in its commitment to scholarship of the highest quality in all respects. There's only one thing I have tried to do. This is a small matter, but I press this on respective Directors and librarians without any success. I miss something, anything, that we might have to show in this Institute which would give to visitors and enquirers a real picture of what has been done here. And I have urged them to try to get into touch with the hundreds of people who have been here and to try to collect a separate library (I don't mean to invade what's already there) of works that have been largely or completely done at this Institute. It would represent many hundreds of volumes, and it would be a very impressive collection. It should be kept under glass, and when you have tourists or foreign statesmen or people who come here, you would have something to show them, because it's

practically impossible to show this place to anybody. What is there to show?

LABALME: Maybe if we got special funding for such a purpose?

KENNAN: Yes, that's what we would have to do. I think it would keep one person fully employed for a year or two for just collecting this stuff.

LABALME: It would be, you're right, a tribute to the work of the Institute.

KENNAN: Only in the form of a book exhibit. I'm not talking about the other possible forms. But something you could see. I mean you could see what marvelous things have been done here over the course of the years.

LABALME: Well, many of those books would be yours, George.

KENNAN: Oh, no. There are far greater things than that that have been done. Oh, yes. Goodness, I think, for example, of the old gentleman who worked here so long on this long great thing on Roman history?

LABALME: Lowe?

KENNAN: Yes, Lowe. I mean, those volumes, all sorts of things like that.

LABALME: What would be wonderful would be the variety, the modern period as well as the earlier.

KENNAN: Yes. I would say all the works of the professors produced during the time they were here. Well, you look at Ken Setton's books on The Papacy and the Levant--this great work that Setton's done. And with great modesty, too. He's

never pushed it. But these things ought to be on exhibit somewhere where somebody could see them.

LABALME: Well, if that's the only way you can think to improve the Institute, we ought to be able to do it.

KENNAN: That's one way we could improve it which I have pressed on people and they've never done it!

LABALME: Thanks very much.

END OF CASSETTE TWO, SIDE ONE

END OF INTERVIEW