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**Ian Shapiro: Containment**

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## 1 The Idea Vacuum

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Power expands to fill a vacuum. This holds for ideas no less than for military campaigns, as the George W. Bush administration's national security doctrine has so dramatically underscored.<sup>1</sup> Announced in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it ranks as one of the most dramatic sea changes in U.S. national security policy ever. The Bush Doctrine has also turned traditional Republican Party foreign policy inside out and upside down. The congenital skeptics of foreign entanglements, whose leader heaped scorn on "nation building" in his 2000 presidential campaign, were transformed overnight into the world's self-appointed internationalists and policemen. The Bush administration committed itself to exporting American-style freedom and democracy worldwide, to confronting an "Axis of Evil" that was said to reach from Tehran to Pyongyang, and to waging unilateral preemptive war by coalitions "of the willing" so as to achieve regime change as was undertaken in Iraq in March of 2003.

A good part of the Bush Doctrine's easy ascendancy can be explained by the shock, scale, and sheer drama of the 9/11 attacks that unfolded in excruciating detail on live television on that beautiful September morning, killing more civilians than had the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor sixty years earlier. It created an opening for Vice

President Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and his influential neoconservative deputy Paul Wolfowitz to rewrite American national security policy almost overnight, without any serious debate on Capitol Hill or any significant opposition from the Democrats.

The Florida election debacle in November of 2000 brought George W. Bush to office with less legitimacy than any president since John Quincy Adams.<sup>2</sup> By the time of the 2002 midterm elections, however, his standing was sufficiently enhanced that the Republicans gained seats in both houses of Congress, bucking the usual pattern whereby the party controlling the White House loses seats on Capitol Hill. The Republican congressional majorities grew again in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, President Bush erased the dead heat of his contest with Al Gore by winning a majority of close to three million in the popular vote over Democratic challenger John Kerry. The administration's reduced popularity took its toll on Capitol Hill in the 2006 midterm elections, but the Bush White House remained in firm control of the national security agenda.

By the time of the 2004 presidential election the original rationale for the Iraq war was in tatters. It was obvious to all that the widely touted weapons of mass destruction did not exist. Nor was there any evidence of a reconstituted nuclear program. President Bush had been forced to admit that there was no link between Iraq and the 9/11 attacks. The war itself was going badly, with more than a thousand American combat troops dead, some multiple of that number wounded, and no plausible exit strategy—not to mention actual exit—in sight. Yet a decorated war veteran could not unseat an administration that had abandoned its core national security principles and bungled a reckless war of

choice. Kerry played into the administration's hands by turning the spotlight from the start onto the wrong war—the last war—by declaring that he was “reporting for duty” and flaunting his Vietnam past and buddies at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. The result was months of charges and countercharges about whether Kerry had won his medals honorably, whether he had faked throwing them over the White House fence, whether he had called his comrades war criminals in his antiwar congressional testimony in the early 1970s, and whether he had misrepresented other aspects of his war record.

When Kerry did confront Bush over the conduct of the Iraq war, there was no contest of ideas or principles. The charges were over gullibility in believing the claims of Ahmed Chalabi and others that Americans would be greeted with flowers in the streets as liberators, over poor postwar planning, over lack of adequate equipment for the troops and armor for trucks, and over other matters of fundamental competence. Kerry did describe the conflict as “the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time,” but he was handicapped by having voted to authorize it in the Senate—a vote based, as the Bush campaign never tired of pointing out, on his having seen the same national intelligence estimates (NIE) that they had seen.<sup>4</sup> This reduced Kerry to parsing the differences between voting to authorize war and deciding to go to war. Such distinctions are too subtle for electoral politics, where everyone knows that once you are explaining you are losing—if you have not already lost. It was as if Kerry had never noticed how disastrously Michael Dukakis had failed against George Bush's father in 1988, when Dukakis declared that “this election isn't about ideology. It's about competence.”<sup>5</sup>

Or perhaps, as I contend here, the problem was that Kerry focused on tactical attacks on the Bush administration's competence because he lacked his own strategic vision of U.S. national security. The first rule of electoral politics is that you can't beat something with nothing. Particularly when one is confronting an administration that is as explicitly and dramatically ideologically driven as the George W. Bush administration, it is essential to formulate an alternative and demonstrate its superiority and attractiveness.

My goal here is to do just that. I begin with an account of the ideological vacuum created by the 9/11 attacks, which obliterated the possibility of thinking about counterterrorism through the lens of the criminal justice system. In chapter 3, I chronicle how the Bush administration filled this vacuum with the Bush Doctrine and its "war on terror," illustrating how radical a departure this has been not only from traditional Republican and conservative ideas in recent American politics, but also from U.S. national security practices at least since the days of Woodrow Wilson. In chapters 4–6, my attention shifts to defending a credible alternative to the Bush Doctrine.

My argument depends centrally on adapting the doctrine of containment developed by George Kennan, a career foreign service diplomat and then director of the Policy Planning Staff for President Truman, in response to the emerging Soviet threat after World War II. Kennan's argument was laid out in "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947, signed by "X," but widely known to have been his work.<sup>6</sup> It provided the basis for the Truman administration's early postwar approach to the Soviet Union. Although it was modified in a variety

of ways by Truman and his successors, the core ideas structured U.S. national security policy for much of the Cold War. The architects of the Bush Doctrine have declared containment to be obsolete in the post-9/11 era. I show that they are wrong. Refashioning containment in light of the realities of the twenty-first century offers the best bet for securing Americans from violent attack while preserving democracy at home and diffusing it abroad.

Kennan believed two things about the Soviets: that appeasement of their ambitions would be disastrous for America's vital interests, and that a direct assault on the USSR or its client states was unnecessary and would be counterproductive. The dangers of appeasement required no extended defense in the aftermath of World War II. Containment was intended to prevent Soviet expansion without saddling the United States with unsustainable global military obligations. It committed the United States to war only when its vital interests are at stake. Otherwise, the Soviet threat was to be contained by our relying on economic sticks and carrots, fostering competition within the world communist movement, engaging in diplomacy, promoting the health and vitality of the capitalist democracies, and ensuring that our attempts to combat the Soviets would not make us become more like them. As the Soviets became overextended internationally and the dysfunctional features of their economic system played themselves out, patient application of these tools would be sufficient to guarantee America's national security.

The Soviet adversary that concerned Kennan posed different challenges from those faced by the United States in the post-9/11 world, but there are important similarities as well. Kennan's article, initially known as the "Long

Telegram,” began as a February 1946 State Department cable from Moscow. It was designed to convince his superiors that the USSR’s political outlook was so antithetical to ours that the United States had to find a basis for dealing with the Soviets other than argument and persuasion. Sometimes they might go through the motions of talking, but Kennan insisted that they saw the arguments of Western governments as mere ideological rationalizations for a system they utterly rejected as exploitative, decadent, and subversive of the world they sought to create.

The parallels with the architects of 9/11 and their supporters do not end there. Kennan had no doubt that the Soviets had regional, if not global, ambitions, that they were constitutionally hostile to democracy as Americans understood it, and that they expected much of the ideological contest between their system and ours to be played out in the Third World. And just as defenders of containment had to face down critics who sought to equate it with appeasement during the Cold War, so I argue here that today containment offers better and more powerful tools than does the Bush Doctrine for protecting Americans and their democracy.

Moreover, though this was not Kennan’s focus, Islamic fundamentalists share in common with the old Soviets the lack of a viable economic model or a success story to which they can point. Where they have come to power, in countries like Afghanistan and Iran, the economic results have been disastrous because authoritarian regimes are not good at running market economies. In Saudi Arabia, a more complex example, success depends entirely on a nonrenewable resource. This makes it doubtful that in the medium term they can pose a serious challenge to democratic

capitalism. For these reasons, among others, I make the case here that Kennan's arguments for containment have continuing relevance to our present circumstances.

There are, nonetheless, significant differences between the world the United States and its allies faced during the Cold War and the adversaries we confront today. The most obvious concerns the object of containment. The Soviet Union was a single "it," whereas today we face dangerous threats from a variety of hostile regimes and transnational terrorist groups. In one respect, as I argue, this situation lends itself to containment. It creates tensions among our adversaries' agendas, as well as openings for competition among them. But containing threats to America's survival as a democracy also confronts us with less predictable, more fluid and open-ended challenges than we faced in the Cold War. This reality is compounded by the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. The world is less stable than it was for much of the Cold War.

Recognizing this does not give us good reasons to abandon containment, but it does make it more complicated. It also suggests the importance of international instruments for which Kennan had little time. Among these are international law and institutions. The challenges posed by weak states, transnational terrorist groups, and unpredictable alliances all suggest that we should buttress the institutions of international legitimacy—pressing them into the service of fostering democracy, and containing threats to it, as best we can. And, whereas Kennan opposed collective defense arrangements like NATO, we should recognize that they can sometimes be helpful tools of containment—so long as they remain subordinate to our vital interest in securing the American people and their

democracy into the future.<sup>7</sup> It is ironic, as we will see, that the two areas where the Bush administration's practice has come closest to Kennan's views are the two areas where they stand in most need of modification.

One other parallel with the early Cold War years deserves mention. Since the collapse of the Soviet empire, Kennan and containment have deservedly been accorded great credit for the national security stance that contributed so much to that result without a superpower war. It is worth noting, however, that at the start of the Cold War it was no foregone conclusion that containment would be the dominant strategy. In the 1952 election campaign Dwight Eisenhower attacked containment. His future secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, called for "rollback" of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, and for aggressive confrontation with communism worldwide. That these views did not prevail, even in the Eisenhower administration, is due, in part at least, to the fact that they were vigorously contested by containment's defenders.

This history makes the Democrats' failure to contest the Bush Doctrine in the present climate, and to get behind an alternative like that proposed here, all the more troubling. This subject is taken up in chapter 7. The Democrats' failure can be traced to several sources. One is fear of challenging a president in a time of national crisis. A second, on the left of the Democratic Party, stems from ideological discomfort with the very idea of national security policy. A third is rooted in the changes wrought in the party's ideology by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) since the 1980s and the resulting tactical political imperatives. Yet unless the DLC outlook is fundamentally

rethought, the Democrats are unlikely to find an effective vehicle to challenge the Bush Doctrine in the medium term. Even if they win the White House in 2008, they will likely have been co-opted by much of the Bush administration's self-defeating national security policy.