

**Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review**  
**Author's Response by Robert Beisner**



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**Response from Robert Beisner, Emeritus Professor, American University**

**R**eading these five expert and attentive essays on *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War* satisfies me of four truths:

First, I am fortunate to have such talented historians and political scientists as colleagues. H-Diplo readers who have not seen my book will find a notably painstaking synopsis in Deborah Larson's generous review.

Second, often scholars argue with one another, and sometimes critics think an author has said or written something he or she hasn't. As to the first, I found parts of the H-Diplo critiques valuable; a propos the second, I'll try to correct the record.

Third, some disagreements arise from differences in belief and philosophy. In these cases, I hope not to convince my critic that he or she is wrong but to spell out the differences between us.

And fourth, it is fitting that Jim Matray should name his next dog "Spot," because Dean Acheson was no poodle to beckon with a sharp whistle. But my sympathies are with any pooch having to answer to "Elihu."

*A historian of American foreign relations, Professor **Robert Beisner** taught at American University for thirty years. He is former president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. He is the author of *Twelve against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists 1898-1900* and *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865-1900* and the winner of the Nevins and Dunning Prizes. Beisner was editor in chief of the two-volume bibliographic *Guide to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (2nd edition).*

Of course, I am pleased when readers praise my book, as in Professor Macdonald's approval of it as balanced, nuanced, and definitive. And I appreciate that readers identify my aim of showing Acheson at work running the State Department and of demonstrating how the mix of personalities shaped the policymaking "process." Based on my account of the Truman-Acheson relationship, John Earl Haynes accurately describes them as dealing in a revolutionary time with "interests and responsibilities of bewildering complexity on every continent." Deborah Larson notes that "my" Acheson is "more uncertain and conflicted than the Cold Warrior of conventional wisdom." Matt Jacobs sees him focusing on "maximizing U.S. economic, military, and political power, while also extending its reach to support and protect U.S. allies within the context of the rising Cold War," adding usefully that deteriorating U.S.-Soviet relations, a burgeoning cold war bureaucracy, and Acheson's wooing of Truman quickened simultaneously. Jacobs finds the argument in chapter 3 ("Patterns of Peril: Joining the Cold Warriors") tedious, but I thought it essential to determine how belatedly (compared to others) he became a cold warrior, since writers have often suggested he was one of the originals.

Truman and Acheson made plenty of errors, but as Haynes points out they "got the one or two vital matters" right, especially in Europe. Many accounts of American policy in these years neglect European issues once authors have put the Marshall Plan behind them, just as

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historians have underestimated the importance of the historic inclusion of the defeated Germans and Japanese into the “western” bloc. Thus, at the risk of losing some readers, I devoted all or parts of six chapters on Germany. Acheson believed the Cold War could be won or lost there.

In its time, the Truman administration came under heavy fire from critics. No matter how low their polling figures, however, the president and Acheson rarely lost control of the making of policy. One reason for their success—intimated at by Macdonald—was their good fortune in having enemies so “awful . . . ugly and hateful.” Arguably, an exception to their maintenance of control was over China and Taiwan. What makes this story so ironical is that Acheson aroused a domestic mutiny by trying to normalize relations with a Mao Zedong who wanted nothing to do with Americans. All agree Acheson made many of his own difficulties, especially in substituting sentiment for reason in defending the indefensible Alger Hiss. Haynes trenchantly observes that Acheson and Kennan in their reactions to Hiss swapped their customary roles as the rational and emotional actor, respectively, and Professor Larson intriguingly suggests that Acheson was inclined to shoot himself in the foot because his very successes made him (as they did Truman) lean more to snap decisions than extended analysis. As much as I agree that future secretaries of state should take office with as much experience as Acheson had in 1949, and concur that reading my book might help aspirants to the office, I hope for neither.

What follows are responses to criticisms of the H-Diplo readers, generally arranged in three categories: first, where readers appear to have either misread or misunderstood me; second, where the questions are chiefly empirical in character, that is, where we appear to differ on the “facts” and their meaning; and third, where disagreements appear to stem from philosophical differences. To spare readers from tedium, I will be selective in taking up my readers’ comments and criticisms.

As an example of the first, Matray credits me with a remark Acheson made about Truman’s sticking peanuts up his nose. He also reports my writing that D.C. authorities routinely flunked Soviets taking drivers’ license tests when I said instead they spurned state department suggestions to do this. It was Truman, as I wrote, not the Secretary of State, who in melding the Truman Doctrine with the loyalty program “essentially asked conservatives: Do you want to help me stop communism or not?” There is no conflict between Acheson still being open to talks on Germany in the spring of 1949 and the statement that “he *came* to believe” friction with Moscow was “less risky than ongoing negotiations with it.” Similarly, Jacobs assigns to me a belief that American values ruled out preemptive war; whether I believe this or not, I wrote that Acheson professed the idea in a 1945 statement to Truman.

Other errors or misrepresentations are more serious. Thus, Jacobs claims I offer no explanation for Acheson’s senior-citizen turn to the right when I wrote in Chapter 36 that his “sourness was surely partly a product of age but also an overstated expression of his old self. He used words as knives, loved to shock others, and was often found pawing for a fight. As the Democratic Party, in shock from Vietnam, listed to the left, Acheson moved to the right. Far younger men curdled in response to the whirlwinds of the late sixties, but Acheson at times seemed to think the young and rebellious were deliberately choosing to flout the standards by which he had

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grown up and that he still honored.” While he remained “a clearheaded writer,” he became “an ever nastier polemicist.” This may not convince, but more specific evidence is simply lacking.

Jacobs’s repeated complaint that I give Acheson’s early years short shrift ignores my subtitle (*A Life in the Cold War*) and introductory statement that I would not be replotting the ground James Chace had tilled so well in his 1998 biography. Jacobs also asserts I give “competing portrayals” of Acheson and asks how I can both consider him a dominant policymaker and give him less blame than Truman and Marshall for China’s onslaught against MacArthur in Korea (Matray has similar concerns). I would reply that people are not consistent and evolve over time; that *dominant* is not the same as *wise*; and—on the Chinese intervention—that I escort my own criticisms of his actions and non-actions with quotations from Acheson’s own severe self-criticism. In any case, why should we even consider judging the man carrying the diplomatic portfolio to be more guilty than the Commander-in-Chief or secretary of defense? Inattention also seems to lie behind Jacobs’s and Matray’s view that throughout the book I typically let Acheson off the hook. This overlooks how I question his heavy-handed and hasty drive to push West Germany into NATO, criticize his loyalty to Alger Hiss (rather than *justifying* it, as Matray claims), label Acheson’s effort to recast China policy bankrupt, expose his alcohol-fueled quarrels with allies over the Korean POW issue at the U.N., recount his slide into crotchety reaction in his last years, and lodge any number of my own objections to his actions.

We enter empirical territory with disagreements about the “facts,” for we ought to be able to figure out who is correct. Acheson for example may have drawn on Britain for much of his culture, but it was not Jacob’s *Anglophilia* that held him in thrall in the Middle East but the impossibility of both serving the interests of allies and gaining the friendship of new, post-colonial nations. On European issues, he clashed as often with London as with Paris, and no Anglophile would set off an uproar in the U.K. in 1962 by publicly declaring Britain had “lost an empire” and not yet found a new “role.” Jacobs is correct, however, to question my remark that states in the Middle East mostly stood outside the “story of colonialism and decolonization.” My reference with this poor choice of words was to such countries as Egypt (never a formal British colony), Ethiopia (always independent, if conquered by Mussolini), Saudi Arabia (new but never a colony), Iran (always independent), and Israel (brand new). I should also have underscored that formal “independence” did not inevitably mean freedom from western influence, or even domination. Jacobs also disputes my statement that the rhetoric of JFK’s inaugural speech was more unbuttoned than the words of the Truman Doctrine, though he pulls his punches in adding that I might be correct in the realm of “sound bites,” whatever that means. (Aren’t sound bites made of pieces of rhetoric?) Pulled punches or not, I invite readers to read the two speeches and see which they think the more unrestrained.

Contrary to Larson’s remark, I don’t really criticize Acheson for not making clear that Washington would not defend South Korea against aggressors, because he had no authority to declare what was not U.S. (or Truman’s) policy. In reviewing evidence on the impact of the “perimeter speech,” I find that Stalin, Mao, and Kim were perhaps more swayed by witnessing Truman’s struggle to gain congressional approval for Korean aid monies. I agree with Larson’s view that Truman and Acheson probably did not know in advance they would defend South Korea, and so wrote.

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I do not think Acheson was a “quintessential realist,” although this is open to question. Classical realists are not likely to define the national interest as the maintenance of “as spacious an environment as possible in which free states might exist and flourish.” Realists consider other states’ “internal affairs” off limits, while Truman and Acheson, especially in relations with allies as they executed aid to Greece and the Marshall Plan, habitually meddled in their internal affairs, provoking numerous complaints. Acheson never acted to challenge Moscow’s dominion over its satellites, but he would never publicly recognize that domination, exasperating such realists as Hans J. Morgenthau and Norman A. Graebner. Acheson believed the cold war would end only when something profound changed in the nature of the Soviet regime. And though he did not try to transform foreign autocracies into democracies, he believed strongly that resistance to the Soviet Union was essential to protect *America’s* democratic nature.

I am the wrong historian to assess Macdonald’s censure of Truman’s 1948 campaign, though it seems overstated, but I need to comment on his unhappiness with my “China hands” portraits. I do not share his harsh opinion of these gentlemen but did not mean to suggest they were all diplomatic savants. My objective in this biography was an account of what Acheson did when O. Edmund Clubb, John Paton Davies, John S. Service, and John Carter Vincent ran afoul of their critics. Between the lines of Macdonald’s remarks, I sense a wish to join the fray as one of the critics, and to hammer John Melby while he’s at it. It is plausible I was too trusting of Melby’s oral history, but it was factually reliable on other matters, and my references to his warnings about Indochina also rest on Service’s oral history and documents in *FRUS*. Macdonald also belabors my allegedly semi-revisionist description of the Soviets’ negligible role in the Greek civil war, but I was clear in writing that Stalin had “partly kept” his wartime “bargain” with Churchill on eastern Europe (including Greece) but was “willing to make trouble from afar if it involved minimal risks. Generally he was far less aggressive than Yugoslav and Greek communists, though at one point he did prod the former to help their ‘Greek comrades.’ Greek insurgents received their arms from neighboring satellite states, who, with the exception of Yugoslavia, could hardly have acted without Stalin’s say-so.”

Since neither charge bothers me, I’ll plead guilty to Matry’s disapproval of my “traditional” writing and neglect of new “cultural” revelations. Both indictments would probably be on target against the vast majority of biographers, as opposed to authors of other monographs. Besides, though I did not dwell on the point either in text or footnotes, I did read the *non-traditional* and “cultural” literature and found little both useful and persuasive.

Jim Matray points to an ambiguity on the question of the Korean War as a “turning point.” It is true I stress changes in policies and policymaking occurring after June 1950, but I also hold that some of most significant (e.g., swelling aid to French arms in Indochina) were already afoot or waiting just offstage when North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel. I could have been clearer on the matter, but the two points are not incompatible. Sticking with Matray for the moment, while Acheson (following Kennan) believed Moscow’s policy was the function of the workings and neuroses of the Soviet system rather than an answer to actions of the United States, it is equally true and a point Matray disregards that in several places I discuss Acheson’s dismissal of we’re-pure, they’re-evil thinking as puerile, not to mention mistaken.

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I have already addressed the issue Matray has in mind in remarks about my “praise” for Acheson being “excessive,” but I also want to ask: does he think Truman and Acheson really missed “a chance to end the cold war” by not more fervently seeking negotiations with Stalin? And is Truman really *less* to blame than Acheson for not seeking congressional sanction for the war in Korea? In our own era of “gotcha” journalism, is it so shocking that besides diligently courting and briefing reporters, Acheson sometimes thought them like “insects”?

A few disagreements appear to be philosophical. Both Jacobs and Matray imply that if—as physicians say—Acheson “presents” symptoms of racism, I must condemn everything about him and his career. If so, this is troubling. I always tried warning students against inflicting current standards on earlier decades (or centuries). We all realize that the great majority of white and Christian Americans in the 1940s and 1950s probably harbored racist attitudes about Africans, Asians, and Arabs (and African-Americans). Does this mean they are all historically unregenerate? Are Jacobs and Matray intimating that Americans were uniquely and wickedly racist in the face of evidence of coexisting and sometimes uglier racism in Russia, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and elsewhere? Doesn't Acheson's immunity to anti-Semitism count? When I show that Acheson was no anti-Semite, had no “prejudice against either Arabs or Islam,” and “understood the damage domestic racial practices posed for U.S. foreign policy,” Jacobs answers all this *may* be “true” but only “in the abstract.” What does this mean? What is the *concrete* meaning of his comradeship with Frankfurter?

Could part of the gap between us lie in the fact that both Jacobs and Matray just dislike both Acheson and his policies? Matray is clear in his loathing, not an attitude most biographers would advise me to take. Jacobs seems far surer than most historians I know that the United States bears the blame for dividing the “world in two.” I agree that today we have reason to worry about how American power is being applied. But I would worry even more over the long haul if American leaders would or could not exercise U.S. power in the name of worthy objectives. I have little doubt that leaders of many other nations on all the continents would share my worry. The calamity in Iraq now makes any talk of a beneficent exercise of American power, hard or soft, seem laughable, but for historical analysis and judgment we should look beyond our own day.

Finally, in response to both Jacobs and Matray, it is not incumbent on me as a historian (not an oracle) to hazard guesses on what Acheson might have thought or done in Iraq. He died more than a third of a century ago, and this was not his fight. I do not know what he would have done or believed.

Oh, and one last thing: Down, Spot! Stay, Condi!