

Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review
Review by Douglas J. Macdonald



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Review by Doug Macdonald, Visiting Research Professor, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College

To some degree, any evaluation of a political biography is colored by how the reviewer feels about the subject. A controversial subject can bring mixed reactions simply by his or her personality or beliefs. Robert L. Beisner has courageously taken on writing the biography of one of the most controversial characters in American diplomacy, Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1949-1953.) Such controversy makes balance and nuance much more difficult, but Beisner has managed to combine both in what has to be seen as the definitive biography thus far of Acheson during his State Department tenure as secretary. This is high praise indeed, as his work supersedes David McLellan's excellent *Dean Acheson: The State Department Years* from 1976.

By incorporating the latest research on the period, his own comprehensive primary research, and the evidentiary revelations of the New Cold War History emanating from the East since the end of the Cold War, Beisner has given us a new perspective on the difficulties that the Truman Administration faced, in Acheson's phrase, "at the creation" of the post-World War II world.

Acheson's reputation has roller-coastered over the years. The right-wing of his time reviled him, as Beisner documents exhaustively, but even some Democrats and respected opinion leaders such as Walter Lippman also called for his resignation. "Realists" such as George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau charged (as did Lippman) that he had over-extended the United States. The New Left excoriated Acheson in the 1960s and 1970s as the initial architect of

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the “Amerikan Empire” and a chief counter-revolutionary in the Third World. Today, polls of historians and political scientists are generally supportive, and they tend to see Acheson’s president as leading one of the better American administrations. Such are the fortunes of historical reputations.¹

Why the controversies? Some were simply a product of the times, and it is difficult to see how any administration could have, for example, “saved” China for the non-communist alliance systems of the 1940s given what Congress and the people were willing to do. But there was also the man.

Dean Acheson embodies what Jackie Gleason’s working class television character of the 1950s, the luckless bus driver Ralph Kramden, would have called a “wise-en-heimer” – a caustic, sarcastic wit who enjoyed flaunting his superiority to his inferiors with his sharp tongue, sharp mind, and sharp appearance. This aspect of Acheson’s personality is not a small issue, for, as Beisner shows over and over, many of Acheson’s political problems were of his own making. This systematic inclusion of character and personality into political analysis is the ultimate value of biography, and where appropriate this approach is far superior to the comically rational calculations of *homo economicus* and his many theoretical imitators hypothesized in the social sciences. This is why, although a political scientist, I read more history than theory.

Despite his subject’s abrasive personality and sometimes bigoted views, Beisner’s Acheson comes off as an ultimately very sympathetic character, at least to this reviewer, in no small part because his opponents, foreign and domestic, were generally so awful. It is helpful to have ugly and hateful enemies.

Having some published familiarity with this period of history, two primary things about Acheson surprised me in Beisner’s telling. First, Acheson gave a lot more thought to decision-making and how it is done *during his time in office* than one would expect. The complexities of politics and the policy process fascinated him, not only as immediate practical problems to be dealt with, but also as intellectual dilemmas to be wrestled with in the longer run. Seldom have we had such an intellectually powerful, and intellectually curious, secretary of state. The Princeton Seminars (informal brainstorming sessions with other decision-makers shortly after leaving office) and his memoirs clearly demonstrate this intellectual curiosity after the fact of his tenure. But his constant search for better means of deciding in a democratic system while in office was something of a revelation to me. As Henry Kissinger has noted, those in government usually do not have the time for such intellectualizing, being too busy dealing with the multiple crises and problems that come flying at them.

¹ In polls of historians and political scientists of American administrations, Truman consistently ends up in the top ten. See “Historical Rankings of United States Presidents” at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>. Accessed 1 December 2006.

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Acheson not only thought deeply about these processes, he tried to educate the press and public, largely unsuccessfully, to the complexities of a post-isolationist world with a strong Soviet Union dedicated to transforming the international system in its direction, and without the British Empire of old. One longs for a secretary of state today, or at any time, who when asked by a journalist whether a meeting in Paris had been a success or a failure, answered, "Do we always have to use dichotomies?" (p. 149) But such admirable pedagogy won him few friends, and gained him not a few enemies. That does not speak well for our system of governance, then or now.

The second great surprise is the time that Acheson did spend trying to smooth relations with the political opposition, both Democratic and Republican. It was clearly a chore for him. But as Beisner documents well, as related in letters to his daughter in particular, Acheson made effort after effort to reach out to critics, at least until McCarthyism burst forth, when the personal vitriol understandably appeared to harden his attitudes. Yet the image of the "shoot from the lip" wise-en-heimer needs to be tempered a good deal by new knowledge of the private and discrete efforts at conciliation that are documented here. Ralph Kramden too might have been pleasantly surprised.

Beisner's use of the New Cold War History from the East and the secondary literature that has emerged from it is nearly exemplary. Finally, it seems, such historical information is seeping into American and general diplomatic histories instead of being quarantined in the regional or specialist literature. With the exception of a few pioneers such as John Lewis Gaddis, it is still commonplace among American historians and, especially, political scientists, to find outdated interpretations of the early Cold War, and later, that were formed ideologically during the Cold War period and have never changed. Beisner has consulted that older revisionist and post-revisionist literature, as well as the New Cold War History, in a kind of empirical synthesis that can only be appreciated by consulting the footnotes in detail. This can also cause some problems, as I shall note below, for at times they cannot be synthesized. But by any measurement, this is a very impressively sourced book.

My problems with the book tend to be over particulars, not the general scholarship, with two exceptions. Beisner details Truman's and Acheson's travails with what the latter called the "primitives" of the Republican Party of the day. McCarthy, Wherry, Judd and the gang are all here, as well as people who should have known better such as Robert Taft (who could not stand Acheson personally and was the butt of many of his *bon mots*). The demagoguery, the lies, the hyperbole, the incivility are all presented in their revolting detail.

But Beisner gives the Democrats something of a free ride in the responsibility for the breakdown of civility and honorable behavior. Harry Truman ran a very dirty and demagogic campaign in his desperate and successful attempt at re-election in 1948. Republicans were unfairly called anti-Semites and worse on the famous "whistle-stop tour," and they and their presidential standard bearer Thomas Dewey – *Thomas Dewey!* – were compared to the recently defeated Nazis and fascists. For good measure, at an earlier

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speech at a “whistle-stop” on the same day, Truman compared the Republicans to the communists, declaring, “If anybody in this country is friendly to the communists, it is the Republicans who are trying so hard to be elected.”²

This was the same bipartisan Thomas Dewey who called for an end to partisan attacks of all kinds at the end of 1950 when McCarthyism really started to take off. (p. 309) Dewey, a decent and dull man, did not deserve this kind of treatment from the desperate Truman, who did not receive it in return from Dewey in 1948 (although Dewey had attacked Roosevelt viciously in 1944.) This behavior does not, of course, excuse the wild accusations of “communist” that were to follow from the Republicans, but it does provide context that is missing from Beisner’s account.

The second area of disappointment was the uneven treatment of the Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) caught up in the ideological maelstrom of the time. Regular readers of H-Diplo may be familiar with my view that the “China Hands” are among the most over-rated historical figures of the Cold War. I will not rehearse those views here generally; they can easily be found in the H-Diplo archives if one is interested.³

But once again in Beisner’s treatment John S. Service is presented as a slightly loose-tongued, brilliant FSO whose deep knowledge of China showed him that the communists were destined to win. This is so even though Service repeatedly stated that they owed more of their inspiration to George Washington than to Lenin, a jaw-dropping ideological missed shot if there ever was one. And he did more than just try to sway public opinion by releasing his own reports to unauthorized persons, as Beisner suggests. Service also covertly released highly classified military documents that would have had no role in swaying public opinion, but that were valuable to the Chinese Communists and others, and potentially detrimental to U.S. interests.

Similarly, John Carter Vincent, the head of the China “desk” in the late 1940s, is portrayed as a prescient and moderate presence in the State Department. What is omitted is that it was primarily Vincent’s idea to cut off ammunition and other military supplies to Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) in August, 1946 at a crucial moment of the Chinese civil war, although it was also obviously approved by General Marshall and President Truman. The military boycott of Chiang, which also consisted of actively persuading the British and others to boycott the Nationalists as well, lasted until May, 1947. Chiang’s supporters saw

² For the general nastiness of the campaign, see, for example, Zachary Karabell, *The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the Election of 1948* (New York: Random House, 2000). Karabell argues, among other things, that it was possible for Truman to get away with this behavior because it was in the pre-television age. This was to quickly change. McCarthy’s later political demise, for example, was greatly accelerated by his television exposure. In a speech on October 25, 1948 Truman analogized that Dewey was a “front man” for wealthy interests out to destroy democracy in America, just like Hitler, Mussolini, and, for extra oomph, Tojo. Both this and the other speech mentioned can be found at The American Presidency Project, at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>. Accessed 25 October 2006.

³ H-Diplo list archives search page- <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Diplo> .

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this as, at best, a major blunder that allowed the communists to take the military initiative in Manchuria at a critical juncture. No one can tell, then or now, what psychological effect this had on the morale and loyalties of Chiang's shaky armies in the north. The critics may or may not have been right in this, but it was a serious charge against a person, Vincent, who was an outspoken internal critic of Chiang and his regime, which suggested political bias to them.

As to Vincent's regional expertise and prescience, his policy recommendation was not, as was John S. Service's, to abandon Chiang and embrace the "New China" of Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong). Rather, Vincent wanted to reform Chiang and the entire Nationalist Party in the middle of a civil war, a policy choice that in retrospect looks rather silly (although no one could really think of what else to do at the time given widespread expectations and constraints.) A foreigner telling a Chinese leader how to run his country? Franklin Roosevelt, who knew next to nothing about China, knew that was impossible and consistently refused to try to reform Chiang during the war, much to the frustration of the "China Hands." If the attempt to reform Iraq and Afghanistan today is such a mess, consider trying to reform China in a New Deal direction in the 1940s. But it was the "China Hand" John Carter Vincent, with an extensive and firsthand knowledge of Chinese culture, who most consistently promoted the idea. Such criticisms of China policy did not come from nowhere, or from merely base political motives.⁴

There is also one error in Beisner's treatment of the "China Hands," or at least a questionable conclusion. Beisner argues that John Melby, who was later drummed out of the Foreign Service, was against aiding the French in Indochina during his mission there in 1950. This is quite questionable, and a look at Beisner's footnotes suggests that he relied on Melby's oral history at the Truman Library, made years later, and perhaps a 1982 article in *Diplomatic History* where Melby claims the same thing. But the initial report on Indochina by Melby and General Erskine is available in original form in FRUS. It concludes:

From a political standpoint [i.e., Melby's area of responsibility], it is the belief of the Mission that the United States should continue to exercise its influence to the end that mutually agreed political programs be carried out in good faith by the participants most directly concerned. Only thus can the maximum utility be drawn from the military assistance which the United States is prepared to give and only thus can the spread of Communism throughout Southeast Asia be contained. It is almost a commonplace, now, to state that failure in Indochina will make nigh on inevitable the over-all (sic) and eventual victory of Communists throughout the area. The French and the Indochinese must be persuaded, wherever necessary, to rise above their own parochial interests by realizing that these interests can be served only

⁴ See the characteristically highly sympathetic account of Vincent in Gary May, *China Scapegoat: The Diplomatic Ordeal of John Carter Vincent* (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1979). The thesis of the book is in the title.

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by the establishment of a community of interests dedicated to the independence, integrity, welfare, and prosperity of the peoples concerned. Any division in this community of interests is and will continue to be the nourishment upon which the Communists will feed.

[signed] John F. Melby, Chairman, Joint State-Defense MDAP Survey Mission (August 6, 1950)⁵

Despite Melby's later claims of firm opposition at the time, only by the most tortured logic could this report be interpreted as opposing U.S. involvement in Indochina. As Beisner points out many times elsewhere, Acheson and many others had been saying the same thing about French reform for several years. In his oral history and article Melby was likely either dissembling or experiencing "hindsight bias." But in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war in Korea he was as hawkish as most everyone else, and appeared to fully accept what later became known as the "Domino Theory," which greatly, and perhaps falsely, enhanced the long term strategic value of Indochina (by the time the countries of Indochina fell in 1975 the strategic landscape, regionally and globally, had changed dramatically in ways that people in 1950 could hardly have foreseen.) Contrary to popular myth, because a "China Hand" was opposed to intervention in China does not necessarily mean that he was against intervention elsewhere in Asia.

In contrast to the travails of the "China Hands," the purge of the Joseph Grew-led Japan "desk" FSOs in the State Department in 1945-46, leading to a shift in the Far East Division towards the New Deal faction associated with China policy, is portrayed by Beisner as "sinking the encrusted battleships of veteran FSOs moored in regional and country offices" (p. 25.) Why this was a good regionalist purge and the "China Hands" a bad regionalist purge is never explained, or even discussed. But clearly there was an ideological effect in the shift.

Thus, as the American need for country expertise concerning Japan was greatest at the beginning of the occupation, it turned out to be the exact moment it was being removed from the policy process. The Japan "desk" was arguably prescient in its analysis: China would not be a Great Power for some time no matter who won its civil war, and therefore a stable, prosperous Japan was important to American policies in the region, despite the emotions left over from the war.

This sensible conclusion was not accepted until the "Great Reversal" in Japan policy in 1947 as China sunk deeper into the morass of civil war and the Cold War heated up. In my view, the purge of Grew and his Japan "desk" colleagues, and conservative China specialists such as Stanley Hornbeck, who might have added some ideological ballast to the sometimes rabid New Dealers among the "China Hands," is one of the great undertold stories of the

⁵ U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, Vol. VI, (Washington, DC: 1976), p. 844.

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era. But this question involves the American historical profession: New Dealers win. Fortunately, this lacuna is unrepresentative of most of Beisner's overall approach to the era.

Although Beisner's use of the New Cold War History is generally excellent, there is an important exception, and there is at least one place where the new evidence apparently has not been consulted sufficiently. In the important case of the Truman Doctrine and the Greek Civil War, Beisner unfortunately largely relies on Cold War revisionist and post-revisionist scholarship, as well as works that have been superseded by subsequent archival revelations.

This is an epistemic problem that arises when synthesizing two literatures that can be, at times at least, mutually exclusive. At those times, one must choose. In this instance, Beisner chooses the old view of the revisionists and post-revisionists. The case of Greece, which as he notes was an important turning point for Acheson and the administration, stands as an example of the gaps this inattention to new scholarship, and reliance on the old, can cause. Thankfully, it is a singular case in the book. I shall therefore treat it at some length.

The archival work of Russian scholars such as Artiom Ulanian and American scholars such as John O. Iatrides, for example, demonstrate that the Soviets did not abandon the chance for victory in Greece at least until mid-1949 when the insurgency had been defeated on the battlefield.⁶ In addition, it is now clear that Yugoslavs such as Milovan Djilas greatly exaggerated their own relative revolutionary ardor in 1947-48 to discredit Stalin among world "progressives" following the break with Moscow.⁷ This remains one of the great revisionist and post-revisionist myths of the Cold War: Stalin's alleged lack of interest in spreading revolution. This new scholarship on the Greek crisis of 1945-49 is unfortunately not adequately reflected in the Beisner book.

To be sure, there was an asymmetrical communist interest in where revolutions were to be pursued. But clearly Stalin saw an opportunity for spreading the revolution in Greece and pursued it, and referred to the potential outcome in February, 1948 as "an international issue of great importance."⁸ That he did so largely by compensating Eastern European nations for the aid they gave the Greeks directly, and only occasionally gave direct Soviet aid to the insurgency, does not change this fact.

⁶ Artiom Ulanian, "The Soviet Union and the Greek Question, 1946-1953: Problems and Appraisals," in Francesca Gori and Silvio Ponti, eds., *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943-1953* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997). More recently, see John O. Iatrides, "Revolution or Self-Defense? Communist Goals, Strategy, and Tactics in the Greek Civil War," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 3-33.

⁷ *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973).

⁸ Quoted in Iatrides, p. 28.

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For Stalin, it was not so much that the British and Americans were committed to a non-communist Greece, as Acheson, and Beisner, seemed to believe, although that was an important factor in many ways. The potential for a successful revolution itself was most determinant of policy. Contrary to the Yugoslav portrayal of him, to Stalin the ideological goal of revolution was a constant; the practical opportunities offered up by the material world to this historical materialist were sporadic. (To the newly empowered Yugoslav communists, like most revolutionary governments, such opportunities appeared almost everywhere. Stalin knew better.) If the revolution in Greece were to succeed, Stalin was quite willing to ride out the subsequent political storm with the West. If it had little chance of success, however, he was quite willing to abandon it without guilt or tremendous loss of face. This was also true of his attitude in Korea in 1950 when Kim Il-sung was losing badly on the battlefield, and it was an attitude the Chinese ultimately did not share towards North Korea, hence their military intervention. Stalin saw the revolution in dialectical terms, with steps backward and steps forward. Only the USSR, as the great “base area” of socialism, and perhaps Eastern Europe after World War II, was completely sacrosanct.

Thus at a February, 1948 meeting of interested communist parties, a Bulgarian delegate asked Stalin: “Will the Americans allow the victory of the [Greek] partisans?” Stalin replied:

No one will ask them. If there are enough forces to win, and if there are people capable of using the people’s forces, then the struggle should be continued. But one shouldn’t think that if nothing comes up in Greece, everything else is lost.⁹

Although Stalin had increasing doubts as the Greek communists did badly on the battlefield, it was not until August 1, 1949 that the Hungarian communist leader was tasked with informing the Greeks that the insurgency was over temporarily as far as the Soviet Bloc was concerned. As Stalin had noted in February, 1948: “If it cannot be done today [in Greece], it can be done tomorrow.”¹⁰ Yugoslavia completely closed its borders to the Greek insurgents at about the same time, under U.S. pressure according to Beisner. (p. 168) But by that time both Yugoslavia and the USSR saw the Greek communist cause as temporarily lost.

The Americans might have believed that their pressure alone brought the Yugoslav role to an end, but there was also nothing credible left for the Soviet Bloc to support in the summer of 1949 in Greece.

Thus, we see the Soviets directly aiding the Greek communists through mid-1949, through pledges and actual deliveries, and ordering satellites to do the same. The great problem in this aid system was not the lack of Soviet or satellite largess, or lack of interest in

⁹ From Georgi Dimitrov’s diary, quoted in *Ibid*_, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 31, 29, Stalin quote from Dimitrov’s diary, p. 29.

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revolution, but the inability of the Greeks to absorb this aid. The Truman Doctrine did not compel the end of this aid and scare Stalin off in 1947, as the reigning myth suggests, and Acheson and Beisner appear to believe, but stimulated its increase in the short term, until Stalin became convinced the Greeks could not win. In June, 1947, *after* the declaration of the Truman Doctrine, the Soviets pledged 50 million rounds of rifle ammunition, 15 million rounds of submachine gun ammunition, and twenty “mountain guns” directly to the Greeks, while Molotov noted at the time that they would have to be found from sources other than Yugoslavia since that country’s stocks of material were becoming depleted.¹¹

Yugoslavia’s role in Greece was severely constrained even prior to the split with the USSR the following year. As noted, such Bloc aid continued into mid-1949. When communist strongholds were overrun in the defeat of the insurgency, large stores of military and other equipment were captured. The main problem for the Greek communists was not supplies but distribution capabilities and a lack of troops to use the equipment.¹²

Ironically, Soviet and satellite generosity helped hasten the Greek communist defeat. Flushed with the pledged aid to their movement in early 1948, and apparently wishing to strike before Marshall Plan aid had an effect, the leadership ordered a general offensive to secure border areas with communist countries that they simply could not sustain with the number of fighters they had. Badly clobbered and outnumbered by the monarchist government, which was increasingly equipped with arriving American military and economic aid, they had an increasingly difficult time making their case for further support in Moscow. But it was practicality and the effective American material response to the challenge, not a failure of ideological belief or perceptions of relative Bloc weakness, that doomed the Greek communists and the aid program of their patrons in Moscow and elsewhere.

Was this proactive, albeit unsuccessful, Soviet behavior “offensive” or “defensive”? Did it stem, as Acheson and apparently Beisner believe, from a weakness on the part of the Soviets? Or was it simply Stalin taking off the gloves because he realized in 1947 that, unlike what he had been told by Roosevelt, the Americans would be staying in Europe indefinitely? Given some of the new evidence of Soviet aggression with the collapse of that regime, further discussion of this important point would seem warranted, as Greece, like Iran in 1946 (another case of Soviet proactivity, as Beisner correctly notes in that case), is presented as a real turning point. But such discussion of Greece is not here, as Beisner merely tells us what Acheson believed at the time and appears to accept the old view of Stalin’s pseudo-interest in spreading revolution and general defensiveness.

Acheson became increasingly crusty and curmudgeonly after leaving office, particularly pouring his scorn on the rising fashion of the radically chic Third World. He was no great

¹¹ Ulanian, p. 150; Iatrides, pp. 25-26.

¹² Iatrides, p. 31.

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supporter of international organizations either. As Beisner accurately portrays his attitude towards the United Nations, he saw it as “dominated by puny states dedicated to forcing unpleasant choices on great powers and independence on people unready for it.” (p. 639) He became far more critical of democracy as a way of governing. He was a great iconoclast and innovative thinker in his policy days, but in older age, in a period of unusually rapid societal and international change, he became a figure of the past. Perhaps we all do. Beisner deals with all of this with balance and historical insight.

Yet whatever one thinks of his particular views, Acheson’s utter intellectual fearlessness is his most striking and admirable characteristic. His astounding self-confidence allowed him to lead the country in its foreign affairs at a time when it had little of its own. Like Churchill, among many others, he was, personal limitations aside, in very many ways what the so-called “postmodern” world no longer produces and therefore disparages and detests: a Great Man.

The criticisms I have mentioned notwithstanding, Robert L. Beisner’s biography of Dean Acheson is a major scholarly accomplishment. His use of the New Cold War History from the East allows him to offer the best treatment yet of this complicated man and his actions in the complicated times in which he lived. I cannot recommend it highly enough.