

## Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review



Reviewed Work:

Robert Beisner. *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: John Earl Haynes, Matthew Jacobs, Deborah Larson, Douglas J. Macdonald, James Matray

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 **ROUNDTABLE** *Review*

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**Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge**

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In 1967 former Secretary of State Dean Acheson visited the University of Michigan to present a lecture on a topic which has long since disappeared from my memory. Those in attendance included faculty and graduate students but not any Students for a Democratic Society or anti-Vietnam war protestors. This was not a “Teach-In”. Reading Robert Beisner’s study did bring back memories of Acheson who was dressed exactly as described by Beisner—“Some people are headlights, and some reflectors. Acheson was a headlight, and his mustache and tailored wrappings were part of his exhibit of power and spirit.” (p. 88) I don’t recall the topic of Acheson’s lecture, but I do remember the command that he exhibited and the perception that he believed the audience needed a good deal of training on the art of diplomacy, the realities of power in international relations, and the fundamental correctness of U.S. Cold War policies as the New Left and the anti-war movement escalated their challenges.

Beisner’s study captures this and much more in 656 pages of very well-written text. You might ask do we really need this many pages on Acheson since we already have 737 pages from Acheson himself in *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, the same period covered by Beisner, as well as three other full studies on Acheson’s career, both before and after his service as Secretary of State. Beisner recognizes these authors as significant contributors to the larger biography of Acheson. The answer of the commentators is yes. Beisner’s study is written so well that the long journey is worth it. If you face the familiar lack of time and stacks of unread books and journals, you can dip into sections such as Part I on Europe and the Cold War, the chapters on China in Part II, and Korea in Parts III and IV.

The commentators do take some cuts at Beisner despite their varying degrees of agreement with his central views on Acheson and the Cold War. Most of the nicks they inflict come from their own areas of specialization, such as reservations on Acheson’s views on Africans, or Beisner’s analysis of Acheson’s difficulties with the Alger Hess case and the China specialists who came under attack by anticommunists, or the appropriateness of placing Acheson’s views in a contemporary situation such as the Iraq war. Beisner’s response to the commentators engages their reservations and questions with a measured approach that offers a good model of how to debate and disagree with professional respect.

Some of the questions raised by the commentators and a reading of the book include

- 1) Despite the decades of historiographical conflict on the Cold War with evolving schools of interpretation, there is a remarkable degree of consensus that emerges in the assessments of Beisner’s study. Beisner is very familiar with the historiography—no nicks in this area—and engages it in the text and especially in the notes. The author ends up with a pretty consistent defense of President Truman’s decisions and Acheson’s central focus on the creation of containment and strength vis-à-vis the Soviet Union with priority on Western Europe. On all of the revisionist assertions of major mistakes and lost

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opportunities to prevent a Cold War over Eastern Europe and Germany, or on the merits of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, or on whether or not there was an opportunity for an accommodation with Mao's China before the outbreak of the Korean War, Beisner weighs their critiques and politely disagrees with them.

2) A related question is whether Acheson shifted in his views on the Soviet Union, as Beisner suggests, from seeking an accommodation in the aftermath of WWII to turning to containment, the creation of situations of strength, and risking little on any negotiations with Stalin after the Soviet-Turkish conflict in August 1946. (pp. 38-47)

3) Whether Acheson was a "quintessential realist" focused on issues of power as opposed to Wilsonian ideals and determined by late 1946 to defend American interests vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, is raised by Beisner and the commentators. The author views Acheson as sufficiently committed to American political and economic values that he could not agree with a long term realist acceptance of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe or accept an Asian environment hostile to American interests and values.

4) The issue of contingency and alternatives emerges along the trail in Beisner's analysis. There seems to be very little, if any, room for viable alternative approaches when Beisner immerses the reader in Acheson's considerations shaping his recommendations that Truman usually adopted without much apparent reflection. Exceptions are Truman's resistance to Acheson's advocacy of a significant increase in military spending or Truman's growing impatience with Acheson's effort to keep a door open to Mao in China. From issues such as the development of the H-Bomb, to U.S. intervention in Indochina, to the outbreak of the Korean War and its destructive course where Beisner is most critical of Acheson, the story that emerges is one repeatedly of a lack of alternatives. Are U.S. decisions as predetermined as Beisner suggests, such as when Acheson's concerns about France's role and support in Western Europe override concerns expressed by U.S. officials in Vietnam about the nature of the conflict and the challenges the U.S. would face if Washington intervened on the side of the French?

5) As the Cold War took the U.S. into relatively new areas of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Truman and Acheson entered the strategic vise of Cold War calculations with respect to European colonial allies on the one hand, and on the other, independence movements laying claims on American ideals and appealing to American Cold War adversaries for assistance. Beisner suggests that Truman and Acheson could not find a middle ground between the two sides of the vise, and neither did their successors. Are there any viable alternatives to this middle ground that helps keep the Western alliance intact on the Cold War but accomplishes very little in Africa?

—Tom Maddux

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Review by John Earl Haynes, Library of Congress

Perhaps some day someone will publish a Dean Acheson biography of the scope and comprehensiveness of Robert Beisner's but it seems both unlikely and unnecessary. Certainly in the future there will be numerous new essays as well as new books on aspects of Dean Acheson's diplomacy. Not only are there still under explored and, indeed, unopened archives in Asia and Europe that will bring to light new information that will recast how one views this or that facet of Acheson's diplomacy, there will always be those taking a new stance or offering a different interpretation. But to research and write a biography of the scale of *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War* would seem a task hardly worth pursuing considering the quality and completeness of Beisner's book.

In addition to the astounding thoroughness of his archival research and reading of the literature, the most impressive of Beisner's achievements is his realistic understanding of the environment and choices that leaders who make and execute policy at Acheson's level must make. These leaders face numerous pressing problems and important decisions. This is particularly true of American leaders of the 1940s onward after America's emergence as a world power with interests and responsibilities of bewildering complexity on every continent. What separates the great leaders from those who fail, or the merely mediocre, is an understanding of which of the many important decisions are the few, or even the one, that he or she must get right or the game is over. It is all too easy to get a great many important decisions about diplomacy right, to solve or properly address a great many pressing regional or even world issues, but to get the one or two truly vital matters wrong. And if one fails on the one or two issues that are essential of America's position in the world, no number of right decisions about important but nonessential issues counts.

The Cold War was the center of Acheson's life, and Beisner argues that Acheson saw that the central contest of the Cold War was Western Europe, and the contest for Europe was to

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be won or lost in Germany. The complex, many faceted struggle we call the “Cold War” was not called a “war” for nothing. While there was never a full scale armed clash of the USSR and the USA, there was enough of a war-like nature to the contest that “war” was and is an appropriate term. And Germany was the *schwerpunkt*, to use an appropriately German military term, of the Cold War: the point of focus, the concentration point, the focal point, the main axis where the attack will be won or lost. Win at the *schwerpunkt*, and the battle may be won, but lose there and no number of tactical victories elsewhere on the battlefield count.

Beisner returns again and again to the centrality of Western Europe and the German question to Acheson’s Cold War diplomacy (and by Acheson’s diplomacy one understands that we are referring to President Truman’s diplomacy, i.e., the foreign policy of the United States in this era). Beisner brings out how Acheson’s concern about Western Europe required him in Asia, the Middle-East, Africa, and Latin America to compromise and often muddle American policy and to produce American diplomatic stances that attempted to straddle, often embarrassingly so, conflicts between emerging Third World nations breaking out of their colonial relationships with America’s European allies. Or, in the case of Korea, leaving commanders on the ground in Korea to fight the war with less than optimal forces and under restrained rules of engagement while sending a major share of newly mobilized and expanded American military forces to Western Europe to reassure the European allies and convert NATO from a piece of paper to a potent military force.

Any number of accounts of American policy in Asia, the Middle-East, Africa, and Latin America in the early Cold War by both historians and political critics of the time have found fault with Acheson’s Eurocentric policies. Some of these accounts have recognized that Acheson deliberately compromised or even (to those critical of the tradeoff) sacrificed American interests in these regions to the service of tying Western Europe to America (and Germany to Western Europe) in the Cold War contest with the Soviet Union.

In Beisner’s view history has vindicated Acheson’s decision. Germany was the *schwerpunkt*. Despite all the muddle, setbacks and outright defeats of American policies in Asia, the Middle-East, and elsewhere from the 1950s to the 1980s, in Europe American goals were achieved and the Cold War was won. American policy converted the two-thirds of Germany that formed the Federal Republic of Germany from a defeated enemy to a stable democracy firmly integrated into Western Europe and whose prosperity and economic power contributed in no small way to the restoration of Western European prosperity and the West’s dominance in the economic competition of the Cold War. With this came the easing and eventual evaporation of fears in Britain, France, and other Western European countries that Germany would once more be a threat and allowed NATO to achieve its goal of deterring an East Bloc assault. In the end, American and Western Europe as stable and confident democracies turned back the Communist ideological offensive, achieved overwhelming economic and technological superiority, and deterred the military threat of the East Bloc. And in the end, it was the East Bloc that suffered ideological and economic collapse.

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Critics, of course, are free to fantasize that some other policy could have brought about a benign end to the Cold War sooner at less cost and risk. But that is what it is, fantasy. It didn't happen that way. Acheson's policy shaped American strategy in the early Cold War and those policies remained the main contours of American policy until the collapse of the Soviet Union and Western victory in the Cold War. Noting that there were paths not taken or opportunities that may have been missed is appropriate but arguing with success is an intellectual indulgence and a waste of time.

Beisner, appropriately, concentrates on Acheson's leadership of America's Cold War diplomacy. But he brings in enough of American domestic politics to establish the context of Truman administration policies. He reviews Acheson's role as an often very able lobbyist with Congress, his less frequent participation in domestic debates on American foreign policy, and, of course, on Acheson's role as a punching bag for Republican frustration with Truman administration policies.

Beisner's discussion of one of Acheson's domestic misjudgments, the Hiss-Chambers case, is thorough and comprehensive. He notes Acheson's bafflement about the case: expressing belief in Hiss's innocence, agreeing, however, that the evidence suggested guilt of some sort but nonetheless finding a conclusion of Hiss's guilt emotionally unacceptable. While in a private capacity Acheson extended some assistance to the Hiss defense after the case broke open in the late summer of 1948 but, reflecting his ambiguity, discouraged his journalist friend Joseph Alsop from championing the Hiss cause and later declined to appear as a character witness for Hiss.

Republicans closely questioned Acheson about the Hiss case during his confirmation hearings in early 1949, and he fully expressed his ambiguity and puzzlement about the case and his unwillingness to join in "throwing stones at this man when he is in serious trouble." But, Beisner notes, Acheson appeared to be willing to allow the American justice system to proceed and told senators that if the judicial system found Hiss guilty, "then I should, of course, say that I would have a different attitude."

Acheson's ambiguous attitude displeased Republicans but it was sufficiently reasonable that they did little more than grumble. And had Acheson actually deferred to the judgment of juries and judges, likely the issue in regard to Acheson would have faded away. Acheson, however, did not defer to the justice system. When Hiss was found guilty, Acheson decided to make public his continued support for Hiss, refusing to listen to contrary advice from Paul Nitze, Charles Bohlen, and others of his inner circle, some of whom knew Hiss better than he. While his announcement that without regard to decision of the trial jury or any later appeals courts that he did "not intend to turn my back upon Alger Hiss" won him praise from liberals resentful of the use Republicans were making of the Hiss case, it was a case of leading with his chin. Republicans eagerly delivered numerous bruising blows, moderate and conservative Democrats thought it an act of self-indulgent and self-righteous folly, and most of the public found it difficult to understand how an American Secretary of State could display such complacency toward and compassion for a State Department official convicted of lying about his covert assistance to America's chief foreign enemy. As

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Beisner notes, outrage at Acheson's defense of Hiss "diminished his effectiveness for the rest of his term as secretary of state" and further opened the Department of State to McCarthyist attack. And even Acheson later agreed that in the way he stated his position on Hiss "perhaps I knocked myself out."

As an aside, Beisner discusses at length the difficult relationship of George Kennan and Dean Acheson. As Wilson Miscamble observed in a 2003 H-Diplo review of Beisner's SHAFR presidential address there was a curious reversal of roles in the approach of Kennan and Acheson toward the Hiss matter.<sup>1</sup> As Beisner noted, on most matters regarding public policy "Kennan's delicate feelings and emotionalism hoisted bile to Acheson's gorge," and Acheson's preference for practicality and distaste for introversion clashed with Kennan's "proclivity to angst." But on the Hiss matter, it was the usually practical Acheson who in Beisner's words, "allowed personal and professional attachments to shape his reaction to a serious public question," while the often emotional Kennan preferred to coolly reserve judgment and remain silent on the Hiss matter.

Acheson cited the Sermon of the Mount to justify his fidelity to Hiss. Others, in regard to Hiss and to Britain's Cambridge spies, have cited E.M. Forster's remark, "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." Even on its face, this is dubious ethics, but in terms of its use to defend either Hiss or Philby, Burgess, and company, what Forster actually wrote usually inappropriately invoked. The full quotation from Forster is: "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." And it was a cause, communism, that motivated Hiss and the Cambridge spies. And it was their loyalty to the cause of communism that led to their betraying not only their country but their friends as well.

Beisner points to several motives for Acheson's actions in the Hiss matter: intellectual and moral pride, class contempt for Hiss's critics, excessive rationality, and under appreciation of the extent of Soviet espionage. But he judges the chief motive to be Acheson's friendship for and loyalty toward Donald Hiss, Alger's brother. And here is where Forster's remark has some applicability, but not in defense of Hiss. In the service of the cause of communism Alger and Donald Hiss betrayed their friend Dean Acheson. They manipulated and used Acheson's friendship to put Acheson in the position where he inflicted a serious blow on his own effectiveness and the effectiveness of his foreign policy leadership of the United States. Given that Acheson was a far more effective Cold Warrior than his Republican critics of the time, the Hiss brothers betrayal of Acheson's friendship served their cause well.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Miscamble, H-Diplo review of Robert L. Beisner, "The Secretary, the Spy, and the Sage: Dean Acheson, Alger Hiss, and George Kennan" (SHAFR Presidential Address), *Diplomatic History* 27.1 (Winter 2003)), <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Miscamble-Beisner.pdf>, published by H-Diplo on 9 February 2003.

**Review by Matthew Jacobs, University of Florida**

Robert Beisner's new biography of Dean Acheson is at once very much like and very much unlike many other biographies of monumental figures in the history of U.S. foreign relations. It is like others mostly in its size. Its six hundred fifty-six pages of text and one hundred eight pages of notes give it suitable heft to sit on bookshelves alongside other substantial biographies of central players in the history of U.S. foreign relations, including the no less than four other sizeable portrayals of Acheson. It is unlike most other biographies, however, in that it has a rather narrow focus, concentrating entirely on Acheson's years in the State Department (though there is already a similar biography of Acheson), and in its obvious parallels with Acheson's own award-winning memoirs that cover almost exactly the same period, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*. Indeed, in Beisner's work we find Acheson readying for his first stint at State in November 1939 at the age of forty-six on page thirteen, and World War II completed by page twenty-four. Nearly six hundred pages later (p. 621) we read of Acheson's resignation on 15 January 1953, a few days before the transfer of power from Truman to Eisenhower, so that Acheson could "duck signing the commission of John Foster Dulles." Acheson gave more space to the World War II years in his memoirs, but from there the two works are surprisingly similar in both size and scope.

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Beisner's depiction is an engaging, if occasionally overwritten, highly detailed narrative account of Acheson's years as the major architect of U.S. foreign policy during a most challenging period. Acheson appears pragmatic, highly intelligent, deeply thoughtful, incredibly complex, and fiercely loyal, though also blunt, quick with a witty and humbling retort, and increasingly caustic, especially in his later years as he reflected on his time at State. Throughout, Acheson's concern with Europe and the Cold War is paramount. Thus, as a policy maker, Acheson focused 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. In practical terms, Beisner suggests, that meant Acheson was most concerned with maintaining and sustaining western Europeans as sturdy U.S. allies. To do so, Acheson was willing to use all means at his disposal—economic and military assistance, various forms of diplomacy, and almost anything else that he thought might work. And he usually did so with the full support of the President.

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Acheson's relationship with Truman is intriguing for many reasons, not least because Acheson constantly walked a very fine line between two competing objectives. On one side of that line was the desire to serve faithfully a President whom Acheson recognized as the individual with ultimate control over U.S. foreign policy but who also viewed the State Department with contempt. On the other side of the line was Acheson's desire to restore the State Department and the Secretary of State to prominence in the making of U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, Acheson walked this line as tensions mounted between the Soviet Union and the United States, and as the State Department and broader government bureaucracy grew dramatically, not least with the addition of new institutions—the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Department—that sought and had their own impact on the development and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. According to Beisner, Acheson walked this line masterfully, with few missteps as a manager of both staff and problems. Acheson quickly learned that the closer he worked with Truman, keeping him well informed and building trust, the more freedom of action Truman conceded to Acheson. The consequence of Acheson's success in moving between these two objectives was the development of a special relationship and a fierce mutual loyalty between the two men. Though the President and the Secretary did not always agree on the issues (see, for example, their widely different views on Palestine/Israel, pp. 215-16), they rarely worked against each other and retained a fundamental respect and admiration for each other until their dying days.

Because Acheson's overriding concern with Western Europe is so well known and because my own work deals with U.S.-Middle East relations, I find the work both intriguing and problematic where it focuses on the areas where he lacked interest and was least qualified to handle: Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Acheson cared about these areas of the world only to the extent that they demanded his attention, which both Asia and the Middle East did to a significant degree during his reign at State. As Beisner makes clear, the polished, well-groomed, and perpetually prepared Acheson who dealt with Europeans became frustrated and annoyed when forced to make sense of the issues and forces animating Africans, Asians, and Middle Easterners. In one reference to Syria, Acheson remarked, "I just don't understand it" (p. 215), a telling remark for the usually cocksure Secretary. Because Acheson cared about and knew these areas so little, Beisner is able to use them to reveal Acheson's keen political instincts as he came to grasp just how deeply non-Western and colonial peoples held their nationalist sentiments. Yet, at the same time, we are able to see how deeply held were Acheson's western European inclinations, as he consistently sought to maintain the vestiges of European power across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East even after coming to such a realization. Thus, we also sense the uglier, unrefined Acheson who was unable to resolve crises in either Egypt or Iran in part because he was never able to overcome fully either his Anglophilia or the fundamental racism and disrespect for non-western peoples that became so evident in his later years (see chapters 12 and 30-32, in particular). Most impressive is Beisner's ability to convey Acheson's ultimately unsuccessful efforts to maneuver his way through these intellectual and policy obstacles as he sought to avoid alienating European colonial powers while also trying to appeal to the

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peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East enough to keep them from turning to the Soviets.

While Beisner displays his abundant analytical and writing skills in handling these competing issues, I also find certain aspects of the discussion of the Middle East troubling. Beisner's statement (p. 512) that "states of the Middle East, whether of ancient (Egypt) or recent (Saudi Arabia, Israel) mostly stood outside the story of colonialism and decolonization" is careless and perplexing, not least because it appears as he sets up three chapters on Egyptian and Iranian efforts to rid themselves of British influence. Beisner's understanding of Middle Eastern history, particularly its leading figures, might also be characterized as uneven. His discussion of Mosadeq in Iran is well nuanced, as is the material on the nominal leader of early post-revolutionary Egypt, Muhammad Naguib. The same cannot be said for some of the other material on Egypt. For example, the suggestion that King Farouk, who was descended from an Albanian leader sent to restore Ottoman authority in early nineteenth century Egypt, whose family owned more of the most fertile land in Egypt than any other in an era of increasing peasant landlessness, and who was renowned and strongly disliked by devout Egyptian Muslims for being a playboy in the French Riviera, had much nationalist credibility (p. 556) is questionable to say the least. Similarly, the portrayal of Nasser and his seizure of the Suez Canal (p. 565), which Beisner completely decontextualizes, beg for more subtle treatment.

Moving from the Middle East to more general concerns about the biography, I also find problematic Beisner's decision to focus so exclusively on the State Department years, to the almost complete exclusion of Acheson's earlier life. The failure to discuss Acheson's life before he arrived at State is most concerning in the early chapters, when the Cold War takes shape and the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan emerge (chapters 3, 4, and 5). We drop almost immediately into these crucial moments, ill-equipped to understand some of the basic operating principles that Acheson brought to his job and why he understood these moments as he did. To be sure, Beisner covers Acheson's evolution from trying to work with the Soviets in spring 1945 to his clear opposition to the Soviets by late summer 1946, but it is a tedious and overwritten effort, complete with a timeline (pp. 44-45), to discern when one could identify Acheson as a Cold Warrior. We move through several different episodes in that chapter, some of which Beisner admits "reveal little about Acheson's transition," (p. 31) as he seeks that crucial moment. Because some of these moments tell us little about Acheson, then, they appear as an implicit attempt to weigh in on the rather tired broader debate over when exactly the Cold War itself started. If one can pinpoint precisely when a crucial person in charge of foreign policy in one of the two combatant countries came to believe in the Cold War, then it becomes easy to claim that moment as the start of the Cold War itself.

Much more helpful in understanding Acheson as individual and policy maker are the chapter on "The Inner and Outer Acheson," (pp. 87-102) and a few brief pages (151-57) in chapter nine. We learn how one man could feel comfortable making world-altering decisions while dressed in the finest apparel, sporting a well manicured and waxed

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mustache on weekdays, and at home on the farm on weekends making furniture while wearing the most “outrageous” clothing his children could find and present to him (p. 89). We also find a very enlightening overview of Acheson’s basic mindset when it came to strategy and how and why he developed it over the course of a quarter century. But both of these sections come after Beisner’s discussion of two of the most defining decisions and policies of the early Cold War period, and would be much more helpful if they came at the outset.

Beisner’s portrayal of Acheson also is in some ways inconsistent and thus unsettling. Beisner clearly holds Acheson in high regard, though also seeks on occasion to criticize him. Unfortunately, however, some of these criticisms seem half-hearted. For example, Beisner rightfully notes Acheson’s arrogance and the pleasure he took in speaking so harshly of those he disliked, both of which are noted throughout the text. But Acheson’s evident racism and belief in the superiority of western civilization receive slightly different treatment. While in office, we read (p. 513) that Acheson had “no prejudice against either Arabs or Islam and was immune to anti-Semitism,” and that “he understood the damage domestic racial practices posed for U.S. foreign policy.” Both of these statements may be true in the abstract, but the mass of evidence that Beisner presents throughout the book suggests that Acheson believed strongly in the inferiority of non-white peoples and that those beliefs impacted the way he pursued policy, particularly when Europeans or Americans were pitted against Africans, Asians, or Middle Easterners (see, for example, the crisis with Iran, especially chapter 31). To be fair to Beisner, he does state repeatedly that Acheson made much more explicitly racist comments after leaving the State Department than he ever did while Secretary of State, but if one accepts these competing portrayals of Acheson then that begs several questions that deserve Beisner’s attention. What caused Acheson’s views to harden as time passed? If his views remained consistent over time, meaning he really was virulently racist all along, how was he able to mute such views while in office but then either unable to unwilling to do so later?

And Beisner is quick to defend Acheson against criticism on other issues, particularly those dealing with Europe. Indeed, in Beisner’s summary assessment, Acheson receives most of the credit for any successes that occur during the period. Responsibility for the “most notable failures” in U.S. policy outside of Europe (Korea, MacArthur, and China), however, Acheson “shared with others.” The only major exception was Vietnam, where according to Beisner Acheson “was in the vanguard in leading the United States into Indochina’s Big Muddy.” (p. 644) But if, aside from Truman, Acheson was the most dominant participant in the development of U.S. foreign policy between 1945 and 1952, and was renowned for his control and management of both those policies and the staff that implemented them, as Beisner claims he was (see chapter 7 on “Acheson, Truman, and the State Department”), then Acheson must shoulder responsibility for the good and the bad. If not, then one cannot claim that Acheson controlled the process to the extent that Beisner suggests.

Along these same lines, I also find curious Beisner’s effort to downplay the importance of Acheson’s rhetoric, particularly as it was reflected in the Truman Doctrine. Beisner

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repeatedly reminds us of Acheson's facility with words and his uncanny ability to locate at any almost any moment the precise word to convey his thoughts, be they positive or negative. Yet Beisner contends the "rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine pales next to" Kennedy's "bear any burden" inaugural address. That may be true to the extent that one is looking for sound bites, but Beisner fails to acknowledge that Kennedy's address likely would not have been possible, and certainly would not have been received so favorably, without the Truman Doctrine as precedent. After all, it was the Truman Doctrine that divided the world in two and claimed an American right and responsibility to lead one half of that world—the very burden that Kennedy referenced. Kennedy's phrases have little meaning outside of that context, and as Beisner contends, Acheson was the individual most responsible for the Truman Doctrine—both as speech and policy—taking the shape it did (see chapter 4, especially pp. 58-59).

Last, and here I readily admit the following is an awkward and difficult criticism to level, one imagines while reading the book a distinguished scholar of the history of U.S. foreign relations using the work as a vehicle to ruminate on what he has learned over the years and to weigh in on any and all debates concerning Truman-era foreign policy, the Cold War and the practice of foreign policy more generally. Some of these ruminations are engaging, insightful and a pleasure to read, but others fall flat, as they can be overwritten, ambiguous, or incomplete. Beisner's comparison (pp. 648-654) of "what happened on his [Acheson's] watch to what could have happened" is stated far too definitively, removing from discussion what are legitimate questions about U.S. motivations and policies. There, Beisner speculates on what he believes would have happened in Europe had there been no Truman Doctrine or no Marshall Plan or no NATO (in short, no Acheson), on different readings of Stalin's intentions, and on whether or not the United States was aggressive enough during the early Cold War. There are other points, moreover, that appear as implicit though incomplete efforts to compare the past to the present. When discussing Acheson's wish to pursue arms control talks with the Soviets at the conclusion of World War II, Beisner imparts that "letting things drift would lead only to an armed truce, and American values ruled out preemptive war." (p. 32) One wonders if that line would read differently if written before 2002. The same can be said of the last two pages of text, where Beisner examines how Acheson's approach might apply to more recent times. Beisner seems to celebrate Acheson's and Truman's courage to use American power in all of its aspects and their lack of concern for "exit strategies," two things we worry deeply about today. (p. 655) Yet, we are left wondering, because Beisner never explicitly completes the comparison. In this sense, then, he seems to have missed an important opportunity to think through how a giant in the history of U.S. foreign relations might view or think through current problems.

By the end, while I found Beisner's portrayal of Acheson both engaging and provocative, I found myself wanting both less and more. I wanted less of the overwritten passages, less of the tangential musings, and less of the repetitious quoting (see, for example, the quote from a September 1948 speech at the War College, where Acheson argued that people should not "slink from problems' but 'do the very best they can in meeting them and get on,'" which

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appears several times, and twice in seventeen pages—p. 82 and 99). But I wanted more of Acheson's earlier life, more even treatment of certain issues, and, perhaps most importantly, a more explicit comparison of Acheson's times to ours. There is much we might take or leave from how Acheson handled such difficult issues, and it is in a way frustrating for such a distinguished scholar as Beisner to begin that analysis and then leave us hanging.

**Review by Deborah Larson, University of California, Los Angeles**

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the United States has searched for a design for its foreign policy. When Dean Acheson was Secretary of State, U.S. foreign policy was unusually creative, forceful, and responsive. Washington gave Marshall Plan aid to Western Europe, launched the Berlin airlift, created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), repelled a North Korean invasion of South Korea, and integrated West Germany and Japan into the western community. Acheson was at the center of formulating most of these initiatives, as Under Secretary of State from 1945-1947 and then as Secretary of State from 1949-1953. Henry Kissinger recently described Dean Acheson as the greatest U.S. Secretary of State in the twentieth century (p. 646). What, if anything, can scholars and practitioners learn from Acheson about how to formulate a workable and legitimate foreign policy?

Beisner offers an in-depth and insightful analysis of Acheson's reasoning and important decisions during his career in the State Department. He builds on previous works by Gaddis Smith, David McLellan, and James Chace<sup>1</sup> as well as Acheson's prize-winning and often revealing memoir, *Present at the Creation*.<sup>2</sup> He discusses more thoroughly Acheson's approach to foreign policy problems and characteristic modes of thinking. Beisner covers in some detail Acheson's policymaking not just on the

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*She is currently doing research on how U.S. presidents have used intuition and judgment to deal with uncertain situations. She is also working with Alexei Shevchenko on how the desire for greater status and prestige affects the foreign policy of aspiring great powers such as China and Russia and the implications for U.S. foreign policy. Preliminary work on status appears in "Shortcut to Greatness: New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy," *International Organization*, Vol. 57 (Winter 2003) with Alexei Shevchenko, 77-110. At UCLA, she teaches courses in *American Foreign Policy*, *The Making of American Foreign Policy*, and *Strategic Interaction at the graduate and undergraduate levels*.*

<sup>1</sup> Gaddis Smith, *Dean Acheson* (New York: Cooper Square, 1972), Vol. 16 of *American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell and Samuel Flagg Bemis; David S. McLellan, *Dean Acheson: The State Department Years* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1976); James Chace, *Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).

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major issues of West Germany, NATO, and Korea, but also relatively neglected questions such as Spain, Iran, Guatemala, India, and Latin America. In addition to using Acheson's papers and speeches, Beisner draws extensively on recent secondary sources on the substantive issues. The research that went into the book is prodigious.

Beisner portrays an Acheson who was more uncertain and conflicted than the Cold Warrior of conventional wisdom. Acheson recalled that "the significance of events was shrouded in ambiguity" and they "groped after interpretations," often hesitating before "grasping what now seems obvious."<sup>3</sup> It was not clear to Acheson or Truman immediately after World War II that the Soviet Union's power and ideology threatened United States security.

Realists argue that the Cold War was preordained by the bipolar distribution of power. Nevertheless, Acheson initially strongly favored U.S.-Soviet cooperation as the best hope for peace in the world. He supported a postwar reconstruction loan to the Soviet Union in mid-1946. He advocated creating an international organization that would maintain control over uranium supplies while nations exploited peaceful uses of atomic energy. This proposal, called the Acheson-Lilienthal plan, did not include any penalties or on-site inspection in order to increase the likelihood that the Soviets would accept.

Acheson continued to believe that the United States could cooperate with the Soviet Union despite a series of events that caused other members of the Truman administration to conclude that the Soviets had unlimited expansionist aims. Beisner lists key political events in 1945-1946 along with Acheson's reactions to show when and why the Under Secretary of State changed his beliefs. Acheson was not particularly bothered by the Soviets' establishment of "friendly governments" in Eastern Europe. Nor was he impressed by George F. Kennan's "Long Telegram" in February 1946, which warned that the Soviets were driven to portray the world as menacing and hostile to legitimize their domestic rule. Acheson regarded the Soviets' initial refusal to withdraw their troops from Iran in March 1946 as typical behavior for a great power toward a weak state on their border.

Acheson changed his views about the Soviet Union beginning in August 1946 in response to Stalin's demands for a base on the Turkish Straits and the Dardanelles. Acheson and his military advisers believed that Stalin wanted to turn Turkey into a satellite regime, an indication that the Soviet Union had designs on the Mediterranean, a strategic area that was part of the British sphere of influence. Truman approved Acheson's proposal to send a firm note to Moscow and dispatch a naval task force to the Mediterranean. This crisis caused Acheson to reorient his views on Soviet goals and intentions so that he no longer regarded the regime as a "normal" state. Still, the conversion was not complete, because Acheson was still willing to negotiate with the Soviet Union on Germany, perhaps because he recognized that the Soviets had substantial leverage over the situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 3.

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Why did the Turkish Straits crisis have such pronounced and enduring effects on Acheson's image of the Soviet Union? Stalin had earlier expressed his desire that the Soviets have a dominant role in governing the Turkish Straits. In March 1945, the Soviet government had denounced its treaties with Turkey and asked for territorial adjustments. To be sure, in the August crisis, the Soviet government carried out threatening troop movements near Turkey's borders.

Beisner explains the turnabout by arguing that Acheson suddenly viewed Soviet demands on Turkey not as a separate issue, but as part of a sequence of events that included communist pressure on Greece and the recent Iranian crisis. The Soviet's request for a base in Turkey appeared to be part of a *pattern*, which indicated that the Soviets were conducting a strategic campaign against the Mediterranean and ultimately the Middle East.

Given this experience, Acheson was prepared in February 1947 when the British officially informed the Washington that they could no longer take responsibility for protecting Greece and Turkey. He took the lead in framing the Truman Doctrine speech in March 1947, selecting the themes of "freedom" vs. "totalitarianism" because he knew such language would resonate with Congress.

The original formulation of the containment policy was an almost instinctive response to an immediate crisis rather than the product of forward-looking strategic analysis. As Beisner points out, Truman did not consider alternatives to propping up the Greek government, such as approaching Stalin, sending in U.S. troops to Greece, or negotiating with neighboring countries that were supporting the insurgency. Despite the high political stakes and the departure that U.S. involvement in Greece and Turkey represented from American foreign policy traditions, Truman did not sit down with his advisers and discuss alternative options before deciding on what became known as the strategy of containment. Truman initially decided to protect Greece and Turkey from Soviet subversion and outside pressure while recognizing the other countries would have to be defended as well.

Despite the ideological language of the Truman Doctrine, Acheson did not perceive the world as divided in a struggle between freedom and totalitarianism. He took advantage of Yugoslav Josef Tito's break with the Cominform to offer aid to the communist regime. Similarly, he believed erroneously as it turns out that the United States could drive a wedge between the Soviet Union and the new communist leadership in China in 1949. He wavered over whether to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1949 while separating the United States from responsibility for the Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek. As it turned out, Acheson's efforts were futile, because the Chinese Communists already regarded the United States as a capitalist enemy, and did not want to have a U.S. embassy on their territory.

The same openness to competing points of view was found in Acheson's approach to issues involving Germany. When he became Secretary of State, Acheson did not know much about

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Germany and quickly immersed himself in expert studies, many of which were too detailed to be of any practical value. For several months, Acheson actively considered Kennan's Plan A to demilitarize and neutralize Germany, until the political uproar in France and Britain over a leak of the proposal doomed it politically. Acheson concluded that West Germany must be integrated into western institutions to prevent Germany from balancing between East and West or, worse yet, aligning with the Soviet Union.

Beginning in 1950, Acheson described the goal of U.S. policy as building "situations of strength" in strategic areas rather than containment of communism. He criticized containment as a reactive policy which implied that the United States would oppose the Soviets wherever communists threatened to take power. Instead, he wanted to create areas of strength that the Soviets would eventually have to recognize. Concerned that Western Europe was weak and vulnerable to a Soviet invasion, Acheson encouraged Paul Nitze and others to write NSC-68 to persuade Truman to relax his restrictions on defense spending. Despite the dire predictions of NSC-68, Truman remained unconvinced until the North Korean attack seemed to indicate that the Soviets would support proxy wars.

Stalin's approval of the North Korean attack, however, was partly a response to the belief that the United States would not intervene. Acheson contributed to this impression with his January 1950 "Press Club" speech in which he excluded South Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter. Acheson's goal in making the speech was to disentangle the United States from support for Chiang Kai-shek and to voice support for nationalism in Asia. The Secretary of State did not intend the speech to be a major policy statement; indeed, he was merely reiterating that the United States would defend the chain of islands off the Asian mainland, a defense strategy that was publicly proclaimed by General Douglas MacArthur in March 1949 (pp. 326-328).

Beisner criticizes Acheson for not making clear to the Soviet Union that the United States would oppose any attack on the South Korean regime. On the other hand, the Truman administration probably did not know in advance that it *would* respond. Psychologists have provided evidence that people are not very good at predicting their own behavior. People find it hard to anticipate how they will react to dramatic events in the future such as losing a job or winning an election.<sup>4</sup> The reality of the North Korean invasion was more disturbing to the Truman administration than the abstract mention of the possibility in National Security Council documents. In addition, it is doubtful that the Truman administration could have won support from Congress for a commitment to South Korea. The House of Representatives stalled on passing a small aid program for South Korea. President George H. W. Bush faced a similar dilemma when Iraqi troops were massed on the border with Kuwait, and he lacked sufficient domestic support to threaten Saddam Hussein that the United States would respond to an Iraqi invasion.

Under the urgent pressures created by the North Korean invasion, Acheson was completely in control, firing off a series of detailed recommendations for action, most of which Truman

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<sup>4</sup> David G. Myers, *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 78-82.

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accepted without debate or discussion. Acheson mobilized the vast diplomatic and military apparatus of the United States government to enact a timely military response to the crisis, one that had the additional legitimacy of a United Nations Security Council resolution. But Acheson's success probably reinforced his distaste for prolonged analysis or reconsideration of an action once chosen. In the months before the Chinese sent troops into the Korean conflict, Acheson failed to question the rationale for allowing MacArthur to carry out an offensive in North Korea all the way up to China's borders. Nor did he warn Truman that MacArthur's offensive might provoke a war with China and Russia. The usually outspoken Acheson was reticent because he did not want to challenge the revered Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall or interfere in what seemed to be purely military issues. But Acheson should have realized that military actions have political implications, and that it was his responsibility to ensure that Truman was fully informed about the risks.

Partly as a consequence of the Korean War, Acheson was subjected to a greater number and more vicious personal attacks than any cabinet member in history—1,268 from the Senate floor (p. 306). Acheson's family was protected by four bodyguards around the clock. Acheson's career was saved by Truman's support and loyalty, even when the president's approval ratings were at their lowest.

Truman's relationship with Acheson was unusually warm, despite differences in their background and education. It helped that Acheson never condescended to the president, who expressed himself in simple, often blunt language. Acheson also met the president's needs for information and adjusted his advice to Truman's cognitive style, which was marked by distaste for reflection or rumination. Instead of detailed analysis of the costs and benefits of options, Acheson gave Truman "communicable wisdom," recommendations for actions that the president could approve or disapprove, along with a simple rationale. Truman was impatient with lengthy debates or analysis, but delighted in making decisions.

Despite the personal attacks, Acheson succeeded brilliantly in getting Truman's foreign policy initiatives through Congress—the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, Mutual Defense Assistance Program, and NATO. Acheson won Republican support by cultivating key Senators. Republicans were invited to attend international conferences and consulted on issues such as the commitment to NATO and the Truman Doctrine. Although Acheson disliked John Foster Dulles intensely, he appointed him to negotiate the peace treaty with Japan to ease the task of ratification. Acheson invited Senate Republican leaders to his home even as they attacked him on the Senate floor.

Beisner argues that Acheson does not quite fit the label of political realist because he was motivated by ideals as well as *Realpolitik*. As Secretary of State, he tried to create an international environment in which freedom could flourish. Realists believe that states are sovereign and that their internal affairs are not properly the concern of outsiders. Consistent with that idea, Acheson believed that it was silly to argue that democracy and communism could not coexist in the world. He advised that the United

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States should focus on what the Soviets did rather than what they believed (p. 154). He quashed Central Intelligence Agency plans for covert action in Guatemala to overthrow the regime, which suggests that he did not believe that the U.S. security depended having on a world of liberal democracies. In his contempt for the United Nations, predilection for diplomacy, and concern with power in all its forms, he was a quintessential realist.

Consistent with his legal background, Acheson was more of an analytical thinker, who dissected problems into manageable components, than a synthesizer or visionary. Acheson questioned ideological cant, conventional wisdom, or complacent platitudes. He used his logic and facility with words to puncture vague or unrealistic arguments. He was a pragmatist who shunned theoretical abstractions in favor of effective policy. He did not have many original foreign policy ideas, but his style of managing the state department encouraged creativity. There were free-wheeling policy discussions in which officials were urged to advocate their positions vigorously. Acheson used these discussions to solicit expert opinions, develop his thinking, monitor details, and convey the reasoning behind his decisions to subordinates.

He took great care to articulate the logic behind his foreign policy decisions in memoranda as well as public speeches. Acheson was arguably the most thoughtful, articulate, and eloquent Secretary of State, rivaled only by Kissinger in the polish and elegance of his prose.

As Secretary of State, he analyzed the facts at hand and reached a judgment based on the evidence that was available. He understood that facts were interpretations “of a very limited segment of data that one gets.” Worries about possible mistakes did not justify a refusal to act. Acheson believed that experience along with the best “facts” available was the source of wisdom (p. 100).

Acheson had more varied foreign policy experience than most other Secretaries of State who have succeeded him. This raises the question of how to cultivate the capacity for judgment and prudence in officials or presidents who have a limited background in the area. The president could consult outside experts, but they are often not sufficiently sensitive to political considerations. Perhaps one source of vicarious experience is for policymakers to read the recounting of decision episodes in case studies and biographies such as this one.

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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.

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Acheson's reputation has roller-coasted 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

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architect of 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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

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compared to the recently defeated Nazis and fascists. For good measure, at an earlier 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

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others to boycott the Nationalists as well, lasted until May, 1947. Chiang's supporters saw 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> 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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own parochial interests by realizing that these interests can be served only 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)<sup>5</sup>

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

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

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rabid New Dealers among the “China Hands,” is one of the great undertold stories of the 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> From Georgi Dimitrov’s diary, quoted in *Ibid*\_, p. 29.

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

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this aid system was not the lack of Soviet or satellite largess, or lack of interest in 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.

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<sup>11</sup> Ulanian, p. 150; Iatrides, pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Iatrides, p. 31.

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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 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.

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**Review by James I. Matray, California State University, Chico**

Congratulations to Robert L. Beisner on writing what should stand for some time as the authoritative biography on Dean G. Acheson. This study of President Harry S. Truman's Secretary of State during his second term is especially impressive because it provides a detailed account of international events across the globe during the early years of the Cold War, almost always with Acheson at the center of the story. Beisner has conducted truly exhaustive research in a vast assortment of manuscript collections. He also incorporates findings from Soviet and Chinese sources that were not available to prior biographers. As important, Beisner's careful and thoughtful reading of the works of numerous leading Cold War scholars informs the narrative and his conclusions.

Beisner's overall assessment of Acheson's performance is glowing. Indeed, he not only agrees with Henry Kissinger that he was "the greatest Secretary of State in the twentieth century," but adds that "only John Quincy Adams and William H. Seward from earlier times might rank higher" (p. 647). Beisner explains that Acheson developed and implemented a "strategy of building situations of strength, which could countermand virtually every cold war danger" (p. 646). In the long run, his approach sought "to build a liberal world order and prevent another world war" (p. 643). Refusing to discuss and settle differences with an intractable Soviet adversary, Acheson's willingness to wait for victory proved prescient, as the Cold War ended "much as he said it would" (p. 654).

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Readers will appreciate Beisner's special talent as a writer not least because this is a thick book. Powerful and depictive sentences energize this smooth and easy read. For example, "Truman," he writes when referring to the request for aid to Greece and Turkey, "delivered this historic speech in a dogged and sturdy rhythm, spitting out words with almost violent syncopation" (p. 60). His description of John Carter Vincent includes the clever remark that "trouble began tracking him like Tuesday after Monday" (p. 302). A master of the metaphor, Beisner explains how the "Republicans garnished [Senator Robert A.] Taft's potatoes with their own parsley" (p. 450). "The German hedgehog," he reports, "continued to leave quills in the hands of everyone touching it" (p. 461). And with respect to postwar Japan, the Joint Chiefs "would no sooner salute a presidential decision than the smoldering embers of their contumacy would reignite" (p. 474).

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Like all good biographers, Beisner makes skillful use of interesting and revealing anecdotes. But his are entertaining, invariably exposing a superb sense of humor and irony. For example, during a meeting with Truman, Beisner quotes Iran's Muhammad Mosadeq as saying "Mr. President, I am speaking for a very poor country—a country that is all desert, just sand, a few camels, a few sheep." Acheson asked in response, "Rather like Texas?" (p. 553). Prior to the Korean War, Acheson's attitude toward the United Nations combined neglect with contempt. "But how quickly," Beisner reminds us, "the contemptible can become the estimable!" (p. 531). His analogy for the tendency of Truman to entertain strange policy proposals is stuffing peanuts up his nose.

Beisner is as much a gentleman on paper as he is in person. He summarizes approvingly the analytical contributions of a long list of Cold War scholars, referring to them by name at relevant points in the narrative. Endorsing the conclusions of Melvyn Leffler, Michael Hogan, Frank Ninkovich, Robert McMahon, Shu Guang Zhang, and Adam Ulam, among many others, he directly challenges the views of fellow historians only three times. He judges Alan S. Milward's belittling of the Marshall Plan's impact "unconvincing" (p. 78). He also faults Nick Cullather for wrongly attributing to Acheson a decision to terminate a planned coup in Guatemala in October 1952. For Vojtech Mastny, that was the year that the United States should have forced the Soviet Union out of Eastern Europe, but Beisner dismisses this as unrealistic speculation.

Readers seeking startling new revelations and interpretations in this biography will be disappointed. Beisner instead provides primarily in depth coverage and analysis of events and issues that Cold War historians will find familiar, especially in their area of research. For example, he references Chinese primary sources and the recent work of top China scholars to reject the "lost chance" thesis. Supporting conventional wisdom, Beisner concludes that beginning in 1947, the "Marshall-Acheson interval that followed set off a golden, two-year heyday for the state department, which—through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—made a remarkable comeback from its pitiable condition under FDR" (p. 490).

Beisner also confirms the consensus when he describes the main assumptions guiding Acheson as secretary of state. "Dean Acheson," he writes, "never thought the cold war was centered on East Asia, let alone North Africa or the Middle East, and least of all Latin America" (p. 586). His strategic design "identified the security and interests of the United States with those of a strong, united, and healthy western Europe" (p. 605), which "was the cold war's great prize" (p. 622). Beisner, like prior biographers, attributes Acheson's success to his close relationship with Truman, but adds that probably no modern secretary of state had greater freedom to act on his own.

On two major points, however, Beisner breaks from the pack. He rejects the claim that Acheson embraced Cold War confrontation with the Soviets as World War II came to an end. Rather, a "relatively complacent early mood (punctuated by short spikes of suspicion) held until August-September 1946, when in a sharp and decisive turn an accommodating

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Acheson became militant” (p. 29). He concluded that the crisis over Turkey was not a Soviet probe but “part of a dangerous strategic campaign” to gain global hegemony. A new Acheson emerged, “the one familiar to historians: profoundly suspicious of the Soviet Union, tough as nails in policy prescriptions, and quick to interpret particular events within large strategic frameworks” (p. 42).

As Secretary of State, Acheson came to accept building superior strength as an end in itself. “Conversation was appropriate with friends, not criminals” (p.156), Beisner observes approvingly. Accordingly, continuing discord was less risky than negotiations. Oddly, however, Beisner reports that in 1949 Acheson chose not to assert U.S. power to apply more pressure on the Soviets because he still was open to an agreement with the Kremlin. Nevertheless, his second challenge to prevailing opinion targets an event that same year. The achievement “that assured Acheson’s place as Truman’s primary guide and adviser in foreign policy was not the conclusion of the North Atlantic alliance in April,” Beisner contends. “Instead, it was the four-power discussion of Germany in May and June at the Council of Foreign Minister (CFM) in Paris” (p. 127).

Beisner’s interpretive framework is traditional, presenting international relations during the early Cold War as a state-to-state affair. Biography perhaps dictates this top down approach, emphasizing the actions and impact of world leaders. Beisner at times acknowledges deeper forces at work, commenting how “the cultural blinders worn by Americans (*and* Chinese) created chasms of otherness neither Washington nor Beijing could span” (p. 414). But neither culturalism nor other innovative approaches are part of his analysis. He finds a simpler answer for Acheson’s problems in the Third World in the child’s game Pick-Up-Sticks. “Americans found no middle ground to stand on,” he laments, “no way to pick up one stick without stirring others—not from ineptitude or stupidity but because it was impossible to be close friends of both imperial states and those resisting their rule” (p. 535). Beisner admits, however, that Acheson’s racism helped push U.S. “policy far from supposed national historical principles” (p. 529).

My reference to alternative frameworks of analysis is not intended to suggest that Beisner’s realist approach is flawed. To be honest, I share this interpretive preference, especially as it relates to the Korean War. Beisner presents compelling evidence that the policies Acheson pursued in the Cold War before Korea were formative rather than summative. Indeed, references to the dramatic impact that the Korean War would have on an array of issues increase steadily until reaching closure on 25 June 1950. There is an anticlimactic tone that characterizes the coverage of events in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, Beisner minimizes the causal impact of Korea. “The Korean War did not signal a radical turn in the cold war,” he writes, because “policy makers were poised for these changes before the onset of war” (p. 375). This same line of reasoning, however, contradicts his claim that, despite approved plans, Washington did not decide to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel until after the Inchon Landing. Beisner cannot have it both ways.

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Although Beisner disagrees, he presents many examples demonstrating that the Korean conflict was the turning point in the Cold War. Truman, he documents, opposed Acheson's desire for a higher defense budget and "would have won this contest had it not been for the Korean War" (p. 237). Before "the Korean War, Truman continued to work at cross-purposes with Foggy Bottom" (p. 246). Not only did the war result in the breaking a tradition and committing U.S. troops in Europe, but "Korea had transformed the idea of integrating past enemies as allies from policy conjectures to the foundations of American strategy" (p. 365). In response to the Korean War, Washington moved to rearm Germany and establish relations with Francisco Franco's Spain. Beisner even notes Korea's contribution to rising "incivility" in U.S.-Soviet relations, as reflected in the District of Columbia "flunking all Soviet officials seeking driving permits" (p. 459).

Regarding Cold War strategy, Beisner writes, Korea "indeed pushed Acheson farther than he wanted toward military solutions" (p. 435) for problems around the globe. The war led to quick restoration of Japan's sovereignty and its military alliance with the United States, as well as a series of U.S. security treaties with its worried neighbors. In combination with McCarthyism, Korea left Acheson's "original China strategy in tatters" (p. 177). A policy paper approved *after* the Korean War identified Indochina as of vital importance to the United States, leading to vigorous support of French colonialism. Korea "opened the gates for arms" (p. 572) shipments that would prop up dictatorships in Latin America. "Nor were Americans much interested in British ideas about Middle Eastern defense until Korea forced greater attention to all military issues" (p. 541). In Africa, "after 25 June 1950, Americans said far less than before about human rights and even eventual independence" (p. 527). One final Beisner quotation is perhaps most telling: "Setbacks lay ahead, but, within the administration, no one seriously contested [Acheson's] foreign policy supremacy after June 1950" (p. 323).

Before concluding, let me explain why I believe this biography has relevance for understanding how the United States finds itself in the current quagmire in Iraq. On one hand, there is reason to believe that Acheson would be appalled. According to Beisner, Acheson thought that "American values ruled out preemptive war" (p. 32). In an August 1951 address at the Naval War College, he advised that a critical element of American power was the "'ability to evoke support from others—an ability quite as important as the capacity to compel.'" "To lead the 'free world,'" Beisner continues in a summary of Acheson's remarks, "Americans must serve the interest of others as well as their own. To accept 'responsibility' for other nations, Americans must 'submit' to 'standards and values' created by others" (p. 389). "Searching for unreachable absolutes," he declared in a 1949 speech, "might cause the United States to stretch for goals 'too great for our powers, and to enter on courses the end of which we cannot see'" (p. 101). James A. Baker, in preparing his report on Iraq, was unknowingly following Acheson's prescription for ending the Korean War immediately after China intervened. "'Our great objective' now . . . must be 'to terminate the fighting, to turn over some area to the Republic of Korea, and to *get out*'—but not 'in a way that will lose face'" (p. 412).

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On the other hand, the Iraq War can claim Acheson as an important antecedent. Like Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Iraq, he was certain that the United States was blameless for the Cold War. Acheson, Beisner writes, “insisted that Soviet enmity was self-generated rather than a response to anything the United States had done or failed to do” (p. 71). Moreover, like leading Bush administration officials, he believed in a domino theory in reverse. Regarding this same troubled region, Beisner reports that “Acheson’s interest went beyond military concerns, thinking that a modernized Egypt might be just the ticket for establishing a Middle Eastern position of strength” (p. 537).

Just days after U.S. troops arrived in Korea, Acheson delivered “a blunt message to Canada’s [Lester] Pearson that the American people would write off allies who did not come through” (p. 353). Waging the Cold War, Acheson believed, required controlling events and playing rough. “With the loyalty program and Truman Doctrine in hand,” bringing to mind the Patriot Act, “he essentially asked conservatives: do you want to help me stop communism or not?” (p. 61). After retirement, Acheson mentored Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, two of his “four musketeers” (p. 635). While this may carry little significance, Beisner’s final word on Southeast Asia would suggest otherwise: “In short, so long as a chance remained to win the fight in Indochina, Acheson (and the Truman administration) would stay the course, even if fresh out of ideas” (p. 495).

George W. Bush probably would agree with Beisner that “Dean Acheson was among the boldest of men and one of the most aggressive and assertive to serve a twentieth-century president” (p. 623). I would too. But Beisner’s praise for Acheson’s performance is excessive, attributing his failures to other world actors pursuing their own agendas. For example, he firmly rejects the claim that refusal to negotiate with the Soviet Union “caused the United States to miss a chance to end the cold war, except on terms only the Kremlin would have found agreeable” (p. 150). Support for Alger Hiss was his “greatest political blunder” (p. 281) because it “diminished his effectiveness for the rest of his term as secretary of state” (p. 297), but “reason and loyalty” (p. 292) justified his actions. Although the loyalty probe damaged State for decades, Acheson still achieved most of his objectives. In Korea, Acheson was “at his best” (p. 393) when “he set standards for intelligence and clear-sighted counsel in national crises that have seldom been surpassed” (p. 347). If failure to secure a Congressional declaration of war in Korea was a mistake, it was Truman’s fault, not Acheson’s. And George Marshall was responsible for not acting to prevent the disastrous march to the Yalu.

Reading Beisner’s account should have elevated my estimation of Acheson’s performance as Secretary of State, but sadly it has had the opposite effect. It has been my practice to name canine companions after those who have held this office for whom I have high regard. Following Quincy and Cordell, I now have Elihu and Webster. Dean Acheson was to be next in line. But there is so much about him to dislike, starting with his imperious personality and style. Congress, Acheson once said, “is just as stupid as the people are; just as uneducated, just as dumb, just as selfish” (p. 313). Beisner tells us that he considered journalists, newspapers, and media networks annoying insects. More disturbing, his “sense

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of class and racial superiority affected how low on the totem pole he placed powerless peoples of color” (p. 211). That a retired Acheson defended apartheid exposed a visceral racism that had a negative impact on his policies outside Europe. His record there was not at all “ambiguous” (p. 644), but one that set the stage for frustrations and failures. Beisner delivers a damning indictment when he writes that “Acheson regarded most non-European areas of the world as insignificant nuisances withal” (p. 219). After considering all this, I have decided to name my next dog Spot.

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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; as to 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

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years neglect European issues once authors have put the Marshall Plan behind them, just as 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

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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 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.

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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.

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

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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.

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

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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!

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