

Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review
Review by John Earl Haynes



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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.

John Earl Haynes is 20th Century Political Historian, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Ph.D. (1978) University of Minnesota, and author/co-author of Early Cold War Spies: the Espionage Trials that Shaped American Politics (2006) In Denial: Historians, Communism and Espionage (2002); Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America (1999); The Soviet World of American Communism (1998); Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era (1996); The Secret World of American Communism (1995); The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself (1992); Communism and Anti-Communism in the United States: An Annotated Guide to Historical Writings (1987); and Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party (1984). A member of the editorial board of American Communist History, on-line editor of H-HOAC, and on the editorial advisory board of Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung, he is currently engaged in a project with Harvey Klehr to translate newly available documents from former East Bloc archives that deal with Soviet espionage in the U.S. in the 1930s-1950s.

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.¹ 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.

¹ 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.