Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review

Introduction by Thomas Maddux

Reviewed Work:  

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


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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
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 weights 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