Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review

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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.

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.
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 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 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 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 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.