Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review

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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 as well as Acheson’s prize-winning and often revealing memoir, Present at the Creation. 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 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." 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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3 Acheson, Present at the Creation, p. 3.
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 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. 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 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.

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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 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.