Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War Roundtable Review

Reviewed Work:

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


Your use of this H-Diplo roundtable review indicates your acceptance of the H-Diplo and H-Net copyright policies, and terms of condition and use.

The following is a plain language summary of these policies:

You may redistribute and reprint this work under the following conditions:

☑ Attribution: You must include full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
☑ Nonprofit and education purposes only. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
☑ For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
☑ Any of these conditions may be waived if you obtain permission from the copyright holder. For such queries, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations). For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/.

For further information about our parent organization, H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, please visit http://www.h-net.org/.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo, a part of H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
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).

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).

James I. Matray is a Professor of History at California State University, Chico, where he also serves as department chair. A student of Norman A. Graebner, he earned his Ph.D. at the University of Virginia in 1977. Since then, he has authored or edited six books, as well as writing more than forty articles and book chapters on issues related to the Korean War and U.S.-Korean relations. His latest book is Korea Divided: The 38th Parallel and the Demilitarized Zone. Currently, he is a member of the Board of Editors for Diplomatic History. Matray teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in U.S. History and U.S. Foreign Relations.
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 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 38th parallel until after the Inchon Landing. Beisner cannot have it both ways.

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).

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 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.