

Passing of a (Cold) Warrior

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Dean Acheson, who died at age 78 on October 12, 1971, was the fiercest of American leaders during the formative years of the cold war. As Under Secretary of State and Secretary of State for President Harry S. Truman, he was (to use the arrogant but perfectly accurate title of his memoirs) *Present at the Creation* of the basic policies which guided American foreign policy for a quarter of a century. In most instances he was the principal author of those policies.

Should we view his career with the unstinting admiration naturally expressed by his old boss, Harry Truman, and by President Nixon? Or with condemnation for his militant role in perpetuating the cold war? More appropriately, we should feel sadness that a man of such extraordinary intellectual ability, and the finest master of the English language to serve as Secretary of State since Jefferson, should have applied his talents to waging a form of war rather than searching for peace. One can argue that Soviet behavior when Acheson was Secretary of State left him and the American government no alternatives, although even on that I do not agree. The greater tragedy is that what were at best temporary necessities became permanent policies, spreading insecurity, suffering, and war through a generation.

The obituary writers have listed Acheson's achievements. In 1946, he advised President Truman to take a tough and threatening stand toward the Soviet Union's continued presence in northern Iran. In 1947, he was the most important contributor to the formulation of the Truman Doctrine, which promised American support for any regime anywhere in the world threatened by internal or external Communist attack. Also in 1947, he coordinated various strands

of thought in the American government which led to the Marshall Plan for the economic reconstruction of Western Europe with American aid. In 1948, momentarily a private citizen, he was a leader in the effort to persuade the American public and Congress to accept the Marshall Plan.

In 1949, as Secretary of State, he negotiated the North Atlantic Treaty with the other member nations and with the American Congress and won approval for the rearmament of Western Europe by the United States. He then encouraged the formation of the West German government system of European defense against the Soviet Union. He learned with dismay that the Soviet Union had exploded an atomic device; advocated the development of the hydrogen bomb; watched unhappily as the Chinese government won control of mainland China; kept foreign policy in balance while the nation fought a costly limited war in Korea without abandoning Europe as the area of primary concern; supported the French colonial war in Indochina; sought to mediate between declining British power and strident nationalism in the Middle East; neglected Latin America; endured accusations of treason from irresponsible domestic critics; and at all times fenced warily with Moscow in the conviction that the nation's security would be preserved by the creation of positions of strength against the Soviet Union, but never by genuine negotiation.

Acheson looked on the Soviet Union as an implacable and permanently hostile enemy, a true successor to Nazi Germany as a threat to the free world. For him, Western relations with the Soviet Union were a zero-sum game. He applied a simple test to every American move. That which strengthened the United States against the Soviet Union was good; that which simultaneously weakened the Soviet Union was very good. That which weakened the United States was bad; and that which simultaneously strengthened the Soviet Union was disastrous. It was inconceivable to him that any development which was of advantage to

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the Soviet Union could also be of advantage to the United States. His favorite slogan was "negotiation from strength." The slogan was misleading. He believed that the United States should never enter a negotiation from a position of weakness. On the other hand, when the United States was stronger than the Soviet Union, negotiation was unnecessary.

He once likened the Soviet Union to a force of nature, a great river flowing inexorably on its course. You cannot reason with a river, he said. You can apply superior strength to contain and divert the flow but you can never reason with it. Acheson believed that settlements with the Soviet Union (for example, the lifting of the Berlin blockade in 1949 and the armistice in Korea in 1953) were the result not of genuine negotiation but of superior American strength. The Soviet Union simply recognized that its power position on these issues had become too costly to maintain. The facade of negotiation was erected as a face-saving device, but that was all. In a later year he argued that only superior military strength would solve the Cuban missile crisis. He believed that President Kennedy made a serious mistake by not bombing the missile installations. Similarly, he believed that a demonstration of American military superiority was a prerequisite for a successful solution of the Vietnam problem.

He believed that it was impossible for the United States to have too much military strength. He was impatient with those who had qualms about the size of the American thermonuclear arsenal. He was skeptical about the possibility of international control of atomic weapons.

Acheson did not believe in the democratic control of foreign policy. He considered the press a mischievous and irresponsible institution, Congress ill-informed and narrow-minded, public opinion fickle and unreliable. In his ideal world, great decisions of foreign policy would be made by a small elite of highly intelligent and highly trained professionals to whom God in his infinite wisdom had imparted the necessary vision and intelligence.

He considered the United Nations a disorderly and inconvenient body which excited utopian expectations on the part of the naive and on occasion gave to weakling nations an unjustified voice in decisions which would have to be carried out by others.

Acheson's heritage illuminates his policies. His father was a British army officer before becoming an Episcopal clergyman and eventual Bishop of Connecticut. His mother was Canadian. The British empire of the late nineteenth century was the standard of excellence by which he judged American behavior. He saw that empire bringing law and order and economic stability to much of the world. He saw the United States of the mid-twentieth century carrying Britain's former burdens in backward areas and in holding the world balance of power

as Britain had once done (although to Acheson "balance of power" really meant predominance). He weighed the importance of nations by the test of economic and military power.

He felt little sympathy for the new and undeveloped nations of what came to be called "the Third World." He gave no more than lip service to the ideals of self-determination and national independence. Some people, he believed, were too inefficient or corrupt to deserve independence. He preferred the crisp militarism of Pakistani leaders to the sentimental moralism of Prime Minister Nehru and other Indians.

In early 1950, Acheson briefly entertained the expectation that Communist China and the Soviet Union would have a falling out and would thus balance each other to the advantage of the West. He said then that the worst thing the United States could do would be to engage in some foolish adventure which would divert on to its own shoulders the natural hostility which the Chinese felt against foreign encroachment, hostility which deserved to be directed against Soviet territorial ambitions on the Chinese-Russian border. But this attitude was expressed before the Chinese entry into the Korean War. He was incapable of seeing that the Chinese came into the Korean War in defense of their own security. He believed that they, like the North Koreans, were acting exclusively as puppets of Moscow. After the Chinese entry into the Korean War he became as implacable in his opposition to China as he was to Russia. He abandoned his former theory and adhered to the myth of the monolith of international communism just as fervently as did his successor as Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles.

In the 1940's, he was mildly critical of French colonial policy in Indochina, but he rapidly came to support the French military effort there. All the later assumptions which guided American policy in Vietnam were developed during the Truman Administration under Acheson's presiding genius: the belief that the Viet Minh, later the North Vietnamese, were tools of the international Communist conspiracy; the belief that Vietnam was a key to all of Asia (if it fell to communism so would the rest of the continent, followed by the Middle East and even Europe); the belief in a special American talent to teach the Vietnamese people to want what America wanted and to fight for it; and the assumption that the war in Indochina could be won on American terms if enough military power and political ingenuity were applied.

For the last eighteen years of his life Acheson combined his first career, the practice of law, with a third career as a man of letters and public oracle on international affairs. He became an increasingly outspoken exponent of rigid cold war attitudes, condemning Willy Brandt for seeking an accommodation between West Germany and the Soviet Union, lamenting the declining importance and militancy of NATO; prais-

ing the roles of Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa in Africa; supporting the antiballistic missile system; criticizing President John F. Kennedy in retrospect as too weak for the responsibilities he faced; and, above all, supporting the American war in Vietnam without question, although in 1968 he did raise some doubts about the efficacy of the American bombing campaign.

Other men of his generation, Averell Harriman, for example, continued their education and changed with a changing world. Acheson did not. He died in

1971 with the same attitudes that he brought so staunchly to bear as a warrior in the Truman era. Measured by how clearly he articulated and carried out his policies he can be called the greatest Secretary of State in American history. Measured by the value of his assumptions as a permanent guide for American foreign policy, the verdict is different. Like the government of which he was such an important part, he acted with more courage than wisdom, more arrogant self-confidence than toleration and understanding.

“Our first line of action—and this seems to me the basis of all the others I shall discuss—is to demonstrate that our own faith in freedom is a burning and a fighting faith. We are children of freedom. We cannot be safe except in an environment of freedom. We believe in freedom as fundamentally as we believe in anything in this world. We believe in it for everyone in our country. And we don’t restrict this belief to freedom for ourselves. We believe that all people in the world are entitled to as much freedom, to develop in their own way, as we want ourselves.

“If we are clear about this, if we are full of passion about this, then we have in our hearts and minds the most dynamic and revolutionary concept in human history and one which properly strikes terror to every dictator, to every tyrant who would attempt to regiment and depress men anywhere.

“Why do I put a strong belief in freedom first in the order of an American program of action? Because it is fundamental, because the second line of action flows from it. . . . [T]he United States must, with a thousand voices and with all the resources of modern science, preach this doctrine throughout the world. . . .

“Thirdly, it is not enough that one should have a faith and should make the faith articulate. It is also essential that we, and those who think like us, should have the power to make safe the area in which we carry that faith into action. This means that we must look to our defenses. It means that we must organize our defenses wisely and prudently, with all the ingenuity and all the methods in which we are best versed to make ourselves strong. . . .

“Fourthly, beyond faith and preachment and defense there lies the necessity of translating all of these into terms of the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people who live in this free world of ours. I am talking about the effort we are now making to help create a better material life for ourselves and for other people in many parts of the world.

“One part of this effort has to do with setting in operation again the great workshops of the free world. . . . Another part of this effort to develop the economic conditions for freedom is to help create new workshops, new crops, new wealth in places where they have not existed before. . . .

“The fifth line of action is in the political field. In this political field we have so far only scratched the surface of what can be done to bring the free world closer together, to make it stronger and more secure and more effective. . . .

“Now our program of action would not be complete if I did not go to a sixth field, as in our relations with the Soviet Union and the countries that have fallen under Communist control. In this field, as in our relations with the free nations, we have the machinery of negotiation at hand. In the United Nations we have a dozen or more conference tables at which our differences could be thrashed out. . . . We shall go on trying to find a common ground for agreement, not perfect or eternal agreement, but at least a better arrangement for living together in greater safety.

“But one thing is clear. There can be no agreement, there can be no approach to agreement unless one idea is done away with, and that is the idea of aggression. And that word ‘aggression’ includes not only military attack but propaganda warfare and the secret undermining of free countries from within.

“We do not propose to subvert the Soviet Union. We shall not attempt to undermine Soviet independence. And we are just as determined that Communism shall not by hook or crook or trickery undermine our country or any other free country that desires to maintain its freedom. That real and present threat of aggression stands in the way of every attempt at understanding with the Soviet Union. For it has been wisely said that there can be no greater disagreement than when someone wants to eliminate your existence altogether.

“If, as, and when that idea of aggression, by one means or another, can be ruled out of our relations with the Soviet Union, then the greatest single obstacle to agreement will be out of the way. As the results of our actions become clear and the free world becomes stronger, it will, I believe, become progressively easier to get agreements with the Soviet Union.

“These, then, are the main lines of action by the Government and people of the United States in dealing with their present danger. . . .”

—Dean Acheson. *From an address before a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 22, 1950.*