



Robert L. Beisner, “The Secretary, the Spy, and the Sage: Dean Acheson, Alger Hiss, and George Kennan” (SHAFR Presidential Address), *Diplomatic History*, Volume 27, Issue 1 (January 2003): 1-14.

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Dean Acheson has been well served by historians seeking to outline and explain his role in the formulation of postwar U.S. foreign policy. Gaddis Smith, David S. McLellan and, most recently, James Chace have made important contributions in clarifying Acheson’s crucial importance in forging the strategy of containment and the policies that gave it meaning. Chace, in his fine biography, makes a persuasive case to justify his subtitle’s description of Acheson as “the secretary of state who created the American world.” Few historians would dispute Acheson’s decisive importance--whatever they may think of the policies he developed--and Robert L. Beisner is surely not among them. Beisner well appreciates that Acheson proved the principal architect of American foreign policy during the Truman administration and he likely would endorse much in Chace’s portrayal. In such circumstances one might ask at the outset whether Beisner has much to add to our understanding of Acheson. The answer is a definite yes!

Those familiar with Beisner’s earlier work--such as his *Twelve Against Empire* and his brilliant textbook, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865-1900*--know that he is not a historian given to simplistic explanations or to blunt interpretative over-kill. He is one who appreciates nuance and subtlety. He prefers to probe the complex motives and ideas of individuals and to demonstrate how multiple forces were at work in effecting policy changes. In his SHAFR presidential address Beisner focuses on personal connections and on individual motivation. He explores Acheson’s relations with two of his contemporaries, Alger Hiss (the spy) and George Kennan (the sage), and in the process sheds new light on Acheson’s personality and his *modus operandi* and the place of reason in it. In effect, he gives us deeper insight into Acheson’s inner workings. Notably, his focus is on Acheson. Hiss and Kennan are discussed in relation to Acheson, but there is no effort to ascertain what the spy thought of the sage or vice versa.

Beisner ably demonstrated his grasp of Acheson in his 1996 essay in *Diplomatic History*, “Patterns of Peril: Dean Acheson Joins the Cold Warriors, 1945-46.” There Beisner convincingly portrayed Acheson as a reluctant cold warrior whose eventual conversion occurred only in the late summer of 1946 when he began to connect the dots and discerned real “patterns of peril” in Soviet actions. Acheson was neither an especially doctrinaire anti-communist nor ideologically anti-Soviet. His joining the developing cold war consensus in 1946 owed to his realist recognition that Soviet thrusts, especially against Turkey, threatened western interests and demanded a firm response.

Acheson's non-ideological approach to matters foreign and domestic is also evident in his relationship with Alger Hiss. There is a clear ring of truth to Beisner's reasoned speculations regarding Acheson's motives in assisting Hiss's defense and in refusing to disassociate himself from Hiss after his perjury conviction. The loyalty-to-friends factor and the special relationship with Donald Hiss, which "pushed blinders firmly around Acheson's eyes" (p. 7) most assuredly played their part, as did Acheson's pride and his "disdain for those on the anticommunist right" (p. 7). Class and social status also likely played their part. Richard Gid Powers' important study, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anti-communism* (1995) revealed (among other things) how many 'elite' Americans avoided being closely identified with domestic anti-communism for fear of being associated with visceral anti-communist extremism. Acheson surely fits in this company. His contempt for the "primitives" knew few bounds and he wanted to concede nothing to them.

Beisner sensibly concludes that one can never replicate an exact weighing in the scales of Acheson's decision-making of the various factors which influenced his actions on the Hiss matter. But he is prepared to note two essential points that Acheson himself never conceded. Firstly, he explains, that the Secretary "allowed personal and professional attachments to shape his reaction to a serious public question," and, secondly, "that the man sustained by his upright gesture did not deserve it (p. 7)." While Acheson could never bring himself to acknowledge these points publicly, historians should not be so reticent. In the Hiss case, as Beisner clarifies, the secretary of state's emotions and personal sentiments overwhelmed his use of reason and sound judgment--and this despite the fact that he suspected Hiss's disloyalty to his country. James Chace suggests in his biography (p. 228) that "Acheson's words of compassion [regarding Hiss] may have marked his finest hour," while also acknowledging that "they were also a political disaster for both him and for the president." Beisner's analysis rightly raises serious questions about any 'finest hour' argument, and alludes to Acheson's culpability for bringing such troubles upon the Truman administration. These are matters to which, one hopes, he and others might devote further attention.

Interestingly, George Kennan's record on communist penetration of the U.S. government and on the Hiss case and McCarthyism reveals more astute powers to judge the real situation than that of 'the secretary' who so emphasized his powers of reason. As Kennan observed in his *Memoirs* (Vol. II, Chapter 9) he recognized both that there was a genuine subversion problem in the U.S. in the thirties and during the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union and that FDR's administration addressed the problem ineffectively. Kennan even attempted to play a part in identifying and countering communist and fellow-traveler activity in the U.S. during a speaking tour in the U.S. after his return from Moscow in 1946. [See Walter Hixson's discussion in *Cold War Iconoclast*, p. 156.] For a variety of reasons, however, Kennan felt that by 1947-48 the problem "was well on the way to being mastered" and that communist subversion "was no longer a serious problem from the standpoint of its influence on American foreign policy." (Beisner makes a similar point -- see p. 5). The sage viewed the developing charges against the Truman administration in 1948 and 1949 with "incredulity" and disgust. As what became known as "McCarthyism" developed, Kennan behaved more honorably and courageously than

most of his contemporaries as he attempted to combat the McCarthyite scourge in the state department. He defended colleagues like John Paton Davies whom he knew to be innocent of the disgraceful charges launched against them. Yet, he remained silent on the matter of Alger Hiss, of whom, like Acheson, he had some suspicions. He preferred to reserve judgment until the facts were available. Acheson might have done well to follow his example.

There is no record of the secretary and the sage ever talking about the matter of the spy, but in 1949-1950 they exchanged views on much else. Significantly, Beisner reveals well that Acheson did not arrive at Foggy Bottom in 1949 with his mind made up on the essential elements of American foreign policy. He reasoned his way to them. There was uncertainty and openness in his views on Europe early in 1949 and he willingly listened to Kennan's views on Germany and the possibilities of limiting the role of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. in Europe. Beisner even suggests that Acheson carried some residual strains of "the Kennan virus" as late as February of 1950 when he speculated about the withdrawal of American troops from Germany (p. 10). As is well known, however, Acheson ultimately decided against Kennan's policy recommendations not only on Germany but also on the development of the H-bomb and on the need for the defense build-up called for in NSC-68. He felt obliged to take account of Soviet capabilities rather than to rely on the Kennan/Bohlen analysis of Soviet intentions. He preferred to build situations of real strength rather than to rely on what he later termed "hunches."

In exploring these matters Beisner clarifies well the respective roles of Acheson and Kennan in the design and implementation of containment as we understand it. Like Chace, Beisner rightly emphasizes Acheson's decisive role. He also aptly corrects the notion that Kennan was "the mastermind of early cold war policy," although he too dismissively brands him a mere "sidelines player" (p. 8). It is, however, as Beisner argues, an "error to lump Acheson with Kennan as coeval advocates of 'containment,' or, worse, to see Kennan as its founder and Acheson as its executor (p. 13). This erroneous view is hard to dislodge. Those who prefer more simplistic explanations like to present Kennan as the American statesman who delineated the West's Cold War policy of Soviet containment and we can expect to be subjected to a new round of these "father of containment" descriptions when the tributes and obituaries are written upon the venerable scholar/diplomat's death. Perhaps Bob Beisner's fine article might lead to more intelligent and accurate assessments of Kennan's contributions but I wouldn't bank on it.

Notably, Beisner concludes his address by observing that Acheson "so unreasonably treated Kennan with less charity than Hiss" (p. 14), which he attributes to Acheson's hot personality. My own assessment is that this might be somewhat harsh on Acheson. At least during his service as secretary of state he treated Kennan fairly for the most part, and more-so even than he later depicted in his memoir *Present at the Creation*. Of course he didn't need to lambaste Kennan with verbal blasts (as he later claimed to have done.) Letting his sage adviser stew in his lonely dissent from the dominant foreign policy paradigm within the Truman administration was punishment enough. It was Kennan's continued willingness to push disengagement in the 1950s and his direct assault on the Achesonian handiwork in Europe--especially in his Reith lectures for the BBC in

1957--that finally attracted the former secretary's caustic criticism and led him to disparage Kennan's understanding of the use of power. [I give some attention to this matter in my *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy*, pp. 341-42.] Acheson found it unreasonable--to put it mildly--that Kennan refused to accept that America's security was linked directly to Europe's and that strength in the end guaranteed peace.

Beisner helps us understand well that Acheson was a man of "strong feelings" which influenced his attitudes to various individuals such as Hiss and Kennan. But there is an essential difference between the two cases that this SHAFR presidential address surfaces. In the case of Hiss Acheson regrettably allowed personal factors to trump his use of reason on the substance of the matter. In the case of Kennan his emotions were roused (eventually) only in defense of the product of his powerful reasoning. Personal factors did not sway his judgment on the major matters of foreign policy. This is an important distinction and one that diplomatic historians should appreciate.

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