

greater demand than ever. His “balanced” response to the catastrophe is dryly rendered by Messud as

a reasoned middle ground that, while not stretching so far as those who claimed America deserved it, nevertheless gently reminded his suffering compatriots of the persistent agonies of the West Bank, or of the ever-growing population of disenfranchised Muslim youth around the globe. He argued in favor of understanding rather than blind hostility.

Not only does 9/11 reinforce Murray’s reputation as a sage, but it spares him the merciless unmasking that is Bootie’s intended contribution to the now-aborted magazine. All this leaves the intellectual and cultural landscape even more desolate than before. Murray represents the novel’s adult generation, the one that prospered handsomely by questioning all authority. But now, with the dissolution of any generally acknowledged authority that one might question, he preaches into the emptiness. As Danielle says of Ludo’s short-circuited agenda via *The Monitor*, it was to be a “nihilists’ revolution,” offering nothing in which to believe.

THE BOOK ends with an air of inconclusiveness, of things left unfinished, ambiguous, suspended. In a way, this inconclusiveness is a tribute to Messud’s novelistic talents—she has given us too much characterization and storyline for one book, and has left us longing for a sequel. In another way, it testifies to an unwillingness or inability, hers no less than her characters’, to imagine any other terms of existence than the ones in which they live and, futilely, writhe.

For all its comedy, *The Emperor’s Children* makes an undeniably serious point. It renders an incisive portrait of a class whose glittering city by the river is now partly in ruins, itself a symbol of a society detached from its roots, fed by shopworn

platitudes, without deeply held beliefs of any kind, mortally threatened by people so steeped in *their* system of belief that they will commit mass murder in its name. Still, in the end, and especially when compared with a novel like Johanna Kaplan’s *O My America!* (1980)—a truly daring exposure of New York’s (Jewish) intelligentsia—it is also something of a copout. As C.S. Lewis devastatingly remarked about modern skepticism in general, “the whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it, not to arrive at nothing.”

### Balancing Act

Dean Acheson:  
A Life in the Cold War

by Robert L. Beisner

Oxford. 800 pp. \$35.00

Reviewed by  
Mark Falcoff

IN TODAY’S troubled and conflicted Washington, it is not uncommon to hear expressions of nostalgia for the supposedly good old days of the cold war. “At least then,” we are told, “the issues were clear-cut.” Robert L. Beisner’s monumental new biography of Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1893-1971) reminds us that nothing about that era was simple or easy; indeed, the tasks facing American leadership were every bit as daunting in the 1940’s as they are at present. Beisner’s great achievement is to reconstruct the statecraft of that period, letting us see and feel it as it was experienced by its key participants. This is a far less common practice than those unacquainted with to-

MARK FALCOFF is resident scholar emeritus at the American Enterprise Institute.

day’s American historical profession might suppose.

“A pure American type of a rather rare species”—thus Acheson was described by the British ambassador of the day. At first glance, he would seem to have been archetypal of the old East Coast aristocracy that long dominated banking, utilities, the law, and to some extent politics in the United States. Son of the Episcopal bishop of Connecticut, Acheson attended Groton, Yale, and Harvard law school, and joined the prestigious law firm of Covington & Burling in Washington before entering public life. What made him unusual among his peers, Beisner writes, was his “intellectual brilliance, moral courage, and elegant style.”

Although a favorite of Justices Frankfurter, Brandeis, and Holmes, Acheson was apparently bored by the practice of law. A committed Democrat, he joined the State Department just before World War II, drafting legislation for the Lend-Lease program and then, in 1944, becoming assistant secretary for congressional relations and international conferences. After the war, he served as undersecretary to George C. Marshall, becoming Secretary of State in his own right under Harry S. Truman in 1949. He was active in drafting the Marshall plan for Western Europe, in the creation of NATO, and in devising the Point Four program of aid to the underdeveloped world. Acheson also played a role in the decision to build an H-bomb, and it was on his watch that the United States concluded a peace treaty with Japan, oversaw the creation of the German Federal Republic, and guided its entry into the Western alliance.

As Beisner shows, every one of these achievements was brought to fruition against the background of a reluctant and often hostile Congress, an American public uninterested in foreign affairs and anxious to return to pre-war normality, and European allies almost as difficult to deal with

as our Soviet adversaries. Nor was Acheson always successful. His decision to declare that Korea was outside the bounds of the U.S. defense perimeter is thought to have encouraged Stalin and Kim Il Sung to cross the north-south boundary of that temporarily partitioned country. (Beisner goes into some detail in attempting to absolve him of the charge.) After China's entry into the Korean war in 1951, Truman himself became one of the most unpopular presidents in American history, and his Secretary of State the most vilified individual ever to hold that office. At one point, Senate Republicans even tried to garnishee his salary. Perhaps Acheson's biggest misstep was to stand by Alger Hiss long after the latter's guilt as a Soviet spy was clear to everyone, including President Truman. It was a rare instance in which social snobbery and blind class loyalty got the better of him.

BEISNER'S ACCOUNT is immense in size, scope, and detail. It touches not only on topics that the casual reader would expect to find—the Chinese civil war, Korea, etc.—but also on such other subjects as the Lilienthal plan for international atomic cooperation, the collapse of French Indochina, German rearmament and the failure to achieve a European Defense Community, and American relations with India, Egypt, and Iran. As Beisner makes clear, Acheson performed an extraordinary balancing act. The U.S. had to confront the Soviet threat while at the same time coaxing allies away from the temptations of neutralism or despair. The British, in particular, though impoverished and subject to rationing and runs on their currency, insisted on playing their pre-war role. Nor could Washington cobble together a North Atlantic treaty without France, whose leaders demanded support against anti-colonial forces in Asia and North Africa. Indeed, the roots of the Vietnam war can be located precisely in the

need to keep Paris on board with German rearmament.

Moreover, Acheson and his colleagues were forced to juggle these issues in the midst of a very un congenial domestic political environment. Unlike his colleague George Kennan, who never bothered to disguise his contempt for Congress and the American public, Acheson believed in patient negotiations with the former and a constant program of public education to win over the latter. But his term at the State Department coincided with a particularly bitter moment in American party politics. The Republicans, having been out of office since 1932 with no apparent prospect of return, leveraged popular anger over the Rosenberg and Hiss spy cases, the Korean war, and Truman's firing of General Douglas MacArthur into a frontal attack on the Democratic administration, the New Deal, the State Department in general, and Acheson in particular. Senator Joseph McCarthy was merely the most vicious and unscrupulous of these politicians, averring that Acheson was "Russian as to heart, British as to manner . . . a pompous diplomat in striped pants with a phony British accent."

No less significant than Beisner's attention to the particulars of the era is his bold historical judgment. Having trawled oceans of archival material, he systematically demolishes 40 years of "revisionist" cold-war history. He eviscerates the claims of such long-standing favorites of the academic Left as I. F. Stone's *Hidden History of the Korean War* (1952), Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965), and Joseph Esherick's *Lost Chance in China* (1974). The fact that he does so in a calm and scholarly way—never raising his narrative voice—is all the more impressive. The book's footnotes alone justify its price.

Finally, like any good biographer, Beisner reveals the man in full—an Acheson of wit, pugnacity, and old-

fashioned American patriotism. How very different Acheson was from the Democrats of today! He had no use for the United Nations, Latin America, Nehru (whose country gave him "the creeps"), "dark and delirious" Africa, foreign-policy "realists," or "wooly-headed liberals" like Chester Bowles and Adlai Stevenson. He despised politicians who exploited America's foreign-policy dilemmas to win votes at home, and he thought of journalists as gnats. Nor did Acheson believe that the United States should fastidiously apply "litmus tests to those worthy of the fight against Soviet aggression." Some of the more reactionary views of his later years—like his decided skepticism about the readiness for self-government of many African and Asian peoples—frankly horrify his biographer, and rightly so. The wonder of it all is that *this* was the man whom Senators McCarthy, Wherry, Knowland and sometimes Taft made the target of their right-wing wrath.

AFTER HE left office in 1953, Acheson discovered the joys of writing and produced a series of memorable books, the most important of which, *Present at the Creation* (1969), was obviously Beisner's point of departure. As he piloted his ship into old age, Acheson found his counsel eagerly sought by a succession of presidents, including Richard Nixon, who as a Senator and vice-presidential candidate had been among his most vociferous critics. It was Acheson whom President Kennedy sent to President de Gaulle to explain our blockade of Cuba in the missile crisis of 1962. He also headed a group of "wise men" who spoon-fed President Lyndon Johnson the bitter news that our cause in Vietnam was lost. His final service was to help defeat the Mansfield amendment, which would have removed all of our troops from Western Europe. In this he was assisted by a group of bright young men of whom much

would be heard in the future, including Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Edward Luttwak.

Beisner ends his book on a lofty note. Truman and Acheson faced very difficult times. They knew that leadership required art, skill, wisdom, and—perhaps most of all—courage. As Beisner writes, “They wasted little time pondering ‘exit strategies.’ They served with no guarantees and without offering them to the people. They knew the more daunting the difficulties, the more important it was that they do their best.” *Dean Acheson* is not merely a rich and fascinating book of history but an invitation to ponder the dilemmas that face our country today—and the sort of leadership needed to see us through them.

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by Jon D. Levenson

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Reviewed by David Berger

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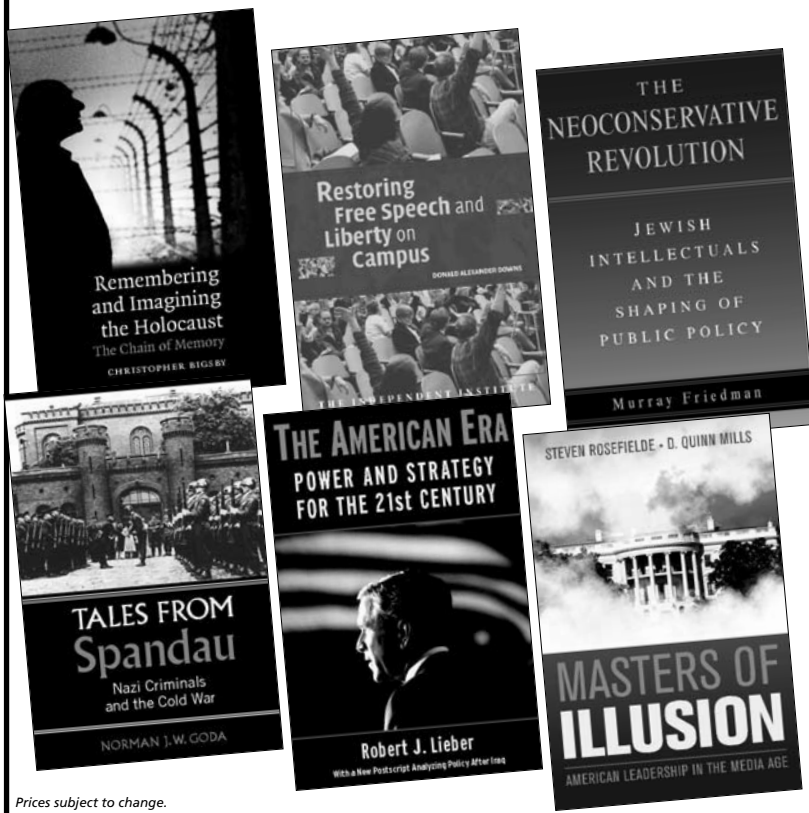
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