

## Review Essays

The appeal of history to us all is in the last analysis poetic. But the poetry of history does not consist of imagination roaming at large, but of imagination pursuing the fact and fastening upon it. That which compels the historian to “scorn delights and live laborious days” is the ardour of his own curiosity to know what really happened long ago in that land of mystery which we call the past. To peer into that magic mirror and see fresh figures there every day is a burning desire that consumes and satisfies him all his life, that carries him each morning, eager as a lover, to the library and the muniment room. It haunts him like a passion of terrible potency, because it is poetic. The dead were and are not. Their place knows them no more, and is ours today. Yet they were once as real as we, and we shall tomorrow be shadows like them. . . . The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow (quoted Evans, p. 250).

Who, reflecting on such words, can doubt that the troubles of history today are after all a petty thing, something that only makes the job to be done greater, more demanding, and therefore more satisfying?

### **Acheson, Nixon, and the Politics of Deception**

**by Francis J. Gavin**

*A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency.* By William Bundy. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998. 768 pp. \$35.00.)

*Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World.* By James Chace. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998. 512 pp. \$30.00.)

Do the demands of American democracy hinder the making of U.S. foreign policy? Are there circumstances in which exaggeration and even duplicity can be justified in the name of national interest? Should we be alarmed by the wide gulf between the Wilsonian rhetoric employed by most American policymakers in public and the hard-nosed realpolitik that is often revealed (long after the fact) by the documentary record? Not one modern American presidency has remained unmarked by these dilemmas. Consider Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to prepare a reluctant nation for war against the Axis powers. Constrained by the still-powerful isolationist sentiment among voters, FDR undertook what amounted to a secret naval war against the Germans in the North Atlantic. The conflict between national interest, which demanded action, and public opinion, which dictated passivity, was resolved—through governmental secrecy—in

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favor of the former by circumventing the latter. Or consider a different case. In order to end the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy agreed to remove America's Jupiter missiles from Turkey. JFK concealed this arrangement with the Soviets from the American people, Congress, and indeed, most of his own administration. Both Roosevelt and Kennedy pursued policies that they believed were in America's best interests, and for the most part, historians have judged these policies to be wise. Yet both presidents were unable, or unwilling, to make a completely honest and open case for their foreign policies to the American people.

How should such divides between rhetoric and reality be judged? The works reviewed here put that question squarely before us. James Chace, in his beautifully written biography, *Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World*, deeply admires the wise statesman who often made things "clearer than the truth" in order to advance policies which he determined to be in America's best interest. Chace does at times lament Acheson's overstatements during his tenure as secretary of state under Truman, but one senses the author's understanding of the need to "exaggerate" in the face of an obtuse Congress and an inward-looking American populace. No such sympathy is found in the study by William Bundy. As the title reveals, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* strongly criticizes Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger for deception and exaggeration. To Bundy's mind, even the Nixon administration's foreign policy successes were overshadowed by its secretive style.

Some might find this an odd, even an unfair, comparison. There are, of course, enormous differences of tone and style between Acheson and the Nixon/Kissinger team. But in many ways, the differences are those of degree, not of kind. Consider the similarities. The authors of both studies portray their subjects as realists who disdained moralistic, Wilsonian reasoning and distanced themselves from what Acheson called the "Christers." Both subjects had spectacular successes and failures, but in the end brought about fundamental shifts in the direction of American foreign policy. Both had severely strained relations with Congress and lacked any sense of the "common touch" that might have allowed them to connect with the American people. And finally, both Acheson and the Nixon/Kissinger team at times exaggerated and misled the public about the real motives behind their foreign policies. While there is little doubt that in both cases the men acted according to a perceived national interest, they were forced to pay a heavy political price for the resulting divide between their public rhetoric and governmental policies. Despite differences in tone, both studies leave us with lingering questions: given America's ideological heritage, the fickle nature of public opinion, and the stubborn and at times parochial interests of the Congress, are there times when it is impossible for U.S. statesmen to pursue the national interest in a completely open and honest way? When does making things "clearer than the truth" cross the line into counterproductive deceit?

### Acheson: Realist or Cold Warrior?

Chace has produced an enjoyable and masterfully written biography of Acheson. His description of Acheson's youth creates a picture of improbable, but somehow gilded beginnings. Here is a young man who could finish last in his prep school class and still get into Yale, goof off at Yale and still go to Harvard Law. In law school and as a clerk in Washington, he finally got his act together—under the watchful eye of the twentieth century's greatest jurists: Felix Frankfurter, Louis Brandeis, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Even before Acheson comes to prominence, one cannot help admiring the "blade of steel." Who else could look down on John F. Kennedy for refusing a martini and instead drinking tea? But Chace portrays Acheson as a man of substance and integrity as well as style. Alger Hiss did bad things, and Dean Acheson should have realized it. But Acheson's unwavering support of this distant acquaintance, in the face of huge political costs, reveals a rare kind of personal courage that is completely lacking in today's political life. While Acheson was wrong almost as often as he was right in his professional decisions (making him, in that respect, much like Nixon and Kissinger), his unmistakable style and confidence, captured wonderfully in Chace's biography, lull the reviewer into a more forgiving posture.

But this book is not perfect. First, anyone acquainted with previous studies and memoirs will find few surprises here.<sup>1</sup> More perplexing is Chace's attempt to present Acheson not as a hardened "Cold Warrior," but as a level-headed realist throughout his career. It is true that Acheson was not especially hawkish during the immediate postwar period, when he supported the international control of atomic weapons and showed little concern about the ideological threat of the Soviet regime. It is also true that Acheson's "wedge" strategy—the plan for the United States to recognize the People's Republic of China in order to exploit the inevitable rifts between China and Russia—was out of character for a Cold Warrior. But as the Cold War intensified, Acheson moved away from the more "realistic" recommendations of George Kennan and Charles Bohlen toward more confrontational policies, particularly in Europe. The Korean War, and in particular, China's intervention in November 1950, completed Acheson's transformation from realist to hawk. Acheson went on a diplomatic offensive around the globe, rehabilitated Japan and West Germany, and in the latter case, began the process that would lead to West German rearmament. Most importantly, he oversaw a massive American rearmament. A close reading of the documents makes it clear that by the early 1950s Acheson no longer saw the Soviet Union as a normal adversary, but as a barbarous enemy bent on world domination and the subjugation of the United States. In such dangerous circumstances, neither Acheson nor his policy planning director

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Acheson's own *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969); Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World they Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986); and Douglas Brinkley, *Dean Acheson: The Cold War Years, 1957–1971* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

Paul Nitze believed that a merely defensive strategy was adequate. Instead, both sought to build “situations of strength” that would put tremendous pressure on their adversary and eventually force a “retraction of Soviet power.” “Realists” such as Kennan were troubled by such an aggressive policy.

Acheson’s hawkishness only increased when he left office. He and Nitze were disturbed when Eisenhower and Dulles reduced the military’s budgets to prepare for a longer-term struggle with the Soviets. And Acheson, the former chief diplomat, brutally scolded his old friend in his article “Reply to Kennan,” which rejected Kennan’s proposal for a joint Anglo-American and Soviet withdrawal from Central Europe. While Acheson’s analysis was on the mark, his nasty public tone towards an old friend was inexplicable. President Kennedy initially relied quite heavily on Acheson in 1961 to craft America’s policy towards both NATO and the Berlin crisis. Acheson also participated in early executive committee (*ex-com*) meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis. But Kennedy was taken aback by the extreme nature of Acheson’s recommendations, and over time distanced himself from the former secretary of state. Lyndon Johnson, more insecure than Kennedy when it came to foreign policy, was less immune to Acheson’s consistently hawkish perspective on Vietnam, and it had a devastating effect on Johnson’s policies in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Acheson’s (and, for that matter, Kennan’s own) unfortunate opinions about white Africa cannot be explained through the lens of realism. In reality, Acheson was never the cool, calculating, Richelieu-like master of *realpolitik* that Chace portrays. But despite these problems, Chace has produced a well-written survey of Acheson’s life, both in and out of government service.

### Whose Tangled Web?

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the effort by Dean Acheson’s son-in-law, William Bundy. An historian is immediately confronted with this troubling question: what is Bundy’s motive for producing a study of Nixon’s foreign policy? Remember, Bill Bundy served the Johnson administration as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, and more importantly, as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. Similar skepticism would naturally arise if, for example, Elliot Abrams wrote a book on Bill Clinton’s foreign policy. One of the beauties of America is that anyone who wants to can write a book on any subject. That does not mean every work is first-rate historical scholarship, however. The types of evidence analyzed and the use of that evidence to build an argument must first withstand scrutiny. If an author striving for fairness and objectivity produces a study built on plausible premises, rigorous logic, and most importantly, a deep evidentiary (preferably archival) base, then the work deserves serious consideration. Unfortunately, few *historians* today approach these standards. How difficult it must be, then, for a partisan policymaker writing about a political foe to achieve this lofty goal.

But such works do exist. In fact, McGeorge Bundy’s *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, Random House:

## Review Essays

1988) provides a perfect example. Whatever the reader's opinion of its conclusions, that magisterial account of American decision making in the nuclear age must be taken seriously because its penetrating arguments rest on a solid base of historical documents and the best of the professional literature. And the author even admits, with insight and fairness, that the policies of Dwight D. Eisenhower were far wiser than he recognized during his time as Kennedy's and Johnson's National Security Advisor.

Unfortunately, William Bundy's book does not remotely approach those levels of fairness, logic, and evidence. First, without any credible sense of objectivity, the author makes abundantly clear his dislike of Nixon and Kissinger and what they stood for. But the book is distressing on another level. There is clearly a great need for detailed archival research on American foreign policy during the Nixon period. Historians mining the mountains of documents declassified in the past few years have fundamentally altered our understanding of the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidencies. However, for a variety of reasons—including contentious battles over the historical materials—this wave of declassification has not yet reached the Nixon presidency. As someone who has tried to write about Nixon's international monetary policy, I can attest to the dearth of documentary evidence from the period. This situation will change over the next decade as legal battles are resolved, tapes are transcribed, and the State Department releases its *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes for the period, but in the absence of such sources, definitive judgments are all but impossible.

How, with information available currently, can we assess the work of the Nixon/Kissinger team? One way might be to examine the foreign policy legacy of the Johnson administration and what Nixon and Kissinger managed to do with it. America was mired in an unwinnable war in Southeast Asia. That conflict had unleashed the most bitter domestic political cleavages within the United States since the Civil War. Anti-Americanism was a rallying cry around the globe. America's relations with NATO were at an all-time low. France had left the organization and the British were trying to bring their army home from the Rhine. Most ominously, an array of contentious issues—military offset, troop withdrawals, the failure of the Multilateral Force initiative, the nonproliferation treaty—were driving the Federal Republic of Germany to reconsider its dependence upon the United States for security and protection. The 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict had left the Middle East in disarray, and the Soviets grew increasingly active in Egypt and Syria. The Alliance for Progress effort in Latin America had largely failed. Mainland China, reeling from the Cultural Revolution, was still isolated and dangerous. The American economy was overheating. The position of the U.S. dollar and gold supply were precarious, and in March 1968 a collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system was only narrowly averted by extreme and illiberal action. The Soviets were in the midst of a massive buildup of their strategic nuclear forces and well on their way to surpassing the military power of the United States. To make matters worse, a tenuous détente with the Soviet bloc had been shattered by the brutal invasion of Prague. Finally, five years of Johnson's deceit had left a deeply divided Congress in no mood to grant the

new president his traditional leeway in making American foreign policy. Rarely has a new administration walked into a less enviable position. An examination of available sources reveals that, in most categories, the United States actually emerged in much better shape when Nixon left office than when he took over from Johnson. This is not to defend everything or even most of what the Nixon administration did, however, or the way they did it. Nor is it to deny that forces beyond the control of the administration also played key roles in these changes.

Bundy's account, unsurprisingly, emphasizes the administration's failures, but despite that lack of balance, some of his criticisms are unquestionably apt. A wide array of policies—for example, towards Chile, Cambodia, and in the longer term, Iran—were disastrous and indefensible. Bundy also does a good job of revealing Nixon and Kissinger's ambivalence in the face of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. He plausibly argues that Soviet policy was driven far more by the radical transformation of the German question than by Nixon's opening to China. And on occasion—for example, with regard to American policy in the Middle East after the Yom Kippur war—Bundy grudgingly gives Nixon and Kissinger due credit for success. However, in light of the truly awful mess that the author and his friends in the Johnson administration left behind, Nixon's impressive accomplishments—withdrawing from Vietnam, opening relations with communist China, negotiating important arms control treaties with the Soviets, stabilizing relations with NATO, and scoring major successes in the Middle East—deserve more acknowledgment than Bundy can stomach. Moreover, even a highly critical assessment of Nixon and Kissinger's policies and methods would carry far more weight from someone who had not been a key architect of Johnson's failed Vietnam strategy. What is most troubling is the prospect that Bundy's biased effort might deter serious historians from tackling the Nixon/Kissinger legacy, or subtly push them towards an inordinately sympathetic view of Nixon and Kissinger, if only to make up for Bundy's unbalanced treatment.

Bundy's book, as problematic as it is, does provide one very useful service. *A Tangled Web* forces us to come to terms with the troubling role of secrecy and duplicity in the making of U.S. foreign policy. That Nixon and Kissinger lied more than their predecessors seems obvious and disturbing. But recent scholarship suggests that Johnson was almost as bad in his deceit.<sup>2</sup> Many of the troubles that Acheson encountered with Congress and the American people originated in his own previous lack of candor. In fact, *every* Cold War administration, at some point or another, exaggerated or even misled Congress and the American people on questions of foreign policy.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Kai Bird's recent study, *The Color of Truth—McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), makes it clear that both Bundys engaged in their own deceits and exaggerations, especially in regard to U.S. policies in Vietnam.

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**Which  
deceptions are  
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and which are  
not?**

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## Review Essays

This unavoidable fact leaves a fundamental question for any historian of the Cold War. Is it ever acceptable for a statesman to mislead, to conceal—even in the name of national interest? Which deceptions are acceptable, and which are not? Carrying out a foreign policy that promotes and protects U.S. interests is the most important and most difficult challenge given our statesmen. Our constitution, our way of government, and our fickle nature can make this difficult task almost an impossible one. During the Cold War, when our leaders were less than completely open and honest on issues of foreign policy, it was rarely for personal gain. Nor was one political party more guilty than another. Still, one is left searching for a proper standard of candor by which to assess our presidents and their advisers. Truman's first secretary of state, James Byrnes, was not completely open with the American people about the true meaning of the Potsdam accords. Eisenhower despised the limitations placed upon him by the Atomic Energy Act, and his de facto nuclear assistance to our European allies made a mockery of the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. The Kennedy brothers insisted that the CIA find a way to kill Fidel Castro. Reagan diverted arms to Iran to seek the release of American hostages in Lebanon. These examples demonstrate that the scale of dishonesty is extremely hard to calibrate. Only when we can look at history free of partisan biases—when we see that Acheson and the Nixon/Kissinger team faced the same pressures and dealt with them in ways more similar than many people would like to admit—will we come to grips with the difficulties of making foreign policy in modern America.

