

Oral History Interview

with

DEAN ACHESON

Assistant Secretary of State, 1941-45; Under Secretary of State, 1945-47; and Secretary of State, 1949-53.

Washington, D.C.
June 30, 1971

by Theodore A. Wilson and Richard D. McKinzie

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WILSON: At the end of the war and the first year thereafter, was the role that the State Department, perhaps, saw itself as playing, one not just in planning but in the administration of programs? There is some suggestion that some people within the Department thought that State would take an active role and that others were horrified by this. I wonder if you would have any comments on that question?

ACHESON: I think that you have just about said it. I would think that--as I recall the thing, which is only vaguely--there were many people, including the older members of the State Department, who believed that it was not our role to undertake eradication of "hoof and mouth disease," and a few various other things around

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the world, feeding people, or building factories, or that sort of thing. There was a view which is pretty sound, I think, that this really had to be done by more technically qualified people; and if you got all those damn people at the State Department overcrowding us with a lot of administrative tasks which are alien to what we were trying to do, with this view, why, I had sympathy. The question was in getting things done in a quick way. A whole lot of things are mixed up in foreign aid--a few being Point IV--the Greek-Turkish program. of course was a crash course, and that had to be treated differently. There we did administer, and we did everything we had to do, which was not to be a permanent part of the effort of the Department.

I wasn't a fussy about who really should do things, but there wasn't anybody who was equipped or able to do this sort of thing; therefore, if we could do it for the time being, we picked up somebody who knew about it and got him over in Greece or Turkey or wherever the hell we had to send somebody. I just don't remember that this was a great issue of any kind.

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If so, everybody would have said, "This is nothing we want to go on doing." We actually went on doing it far too long, I think. We finally got John Bingham and other people in, and that very nice old man who was killed in the airplane.

MCKINZIE: Henry Bennett.

ACHESON: He was in there. We did a lot of that. This was really in default of finding anybody else who was capable. I don't know who would have done it had we hadn't.

WILSON: When the big program came, the very large program, the Marshall plan, and then followed MSA, the documentation we've seen suggests that because the State Department was not the administering agency for all this aid, it was placed--or at least the tone of the relationship between the State Department and ECA, then MSA--the documentation suggests it was a negative one.

ACHESON: Was a what?

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WILSON: Was negative in the sense that the State Department had a veto over certain kinds of actions but, at least from the ECA side, the State Department did not have positive control. Is that at all fair, or is the documentation leading us wrong as it often does? Perhaps an example would be this question of economic integration in Europe. The documentation suggests that Hoffman and Harriman and a number of people in ECA were very strong for this, and that State was acting as a brake.

ACHESON: I don't really know whether it was acting as a brake or not, but I should think you are right. We were probably saying, "Take it easy, do what you are supposed to do."

MCKINZIE: These things are all so innovative that came out of these years, the whole idea of massive injections of developmental capital and particularly the business of extending technological assistance, did it not strain a little bit the traditional idea of what a diplomat was supposed to do? We've been concerned about rigidity versus flexibility in departments, and

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I gather that it took some little stretching of things to get the idea of technical assistance incorporated?

ACHESON: Yes, I think this is true, and, of course, then people didn't realize as clearly as they realize now that we were dealing with something as fundamental as we, were. It didn't really strike home to us that the British Empire was gone, the great power of France was gone, that Europe was made out of four or five countries of 50,000,000 people. I still looked at the map and saw that red on the thing, and, by God, that was the British Empire, the French Senegalese troops in East Asia and in Germany--all of this was gone to hell. These were countries hardly much more important than Brazil in the world. If we had known all of that, and seen what we were really trying to do, to use this instrument of foreign aid to bring about an integrated Europe, we would have just said, "Sure this is the very essence of diplomacy;" but I don't think that any of us really saw it that way. Therefore, I think our judgment was colored by

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a lack of comprehension of the reality. And although you could put it in any kind of way, these were stuffy old diplomats who never wanted to get out of the tea party and pick up the slide rule. We didn't see that this was that important. This was an outgrowth of UNRRA. This was relief work, like taking care of the present Pakistan refugees. They all were together, too. They kind of grouped together under the Red Cross. That was more the attitude of it.

WILSON: In a sense, then, President Truman's inaugural address of 1949 can be thought of as breaking away from the wartime patterns and immediate postwar patterns of thought, as well as going forward in something new (in a number of directions in our mind)--and I think your book has suggested this--and it announced that the United States was going to take a very strong and new, in some ways, position, if necessary acting alone.

ACHESON: Yes, I think probably the most imaginative view of it was my press conference where the Point IV program was announced, when I talked about using "material means

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for immaterial purposes." That's reproduced in Present At The Creation. I think this was way ahead of the President himself. I don't think he had thought this thing out at all. This was really Clark Clifford's contribution and it was written out. The State Department didn't think a hell of a lot of it, and the President overruled the State Department and put it in. I don't think General Marshall ever put his mind on it at all; he was sick. We were really making a lot out of nothing, and I tried to blow it up so it had more intellectual content than even I thought it really had.

MCKINZIE: Now this may be an unfair question, but do you think that after it was created and in operation, that it did what you anticipated it might be able to do?

ACHESON: To some extent, yes. It was really not until the Schuman plan came along that the possibilities of this sort of thing began to be seen. I don't think I really saw it until Jean Bonnet talked with me about the Schuman plan.

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WILSON: Another basic problem we have to face in our work is the negative contribution of the United States Congress with regard to foreign aid. It comes up again and again that Senator Kem or the Wherry amendment, et cetera, et cetera. If there had been no such institution, how much difference--maybe this is putting the question wrong--but how much difference would it have made for the programs that were carried forward? Would the administration have been much more bold than happened on occasion, if it didn't have that check?

ACHESON: I think probably so, but this is sort of an unreal question . . .

WILSON: Yes it is.

ACHESON: . . . because in order to get the money you have to go to a non-executive branch . . .

WILSON: Perhaps putting a real question--it is our impression that so many of the Representatives and Senators with whom you had to deal were amazingly uneducated about the problem?

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ACHESON: You see, you all start with the premise that democracy is some good. I don't think it's worth a damn. I think Churchill is right, the only thing to be said for democracy is that there is nothing else that's any better, and therefore he used to say, "Tyranny tempered by assassination, but lots of assassination." People say, "If the Congress were more representative of the people it would be better." I say the Congress is too damn representative. It's just as stupid as the people are; just as uneducated, just as dumb, just as selfish. You know the Congress is a perfect example, and created to be a perfect example. We are sure to get Rooney out of Brooklyn. He is absolutely perfect. He couldn't represent anything better than he does Brooklyn. He's the perfect type.

WILSON: There have been a few.

ACHESON: A damn few.

WILSON: By accident.

ACHESON: In the old days when liberalism didn't persist

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and Senators were elected by the legislatures, you got some pretty good Senators, because they were not representative.

WILSON: These people in Congress practiced the representative principle in their view, that is, they did vote, on the basis of what they thought were the prejudices or views of their constituencies, or did they?--in that sense there was very little in the way you could do to educate them.

ACHESON: There wasn't very much, you did some. Vandenberg is a typical example of somebody who got educated, and I think, very largely, Cordell Hull did this. He took a fellow from Grand Rapids, who was a perfect editor of the Grand Rapids newspaper. He didn't look any further than furniture, not a bit. And Hull began to tell him about the world. What you had to do to get certain results. And Van was sort of open-mouthed at this, he said, "My God," it was sort of like having Marco Polo come home and talk with you. "I'll be damned, you really mean it's like that?" "Yes, it really is." And he said, "Well, God, then we're going to do something

[11]about it." Then he became a fellow who had ideas but never strolled far off first base.

MCKINZIE: Bob Taft, I take it, was uneducable in these matters?

ACHESON: Well, Bob was very educated on certain things. Public housing he knew a lot about and was for, and was radical as hell on that; but so far as them foreigners out there are concerned, to hell with them, they didn't vote in Ohio and they were not good, and shiftless. Get a good Army, Navy and Air Force, and to hell with it.

WILSON: How deep did bipartisanship go? That is something that we have been wrestling with.

ACHESON: Well, don't let it bother you too much. Bipartisanship was a magnificent fraud. I had a group of William's students in here today, and they said that James MacGregor Burns, who teaches there, had come up with the idea that bipartisanship in foreign policy was a grand thing. And I said, "Well, don't take him very seriously either." The question, who is it bad

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for, and who is it good for, is what you ought to put your mind on. If it is only good for the Senate of the United States, this doesn't get you anywhere. Bipartisan foreign policy is ideal for the Executive because you cannot run this damn country under the Constitution any other way.

Now, the way to do that is to say, politics stops at the seaboard, and anybody who denies that postulate is "a son of a bitch and a crook and not a true patriot." Now, if people will swallow that, then you're off to the races. I said Van swallowed it, but every once in a while he knew it was a fake. And he would say to me, "What the hell happens on election, do you go around my State of Michigan and say what a grand man Senator Vandenberg is because he voted for this, that, and the other, and you ought to reelect him?" He said, "Not at all. Say some labor leader runs against me, and is an isolationist that isn't worth a damn; he's a fine Democrat and the President gets photographed with his arm- around him shaking his hand. Now," he said, "this is fraud."

I said, "Sure it's a fraud, but it's a

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necessary fraud. You won't get much mileage out of opposing the administration, you get a little going along, perhaps break even, 50-50." I said, "of course, the biggest fraud of all was President Truman when he said the 80th Congress is the do-nothing Congress." I said to President Truman, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, that is the biggest fraud ever perpetrated on the American people. The 80th Congress was the best Congress in foreign policy we ever had. We were damn lucky to have it. And you've come up with this idea and got elected, and I'm glad you did, I think it's fine, that's all right; but it is ridiculous and is not at all true."

He said, "Well, it worked."

No, I wouldn't be too serious about bipartisanship. It's a great myth that ought to be fostered. And don't bring too damn much scholarship to bear on it. You'll prove it out of existence if you're not careful.

MCKINZIE: This is one thing that we've been most struck by in the work we've done, is that you can raise this stuff to the level where human beings, and

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human emotions are completely absent from it. Particularly in this trip to Washington, as we've talked to people, most people end up telling us, you know, after all, Government is a matter of people and that personal relationships end up being as important as the process and the rest of it.

ACHESON: That is right. It isn't the fact that policy is nonpartisan that's important, it's the fact that it's good. Now, the Korean war was perfectly nonpartisan and it stank just as much when it was nonpartisan as it would if it was partisan. The nonpartisan aspect of it doesn't make it good or bad. It's merely an instrument in making it possible. If you use that to make possible good things, then it's a hell of a good instrument. Take Bob Taft's view that the opposition is supposed to oppose; that we will run on the adversary principle. We have two great parties, and the one out of office ought to be criticizing the hell out of the one in office; and we have a Constitution which makes treaties necessary to have two-thirds of the Senate. We have to have all these legislative impediments. Read my

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little book which has now been republished, A Citizen Looks at Congress. It's a hell of a good book, and is now reprinted. You can get it quite easily. You see the Congress is not two great parties. The Congress is the committees of Congress. That's what really makes the Congress work and the committees are damn near evenly balanced whatever the election shows. You may have two more majority members than minority members if the election is a landslide, otherwise, you might have one more.

Now these people live and work together and you don't have Republicans and Democrats, you have votes all split up; and if you have any important minority on the committee the damn thing won't work, because when it gets into the Congress they will not follow the committee report. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the House never amounted to a damn, and doesn't today. Nobody wants to be on that Foreign Affairs Committee. It's a bore; it's a nuisance. It doesn't carry any weight. The great committees are the Ways and Means, and Appropriations, and Armed Services. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was very important

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for a long time, and a lot of chairmen of other committees were on it. The real leadership of the Senate was on this committee. I used to go up to the Hill, have lunch in Les Biffle's office with fifteen Senators, most of whom would be on this committee, and others. The real leadership of the Senate used to be an extraordinary group, and most of them were on Foreign Affairs. Now they're not; now it's a maverick group. Lyndon Johnson ruined the damn committee by putting people on as a reward for certain votes.

Jim Webb and I went over to see President Truman who was mad as hell at our friend from Arkansas.

WILSON: Fulbright?

ACHESON: Mr. Fulbright had said that, under the British system, the election of '46 having been lost, President Truman would have resigned and considered him (Fulbright) as President. He said, "This damn Rhodes scholar is educated above his intelligence," which was true; he is and was. So he was mad as hell. So, Jim and I said, "Well, now, when these elder statesmen are through, the only young man in there that has got any

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brains is Fulbright. Now let's butter him up, take him into camp, and get him on our side."

The President said, "All right, bring him in, but," he said, "it won't work. I'll tell you it won't work; but anyway you are young and hopeful, bring him in here." So we brought him in. He went back on the Hill and immediately attacked the RFC--the administration was corrupt. Truman was quite right.

But as I say, the committees almost always operate as a unit. They have the same style, the series of them, there is very little minority organization on the committee. Therefore, you stick close to the majority leadership. You've got to.

I used to have a terrible time between Tom Connally and Vandenberg, just like two prima donnas. If the producer would take one out to lunch and not the other one, why, he got a hell of a row. And if you had conferences you had to have them both in, and if you didn't have them both in together, they thought you were doing some trickery because you had them separately. It was a hell of a job. This was really

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like producing an opera, to get this committee to work together.

I sent a telegram to a meeting with the Russians in '49, to the chairman of the committee; and he had the clerk of the committee read it to the committee at an executive meeting. He started to read the telegram, and Tom said, "No, no, no begin at the beginning."

"I am. beginning at the beginning."

He said, "No, you're not, give me the telegram."

So he gave him the telegram and he began, "Dear Tom," he didn't want the "Dear Tom" left out. This was the most important part of the telegram to Tom, but it wasn't the most important part of it to Vandenberg.

I think it's very important in thinking about these things to think about the organization of the body that you're trying to make nonpartisan. And if in fact it really is that, particularly if it's against you, you can get the committee 100 percent against you without any trouble at all. That's the easiest thing in the world to do. If you want them 100 percent for you you've got to get some kind of a

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formula. You don't need any formula if they're 100 percent against the President. This is the separation of power, it's what we're here for. Those guys will sell their country down the road, watch. them, look out. Skepticism, cynicism, don't believe all you hear, is terribly important to them.

WILSON: Yes, that's very helpful. I see we've taken up a half hour of your time, we appreciate this.

ACHESON: Well, go ahead if there is anything else you want to ask.

WILSON: Well, I think the question that you've answered in great part in your book, that I would like to put a little differently. You indicated that you were working for a remarkable man, Harry Truman.

ACHESON: Oh, yes.

WILSON: And I wonder how much again the contrast between the previous man's administrative efforts had to do with your obvious admiration and ability to work with Truman?

ACHESON: You mean FDR?

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WILSON: Yes. It was so much better.

ACHESON: Truman was straight, above board, straight in line.

Two days ago, Monday, former President Sachar of Brandeis University was here and talked about President Truman. He started off by saying, "Let me read you two or three paragraphs here about Mr. Truman, criticize that."

And I said, "All right."

And he began about how with totally inadequate preparation, education, and everything else, Mr. Truman was turning out to be one of the best Presidents, and went on and said, "What do you think of this?"

I said, "I think it's the goddamndest collection of cliches I ever heard in my life, and none of it is true."

Well, he said, "You agree that he didn't have any education."

I said, "I don't agree to that at all; he had a remarkable education." My younger daughter had TB at 19, after she had been in college one month, and just

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been married and her husband went off to the war, and she spent five years in Saranac and lost her lung; and in the course of that time she spent in bed she read and read and read and talked to all kinds of people. And she's far better educated than I am. I went to the best school, the best college, the best law school. That isn't the way you get educated. The point is what enters into your innards.

Suppose somebody sits under John Kennedy Galbraith for three years to get an education; a hell of a waste of time. Mr. Truman read every book in the Independence library, which had about 3,500 to 5,000 volumes including three encyclopedias, and he read them all the way through. He took in a hell of a lot more out of that effort, which he took out of farming when he did it, than he would listening to all of this crap that goes on at Yale and Harvard, and perhaps in other places--Harvard Law School education.

I sit here and talk about his preparation. I would think he did more preparation by being on the County Court or whatever it was called in Jackson County, than he would have being a Justice of the

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Supreme Court, a hell of a lot more. See how people work, how the thing runs, what makes it tick, what are the important things, what are the unimportant things. And it's sort of significant comparing to other Presidents. Well, I think I said Washington should have been President. Tom Jefferson I would give a very low rating, too; he was a man of words, and was a poor Governor, a poor Ambassador to France. The only thing as President that he really did that was really worth a damn was the Louisiana Purchase. And that was contrary to everything that he was . . .

MCKINZIE: That he believed in, yes.

ACHESON: Well, he said, "What do you think about Lincoln?"

I said, "The best thing that can be said about Lincoln are the Trumanesque qualities that he had.

"He said, "That's the damndest thing I ever heard, you usually think it's the other way, the thing that is good about Truman is the Lincolnesque."

I said, "That isn't what he had at all; he didn't have Lincolnesque qualities. Lincoln had Trumanesque qualities. He did things that were contrary to the baloney that he talked; he didn't believe his own

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book. A house divided against itself doesn't fall if you stand up and fight, the house stands up, and he proved it. All these things--it isn't true that a drop of blood drawn by the lash has got to be paid for by one drawn by the sword, or that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous--poetic talk, that's fool talk. Dr. Johnson said to Boswell, "You can talk foolishly, but don't think foolishly."

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