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Genocide Next Door by Eric Paul Roorda
Dean Acheson Joins the Cold Warriors by Robert L. Beisner
Images of Israel by Michelle Mart
The 1953 East German Uprising by Valur Ingimundarson
Japan and the West Revisited by Laura E. Hein

A Roundtable Review: McNamara's In Retrospect
The Closest of Hindsight by Marilyn B. Young
A Theological War by Tom Wicker
Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark by Noam Chomsky
A Very Subdued Confession by Edwin M. Yoder, Jr.
McNamara's Complaint by Ward Just
Vietnam and Asia by W. W. Rostow

Review Essay
Chinese-American Relations in the Early Cold War by Rosemary Foot

Feature Reviews
Guano, Bananas, and American Foreign Relations by Joseph A. Fry
The Book, the Bomb, and Stalin by Odd Arne Westad
The Trouble with U.S.-Third World Studies by H. W. Brands
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CONTENTS

Diplomatic History Volume 20, Number 3, Summer 1996

Genocide Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy, the Trujillo Regime, and the Haitian Massacre of 1937 301
by Eric Paul Roorda

Patterns of Peril: Dean Acheson Joins the Cold Warriors, 1945–46 321

By Robert L. Beisner

Tough Guys and American Cold War Policy: Images of Israel, 1948–1960 357

By Michelle Mart

The Eisenhower Administration, the Adenauer Government, and the Political Uses of the East German Uprising in 1953 381

By Valur Ingimundarson

Free-Floating Anxieties on the Pacific: Japan and the West Revisited 411

By Laura E. Hein

A ROUND TABLE REVIEW: MCNAMARA'S IN RETROSPECT

The Closest of Hindsight 440

By Marilyn B. Young

A Theological War 445

By Tom Wicker

Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark 450

By Noam Chomsky

A Very Subdued Confession 456

By Edwin M. Yoder, Jr.

McNamara’s Complaint 462

By Ward Just

Vietnam and Asia 467

By W. W. Rostow

REVIEW ESSAY

Leadership, Perceptions, and Interest: Chinese-American Relations in the Early Cold War 473

By Rosemary Foot
FEATURE REVIEWS

Constructing an Empire? Guano, Bananas, and American Foreign Relations 483
By Joseph A. Fry

The Book, the Bomb, and Stalin 491
By Odd Arne Westad

The Trouble with U.S.-Third World Studies 497
By H. W. Brands
ROBERT L. BEISNER*

Patterns of Peril:
Dean Acheson Joins the Cold Warriors, 1945–46

Undersecretary of State Dean G. Acheson was not among those urging the new president in April 1945 to discard FDR’s velvet glove for handling the troublesome Russians. Acheson would eventually be about as fierce as they come in adopting a hard-line view of the Cold War; historians are mistaken, however, in thinking of him as one of the first Cold Warriors. Instead, as World War II came to a close, he was close to FDR’s circumspectly optimistic view about future U.S.-Soviet relations. Cold War historiography provides little insight into when and why Acheson moved from believing that conventional diplomacy could contend with U.S.-Soviet friction points to opposing virtually any negotiations with Moscow during his tenure as secretary of state in 1949–1953. When did this change occur? How much earlier or later than other key U.S. officials did Acheson join the ranks of those who thought the United States was engaged in a new kind of war? The general period of his shift is easy to isolate: between the end of the war in August 1945, when Acheson still hoped for an era of U.S.-Soviet cooperation, and the Greek-Turkish crisis of February 1947, at which time his hard-line leadership was manifest. When in the interregnum did he switch—and why?

The answer is important because in the fall of 1945 Acheson, appointed undersecretary of state in August, began gaining Truman’s trust and shaping a policy relationship that deepened during constant visits to the Oval Office while Secretaries of State James F. Byrnes and George C. Marshall

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*I want to acknowledge here the helpful critiques offered on earlier drafts of this article by Walter LaFeber, Melvyn P. Leffler, Anna K. Nelson, Arnold A. Offner, and anonymous readers for *Diplomatic History*, none of whom, however, are responsible for its contents. I also want to thank Dianne Schaefer for invaluable help in researching the *New York Times*. Though not focusing on the issue, Warren I. Cohen is one of the few historians explicitly recognizing the pacing of Acheson’s move toward hard-line anti-Soviet views: “Acheson, who had not allowed his contempt for communism to cloud his vision, who had persistently been able to understand how the Soviets might view things from their presumably warped perspective, who had been willing always to concede Soviet security requirements, concluded [in the summer and fall of 1946] that Soviet demands in the Middle East were unreasonable—and they would have to be resisted.” Cohen, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Vol. 4, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991* (New York, 1993), 33.
traveled abroad to postwar conferences. More than any other person in the Truman era, Acheson would figure out how to translate tough Cold War viewpoints into policy action. Though a pragmatist in day-to-day operations, when confronted with large issues, Acheson responded with large strategies. His intellectual powers and persuasive abilities outmatched those of other men charged with running U.S. foreign and national security policy for the president. His penchant for generalization and synthesis was formidable. Once convinced, therefore, that the Soviet Union represented a major and unconventional threat to U.S. interests, he would act as far as his power allowed to apply systematic countermeasures, from Europe to Asia, from forming alliances to shaping military policy. Truman trusted Dean Acheson and often followed his counsel to the letter. Thus, Acheson was in a position to generate and maintain anti-Soviet policies in a way that helped turn the Cold War into a deep freeze. His shift in attitude was a principal step in the early history of the Cold War.

Acheson was not among the ardent admirers of the Soviets in the World War II State Department, but they did not frighten him, either. While negotiating Washington's lend-lease deals with the USSR as assistant secretary of state for economic affairs, he saw Soviet diplomats as "clumsy and difficult," with "no flexibility, no feel for the possible." But he did not identify their state as the enemy—it was an ally. Once an allied victory seemed likely, he began thinking seriously about the era to follow. He did not worry about a particular enemy in the postwar period, and certainly not the USSR. What was more likely to endanger U.S. strategic interests, as he saw them in December 1943, were instability and disorder, perhaps borne of too-rapid democratization of authoritarian regimes, idealistic American initiatives to transform European colonies, possibly even a new round of traditional colonialist competition.

As the State Department's top representative at the Bretton Woods conference on postwar economic issues from July to mid-September 1944, Acheson talked lengthily with the Russian team about dispensing postwar aid to the USSR through lend-lease. "Firm" in representing U.S. views, he was "gentle" in trying to make the Soviets realistic about the prospects. (Nothing came of these talks.) He supported Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., in permitting the USSR to enjoy heavy drawing rights in the International Monetary Fund and the third largest voting power in its operations. He was skeptical, however, of the treasury dogma that the postwar international system could adapt to the USSR's state-run economy.

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1. Byrnes spent 350 of his 562 days as secretary of state out of the country. I have not run into a numerical account of Marshall's absences from Washington, but they were frequent, and extended, as well.

and thought Morgenthau had been “too generous” to Moscow on the IMF. Soviet specialist Elbridge Durrow, one of Acheson’s assistants, later stated that Bretton Woods signaled the end of hopes for postwar cooperation with Moscow and that Acheson too, though making “fine efforts” to get along with the Russians, “saw the writing on the wall.” Durrow undoubtedly witnessed some irritation with Soviet conduct, but Acheson was then a long way from giving up on postwar cooperation between the American and Soviet republics.

At the conference itself and later in congressional testimony defending the Bretton Woods agreements, Acheson identified not the USSR but social and economic problems left over from the 1930s and new issues generated by the war as the likely engines of international disorder. In a dispatch sent Christmas Day 1944 he warned of an unwitting U.S.-USSR conflict arising from a failure in European economic recovery, which would result in “idleness, the most meagre existence, frustration. With these have come and will come agitation and unrest. With them also come arbitrary and absolutist controls. Then follows the overthrow of governments with rival aspirants for the succession from the right and the left. And with this comes also dissonance among the great powers, with one backing one faction; and another, another faction.” Whether a future of stability lay ahead depended particularly on the ability of European nations to recover economically without resuming shortsighted commercial warfare or succumbing to social pathology induced by war and Nazi occupation. In March 1945 testimony before the House Banking and Currency Committee, he candidly discussed postwar challenges without a hint that they might originate with Soviet behavior. In February he had remarked on the need to “prevent war” by keeping the “purposes and policies of the great powers” compatible. In a 24 February radio broadcast he expounded lengthily on recent international events, particularly the just completed Big Three meeting at Yalta and the conclusion of the Dumbarton Oaks talks establishing the United Nations. Not one shadow of suspicion toward the Soviet Union darkened his upbeat and FDR-like summary. He cheerfully dismissed accusations that Poland “had been sold down the river,” calling plans for Soviet-run Polish elections “fair and reasonable.” Everything done at Yalta, he remarked, was “in complete harmony with American opinion.”


By the time FDR died, one foreign service veteran recalled, the European desk officers at the State Department had become “bitterly anti-Communist.” These worriers, however, failed to sway Acheson; in the spring of 1945 he had not yet identified the USSR as an adversary of the United States. As delegations of Jeremiahs descended on the new president with anti-Soviet warnings, Acheson reacted noncommittally—perhaps nervously. Chief among them was his old rowing coach and fellow student at Groton, W. Averell Harriman, who had argued as early as March 1943 that “we will build trouble for the future if we allow ourselves to be kicked around by the Russians” and now pressed that view on Truman. In a 12 May 1945 letter to his daughter, Acheson described his friend as “ferocious about the Rouskis,” an attitude he described ambiguously as “OK for those who can handle it but dangerous medicine for those who want to be ineffectively anti-Russian.” Agreeing that the Russians were “behaving badly and running out on Agreements and attempting to dominate Europe and elsewhere” and favoring “a policy of firmness,” he nonetheless intimated discomfort with Harriman’s eagerness to use “any stick to beat them with.”

On his appointment as undersecretary of state, the New York Times saw Acheson as a “proponent of close cooperation with Russia and Great Britain.” His behavior supported this view, or at least the view that the powers could find common interests around which to unite. In September he urged the worried Harriman to support more generous aid to Russia from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration: The USSR had made “greater physical sacrifice, suffered more devastation, and lowered her already low standard of living below that of any repeat any European nations.” In December, Acheson urged offering most-favored-nation status to Moscow, and the State Department overruled Harriman’s objections, determining also to seek a Soviet role in the proposed new International Trade Organization. In an address that same month he emphasized Soviet and American likeness—in size, resources, capacity to give their peoples a good life—and concluded that neither nation required war to accomplish its goals. In another speech on 3 January 1946, Acheson declared: “It is absolutely unthinkable that we should fight Russia. It would destroy both of us

Explanation (Princeton, 1985), 216. New York Times, 25 February 1945. Of course, as both Democratic internationalists and Republican critics would soon learn, Roosevelt had in some cases shared the results of his confidential talks with Churchill and (especially) Stalin with virtually no one else, particularly not in the State Department.


and would be the end of the road.” He worried about festering East-West disputes over Germany as a harbinger to a divided Europe, to which he was then unreconciled. On 20 January 1946 he fretted about creating the impression that the “U.S. and UK are forming [a] bloc in [the] Middle East opposed to the Soviet Union.” During a U.S.-Soviet confrontation in March, he agreed on the need to get Soviet forces withdrawn from Iran but wanted to find a way that permitted a graceful departure. In May he was reassuring Moscow’s representatives that the Export-Import Bank was ready to act positively on a $1 billion loan to the USSR. As late as August 1946, when the White House asked for a memorandum on Soviet violations of past agreements in preparation of the “Clifford-Elsey Report” of 24 September 1946—a notoriously ideological and even fanatical statement on the Soviet threat to the United States—Acheson’s response was mild, philosophic, and lawyerlike: “Much of the difficulty regarding the implementation of agreements to which the United States and the USSR are signatories results from the divergence of objective with which the two countries approach postwar problems. As a result, many of the acts of the Soviet Government appear to the United States Government to be violations of the spirit of an international agreement although it is difficult to adduce acceptable evidence of literal violations.”

By January 1947, however, Acheson was marching resolutely in the vanguard of the anti-Soviet ranks. His own explanation of the change, offered in his memoirs, is both excessively and inadequately precise. “Stalin’s offensive against the United States and the West,” he wrote, “announced in his speech of February 9, 1946, had begun in Poland in 1945 and would reach its crescendo in Korea and the ‘hate America’ campaign of the early 1950s. This was the start of the ‘cold war.’ ” Another retrospective, if indirect, explanation, much closer in time to the events described, appears in a 5 February 1954 letter to Truman identifying the dispersal of American military power in 1945–46 as Washington’s greatest postwar error. Alluding to wartime discussions held by Henry Wallace and Patrick Hurley with Stalin, Acheson concludes that the Soviet leader then believed Washington would not “permit him to adopt any other [than a cooperative] course and then we had the power to make our will effective without the necessity of using the power.” After the U.S. demobilization that followed, Acheson


wondered “how much . . . Stalin change[d] his plans about China and Korea when, to what must have been his utter amazement our army, navy and air force simply melted away.” Thus he explains his own change of view and justifies its timing. All along, he implies, his views accurately registered Soviet behavior, which changed. As long as American military power remained an element to contend with, Soviet conduct was acceptable; it became unacceptable and “aggressive” after U.S. demobilization: Consequently, there was the Acheson of mild views toward the USSR in 1945 and part of 1946, and then the new Cold Warrior.

Contemporary documents offer better evidence for his change, which occurred gradually, though with a sharp, decisive turn in August and September 1946. As the quotation from Acheson’s memoirs suggests, the change began in 1945, though not in Poland, with which he was little involved. The shift was complete by the end of the summer in the following year. A vital part of the story lies in Acheson’s connection with nuclear issues, where until well into 1946 he stood conspicuously apart from the growing assemblage of anti-Soviet officials. He advocated sharing information on nuclear energy and weapons with the Soviet Union and earnestly strove to create a workable international system of weapons control through the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan. His involvement in postwar nuclear controversies is familiar to historians but requires some recapitulation to grasp how distant the Acheson of the Truman Doctrine was from the 1946 collaborator with David Lilienthal and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

The announcement of Hiroshima’s bombing horrified Acheson. “The news of the atomic bomb,” he wrote, “is the most frightening yet. If we can’t work out some sort of organization of great powers, we shall be gone geese for fair.” He quickly joined outgoing Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson in favoring the exchange of nuclear information with the USSR. His position stemmed from what he had learned about atomic technology and from his views of relations with the Russians. Atomic “secrets,” he thought, was a misnomer: Once Hiroshima demonstrated the practicability of the weapon, others need only make deductions from already understood principles of physics. Danish physicist Neils Bohr, Acheson claimed in 1957, had explained to him that the Russians would be no more than two to five years behind the Americans in developing the bomb. It was inevitable that the Russians would soon have it despite anything the Americans did.

9. Acheson, PAC, 194. Acheson to Truman, 5 February 1954, Acheson Papers, box 30, folder 392, Yale University Library. There was nothing ex post facto about Acheson’s disapproval of the demobilization. At a cabinet meeting of 11 January 1946 he described demobilization as “a matter of great embarrassment and concern to his own Department in their conduct of our foreign affairs.” Walter Millis, ed., with the collaboration of E. S. Duffield, The Forrestal Diaries (New York, 1951), 129.

10. Acheson to Mary Bundy, 6 August 1945, Acheson Papers, box 4, folder 52, Yale University Library; Acheson to John Cowles, 8 October 1957, Acheson Papers, box 6, folder 82, Yale University Library.
Consequently, a conspicuous show of "secret"-keeping would simply arouse Soviet hostility and suspicions. Greatly fearing the power of nuclear weapons from the outset, Acheson wanted to control and perhaps abolish them before setting off a dangerous nuclear arms race.

On 21 September 1945, Stimson's seventy-eighth birthday, Truman held a cabinet meeting devoted exclusively to these issues. Acheson, whom Stimson had already identified as an ally, attended in Secretary of State Byrnes's absence. Although contemporaries as well as later critics misidentified the meeting as a debate on whether to share the "bomb" with the Soviets (some participants errantly spoke as though that were the issue before them), Stimson was trying to frame a policy of cooperation with the USSR. As Acheson recalled, the secretary of war had proposed "a sharing of basic scientific data" rather than "information on the industrial processes used to manufacture atomic weapons." Stimson put his case succinctly in a memorandum to the president: U.S.-Soviet relations "may be perhaps irretrievably embittered by the way in which we approach the solution of the bomb with Russia. For if we fail to approach them now and merely continue to negotiate with them, having this weapon rather ostentatiously on our hip, their suspicions and their distrust of our purposes and motives will increase."

The old statesman led off the cabinet discussion. "Our future of world peace rests on whether or not we and the Russians can find a working pattern of understanding," he stated, according to Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal's notes. Much of the following discussion was muddled and, Acheson recalled, "unworthy of the subject." Leading the opposition was Forrestal, who saw the bomb as U.S. "property," old allies as potential enemies, and the Russians as "essentially Oriental in their thinking." Until they proved worthy of trust, Americans should not "endeavor to buy their understanding and sympathy." The two most pronounced Stimson supporters were Acheson and Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace. Although Acheson's retrospective account emphasized his moderation and desire to defer to Stimson, Forrestal's contemporary notes portray him as a vigorous supporter. Acheson, he wrote, saw "no alternative except to give full information to the Russians," though in the context of gaining "some quid pro quo in the way of a mutual exchange of information." He "could not conceive of a world in which we were hoarders of military secrets from our Allies, particularly this great Ally upon our cooperation with whom rests the future peace of the world." Wallace was even more enthusiastic, rhetorically surpassing anything uttered by Stimson. The president was noncommittal.

but seemed friendly to Stimson's views and concluded the meeting by asking interested parties to follow up their discussion with memorandums.\textsuperscript{12}

Acheson's memo arrived at the White House four days later. Described in Acheson's memoirs as "deeply influenced" by Stimson's views, it made a powerful case for them.\textsuperscript{13} It also displayed Acheson's current thinking on U.S.-Soviet relations. In the "conclusion" with which the paper opened, the undersecretary linked the two issues of "sharing" and international control: "A policy of secrecy is both futile and dangerous.\ldots The real issues involve the methods and conditions which should govern interchange of scientific knowledge and the international controls which should be sought to prevent a race toward mutual destruction." The lawyer Acheson then deployed eight "premises" in support of his conclusions. First, not only could the United States not keep the bomb "secret," but it could probably not build "effective defensive measures" against the inevitable Soviet bombs to come. Second, nuclear and weapons technology had only begun; bombs strapped to future rockets would endanger "vast areas" of the earth. Since a rocket-armed nuclear war might destroy civilization without producing a victor, "the advantage of being ahead in [an arms] race is nothing compared with not having the race." Third, Americans' "moral and political nature" would not allow the preemptive use of such weapons, leaving "the advantage of unannounced attack" to "others." Fourth, the current U.S.-British-Canadian cooperation in nuclear development surely looked to the Russians as "unanswerable evidence of an Anglo-American combination against them." Fifth, Washington must expect any great power like the Soviet Union to react badly to such a situation: "It must and will exert every energy to restore the loss of power which this discovery has produced. It will do this, if we attempt to maintain the policy of exclusion, in an atmosphere of suspicion and hostility, thereby exacerbating every present difficulty between us." Sixth, though disagreements with the USSR were mounting, he saw no reason why the "basic interests of the two nations should conflict." A relationship "based on firmness and frankness and mutual recognition of the other's basic interests seems to me impossible under a policy of Anglo-American exclusion of Russia from atomic development. If it is impossible, there will be no organized peace but only an armed truce." Seventh, relying on the United Nations to solve the nuclear issue would be folly; the United States should talk directly to the Soviet Union rather than involve fifty-some other states. Eighth, while an informed public discussion must precede acceptance of a policy of cooperation with the USSR, delaying talks with the Soviets was "untenable." "The resulting deterioration in Russian relations would\ldots adversely color our domestic discussions" and

\textsuperscript{12} Acheson, \textit{PAC}, 123-24; "Atomic Bomb," 21 September 1945, Truman Papers, President's Secretary's Files, box 193, Truman Library; Bernstein, "Quest for Security," 1018-19; Forrestal Diaries, 94-96.

\textsuperscript{13} Acheson, \textit{PAC}, 124.
prejudice the Soviets against cooperation. “It is necessary that public opinion be given an opportunity to mature at the same time that action is taken to prevent Russian fear and suspicion from increasing and crystallizing.”

Finally, Acheson made a series of recommendations to the president. The United States and Britain should approach the USSR to work out a program of “mutual exchange of scientific information and [gradual] collaboration in the development of atomic power” conditioned on a genuinely “mutual” exchange of information, on an agreement to renounce further weapons development supported by a credible inspection system, on an understanding to advance peaceful development of nuclear power, and on a formal U.S.-U.K.-USSR treaty embodying these conditions, which would be open to other nations “in due course, probably through the mechanism of the United Nations.” None of this would yet require “full collaboration” or “any disclosures” the United States had not already made. Additionally, he urged the president to keep Congress fully informed of such negotiations, hoping to dissuade legislators from advancing their own “domestic” regulations and civilian control of nuclear energy.¹⁴

After appearing to accept the memo, Truman put Acheson to work along with the White House staff preparing a special message to Congress. There were vital differences, however, between Acheson’s recommendations and the 3 October 1945 message the president delivered. Considered along with a series of presidential statements that followed, the message represents an important defeat for Acheson. First, Truman omitted Acheson’s statement stipulating the inevitability that others would match U.S. nuclear efforts “in a comparatively short time.” In referring to international discussions, the president mentioned only the United Kingdom and Canada. The speech implicitly preserved the notion of the American “secret” and—again implicitly, for he did not eliminate the possibility of talks with Moscow—maintained Anglo-American solidarity. Then, in an impromptu news conference a few days later, Truman described bomb-assembly knowledge as an American secret, adding that if the Russians “catch up with us on that, they will have to do it on their own hook, just as we did.” In an aggressive Navy Day speech on 27 October, he declared that the atomic bomb was the United States’s “sacred trust,” too valuable to share with a “lawless world.” Nearly a month later he told Congress that the best guarantee of American safety was “to remain strong in the only kind of strength an aggressor understands—military power.”¹⁵

¹⁴. “Memorandum Requested by the President. Subject: U.S. Policy Regarding Secrecy of Scientific Knowledge about Atomic Bomb and Atomic Energy,” Truman Papers, President’s Secretary’s Files, box 199.

Acheson got another chance early in 1946. After the USSR surprised Washington by endorsing creation of a UN atomic energy commission, Byrnes asked him to direct a committee that would draft an international control plan for submission to the UN. My only concern in reexamining this familiar story is the light it sheds on the timing of Acheson’s movement to a Cold War outlook. Clearly, in the first months of 1946 he had not given up the fight for nuclear cooperation. Most of the original “Acheson-Lilienthal” report was drafted over two weekends in March, led by nuclear physicist Oppenheimer and his ally Lilienthal, TVA director and future head of the Atomic Energy Commission. They proposed an International Atomic Development Authority that would own all nuclear-materials resources, have the power to license any use of such materials, conduct all research, and develop any production or other activity deemed hazardous, leaving only “peaceful” or nonhazardous activities in the control of individual nation states. Precisely to attract Soviet support, they deemphasized inspections, which they saw as resistant to accomplishment, incapable of offering foolproof protection, and profoundly intrusive to Russian leaders. Acheson agreed; the damage to international comity caused by the implicit insult represented by elaborate provisions for inspection outweighed any protection of security they could achieve. Oppenheimer, Lilienthal, Acheson, and company also opposed including sanctions against violators, lacking faith that institutional tinkering could effect international control of the atom and believing that serious violations would mean the plan’s failure in any case. On nationwide radio, Acheson explicitly sought support for the plan as a way to prevent U.S.-Soviet conflict, arguing that the current U.S. superiority in “atomic devices” was “only temporary.” “It will not last,” he added. “We must use that advantage now to promote international security and to carry out our policy of building a lasting peace through international agreement.”

This scheme was an unusually bold bureaucratic creation, put together at a time of rising U.S.-Soviet tension over Iran, sensational stories about Russian spy rings in Canada, and increasingly hostile rhetoric emanating from both Moscow and Washington. When the plan was published, right—Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford, 1992), 26–27. It is probably a mistake, however, to think of Truman as having a fixed position on the subject at this time. His remarks at a country fair in Missouri on 7 October 1945 were far from aggressive: “We can’t ever have another war, unless it is a total war, and that means the end of our civilization as we know it. We are not going to do that.” Lawrence S. Wittner, One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953 (Stanford, 1993), 249.

wing newspapers attacked it as a giveaway to the USSR. In fact, the plan’s authors had been tender in protecting U.S. interests. While the plan developed through stages, the United States could retain its nuclear weapons and presumably produce more. Even before its corruption at the hands of Bernard M. Baruch, Stalin would probably have rejected the Oppenheimer-Lilienthal-Acheson plan, for it would expose the Soviet state’s internal workings to the outside world and, more important, ban Soviet production of weapons while Washington kept its own supply. The USSR would have been “compelled to rely upon America’s good faith,” Barton J. Bernstein writes. Had Washington “chosen for its own reasons to withdraw from the plan before the last stage, the Soviet Union, by having foregone independent work on the bombs, would have been at a serious disadvantage and the United States would have preserved its nuclear monopoly for an even longer period.”

Truman and Byrnes guaranteed Soviet rejection by appointing the seventy-five-year-old Baruch to take over the plan for presentation to the United Nations as the U.S. representative on the UN’s Atomic Energy Commission. He began immediately to sharpen its edges against the Soviets. Despite Byrnes’s and Truman’s backing of the financial sage, Acheson campaigned through the spring to restore the plan’s original intent. Over his objections—by May he seemed “deeply depressed”—Baruch added “automatic” punishments for any state violating the International Atomic Development Authority’s rules and a ban on using the Security Council veto to escape discipline. In a meeting between the Acheson-Lilienthal and Baruch groups on 17 May 1946, Acheson argued strenuously against penalties and the waiver of the Security Council veto. Fiddling with international machinery, he argued, could not resolve vital differences between Great Powers, as seen in the very nature of the United Nations itself. Nor could the threat of punishments provide America with perfect security, which was an illusion in any case. Acheson lost the argument. Attempts at cooperation continued between the groups, but mutual distrust prevailed. Early in June, Acheson and his allies in the State Department were still deleting references to crimes and penalties from the document that would officially guide Baruch in the United Nations. On 6 June, Baruch staged a showdown, telling Byrnes that the administration had to choose between what his and Acheson’s groups wanted; Truman caved in to Baruch’s every demand the next day.

Thus was born the "Baruch Plan," presented a week later to the United Nations, where it would languish and die in the face of the determined opposition of the Russians, who demanded that limits on atomic controls be linked with general disarmament and that all manufacture and deployment of nuclear weapons must precede establishment of international controls. In his State Department memoirs, Acheson explained his opposition to Baruch's terms for "swift and sure" or "condign" punishment of violators. These "were very dangerous words that added nothing to a treaty and were almost certain to wreck any possibility of Russian acceptance of one." Moscow would interpret them as "an attempt to turn the United Nations into an alliance to support a United States war against the USSR unless it ceased its efforts" to develop nuclear weapons. Since anything like "swift and sure" sanctions against wrongdoers meant a threat of war, it was utterly implausible that the same Great Powers that had barely managed agreement on the terms for the UN would now drop the vital provision making that agreement possible, the Security Council veto.19

Thus, Acheson suffered defeat on both sharing nuclear information and international control. Considering that these defeats occurred when a growing number of other officials were (sometimes noisily) giving up on cooperation with the Soviet Union, the lessons or morals Acheson drew from the experience would be important. Unfortunately, he left no direct testimony on the matter. We can try getting at how he reacted to both the defeats and the growing Cold War consensus in Washington by asking a question of our own. Did Acheson, an ambitious man, one frequently in daily contact with the president, worry that his standing and future prospects might be in jeopardy if he persisted in an apparent rearguard resistance to the prevalent tide of opinion within the government? In this form, the question errs in implying that Acheson might have switched his views exclusively out of bureaucratic or careerist self-interest. But the question does suggest issues and circumstances requiring examination in assessing why Acheson became such a stout Cold Warrior. We can move closer to some answers by looking at the record on other issues.

What does it show? First a word about the official Acheson record. As second in command to an often absent secretary of state, he necessarily watched daily cable traffic on events all over the world. All kinds of messages to U.S. diplomats—instructions, replies, general circulars—radiated from Washington, frequently signed "ACHESON" as acting secretary of state. In one form or another these messages attached his name to "positions" on virtually every issue and new problem demanding Washington's attention. Since subordinates, however, often drafted the "ACHESON" messages, how much do they tell us about his views? Acheson's hands-on

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19. Acheson, PAC, 155. None of the United States's allies supported Baruch's arguments on the veto when he presented the plan in the UN.
modus operandi in the department, his habit of personally consulting the
desk officers who first saw incoming cables and drafted responses, suggests
the difficulty in ignoring any “ACHESON” dispatches. On the other hand,
close examination reveals that “ACHESON” is often tagged to cables on
subjects to which their putative author never returned. Either the subject
matter was uncontroversial or Acheson was simply signing something writ-
ten for him. The documents that best reveal his evolution toward a hard-
line view of the Soviet Union are on subjects he pursued through assertive,
sometimes even aggressive, action within the federal bureaucracy.

Some of this evidence makes abundantly clear that even his “Roose-
veltian” phase never reflected a sentimental attitude toward the Soviet
Union or anything like a careless regard for U.S. interests, as he understood
them. An example was his reaction in September 1945 when the new
government in Czechoslovakia, where U.S. and Soviet troops had met at
war’s end, asked the Americans to withdraw theirs. The U.S. Army, short
of men for occupation duty in Germany, was agreeable; but Acheson inter-
vened to prevent a unilateral withdrawal. His advice, though not expressly
hostile to Moscow, showed concern about its influence. U.S. troops, he
thought, gave “the most concrete and telling evidence of our interest in the
restoration of stable and democratic conditions” in Czechoslovakia and
would prevent creating the impression of American disinterest in the post-
war “affairs of this part of Europe.” He also implied that the presence of
U.S. troops would help produce democratic results in upcoming elections.
Following this advice, Truman proposed a mutual withdrawal to Stalin,
which occurred without incident in November.20

Historians have long identified the late 1945 confrontation in Iran as a
milestone in the early Cold War. Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and later
the United States had all sent military forces there to keep the country free
from German or pro-German control, protect oil supplies, and watch over a
lend-lease route to Russia. They had also promised to remove these military
units within six months of the end of the war. Soviet troops were scheduled to
depart at the beginning of March 1946. Washington grew concerned at evi-
dence that the Russians were using the interregnum to set up puppet Kurdish
and Azerbaijani republics in the northern reaches of the country. November
saw an uprising by pro-Soviet Azerbaijanis. In December, with Byrnes in
Moscow for a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM), Acheson,
citing 1930s “appeasement” analogies, urged him to relate Washington’s con-
cern to Stalin. Then looking for areas of compromise with the USSR, Byrnes
did not see the issue as Acheson described it in a 24 December memo: “a test
case” for “a small state victim of large state aggression.” By early March, Iran
was appealing to Byrnes for help—the Russian troops had not left as prom-

4:493 (henceforth FRUS); Gaddis Smith, Dean Acheson, Vol. 16, American Secretaries of State and
ised. On 5 March he lodged a protest with Moscow, to which the Soviets never responded, underlining Washington's fears that they were up to no good. Just then in the last stages of crafting the plan on nuclear controls, Acheson told Lilienthal that "the Russian situation . . . may disintegrate in the Middle East in the near future," giving "a note of grim reality to the whole business" of nuclear weapons. His views remained temperate, however, if hardly roseate. The United States might have difficulties with the Soviet Union for many years, but they would grow less trying with the gradual progress of "civilization" in Russia. Soviet-American problems could not be erased through arms control negotiations; and it was nonsense to try forcing internal changes in the Soviet system through intrusive inspection of its territory.21 On 18 March, Iran succeeded in placing its problems with the Soviet Union on the UN Security Council agenda, while also dispatching an emissary to the USSR in search of a resolution. With the United States standing conspicuously in Iran's corner, Moscow folded its cards and Molotov announced a general settlement and plans for prompt withdrawal of Soviet army units, which took place in April.

Though not unconcerned, Acheson seems to have viewed this episode with little trepidation. When Soviet-Iranian tensions recurred after Iran's parliament, the Majlis, reneged on forming a joint oil company with the Soviets, he interpreted Russian actions as those of a conventional Great Power, if an unreliable one, patiently giving another try at imperial advantage. In turn, the USSR Communist party newspaper Pravda described the Majlis's action as a "triumph of dollar imperialism." In September and October, U.S. concern deepened when Prime Minister Qavam, rather than rush to reestablish full control over Azerbaijan, made temporizing overtures to Moscow. Acheson instructed the U.S. ambassador to warn Qavam that trifling with the Russians could result in the loss of Iran's independence. With Byrnes's approval, the undersecretary pledged a $10 million credit and the prospect of even more aid to Tehran, now worrying less about Soviet face and more about sealing the U.S. advantage in Iran. When in November Qavam asked for new assurances of U.S. backing in the UN in case the Soviets caused more trouble, Acheson promised "unqualified support." Qavam then rid his cabinet of pro-Soviet elements and sent troops to reoccupy Azerbaijan, where the "autonomous" republic set up by the Soviets fell immediately. At a Washington dinner given by the

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Acheson joins the Cold Warriors

Iranian ambassador, Acheson promised continuing support in a toast to his host. ²²

Though there was nothing remotely “soft” about Acheson’s 1945–46 Iranian involvement, it reveals little about his transition to Cold Warrior. A crisis occurred, the United States reacted strongly, and the Soviet Union backed down: In isolation, Acheson might well have seen evidence in these events that the Soviets would listen to “reason,” thus allowing a resumption of seminormal ties. In a September 1948 speech at the War College, he hinted as much amid reflections on the general unpredictability of nations’ behavior:

I remember sitting about in the State Department when the row over Azerbaijan was going on in the United Nations. We said, “This is gallant, but it is futile. The Russians will get out of Persia, they will set up this puppet government, they will subsidize it, it will be stronger than anything else around there, and all this effort is for nothing.” After their troops moved out the Persians sent a few ill-armed troops into Azerbaijan, a half a dozen shots were fired, all the Russian puppets skipped into Russia taking the assets of the national bank with them, the whole business collapsed overnight, and the Russians did nothing about it. I would have bet a thousand to one that such a thing would not happen, and I was just as wrong as I could be. ²³

Events do not happen in isolation, however. Iran was only one of several stories developing simultaneously. Though the Iranian imbroglio first arose while Acheson was in his “cooperative” phase of policy thinking, it concluded in tandem with the crisis over neighboring Turkey that was most instrumental in his turnaround. (His strongest words and measures on Iran came during its autumn reprise.) As Acheson sent warnings on Iran to Byrnes in Moscow, in December 1945, in another development the Soviet Union allowed the deadline for ratifying the Bretton Woods agreements to lapse. This concerned Acheson, as did Byrnes’s difficulties at the Moscow conference, which officials in Washington generally attributed to a hardening of Soviet policies. Another contemporary event was the early September 1945 defection of Ivan Gouzenko, a clerk in the Soviet embassy in Ottawa. Gouzenko revealed to his Canadian and U.S. debriefers a wide-ranging Soviet espionage apparatus spread through Canada, the United

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²³. War College Speech, 16 September 1948, 26–27, Acheson Papers, box 69, Truman Library. In April 1947, he said, off the record, that “The Russians put on a supremely poor show in Persia through stupidity, avarice, and the basic unsoundness of their purpose.” “Address Made off the Record before the American Society of Newspaper Editors by the Honorable Dean Acheson, Acting Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., April 18, 1947,” 11, Acheson Papers, box 69, Truman Library.
States, and Britain, all still unknown to the public but quite familiar to Acheson at the close of 1945. For State Department official John D. “Jack” Hickerson, and others, the revelation of a Soviet spy ring in Canada was crucial in ending hopes for good relations with Moscow. But not yet for Acheson. Even as he had classified information on the Gouzenko case stuffed in his briefcase, for months Acheson worked on behalf of the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan, most passionately advocating and defending it as late as June 1946.

Events in the three and a half weeks from 9 February to 3 March 1946 transported many prominent Americans to a hard anti-Soviet line—but, again, not Acheson. On the first date mentioned, Josef Stalin made an important “election” speech in Moscow. On the latter date, Winston Churchill made his “iron curtain” speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Almost equidistant between these orations, U.S. chargé in Moscow, George F. Kennan, on 22 February sent the State Department his historic “Long Telegram.” In his memoirs, Acheson writes that the entire year 1946 was “a year of learning that minds in the Kremlin worked very much” as Kennan described in his cable. Hindsight wrote that passage, for the most crucial lesson for Acheson came in the summer, not the winter of 1946.25

Mostly a long disquisition on economics and defense of past programs, Stalin’s speech presented a justification for another series of five-year plans requiring sacrifice by Soviet workers and consumers. What particularly disturbed Americans was the dictator’s rationale—as many mistakenly read it. Although Stalin tried to argue for both the incompatibility of communist and capitalist systems (the truth of which he asserted) and the non-inevitability of imminent war between them (instead forecasting an inter-imperialist, Anglo-American conflict), many read the speech, printed in the New York Times on 10 February, as a deliberate rejection of the World War II alliance and a belligerent pronouncement of looming war with the West. The five-year plans were essential to prepare “against any eventuality.” In his 1969 memoirs, Acheson characterized Stalin’s speech as an announcement of his “offensive” against the West, which is consistent with the orthodox U.S. view of the speech. Much earlier, in September 1948, he described it as “the official rejection” of “a workable measure” of East-West cooperation, a proclamation that “the Soviet Union chose to stand upon its earlier doctrine of the incompatibility of a communist regime with any other and to seek security through the extension of Soviet power and domination.” Later writers have often treated this speech as though everyone at the time considered it deeply menacing, Truman biographer David McCullough, for example, writing: “Washington was stunned.” Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas called the

25. Acheson, PAC, 196.
speech "The Declaration of World War III." Walter Lippmann announced that the United States would now have to buckle down for a contest of power with the Russians.

Many Americans took Stalin's speech in stride, however, including Time, Newsweek, and Business Week, which described Lippmann as having "gone berserk and virtually declared war on Russia." The Washington Post editorialized that had France or Britain announced such an ambitious plan for self-sacrifice and economic growth, Americans "would have welcomed it . . . as a sign of economic health." State Department official Elbridge Durbrow wrote Byrnes and Acheson that Stalin was simply rallying his people for a hard period of "reconstruction, reconversion, and rehabilitation" and had probably not given up on the idea of "collaboration in the international field . . . as long as it appears to be in the interest of the Soviet Government." Even Truman calmly commented: "Well, you know we always have to demagogue a little, before elections." According to Paul H. Nitze, then a midlevel department official, Acheson also reacted with aplomb. When Nitze went to him with his own scarifying interpretation, Acheson told him he was "just seeing mirages." "Paul," Nitze recalls him saying, "you see hobgoblins under the bed. They aren't there. Forget it!" In later years, Acheson conveniently forgot his own initial response.

Public exposure of a large Soviet atomic spy ring in Canada broke two weeks later. Stalin's speech fresh in mind, prominent Americans began announcing their new pessimism and hostility toward the Soviets. Though still making ritualistic bows to wartime U.S.-Soviet amity, Secretary of State Byrnes, leading Republican foreign policy leaders John Foster Dulles and Senator Arthur Vandenberg, and others alerted the nation to the Soviet menace in public speeches. From the State Department's Office of European Affairs, Herbert Matthews urged Byrnes to make Stalin's speech "required reading for everyone in the Department" as "the most important


and authoritative guide to postwar Soviet policy”; it would become “the Communist and fellow-traveler Bible throughout the world.” Byrnes instead cabled George Kennan, handling the Moscow embassy in Averell Harriman’s absence, asking for his analysis.28

The result was the Long Telegram, a snapshot of Washington’s paradigm change in the winter of 1946. Virtually everyone in the government connected with foreign policy—though not Acheson—shifted toward a more combative attitude toward the Kremlin. Russian behavior once deemed acceptable or at worst bothersome now seemed provocative. Kennan’s telegram codified the paradigm change, giving handles of interpretation to officials who thus far had only vaguely sensed something amiss. Its five thousand words both chilled and thrilled diplomatic and military offices throughout Washington. Kennan described Soviet behavior as unremittingly hostile, caused by a traditional Russian fear of the outside world now overlaid with the insecurity generated by an oppressive and self-perpetuating regime still lacking popular legitimacy three decades after the Bolshevik Revolution. The USSR was more than a conventional state acting aggressively, for its leaders were impelled to seek absolute security. Marxist dogma had justified “their instinctive fear of the outside world” and “the dictatorship without which they did not know how to rule.” Kennan did not forecast imminent aggression against the West—the regime was cautious and patient as well as hostile—but a long and tough political struggle. Since Soviet hostility was at heart internal in origin and not “based on any objective analysis of [the] situation beyond Russia’s borders,” its challenge was “undoubtedly the greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced and probably the greatest it will ever have to face.” Years later, Acheson pointed to both the strengths and weaknesses of Kennan’s dispatch: “His recommendations—to be of good heart, to look to our own social and economic health, to present a good face to the world, all of which the Government was trying to do—were of no help; his historical analysis might or might not have been sound, but his predictions and warnings could not have been better. We responded to them slowly.”29 This too seems greatly influenced by hindsight; at the time, apart from letting Lilienthal read the document in early March, he gave the Long Telegram little attention.

Then came the visit to the United States of Winston Churchill, now leader of the Tory opposition. He, too, had not given up on maintaining a cooperative relationship with the USSR but was close. British officials had been quicker to take fright from the events of late 1945 and early 1946; many of the Soviet Union’s apparent challenges pointed at spheres of British

influence in the Middle East and Mediterranean basin. London also worried about the lagging recovery of Europe's economy and about how the Continent's future would play out with France demoralized, Germany shattered and sullen, and Americans restless to go home. Getting U.S. power thrown into the balance would best save the Continent from Russian power and alien ideologies and maintain Western sway beyond the Continent. Churchill would sound another warning about Soviet behavior in the hope of rallying a reprise of the Anglo-American wartime alliance. He discussed at least some of his plan with Truman before giving his speech. On the morning of its delivery, 5 March, the president told him he had read the speech and thought it would "do nothing but good."

Early in his address Churchill appealed for "a special relationship" between the United States and Britain. He was satisfied with an American nuclear monopoly. In his most memorable passage, he reported to Americans what was happening in Europe: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in the Soviet sphere and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and increasing measure of control from Moscow." He offered a prescription of action for the U.K.-U.S. partnership. "From what I have seen of our Russian friends and allies during the war," he started temperately, "I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for military weakness." Artfully linking the Soviet with the prewar Nazi threat, he warned against repeating the disastrous experiment of appeasement. Stripped of camouflage, he had branded the USSR a Hitler-like aggressor and called a nuclear-armed United States to join Britain in demanding a halt to the aggression.

American public opinion seemed to be following Kennan and Churchill; in mid-March 71 percent disapproved of Russian international policy and 60 percent believed Washington's policy was too "soft" on Moscow. Yet, though many Americans applauded Churchill's speech, neither he nor the president anticipated how much controversy it would stir. Though such public organs as the New York Times and Time endorsed Churchill's words, others jumped on the World War II hero as a warmonger gratuitously chafing tender spots in an already troubled East-West relationship. Walter Lippmann pronounced the speech an "almost catastrophic blunder." Stalin angrily denounced it as a "call to war." Lying about his previous knowledge of what Churchill would say, Truman declared in a press conference three

30. McCullough, Truman, 488.
days after the speech that Churchill could say anything he wanted in a free
country and barked “no comment” to a question about the content of the
speech. Byrnes also quickly distanced himself. The State Department had
scheduled Acheson to be the official host for a New York dinner honoring
Churchill on 15 March but pulled him from the assignment at the last
minute.\footnote{32}

Acheson’s personal reaction to the speech is something of a mystery. He
failed to mention the event in his memoirs. Byrnes was in town, so he
played no role in preparing Truman for Churchill’s visit. His absence at the
New York dinner was department ordered. In the 1970s, Asian expert John
Carter Vincent speculated that the speech “would have influenced” Ache-
son by giving him room to push his own increasingly aggressive views and
“fortified any latent tendency” toward a Cold War hard line. On the even-
ing of the speech in Washington, Acheson and his wife, Alice, hosted a
dinner where the guests included Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace,
Charles E. Bohlen from the State Department, and Australian ambassador
Richard Casey. Wallace told his diary that “it was apparent that Bohlen,
Acheson and Casey all think that the United States should run the risk of
immediate war with Russia by a very hardboiled stand and being willing to
use force if Russia should go beyond a certain point.”\footnote{33} Both Vincent’s and
Wallace’s statements are intrinsically suspect, the former as speculative and
distant from the events, Wallace’s because of his excitable bent and passion-
ate opposition to any anti-Soviet rhetoric at the time. It is certainly plausible
that Acheson joined Bohlen and Casey in “hardboiled” statements about the
USSR, but it is important to remember that precisely contemporaneous
with Stalin’s speech, Kennan’s telegram, and Churchill’s oration he was
freely spending political capital trying to create an international nuclear
control regime whose fundamental purpose was to prevent a rupture in
relations with the Soviet Union. Moreover, no contemporary evidence indi-
cates that he then favored an Anglo-American alliance against the USSR.

On the contrary. As Walt W. Rostow has shown, seven weeks after
Churchill’s manifesto, on 20 April, Acheson and Assistant Secretary for
Economic Affairs Will Clayton placed before Byrnes a major proposal (writt-
en by Rostow) for the upcoming Paris CFM, where British, French, Ameri-
can, and Soviet diplomats would try to conclude peace treaties with Nazi
allies Finland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Italy. Countering Byrnes’s
tendency to bargain with the Russians item by item, trading off a gain here
for a loss there, Acheson and Clayton urged him to propose a broad settle-
ment on the future of Germany and Austria as well as the Axis’s minor war

\footnote{32. Gaddis, \textit{The United States and the Origins of the Cold War}, 296; McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 490;
Harbutt, \textit{Iron Curtain}, 197, 218, 227.}

\footnote{33. Martin Weil, \textit{A Pretty Good Club: The Founding Fathers of the U.S. Foreign Service} (New
York, 1978), 256; Randall Bennett Woods, \textit{A Changing of the Guard: Anglo-American Relations,
1944–1946} (Chapel Hill, 1990), 299.
partners. They wanted to create a Europe united for purposes of economic reconstruction and halt consolidating an “East-West” division that would ensure constant tension between the Soviet Union and the United States and its Western European friends. To reassure the latter and caution the former, Byrnes should emphasize that, with Washington’s own interests heavily engaged there, the United States was planning on an indefinite presence in Europe. Finally, the secretary of state should propose a pan-European plan for economic recovery. Byrnes listened politely but in Paris went about his business in the incremental way he found comfortable. Meanwhile, there was a brief panic in Washington caused by rumors of an imminent Communist coup in France. Truman authorized contingency plans for armed U.S. intervention in case the worst happened, an order Acheson and State Department colleagues tried in vain to have countermanded. The possibility of an agitated resort to arms may have prompted Acheson’s renewed pressure on Byrnes in a 9 May cable to push the Rostow-Acheson-Clayton plan. The whole scheme, he wrote, revealing a more conflict-oriented motive, would “put Soviet protestations of loyalty to [the August 1945] Potsdam [agreements on Germany] to final test in order to gauge their willingness to live up to [the] substance as well as [the] letter of Potsdam and fix [the] blame for breach of Potsdam on [the] Soviets in case they fail to meet this test.”34 Byrnes carried on unfazed, but the episode shows that in April and May 1946 Acheson had not given up on a postwar European settlement that avoided a division of the Continent. It also shows, of course, that he wanted the Russians blamed should attempts at reconciliation fail. Acheson was never among the dreamier pro-Soviet advocates in Washington. (He was hardly “dreamy” about anything.) Throughout, his outlook remained that of a “realist” protecting his current conception of American interests. Significantly, well into mid-1946 he failed to see Soviet actions or behavior as seriously threatening those interests.

The diplomats in Paris struggled for weeks, recessed, and tried again without success. Finally in a New York conference at the end of the year, they settled the peace treaties with the Nazi satellite states—but not Germany or Austria. American frustration had mounted in the meantime. On 3 May 1946, General Lucius D. Clay, head of U.S. occupation forces in Germany, abruptly announced that the three western sectors of Germany would no longer deliver reparations material from their zones to the Soviets,

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a key marker in the path toward a permanent division of Germany. Senator Vandenberg, on the U.S. delegation in Paris, returned home in July reporting “appalling disagreement” over Germany and “intense suspicions” between the USSR and Western powers.  

As diplomats struggled vainly for agreement in Paris, Acheson in early June told an audience at home that the effort to reach an accommodation with the USSR against a background of “confusion, hesitation and disintegration” would be “hard” for Americans. “We are in for it,” he warned. Offering a generic admonition of the trying times ahead rather than attacking the Soviets, on 11 June at Bryn Mawr (with his graduating daughter-in-law in attendance), he complained that changing conditions had robbed policymakers of the time needed to make good decisions. Relying on trial and error could now be a fatal luxury, as it was in the thirties. The “atomic bomb, guided missiles, and biological warfare” were the “instruments by which external pressure had deprived us of time.” Americans, he concluded, would have to forgo pursuing individual agendas and become “more competent, more disciplined and more absorbed in [their] common interests.”

In August, while the wrangling in Paris continued, a Soviet-Turkish conflict arose that finally pushed Acheson over the edge, ending his patient attempts at U.S.-Soviet cooperation. Sparking the crisis was Moscow’s note to Ankara of 7 August. Having previously denounced its existing treaties with Turkey in March 1945 and hinted at territorial claims, Moscow now insisted that security of the approaches to the Black Sea required joint defense of the Dardanelles and Turkish Straits. U.S. diplomatic and defense officials may have exaggerated the seriousness of this threat, or the determination of the Soviets to carry it out, but 1970s and 1980s reminiscences of Stalin’s foreign minister, while possibly inaccurate in detail, confirm existence of some level of threat. Molotov recalled that immediately after the war Moscow had mentioned sharing control over the Dardanelles with Turkey, gaining no support from its wartime allies. Traditionally tempting to the Russians, the straits remained a matter of interest (in part because of pressure from Soviet Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians), as did the possibility of inveigling strips of territory from Turkey. Pressure on Turkey resumed in 1946. Although Molotov said that Stalin wanted to accomplish his goals “legally, through the UN,” he shifted quickly to peremptory demands when that proved unavailing. Now “puffed up a bit . . . Stalin said, ‘Go ahead, press them for joint possession!’ Me: ‘They won’t allow it.’ ‘Demand it!’ ” Carrying out orders, Molotov applied pressures and made demands he described in 1978 as “inopportune, impossible,” throwing a “bad scare” into the Turks that would have resulted in a punishing Anglo-

35. McCullough, _Truman_, 508.
American war against Moscow had the Kremlin not relented. "It was good that we backed down in time," he recalled.37

The August rumblings over Turkey coincided with another crisis in the making when Communist Yugoslavia forced a U.S. plane down over its territory. Taking the lead in a State-War-Navy meeting he called as acting secretary, Acheson and his fellow conferees on 14 August assembled recommendations for the president. Significantly, his analysis now rested on a broad geopolitical interpretation of Soviet conduct. Only Turkey could block a Russian move to dominate the eastern Mediterranean and reach for power in Africa. "For global reasons," the United States must act to protect Turkey or face the prospect of seeing "other bulwarks in Western Europe and the Far East begin crumbling at a fast rate." The "only real deterrent to Soviet plans for engulfing Turkey and the Middle East will be the conviction that the pursuance of such a policy will result in a war with the United States."

On 15 August, the same day he demanded in an "ultimatum" that Belgrade disclaim its action and within forty-eight hours release the U.S. crew members (which it did), Acheson and the military chiefs went to the White House with their recommendations. Working from a memorandum prepared by Loy W. Henderson of the department's near eastern affairs bureau, Acheson, Forrestal, and others urged the toughest actions to date in the Cold War. Participants in the discussion thought war was a real possibility; Acheson was ready to face it. Soviet demands, which "reflected a desire to control and dominate" Turkey, were intended to introduce a Soviet naval base in the Black Sea Straits. If the Russians were not stopped, Acheson told Truman, they would pose a danger to "the whole Near and Middle East." Turkey, Greece, the whole area might fall "under Soviet control" and be "cut off from the Western world." Then the USSR, "from the point of view of resources, including oil, and from the point of view of communications, [would] be in a much stronger position to obtain its objectives in India and China." At one point Acheson called the Soviet action a "trial balloon" but insisted on shooting it down, fully realizing "that if Russia did not back down and we maintained our attitude it might lead to armed conflict." The time "has come," he continued, "when we must decide that we shall resist by all means at our disposal any Soviet aggression." He urged sending a firm, serious, but restrained note to the Russians and dispatching a strong naval task force to the region. Truman swiftly agreed, remarking: "We might as well find out whether the Russians were bent on world conquest


now as in five or ten years.” Acheson cabled Byrnes in Paris that the president was ready to take the issue “to the end”; with Byrnes’s assent, the State Department began drafting messages to both Turkey and the Soviet Union. On the 16th Acheson briefed the press on the “crisis”; the next day the department sent a note to Ankara (published on the 21st) advising the Turks to hold on, and on the 19th Acheson handed a note to the Soviet chargé stating “the firm opinion of this Government that Turkey should continue to be primarily responsible for the defense of the Straits.” Whatever its intentions, or hopes, Moscow retreated in the face of this show of will and power, and nothing more was heard of the straits controversy.39

Thus disappeared the Acheson who fought against unilateralism on nuclear development and chided Paul Nitze for his apprehension at Stalin’s election speech. In his place is the figure most familiar to historians: profoundly suspicious of the Soviet Union, tough as nails in policy prescriptions, and quick to interpret particular events within sweeping strategic formulations. The timing of the change is easier to demonstrate than the cause. Why he shifted at this date cannot be conclusively determined, but we can explore some possibilities.

Deborah Welch Larson suggests that Acheson may have experienced a strategic epiphany when he grasped the Pentagon’s argument that fortifying the straits was not enough to defend Russia against air or sea attacks (control over approaches far distant from the straits would be necessary, in the Joint Chiefs’ view, for effective defense of the straits), thus exposing Moscow’s real intention as that of preparing the way for domination of Turkey.40 This point is less persuasive than her view that a freshly acute geopolitical perspective caused Acheson to look at Soviet actions in a new light, which still leaves one wondering why this issue or event as opposed to others suddenly played such a role in Acheson’s evolution. Molotov’s reminiscences are a reminder that the straits issue was hardly a novelty in 1946; neither was the U.S. military’s concern about the region. If Acheson had previously given attention to the matter, he had made little of it. Previous immersion in the Iranian question would alert him to the region’s significance—and its instability. So would growing problems in Greece, which had drawn his notice as early as January 1946. Critical of Byrnes’s extravagant pragmatism, Acheson himself had been looking at cases as they appeared one by one. Now he took a broader view. The juxtaposition of Turkey, Yugoslavia, Iran, and Greece highlighted the straits’ interlocked connections with the Mediterranean, North Africa, Middle East, and points even farther east. Trouble over

Turkey, therefore, signified not another isolated probe but a grand Soviet strategy, dangerous to the West unless frustrated.\textsuperscript{41} Thanks to the precipitate U.S. demobilization so deplored by Acheson, Moscow's initiative came when Washington was nearly powerless to act militarily. If the Soviets did shift from probing and complaining to a serious campaign of expansion—or if they had been doing so all along, undetected by Acheson—then genuine danger lay ahead. Where Acheson before had seen unrelated dots on a canvas, he now saw patterns of peril.

His memoirs (if retrospectively) capture his sudden sight of interrelated events once seen as distinct. In one paragraph he links Turkey and Yugoslavia with Greece, where he portrays the USSR “simultaneously” conspiring against the government. The language of his discussion of the August 1946 Turkish affair is that of someone making out the general picture intimated by the dots, tracing them along a line pointing directly to the Kremlin and a Soviet strategic plan: “The Russian offensive moved to the northern border of Greece, the eastern provinces of Turkey, and northern Iran. The autumn would witness Soviet fire increasingly concentrated there.”\textsuperscript{42} In the 25 August 1946 \textit{New York Times}, James Reston detected Acheson’s movement. Noting that he had previously held for “a liberal policy” toward the Soviet Union without being “doctrinaire” about it, Reston wrote that “when the facts seemed to [Acheson] to merit a change—as he seems to think they now do in the case of the Soviet Union—he switched with the facts.” Reporters believe in facts. Acheson would have said that facts alone are indeterminate, that all he had now done was see them from a different angle.\textsuperscript{43} As we have

\begin{footnotes}
\item[41.] Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War.” In “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–48,” \textit{American Historical Review} 89 (April 1984): 366, Leffler notes that the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 1946 had already declared that Moscow’s goal was that of “world domination.” Acheson, \textit{PAC}, 195. Larson, \textit{Origins of Containment}, 280, 283–84. By November in a dispatch to the U.S. ambassador he was describing Turkey as “the stopper in the neck of the bottle through which Soviet political and military influence could most effectively flow into the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.” Pach, \textit{Arming the Free World}, 100.

\item[42.] Acheson, \textit{PAC}, 196 (emphasis added). In 1949 he told Turkey’s foreign minister that Truman considered the U.S. intervention on Turkey in August 1946 “the most important decision he had made subsequent to the bombing of Hiroshima.” Kuniholm, “Loy Henderson,” 92.

\item[43.] Late in life, in a television interview with Eric Sevareid, he asked: “What are the facts? Nobody knows what the facts are. The facts are really a matter of interpretation of a very limited segment of data that one gets. If you add more data the interpretation would be different. But what the true data are nobody knows. The poet says things are not what they seem. The great trouble is sometimes they are what they seem. The question is are they or aren’t they what they seem? This is inherent in the problem. This is what makes government, especially foreign affairs, an art and not a science.” \textit{Conversations with Eric Severeid} (Washington, 1976), 72. An example of the kind of “facts” produced through “intelligence” gathering that might possibly have influenced him was the American journalist Richard C. Hottelet’s account of an 18 June 1946 conversation with Soviet deputy foreign minister Maxim Litvinov, who told him that growing Soviet-American tensions stemmed from his own government’s “false conception of security, prompted by the belief that war with the West was inevitable.” Resis, \textit{Molotov Remembers}, 6, 67–68. The staff of the Harry S. Truman Library can find no record in either
\end{footnotes}
seen, glimpses of Acheson as Cold Warrior had appeared at scattered moments before August 1946. After that date, the advocate of forging conciliatory links with the USSR vanishes, never to return. Mindful of how Acheson’s switch might have significance well beyond one man’s stance, Reston observed that until the moment of the Turkish crisis the undersecretary had “not become identified with any of the doctrinaire groups in the department, but [had] managed to retain the esteem of them all.”

Acheson’s shift did not mean he sought armed conflict with the Soviets. Demonstrating a will to risk a contest of arms, he thought, would render war itself unnecessary. In fact, speaking softly during tense moments was particularly important; ten months after the Turkish affair he told Lilienthal that “the way to impress the Russian political mind is to understate what we are doing. The thing to do is to go ahead and do things and say little.” Consequently, even as he moved toward a Cold Warrior’s stance, he urged the use of restraint in playing out the Turkish affair. Truman ostentatiously left for an eighteen-day cruise on 16 August. On the 20th, a day after the U.S. note to the Soviets, Acheson deemphasized the importance of the affair in a discussion with Britain’s ambassador, hoping to dispel fears London might have that Washington really believed war likely. “If we thoroughly appreciated the seriousness of the step which we were taking,” he told Lord Inverchapel, we should “conduct ourselves with restraint and seriousness, doing everything in our power to bring about a peaceful solution of the matter, and that this attitude would of itself be communicated by our very action to the Soviet Union.” Finally, while the U.S. Navy made a few pertinent moves in the Mediterranean to support Washington’s diplomatic resolve, none was remotely threatening; notably, it sent no ships to the straits or any Turkish port, suggesting self-restraint as well as confidence that the Soviet Union would not react aggressively.

Moving toward a more anti-Soviet diplomatic position seated Acheson tightly within the growing American Cold War consensus, and into synchronous orbit with Truman. In February 1947, U.S. News and World Report offered an ungenerous interpretation of Acheson’s new diplomatic stance. “In the postwar situation,” the magazine stated, “Mr. Acheson, who is considered highly susceptible to liberal opinion, urged a liberal, friendly approach to Russia. As events developed, doubts grew, and perhaps he...”

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Truman’s or Acheson’s papers indicating that either man was briefed on Hotteletr’s information. Raymond H. Geselbrecht to the author, 2 February 1994. Even if Acheson had been briefed on Litvinov’s utterances, it seems unlikely that they would have profoundly altered his views: His own observation of a nation’s behavior was always more important to him, as were the views of intelligent “general practitioners” of diplomacy or politics, than information from “intelligence” sources.


Acheson joined the Cold Warriors: remembered his experience in the Treasury [in 1933]. At any rate, when policy toward Russia changed to one of firmness, Acheson swung with it. This is too cynical by half considering Acheson's lifelong willingness to defy conventional opinion. It also miscasts Acheson as a marginal rather than central actor in the change to which the article referred.

But we must again consider the role of political expediency. Though no document so proves, Acheson must have felt the cold drafts of fear and anti-Soviet feeling blowing through Washington—and the White House. His refusal in 1950 to "turn [his] back" on Alger Hiss may suggest otherwise, but Acheson's political traits were not lemminglike. Caught in the middle, in December 1945 he had relayed messages of a chief executive increasingly furious with Byrnes for moving beyond Truman's policy reach and, specifically, "babying" the Soviets at the December 1945 CFM in Moscow. Acheson may not always have agreed with his boss, but for all the years he served Truman he assiduously kept him closely informed of everything he was doing. Despite his phlegmatic responses to Stalin's election speech and Kennan's telegram, by August 1946 he had to be acutely aware that Truman's own tentativeness about the Russians was fast changing to a rigid opposition. Refusing to get in rhythm with the president would have left Acheson either out of the loop or out of a job. Only days before the Soviet diplomatic note on Turkey, the president had issued the order resulting in the Clifford-Elsey report. Though Acheson had responded calmly to queries from its authors about Soviet misbehavior, he surely noted signs of growing anti-Soviet hostility in the White House. Six weeks after the Soviet note, Truman (pushed by Byrnes in an ironic turnabout) fired Henry Wallace for challenging the new direction of U.S. policy. At the time, Acheson was casting for trout in the Canadian Rockies, but the rolling of Wallace's head rumbled over long distances.

Suggesting that Acheson's position vis-à-vis Truman's was a factor in converting to a tougher view of the Soviets is not to say that mere expediency was responsible, which would underestimate both the man and the situation's complexity. The president's own jettisoning of a middle-road view expedited Acheson's transition without causing it. For months, both men had been torn on how to view Soviet behavior, which was common in Washington in 1945 and 1946. What distinguished Acheson from others was the late date of his "switch" and the rationalistic way he went about it. There had always been, as we have seen, the potential of the Cold Warrior in Acheson, even as he sought acceptably decent U.S.-Soviet relations. In November 1945 he had offended pro-Soviet Americans with a speech before the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship at Madison Square Garden. Byrnes instructed

46. Quoted in Weil, A Pretty Good Club, 258. The allusion to 1933 concerns the fight between FDR and Acheson, then undersecretary of the treasury, over U.S. currency policy, a conflict resulting in the latter's resignation.

47. Acheson, PAC, 360, 191–92.
him to give the speech in his stead, and several hands in the State Department, including Acheson, worked on the text. The Garden, he later recalled, was “packed,” the audience “vociferous” as it heard messages of greeting from Secretary of War Robert Patterson, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Admiral Ernest J. King, and President Truman himself. The “mass meeting,” called to celebrate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the founding of the USSR and twelfth of U.S.-Soviet diplomatic relations, in turn sent greetings to Josef Stalin. Before Acheson’s speech came crowd-warmers by the Soviet chargé, Russophile former ambassador to Moscow Joseph E. Davies, Hewlett Johnson (the “Red” Dean of Canterbury), and radical African American singer Paul Robeson. All rang the changes on the Soviets’ noble wartime sacrifices, the USSR’s progressive world goals, and Washington’s duty to help it rebuild from Nazi destruction. Acheson rose to speak, according to his memoirs, feeling “like a bartender announcing that the last drink before closing time would be cambric tea.” Much that he said was closer to the prevailing mood than he wished to remember. His talk revolved around factors working for or against U.S.-Soviet “friendship” beginning with the former. The two nations had long had close ties despite differences in their ways of life. He portrayed the period of U.S. nonrecognition from 1917 to 1933 as regrettable. The basis of historic U.S.-Russian amity was the absence of territorial conflicts, which was unlikely to change. Expressing his own sympathy for the Soviet experience in the war, he defined “the paramount interest, the only conceivable hope of both nations” as “the cooperative enterprise of peace.”

In a section drafted personally, he then considered obstacles to friendship. He understood the Soviet Union’s insistence on having “friendly” nations on its borders but remarked that Moscow must respect the rights of other nations too. Pointedly referring to events in Eastern Europe, he described Washington’s belief that the “adjustment of interests” between the USSR and its neighbors “should take place short of the point where persuasion and firmness become coercion, where a knock on the door at night strikes terror into men and women.” The United States, too, sought security through distancing itself from danger (suggesting a parallel between Soviet and U.S. needs), and he believed friendly solutions of disagreements between these two great states were possible: being willing to compromise and seeking peace through the United Nations and other collective means rather than unilateral measures. The “best and surest foundations of friendship” lay in the “principles of restraint and moderation and patience and respect for the dignity and integrity of nations and individuals.” There was a particular need, he said, for more understanding between the United States and Soviet Union, nourished by people-to-people contact. Implicitly condemning Soviet repression, he described such contact as available only through “the lines of communication[,] though the press and the radio, through books and magazines, through the exchange of knowledge and culture, and through travel and personal acquaintance.” Acheson’s perora-
tion, he recalls, met "boos and catcalls": "We have so much to learn and, what is more difficult, to understand about each other that we cannot hope to succeed except in the spacious atmosphere of honesty, candor and knowledge. Only in that atmosphere can we keep our minds and emotions on an even keel and avoid the pitfalls of overoptimism on the one side and despair on the other. Both are equally dangerous and equally unjustified." "When I finished," Acheson wrote, "protest drowned out even polite applause." Escorted from the Garden by a police officer, he escaped to a friend's house for a "quiet scotch." In retrospect, he believed that he had shown his "colors," but those "who took their red straight, without a chaser of white and blue, were not mollified."48

The Madison Square Garden speech may have been the most important rhetorical harbinger of Acheson's later metamorphosis, but he hinted at his Cold War potential several times before August 1946. Though not influential on German and Japanese policy at this time, he favored speedy rehabilitation over punishment, a position eventually if not originally associated with anti-Soviet views. His primary contact with Asian issues before 1949 usually occurred when acting for Byrnes, most often relaying advice drafted at lower levels. In November 1945 he rebuffed Harriman's backing of military aid to Jiang Jieshi's Chinese Nationalist regime, remarking that, "at a time when demobilization is amounting almost to disintegration, American policy must be based upon understanding and agreement rather than mere military force." These views may uniquely reflect Acheson's disdain for Jiang, which long survived his acceptance of Cold War opposition to the Soviets. Otherwise, as early as the spring of 1946 he appeared to hold some suggestively Cold-Warriorish views on Asian issues. Most of these were mild enough, such as his endorsement in a 17 May 1946 news conference of another American's statement that "the United States does not favor communism in the United States or Japan," and, at the same reporters' session, his backing of General John R. Hodge in ending talks with his Soviet military counterpart in Korea. On the latter, however, Acheson said "he was not seeking a controversy" with the USSR. In July 1946 he drafted a response to a roving presidential representative seeking advice on Korea. At this time still dismissing the idea of creating a separate South Korean government, Acheson through Truman vaguely endorsed a U.S. presence in Korea until reaching success—preferably in concord with the Soviets—in building "a

48. "Address by the Honorable Dean Acheson, Under Secretary of State, at a Rally Sponsored by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, at Madison Square Garden, New York City, November 14, 1945, at 9:00 P.M., E.S.T.," Acheson Papers, box 89, Truman Library; Acheson, PAC, 130–31. Other details are in the New York Times, 15 November 1945, which does not mention any boos or catcalls. During his 1949 confirmation hearings as secretary of state, Acheson cited the speech in support of his anti-Soviet credentials but complained that he was "continually criticized" for even appearing at such a gathering. Nomination of Dean G. Acheson: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 81st Cong., 1st sess., 13 January 1949, 22–23, Acheson Papers, box 61, Truman Library.
self-governing and democratic Korea, neither subservient to nor menacing any power."

These remarks on Japan and Korea reveal little about Acheson’s personal views and seem compatible with his struggles for the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan. In contrast, four months after the Turkish affray a much tougher sounding Acheson—and Washington government—reacted to the fighting that had broken out between guerrillas and French forces in Indochina. On 5 December Acheson cabled the department’s most recent thinking to a State Department official visiting the area: “Keep in mind [Ho Chi Minh’s] clear record as agent international communism, absence evidence recantation Moscow affiliations, confused political situation France and support Ho receiving French Communist Party. Least desirable eventuality would be establishment Communist-dominated, Moscow-oriented state Indochina in view Dept.”

Two and a half weeks later he told the French ambassador of the United States’s “deep concern” about Indochinese developments; while promising nothing concrete, he added that Washington was “ready and willing to do anything which [France] might consider helpful in the circumstances.”

This Acheson was far removed from the man who thought of Averell Harriman as an extremist. When George Kennan made a public attack on Henry Wallace’s views, two months after Turkey had riveted Acheson’s attention to the Soviet threat, he prodded Kennan to “accept as many . . . invitations to speak as you can” to spread the new gospel on U.S. policy toward the Soviets. By the late summer and fall of 1946 he was a leading Cold Warrior, his concerns overwhelmingly dominated by sheer power and military considerations. Though Acheson held sophisticated views about the connections between U.S. security and stability in the world economy, none of his statements (public or private) in late 1946 emphasized such matters. Questions of causality remain. A fascinating though significantly deficient explanation was offered in a 1975 oral history by Paul Nitze, who later became a trusted subordinate and friend for many years. Characterizing the “old” Acheson a semi-isolationist, he also views him as always managing—“old” or “new”—to keep a place in whatever was the majority camp of policymakers at the moment. Oddly, he dates Acheson’s movement from the one to the other in February and March 1947 during the formulation of the Truman Doctrine, six months after the 1946 Turkish crisis:

That, in my mind was the turning point of U.S. policy, the Greek-Turkish aid program. Up to that point, Dean Acheson had been, in a way, the most articulate man and almost the ringleader of the point of view which dominated policy from the end of the war till the spring of

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1947. That was that England could be looked to maintain the balance of power, at least in Western Europe, and could be looked to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East and out through South Asia to Southeast Asia.

The U.N. was the important body which would deal with the East-West confrontation and the major issues which arose, and the subordinate bodies of the U.N., including the Bretton Woods agreement institutions, would handle the basic economic affairs. And the United States could withdraw to a role similar to the role that it had held prior to World War II. And that view was not the view of Jim Forrestal; it wasn't really George Kennan's view; nor was it really Will Clayton's view; but we were in the minority. The majority view was that the United States shouldn't be that active; we should leave it to the U.N., to the UK, so forth and so on, and to the international organizations. I think Dean Acheson's conversion to the minority view, which then became the majority view, was as a result of the Greek problem. This indicated the incapacity of the UK to carry as large a role as the majority view had assumed that she would be able to carry. It indicated that the East-West confrontation was of a more serious nature than could be handled just by the U.N. The U.N. couldn't deal with this; the members of the U.N. had to deal with it, not the U.N. as an organization. No one other than the U.S. was in a position, really, to do what was necessary in order to reverse that Greek-Turkish situation. And Dean clearly saw those points.51

Nitze's long firsthand experience working with Acheson commands respect for his analysis, but his proximity to Acheson came only in 1949. Nitze's remarks appear errant in several respects. They overlook how many officials had long before shifted to a sharply anti-Soviet view by the time of the Truman Doctrine. They grossly exaggerate whatever faith Acheson may ever have had in the United Nations. They also miss Acheson's running start on the Greek crisis (going back to the summer and fall of 1946). Nor is it likely that such a personally confident and activist official as Dean Acheson would have settled for a U.S. world role secondary to Britain's.

Nitze's recollection is valuable, however, as a reminder of the impact on U.S. officials of Britain's sudden inability to manage a crisis in its traditional sphere of influence. That Turkey looked to the United States for help in August 1946 may have conclusively communicated this weakness to Acheson, intensifying his awareness of geopolitical consequences in the absence of U.S. leadership. The unexpectedly quick decline of the British Empire and its traditional resources for crisis management may have compelled him

to alter his definition of the scope of U.S. strategy from merely broad to
globalistic and his tactics from multilateral—combining with friendly allies—
to unilateral when necessary. Not that he wanted the United States to act
alone; but now in regions where other states had historically taken the lead,
the United States must now do so, getting declining powers like Britain to
rally to continued efforts precisely through the pressure and inspiration
generated by Washington's leadership. (Ironically, Stalin's strategy counted
on achieving Soviet goals in Turkey because of clashing U.S. and British
"imperialist" interests in the region.) If the United States now bore primary
responsibility as "leader" of the "West," it makes sense, therefore, that
Acheson detected more peril in Moscow's actions in Turkey in the summer
of 1946 than in Iran in 1945. The Turkish crisis dissipated any shreds of
complacency about postwar dangers, sharply elevated Acheson's willing-
ness for Washington to assume responsibility, and stiffened his view of the
USSR as a hostile and menacing state. Possibly he still thought that over
the long term the gradual "civilization" of the Soviets would reduce interna-
tional hazards, but by the summer of 1946 it would have seemed far too
risky to him to recommend that President Truman base his policies on such
a premise. Had he been so inclined, by then the effort and political risks of
pushing for U.S.-Soviet cooperation could hardly have seemed worthwhile.
As he would surrender early in 1950 to the hard line on China (another
story), in the late summer of 1946 Acheson chose the clarity of clear-cut
conflict over dauntingly scanty prospects of U.S.-Communist cooperation.
Whatever the combination of motives and reasons involved, that Ache-
son turned to the Cold war line in August 1946 seems clear. The chronology
below graphically portrays Acheson's Cold War evolution. The pre-"Cold
War" Acheson appears in italics, the Cold Warrior in bold print; events and
reactions ambiguous in character appear in normal print:

February 1945        Says chief purpose of great powers should be to pre-
                      vent war
September 1945      Urges more generous UNRRA aid to USSR
September 1945      Opposed to unilateral withdrawal of U.S.
                      troops from Czechoslovakia
September 1945      Sharp pro-Stimson advocacy on sharing nuclear in-
                      formation with Soviet Union
November 1945       Madison Square Garden speech: statement of
                      sources of both unity and conflict between
                      U.S. and USSR

52. I am grateful for John Lewis Gaddis's interesting discussion in a spring 1994 seminar at
the Council on Foreign Relations in New York of the difference between interpreting some-
one's behavior as "situational" and viewing it as "dispositional." In effect, Acheson in August
and September 1946 shifted from a situational to a dispositional interpretation of negative
Soviet behavior.
November 1945

Unhappy at U.S.-U.K.-Canadian nuclear meetings for avoiding direct talks with USSR and planning to go to UN with a plan for international control

December 1945

Wants to warn USSR about U.S. unhappiness with its activities in Iran

December 1945

Agrees U.S. will have to support KMT if Marshall mission fails

January 1946

Says war between U.S. and USSR unthinkable; would destroy both

January 1946

Worries at appearance of Anglo-American, anti-Soviet combine in Middle East

January–March 1946

Statements on U.K. loan and international trade as key issues; none anti-Soviet

January 1946

In charge of Acheson-Lilienthal Plan

February 1946

Indifferent to Stalin election speech

February 1946

Little recorded contemporary record of reaction to Kennan’s Long Telegram

March 1946

Distanced by State Department from Churchill’s iron curtain speech

March 1946

Draft of Acheson-Lilienthal Plan completed

March 1946

Defends Acheson-Lilienthal Plan in congressional testimony

April 1946

Presses Byrnes to negotiate general European settlement with USSR that leaves Europe undivided

April 1946

Protests against Baruch’s changes to Acheson-Lilienthal Plan

May 1946

Opposes contingency plan for armed intervention in France

May 1946

Again urges negotiated pan-European settlement on Byrnes

May 1946

Arguably Cold-Warriorish statements on Japan and Korea

June 1946

Vigorous attempt to salvage Acheson-Lilienthal Plan from Baruch

August 1946

Mild response to Clifford-Elsey Report query on Soviet violations of international agreements

August 1946

Aggressive response to crisis in Turkey over Soviet note on Straits

August 1946

Aggressive response to Yugoslav shootdown of U.S. plane

September–October 1946

Heightened concern about USSR activities and intentions in Iran

October 1946

Urges Kennan to make more “hard-line” speeches

November 1946

Says U.S. will back Iran if necessary against
December 1946

Here we see the significant trend in Acheson's views in 1945 and 1946. He was not an early alarmist about the Soviet Union. He did not join the panicky belligerence of February 1946. In vain, from the fall of 1945 to the late spring of 1946 he fought for a program of nuclear cooperation that would forestall open conflict with the USSR. In the spring of 1946 he joined a concerted State Department effort to stir Byrnes into negotiating a broad European settlement with the Russians. Only in August 1946, when Soviet machinations over Turkey no longer looked to him like acceptable state-to-state behavior but a threat to Western geopolitical interests, did the chances of achieving normal East-West relations seem too slender to champion.

Acheson's conversion was immediately noticeable. As Soviet maneuvers in Turkey began to take their transforming effects on Acheson, he argued as acting secretary against withdrawing U.S. troops still in China, since they could deter "some other country from interfering in China to our regret." In early September, with the confrontation over Turkey just passed, New York Times editors headlined a James Reston article: "U.S. Must Wage Long Fight For Peace, Acheson Holds. Believes We Should Intervene Abroad Because Wars Cannot Be Isolated." To prevent future wars, Acheson told Reston, the United States must now defend interests all over the world. He imparted the view "that the dangers of intervention are less than the dangers of non-intervention, since the latter" had shown little "noticeable success." He lamented the low level of the people's—and policymakers'—understanding of the complexity and intractability of the problems facing them, warning that "it will take years before dependable security is attained." Sharing a platform with Baruch on 16 October at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, he declared a sweeping U.S. commitment to human rights, democracy, free elections, aid for weak and endangered nations, and opening new international trade opportunities, repeating that America's task would be long and "slow." In private, he now identified the USSR as the greatest barrier to American goals. The Kremlin leaders led not a traditional nation-state but a malevolent force with goals almost impossible to accommodate short of surrender. In a November State Department meeting he traced Washington's policy alternatives: "There were two possible approaches: first, we could support the United Nations and continue our efforts patiently to draw the Soviet Union towards an accommodation with us. Second, plan to lick the hell out of them in 10 to 15 years. It was clear that we were committed to the first and should do it and not diminish our efforts, but that as practical men we should realize that our efforts might not succeed and that we must therefore be prepared, should it be necessary, to adopt the latter course." Where formerly he had been relaxed about the possibility that economic aid to Poland might buttress a socialist economy, he now warned the importuning Poles not to expect
further help in “building up a domestic economy which would be joined to
the closed economic system of the Soviet Union.”  

He now made barely disguised attacks on the Soviet Union in public. By early 1947 he had even given up on cooperation on nuclear controls in the United Nations and thought it best to abandon such efforts. (Oppenheimer agreed.) Telling journalist Louis Fischer in the first week of January how “busy” the Soviets kept the State Department, he resorted to a metaphor of unremitting and automatic aggression: “They throw bricks into the window and we push a newspaper in that hole and try quickly to plug another hole, and so on.” On the eve of the renewed Tur. ‘sl (and Greek) crisis that led to the Truman Doctrine, the formulat. 53 of which planted Acheson’s conception of Cold War strategy at the heart of U.S. policy, he told his staff to go on the offensive: “One week must be lend-lease week and we must stress the fact that Russia hasn’t settled. . . . Next week we will pick another problem and keep on the offensive about it.” His Cold War conversion set the stage for the State Department’s swift seizure of leadership in February when Britain called for help in Greece and Turkey. From that time forward—through the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, NATO, Korea, and German rearmament and on into Acheson’s days as elder statesman—the views adopted in the summer of 1946 barely budged. Dean Acheson became the model American Cold Warrior, but he was not the first. 54

54. Larson, Origins of Containment, 306. That Acheson had dropped his view of the Soviet Union as somethug of a “normal” power does not mean he had become blinded to generic social and economic sources of economic instability independent of either the existence or conduct of the USSR. Talking to the State Department’s mission at the United Nations in June 1947, for example, he averred that the most important problems facing the United States in the postwar era were “social disintegration, political disintegration, the loss of faith by people in leaders who have led them in the past, and a great deal of economic disintegration.” Quoted in Thomas G. Paterson, On Every Front: The Making of the Cold War (New York, 1979), 13.