SHAFR Presidential Address:
The Secretary, the Spy, and the Sage
Dean Acheson, Alger Hiss, and George Kennan*

Long immersion in Dean Acheson’s foreign policy career reveals both surprises and unexpected wrinkles, including evidence of dissonance in his stated commitment to the centrality of reason in international—and personal—relations. Both the wrinkles and dissonance become apparent in examining his connections with two contemporaries. First, we’ll look at the odd story of Acheson and Alger Hiss. While some still disagree that Hiss was a communist and spy for the Soviet Union, the documentation against him is overwhelming, and what follows assumes the accuracy of Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev’s conclusion that his “devotion in adversity” to the USSR was “rock-solid.”

Conventional wisdom holds that Acheson’s public refusal to condemn him was simply an impolitic, if Christian, defiance of McCarthyism’s mob spirit, but there is more to it than that. Then, we will examine Acheson’s connection and conflict with George Kennan, long considered the diplomatic sage of the Truman era. Here, a near consensus has pictured a tough-guy secretary of state brusquely pushing aside the master of strategic nuance. This, too, is an incomplete portrait, especially in neglecting Acheson’s ambivalence toward and sometimes grateful reliance on Kennan.

The highlights of the Acheson-Hiss story include Acheson’s statements in his 1949 confirmation hearings that Hiss, already indicted for perjury, was his friend, that his “friendship [was] not easily given, and it is not easily withdrawn,” and that he was “not going to abandon him and throw rocks at him when he is in trouble.” Even more familiar is the 1950 press conference—on the day Hiss was sentenced to federal prison—at which Acheson said “I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss” and cited scripture in justification. This remark, made with studied malice aforethought, provoked three uninterrupted years of right-wing abuse against both Acheson and Truman, who laughed off the Secretary’s

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offer to resign with a story about his own attendance at Boss Tom Pendergast's funeral.²

While the Hiss episode was partly about an ideal of friendship and honor, it also involved Acheson’s lifelong relish at thumbing his nose at people he despised and his bent for going over the top—thus the arch and preachy reference to Matthew 25:34, instead of a simple declaration of unwillingness to strike a man already down. Though never any kind of radical himself, Acheson was a friend of such left-leaning figures as Sinclair Lewis, Stuart Chase, John L. Lewis, and assorted La Follettes, and not aghast during the thirties or the heyday of the wartime Russian alliance to find himself in the company of socialists or Soviet sympathizers. In contrast, he profoundly loathed Hiss’s accusers (“primitives,” he called them), rejected their fears that Washington was crawling with communist spies, and surely acted in part from the almost universal establishment repugnance for the tacky Whittaker Chambers. When first officially informed of the suspicions against Hiss, in the wake of the 1945 Gouzenko case in Canada, Acheson may also have known that J. Edgar Hoover was leaking accusations that among unwitting “pro-Soviet” enablers of “an enormous Soviet espionage ring” trying to steal atomic secrets were Acheson himself, John McCloy, Henry Wallace, Senator Brien McMahon, and journalists Raymond Gram Swing and Marquis Childs.³

Once we recognize that Alger Hiss was not a special friend of Acheson’s, it becomes even more apparent that something else lies below the surface of this story. The two men had sometimes worked together during the war; Hiss had attended Undersecretary Acheson’s renowned “9:30 meetings” in 1946; they

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3. Acheson, Present at the Creation, 354, 359; J. Edgar Hoover to George E. Allen, 29 May 1946, Truman Papers, President’s Secretary’s Files, Box 167, TL. Robert Messer writes: “There is no indication that these rumors had any impact, or that anything was done with the report except to file it.” Robert L. Messer, “Acheson, the Bomb, and the Cold War,” in Brinkley, Acheson and . . . U.S. Foreign Policy, 64.
lived within shouting distance of one another in Georgetown; in 1948 both were on the letterhead of the Committee for the Marshall Plan to Aid European Recovery—yet Acheson did not much like Hiss, telling George Ball he was “stuffy,” “rigid,” and lacking “a sense of humor.” Yet when the controversy broke in 1948 in the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), Acheson not only advised Hiss, helping direct him to a lawyer, but, in another HUAC hearing, sat in the counsel’s chair alongside another of the accused, former presidential assistant Lauchlin Currie. Once he became secretary of state, he did what he could to protect others under McCarthyite attack—especially China hands O. Edmund Clubb, John Paton Davies, Jr., and John Carter Vincent—including moving them from post to post to keep them invisible from investigators. These maneuvers were only temporarily and partially effective, saving a pension here and there but never a career. Even John Stewart Service, first implicated in the Amerasia case, whom Acheson fired after damaging revelations about the leaking of classified documents, later won in the courts when Acheson was found wrong in basing the Service decision solely on the Loyalty Review Board’s finding, a method to which Acheson had drawn attention—perhaps deliberately—in an affidavit. In a 1955 interview, he accepted blame for insufficiently resisting the “grave mistake” of the entire loyalty-board apparatus; in the same year, he rose to J. Robert Oppenheimer’s defense when the government stripped Oppenheimer of his security clearance.

 Nonetheless, in 1948 he refused to represent Hiss personally or serve as a character witness, partly because, whatever his later statements, he harbored suspicions of Hiss’s disloyalty. He knew in 1946 that department security officers were monitoring Hiss’s appointments calendar and during the Greek crisis in early 1947 told subordinates to keep planning documents out of Hiss’s sight.


When Joseph Alsop, outraged by Chambers’s charges against Hiss, marched into Acheson’s law office in 1948 brimming with plans to write a blistering column about it, Acheson told him to cool it: “It’s always a mistake to write about anything that is _sub judice._” “It was perfectly obvious,” Alsop recalled, “that Dean thought that Hiss was guilty, or had been guilty.” Leaving us to ask again, what was going on here? Where did Acheson stand on the matter, and why?

Without access to his inner life, or the subconscious impulses of which even he was unaware, it is impossible to be sure, but I believe that central to Acheson’s confusing stance was his affection for Alger’s brother, _Donald_ Hiss. As he told senators at his confirmation hearings, he had known both Hisses for years, but he came to know Donald quite well in the thirties, made him a State Department assistant during the war, and eventually became, first, a “close and intimate” friend, and then a partner at Covington, Burling. Unbeknownst to Acheson, Donald was also a communist, a veteran of the “Ware Group” in the Agriculture Department, and almost certainly under the intermittent discipline of “J. Peters,” the Soviet Union’s underground chief in the United States. When, during the war, Acheson asked Donald about suspicions brought to him by Adolf Berle, Donald denied any compromising affiliation, which, surprisingly, “closed” the matter in Acheson’s mind, probably in part because of his dislike for Berle. Praising him to the senators in 1949 as courageous and patriotic, he added that Donald was “just torn to pieces emotionally” about his brother’s case and explained that “the kindest thing a friend could do is just not to talk about it.” Donald’s name had regularly surfaced in postwar inquiries, but the marginal character of his work for Peters, his categorical denial of all HUAC accusations, and Chambers’s denial that he had ever been one of _his_ agents caused his “case” to disappear after 1948, leaving unpublicized a small later fame among Holocaust historians as a leaker of documents on the plight of Europe’s Jews. From State’s division of Foreign Funds Control, he dribbled secret records to Henry Morgenthau’s Treasury Department, Washington’s most aggressive force against the Holocaust.

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8. Draft of memoirs, Joseph Alsop Papers, LC; Alsop to George A. Eddy, 26 November 1979, Alsop Papers, LC. My thanks to Bruce Craig for sharing these documents with me.

9. On Donald Hiss and Acheson’s connections with him, see the confirmation hearings material already cited; Acheson, _Present at the Creation_, 251; Acheson to Louis Halle, 13.
Probably not knowing this, a trusting and even credulous Acheson felt the power of Donald’s claim on his loyalty. His obligations as friend, mentor, and senior partner were unyielding. Moreover, in the very early days of the Cold War, both Acheson and the administration of which he was a part held a remarkably complacent attitude at times toward internal security, a direct inheritance of FDR’s casual attitude. When Acheson first met Service, he quipped, “Well, you don’t look like a dangerous man.”

In the summer of 1946, shortly before abandoning hope for normal relations with the USSR, he told a House committee that the problem of communists in the State Department was “more a matter of alarm than of fact,” since some of the accused were merely “New Dealers,” which, he added with a grin, “I have not considered... to be a crime.”

When the turncoat Gouzenko walked into the Royal Mounties’ office laden with documents proving anti-Western Soviet espionage, the first impulse of the targeted Canadian, American, and British governments was to hush up the scandal in the interest of good relations with the Soviets. Shortly after Gouzenko’s revelations in the lair of the Mounties, when the defecting Elizabeth Bentley sallied into an FBI office, ready to identify the jewels of the Soviets’ US network, Moscow largely shut it down. By the time Washington geared up its own search-and-destroy operations against “communists-in-government,” the most important among them had already gone dormant or underground. When it mattered, the US government was lax; when it didn’t, it was draconian.

The Hiss case first arose amid the earlier, complacent period, and Acheson had plenty of company out on his limb. Hiss went on trial for perjury with the journalistic backing of Eleanor Roosevelt, Childs, Alsop (though now luke...
warm), and James Reston. Another supporter was Walter Lippmann, who told a friend, “I know Alger Hiss. He couldn’t be guilty of treason.” In person or in depositions, a list of luminaries swore to his probity, among them Adlai Stevenson, Stanley Hornbeck, and 1924 Democratic presidential candidate John W. Davis. With Acheson’s approval, Ambassador-at-Large Philip Jessup backed Hiss in writing—and in person at his second trial. Most remarkably, two sitting Supreme Court justices—Felix Frankfurter and Stanley Reed—personally testified in his behalf.  

This is not to say that Acheson was following the crowd, for he was not that sort. Exuding self-confidence, he credited his own judgment more than most men. He also believed profoundly that puzzles were subject to solution through the use of reason—and that he had the intellectual power to reach such solutions. A statement at his confirmation hearing that any theory of Hiss’s guilt contradicted “sane conduct,” combined with another about his own ability to judge “human nature,” suggest that his own peculiar theory about the Hiss case evolved from an inharmonious fusion of principles vital to his character and identity—from the intellect, his confidence in the power of reason, and from the realm of sentiment, his devotion to a code of personal loyalty. He was often baffled when others acted in ways that seemed irrational to him—whether states (Mao’s China in 1949 to 1950 is a prime example) or individuals. And he was repelled by disloyalty to friends, deeply admiring Truman’s visceral fidelity, even when extended to unworthy cronies. Thus, he may have arrived at his judgment about Alger Hiss as follows. First, as he told the senators, it would be “insane” (that is, reasonless) to act traitorously toward the United States, as Hiss was accused of doing. It would be equally insane for a traitor to take actions in his own defense that would expose his treachery, as Hiss did in his (pre–Pumpkin Papers) slander suit against Chambers. Understanding human nature, Acheson could judge Hiss’s character and actions, and his rational judgment was that such a man would not do what was said by his contemptible accusers, who had also branded Acheson as pro-Soviet. The accusations against Hiss were probably as untrue as those against himself. Besides, he was Donald’s brother, a fact that pushed blinders firmly around Acheson’s eyes. Something remained unexplained, he insisted: either Hiss was trying to protect someone else or, he told the senators, “[T]here is something else here that one does not understand.”

Acheson stuck to this story, gilding it over the years with some self-indulgent gratification about the trouble he had caused. The closest he came to a retraction came when he told Eric Sevareid on television in 1969, “I knew the press was going to believe I’d run. I just said, I’m not going to run. I’m going to let


13. See, for example, Acheson, Present at the Creation, 302.
you have it right on the jaw.” But “perhaps I knocked myself out. . . . It may have been I was a little grandiloquent. Perhaps it would have been better if I had said, ‘I haven’t anything to say about it.’” “I suppose in a way,” he added, “an element of pride entered into this.”

Yes—a combination of moral and intellectual pride, mixed with disdain for those on the anticommunist right. What we may never understand is exactly which of Acheson’s buttons the Hiss case pushed to cause such a reaction—it might have been an acute form of denial that he could have been so wrong about a man, or even a convoluted response to anger at Hiss’s acts of betrayal. What Acheson himself never conceded was how he had allowed personal and professional attachments to shape his reaction to a serious public question, or that the man sustained by his upright gesture did not deserve it. Though he understood the need to balance the demands of national security against those of personal liberty, like many contemporary Democrats and liberals he also underestimated both the menace of espionage and the administration’s own part in arousing the “primitives.” His austere demands that the people steel themselves for an apparently endless contest with the Russians helped produce the acids eroding the walls of domestic civility. In his 1950 press conference statement he also acted against the advice of his closest advisers in not dissociating himself from a man condemned by the American public—and by the federal courts. Later he wrote that the Hiss case “was destined to go on to something approaching national disaster, lending . . . support to a widespread attack throughout the country upon confidence in government itself.” He, his president, and his department would never free themselves of the burden he added to those they already carried.

Acheson’s tangled relationship with George Kennan was almost as complicated as his tie to Hiss was mysterious. Differences in personality and style were bound to create at least tricky relations between these two. Kennan’s prosy susceptibilities and proclivity to angst affronted Acheson’s practicality and distaste for introversion. Kennan’s delicate feelings and emotionalism hoisted bile to Acheson’s gorge. Where the former was melancholic and soulful, earnest and intense, the latter was witty, ironic, and as vigorous and spirited as his guardman’s mustache. Kennan scorned politicians and democracy itself; Acheson, while sharing his skepticism about the people’s wisdom, knew his policies must command their support—and his president their ultimate backing. Kennan thought, correctly, that Acheson probably believed his ideas “lacked foundation in the daily grind of operational routine and were not generally to be taken seriously.” Yet at other times, Acheson greatly respected Kennan’s insights and experience and did take his ideas seriously. That he often rejected them did not mean he never wanted to hear them.

15. Acheson, Present at the Creation, 251.
Contrary to common report, Kennan, as head of the Policy Planning Staff (PPS), did not have direct access to the secretary of state’s office under George Marshall and was not, therefore, deprived of such access by Acheson. What was once nonetheless a smooth path to Marshall’s desk was first strewn with obstacles in 1949 by Undersecretary James Webb, who disliked Foreign Service officers generally and Kennan in particular. When Acheson began to chafe at the impressionable Kremlinologist’s close proximity, he let Webb’s methods rule. Nor was it true that Acheson forced Kennan out of the department, but the latter knew he had lost his special status in September when Webb circulated a PPS paper on Yugoslavia through the country desks before returning it to him for changes. Shortly after accepting the hazy office of counselor and seeing Paul Nitze take over the PPS, Kennan saw the drift of things and asked for a sabbatical at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study.\(^{17}\)

Considering how often Kennan opposed the administration’s core decisions, it is remarkable that historians still consider him the mastermind of early Cold War policy instead of a sidelines player, often nurturing slights and criticizing decisions taken against his advice. His opposition to the universalist language of the Truman Doctrine represented a rejection of the broad warning to the Soviet Union intended by both Truman and the doctrine’s chief architect, Acheson. When Acheson assumed command of the already ongoing negotiations to create the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), he knew Kennan was its harshest internal critic. Kennan also opposed NSC–68 in 1950 by backing the vigorous resistance of his soulmate, Charles Bohlen, about whom Acheson once remarked, “I can’t run foreign policy out of Chip Bohlen’s restaurant.” Whatever its excesses, NSC–68 reflected Acheson’s core strategy of eliminating positions of weakness with situations of strength. When Kennan and Bohlen criticized the focus on Soviet capabilities rather than intentions, he brusquely countered that his only choice as a public servant was to work from the capabilities, since Iron Curtain secrecy veiled Moscow’s intentions. Kennan and Bohlen’s opposition inspired his long-term distrust: “Their hunches are uncommunicable,” he remarked, “and must be accepted by those who have not the same occult power of divination.”\(^{18}\)

\(^{17}\) See Martin Mayer, *The Diplomats* (Garden City, NY, 1983), 212; Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 157; Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York, 1989), 86–87, 90; Paul H. Nitze with Ann M. Smith and Steven L. Rearden, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision: A Memoir* (New York, 1990), 86. Technically, Kennan remained director of the PPS through 31 December 1949 concurrently with his job as counselor, to which he was appointed 24 June and on the duties of which he began 4 August 1949. Kennan’s 1950–1951 comings and goings from Princeton to the State Department were formalized in a continuous term as counselor, which came to a legal end on 11 July 1951. He would later receive an (ill-fated) appointment as ambassador to the Soviet Union and, under President Kennedy, to Yugoslavia.

Two other cases—German policy early in Acheson’s secretaryship and the H-Bomb decision—illustrate the intricacy and ambivalence of Acheson’s connection with Kennan. The first involved a surprising and extended flirtation with highly unorthodox ideas on Germany’s future. Considering Acheson’s record as a stalwart builder of the Western alliance and, after 1950, advocate of German rearmament and NATO membership, it is startling to see how he floundered over the issue in the first half of 1949 while preparing for a Big Four Council of Foreign Ministers in Paris that the allies had promised Moscow for settling the Berlin blockade. He was baffled, even bewildered at first, something he did nothing to disguise, warning aides on 21 March against the “false impression . . . that he knew all there was to know about Germany.” He wanted to “correct that impression as he knew very little about Germany and wanted to make sure he was carefully briefed.”

This uncertainty made Acheson open to all kinds of possibilities, and his eventual adoption of what became the standard Western policy toward West Germany came only after seriously considering far different options promoted by Kennan. The previous autumn, Kennan had invited private citizen Acheson to join PPS discussions of what he called Program “A,” a plan to get the Soviets to evacuate their forces from central Europe by agreeing to withdraw all foreign troops from a reunified and sovereign Germany. Remnants of occupation forces would temporarily be garrisoned in enclaves just inside its borders while Germany organized and conducted free elections to reestablish a unified nation. Because this risked losing control over the former Nazi state, none of Kennan’s superiors or key associates supported him—but, attracted by the plan, Acheson did! Expressing puzzlement about “how we ever arrived at the decision to see established a Western German government or state,” he still did after two months in office. By assigning Kennan the task of drafting a new paper on Germany, he momentarily guaranteed Plan A’s place on center stage. It could not, however, survive strenuous assaults from within the department and, after it was leaked to Reston and made public, from a powerful phalanx of the Pentagon and French and British governments. Meanwhile, Acheson’s interest flagged when Kennan could not satisfactorily convince him that Plan A might not lead to a calamity rather than a European settlement. Thus in Paris he and his Western colleagues, Ernest Bevin and Robert Schumann, firmly withstood every effort by Andrei Vyshinsky to block creation of a pro-Western West German state. Interestingly, however, they did not yet agree about the future of Western troops in Germany because even then Acheson carried the Kennan virus. While Bevin and Schuman fretted about any reduction of the Western troops in Germany because even then Acheson carried the Kennan virus.

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February 1980, Washington, DC (n.d., TL), 84; Acheson to Bill Tyler, 31 May 1960, Acheson Papers, Box 32, Folder 405, Yale University Library.

military presence in Germany, Acheson emphasized the impossibility of an indefinite occupation and the need for incentives to get Soviet forces out. His hopes for a mutual troop withdrawal faded after hearing that the Soviet high commissioner had told Bohlen that since “the Germans hate us,” it would be “necessary that we maintain our forces in Germany.” But echoes of Plan A were still sounding as late as February 1950, when Acheson speculated in a department meeting “about the possibility of withdrawal of troops in Germany.”

More significant for our purposes, after Plan A’s abandonment, Acheson did not look back, while Kennan sulked, writing Acheson a plaintive threnody about jettisoning German reunification and saying that “some day we may pay bitterly for our present unconcern with the possibility of getting the Russians out of the Eastern Zone.” After grumbling that the “logic” of his “program” was “broken,” he wanted to drop the whole business and let the Europeans handle Germany on their own. This surely left a spore in Acheson’s mind that would germinate when he next encountered such petulance.

Which leads us to Kennan’s tenacious opposition to building the H-Bomb, or “Super,” a complex story I can only summarize here. Well before Moscow detonated its first atomic bomb in September 1949, Acheson had abandoned his earlier hopes (as evinced in the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan) for nuclear arms control. In October, he told Kennan he opposed any pledge against first use of atomic weapons, since it would “deprive” the United States of “the effect on the enemy of the fear of retaliation by atomic bombing against orthodox aggression.” Unlike Kennan, he wanted Moscow to fear U.S. nuclear weapons, both

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for their deterrence value and for the possibility that a standoff would lead to far-reaching political settlements. At one point, he asked Kennan and the ascendant Nitze to join him in writing appraisals of the strategic situation. The results exposed Kennan’s growing estrangement. While Acheson and Nitze both sought ways to compensate for an atomic-armed Soviet Union’s power to neutralize America’s nuclear force, Kennan—bewailing the “corrupting” impact of nuclear weapons on policymaking—simply advocated new arms talks.22

Acheson’s own doubts about the efficacy of nuclear weapons drove him toward NSC–68’s call for a massive buildup of conventional forces. When the possibility arose of building a fusion bomb, however, he came down strongly in its favor, after weighing visible alternatives and deciding that the Soviets would build one whatever Washington did or said. He was then greatly vexed to meet opposition for what he deemed impractical ethical reasons (he had asked advisers to ignore “the ultimate moral question”) from three admired friends—Kennan, Oppenheimer, and David Lilienthal. By his own account, he reserved his harshest criticism for Kennan, who had harried him with a string of memos that concluded with a demand that the United States simply abstain from building the H-Bomb. Better, he thought, for the Soviet Union to bear a solitary onus for such a heinous act; and better—according to one of Acheson’s several accounts—that Americans “should perish rather than be party to a course so evil as producing that weapon.” Acheson recalls barking in response, no doubt with eyebrows and mustache trembling, “[I]f that is your view you ought to resign from the Foreign Service and go out and preach your Quaker gospel, but don’t do it within the department.”

His fury, probably resulting partly from his own unease about the H-Bomb, was far less than he let on—no documentation supports the tale of such an ill-tempered outburst at Kennan. Nor is it true, as his memoirs imply, that he then used a contrived Latin American inspection trip to exile Kennan. Kennan persuasively wrote later that he remembered nothing of Acheson’s view of his H-Bomb opinions but guessed it was “probably one of bewilderment and pity for my naïveté.” He added that he already had one “foot out of Washington,” and that the inspection trip had been in the works for months. Acheson’s ex post facto embroidery—making himself look more obnoxious than reality merited—is yet another chapter in the troubled book of his relationship with the inventive and sensitive Kennan. As a memoirist—publishing after Kennan—he was determined to look the tougher of the two and more prepared to face and deal with harsh political facts.23

An even sharper conflict than that over the Super came during the Eisenhower administration, when Kennan, in 1957–1958, called for “disengagement” in Europe. Acheson pounced, stating publicly that Kennan had “never grasped the realities of power relationships” and had a “rather mystical attitude toward them.” Overlooking or veiling his interest in Plan A, he added that the same ideas had been “expounded” in 1949 and “rejected.” Kennan was deeply wounded, but when the Washington Post criticized Acheson for his “savage” attack, he told a friend: “I felt savage about it.”

What made this fracas especially sad is that in happier days Acheson had always known he could rely on Kennan in times of grave need. He asked him to delay leaving the government at the outset of the Korean War and gratefully accepted his offer of help when Chinese armies overran Macarthur in Korea. When Kennan first decided to leave Washington, Acheson spoke affectingly about it in his presence at the National War College, saying the news had first filled him with despair. “He is one of the most distinguished, if not the most distinguished, Foreign Service Officer. I have rarely met a man the depth of whose thought, the sweetness of whose nature combined to bring about a real understanding of the underlying problems of modern life.” While this may have been hyperbole exercised when he knew Kennan would soon be out of his hair, when liberals attacked the career diplomat early in 1951—after the dispute over the H-Bomb—Acheson invaded their clubhouse, the annual dinner of the Americans for Democratic Action, to defend him.

When Kennan sped to Washington from Princeton in the wake of the Chinese intervention, a shaken and wearied Acheson invited him home to dinner. Given their history, Kennan was touched and would later recall his host’s “characteristic spirit and wit, which no crisis and no weariness seemed ever to extinguish.” Acheson undoubtedly served up both dry martinis and wicked anecdotes, but what the humor-challenged Kennan remembered was the company of “a gentleman, the soul of honor, attempting to serve the interests of the country against the background of a Washington seething with anger, confusion, and misunderstanding, bearing the greatest possible burden of responsibility for a dreadful situation he had not created... [and] having daily to endure

George F. Kennan, Memoirs 1950–1963 (Boston, 1972), 65. In a 1964 lecture, without naming him, Acheson told the Kennan story somewhat differently: “I told him that on the Day of Judgment his view might be confirmed and that he was free to go forth and preach the necessity for salvation. It was not, however, a view I could entertain as a public servant.” Dean Acheson, This Vast External Realm (New York, 1973), 135–36.


the most vicious and unjust personal attacks.” The next day Acheson found a
note on his desk from Kennan, saying that now the nation faced its real test. If
it accepted its “failure” with “candor, with dignity, with resolve to absorb its
lessons and to make it good by re-doubled and determined effort—starting all
over again, if necessary, along the pattern of Pearl Harbor—we need lose neither
our self-confidence nor our allies nor our power for bargaining, eventually, with
the Russians.” Stirred, Acheson read the words to the men in his office, includ-
ing their author, urging everyone to ignore the “spirit of defeatism” he thought
was enveloping the Pentagon. Kennan, he said, turning to him, had been
“greatly missed in the daily councils of the fifth floor.” In the days ahead he
repeatedly cited Kennan’s view that, with its armies on the run, Washington
could not choose a worse time to negotiate with the communist world.¹⁶

Most people in politics and government, including Acheson and Kennan,
would agree on the doubtful wisdom of negotiating with your opponent while
retreating from a beating. But they differed greatly on a central ingredient of
politics—the use of power. Acheson, in public, sometimes muffled his relation
to power, but compared to Kennan, congenitally uncomfortable with its actual
use, he believed in using it boldly to advance the national interest. He thought
Benjamin Disraeli had it right in asking, “[W]hat is the usefulness of power if
you don’t make people do what they don’t like?”, and he wrote Truman in 1956
that the proper use of power was a necessity in a world ruled by “the law of
the jungle,” where the judgment of nature upon error is death.” In the cold war
with the Soviet Union, which “we are playing for keeps,” there were no “rules,
no umpire, no prizes for good boys, no dunce caps for bad boys”; “good inten-
tions are not worth a damn; moral principles are traps; weakness and indecision
are fatal.” While “spiritual values” were well and good, he noted shortly after
leaving office, even better were “common sense and a little organization and a
gun or two around in a critical moment.” Rather than negotiating differences
with the Soviets, Washington’s strategic challenge was to outdo them—not
“containing” Moscow point by point, but outmatching its strength by building
and managing political, social, economic, and especially military power. Thus
fortified, the United States could eventually negotiate, not in search of com-
promises but to gain Moscow’s acceptance of “realities” and the codification of
Western situations of strength. The United States—for the West—would
resolve Cold War dangers through its own actions. It is clearly an error to lump
Acheson with Kennan as coeval advocates of “containment,” or, worse, to see
Kennan as its founder and Acheson its executor.¹⁷

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Miscamble, Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 329; Acheson, Present at the

¹⁷. Henry Brandon, Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent’s Memoirs from Roosevelt
to Reagan (New York, 1988), 96; Acheson to Truman, 4 December 1956, Acheson Papers, Box
In a world of hot and cold personalities, it is obvious that Acheson was one of the former, so we should not be surprised that this man who so valued reason and took such pride in his own intellect at times acted out of strong feelings, as he clearly did in his relations with both Hiss and Kennan, or that he so unreasonably treated Kennan with less charity than Hiss. Chronology was important in this difference, too, as was the large gap in political salience of Hiss and Kennan’s histories after Acheson left office in 1953. Once imprisoned, Hiss’s story was over, except for the stones thrown at Acheson by right-wingers to the end of his life, hardly an inducement to reconsider his actions. In contrast, the Acheson-Kennan tale went on and on, past the disengagement debate, into the books, articles, and memoirs of the fifties and sixties in which Kennan sought to extricate himself from the Tar Baby of containment. Virtually every passage of these retrospective criticisms for “militarizing” containment was a reproach to Acheson—and his legacy. Having already endured the worst that Hiss’s peculiar career could cause him, Acheson responded to this continuing nuisance in his own flood of retirement writings. Kennan was a position of weakness in his reputation that must be converted to a situation of strength. The result was not likely to be negotiations.