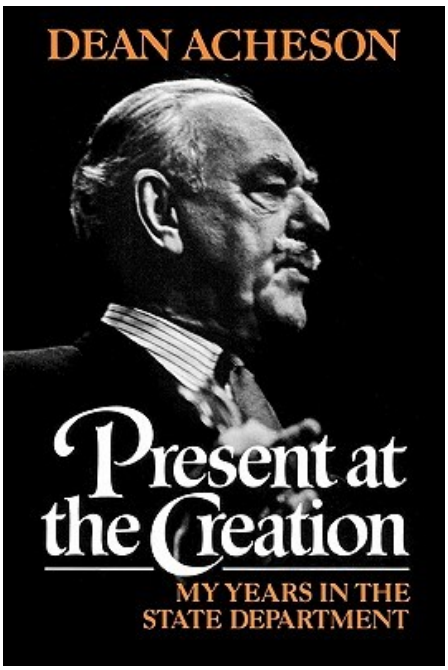

Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department

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Acheson (1893–1971) was not only present at the creation of the postwar world, he was one of its chief architects. He joined the Department of State in 1941 as Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and, with brief intermissions, was continuously involved until 1953, when he left office as Secretary of State at the end of the Truman years.

Throughout that time Acheson's was one of the most influential minds and strongest wills at work. It was a period that included World War II, the reconstruction of Europe, the Korean War, the development of nuclear power, the formation of the United Nations and NATO. It involved him at close quarters with a cast that starred Truman, Roosevelt, Churchill, de Gaulle, Marshall, MacArthur, Eisenhower, Attlee, Eden Bevin, Schuman, Dulles, de Gasperi, Adenauer, Yoshida, Vishinsky, and Molotov.

Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department Details

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From Reader Review Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department for online ebook

Tommy Powell says

A well written and thoroughly enjoyable look inside the machinery of U.S. Government monetary policy coming out of WW II -and the birth of the IMF, World Bank and the WTO.

Curtis Bentley says

Full of information and insight. An absolute chore to get through. I made it most of the way through, but I had to come back to it 3 times over the course of two years. Tough even for one accustomed to pushing through dry nonfiction.

Joseph Millo says

In 1969 Dean Acheson published this book as memoirs of his tenure in the State Department from 1941 to the end of the Truman presidency in 1953. My original intent in reading this 800 page tome was to become better informed about a man whose name constantly pops up when reading about the first post-WWII decade of world affairs. While the book will give you a detailed understandingly Acheson’s personality and character, it is more a history of international affairs from 1941 through 1952. One of the things I learned is the incredible amount of behind-the-scenes work that goes into negotiating international agreements – and the statesmanship required to win congressional approval. After reading the book, I was surprised (and not surprised) to discover it was awarded the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for History.

Michael Ting says

Having first read the wise men & Dean Acheson: life in the Cold War, I was delighted to pickup a copy of Present at the Creation. One of the best memoirs I’ve read, certainly deserving of the Pulitzer Prize it bagged in 1970. Acheson is a cheeky cynic and at some points, comical.

Acheson remarks are very memorable & colorful- I particularly liked the ones on hurricane Vandenberg where he referred to former senate majority leader as a cyclone full of hot air spinning counter clockwise who would set progress back a few months.

Don says

Excruciating details and long descriptions almost prevent this book from rating five stars. The details and care are so rich, and the events described so important to understanding the development of the US foreign

policy in the post-world-war II era, that they outweigh the heft of this book.

Occasionally, Acheson's wry observations of personality conflicts, bureaucratic infighting, diplomatic negotiations, and executive branch engagement with congressional leaders delightfully entertain and educate. One quote from the book mirrors my own experience in bureaucracy well: "I have long been the advocate of the heretical view that, whatever political scientists might say, policy in this country is made, as often as not, by the necessity of finding something to say for an important figure committed to speak without a prearranged subject." They provide a nice balance to the historical details that can sometimes weigh down the book.

This is an historical record of one of the major players of the cold war. I highly recommend the book for anyone interested in this time period.

Hadrian says

Published in 1969, this lengthy memoir of Acheson's time in the State Department has avoided imposing contemporary terms and concepts onto previous decision-making. As a matter of fact, the author, aided by his own memory and access to his old files, largely presents history as he saw it at the time: as Assistant Secretary of State for economic matters from 1941-1945, as Undersecretary of state from 1945-1947, and as Secretary of State from 1949-1953. While he does tend to understate his own uncertainty, this was a period of immense institutional change, which saw the United States stand virtually alone in opposition to the Soviet Union.

Acheson and the Truman administration found themselves in the unenviable task of fashioning some institutional and diplomatic order out of the ruins of the Second World War. As Lenin said, these were the weeks in which decades happen. That period from 1947-1949 where Acheson was *not* in public office saw the Yugoslav-Soviet split, the Soviet blockade of Berlin, the disintegration of the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine, the United States' recognition of Israel, and the final stages of the Marshall Plan.

Instead, this left for him the formation and organization of NATO, the beginnings of what would become the EU: that is, the European Coal and Steel Community, the division of Germany, aid to Greece and Turkey, the conclusion of the Chinese civil war and flight of the Guomindang across the Taiwan Strait, the Soviet development of atomic weaponry, the North Korean invasion of the South, and the negotiation of a peace treaty with Japan. somewhere in one of the end notes.

Acheson's memoir is one of personal notes and relationships. He is warm and friendly to his own staff, President Truman, and some close friends abroad - Robert Schumann, and Ernest Bevin, to give two examples. But on the other hand, he lets freely known his reservations about other leaders. President Roosevelt was too distant and aloof, and the former Secretary of State Stettinius was not well equipped for his job. While he is himself a firm anti-communist, he casts out Joseph McCarthy as "primitives", Gen. Douglas MacArthur as a boor, and others as self-promoters, wailing Jeremiahs, and so on. But gossip is not the main topic of the book, so much as it is the creation and putting into action of foreign policy.

While Acheson was primarily known as one of the architects of the doctrine of containment, he saw it as adaptable, and not a blanket strategy which would be applied uniformly everywhere. He saw conditions as separate in the case of, say, Greece and Turkey. He saw it as both a realist opposition to Soviet expansion, but also due to his idealistic trans-Atlantic beliefs about future cooperation between European countries and

the United States. For the most part, he presents his thinking as how it was then, and not with the perspective of what comes twenty years later. Yet he lets this slide once or twice, as in an endnote past page 700 - he remarks about the first wave of historical revisionists who believed that the United States had overreacted to Soviet control of Eastern Europe and North Korea - he wonders if they would say the same if they had taken a more accommodating tone to Stalin.

And yet there is something to the criticism. His interest in the reconstruction and stability of Western Europe was the priority, and that came with the recognition of the colonial regime of the French in Vietnam. This was one of the first steps down the long descent into the hell of the Vietnam War. It was a muddled course, but he admitted he saw none better. Likewise, his priority of one continent over the others and his view of a wider struggle against the communists would give him, and other practitioners of foreign policy an incomplete and distorted picture of post-colonial struggles over the coming decades.

With seventy years' distance, Acheson's basic assessments are not wholly wrong. The Marshall Plan, the formation of NATO, and the preservation of South Korea are substantive achievements - especially when taking into account the incomparably hostile climate of Congress. How would they all, seventy years ago, look upon their future, or our present? Would they still think it was worth it?

Liam says

Very, very boring for the most part, but highly detailed. My primary interest in reading this book was Acheson's "insider" account of U.S. policy toward France and the so-called Associated States (Viet Nam, Cambodia & Laos) during the First Indochina War. The majority of this memoir dealt with other matters in great and lengthy detail, which I found difficult to struggle through even though Acheson's extremely clear writing style made the task easier than it might have been. I have to say, though, that "Present At The Creation" is not only indispensable for the study of the U.N., but also for the study of U.S. politico-military policy during WWII, Korea, and the early years of the Indochina conflict as well. I am glad that I managed to get a copy of this book, but I am just as glad that I got this copy gratis! (Thanx again to John King Books, Detroit)

Matt Simmons says

I started this book while on a trip to China. It has some of the best descriptions of how U.S. foreign policy and government function, but parts of it are pretty dated. Definitely more fun to read when you're traveling the world than when you're sitting at home.

Mel [profile closed] says

You need to know your American History for this one, but if you do, it's a truly fascinating read. Acheson was the Secretary of State in the late 40s and early 50s and was indeed "present at the creation" of every major U.S. Policy of the time, from the Marshall Plan to the policy of containment used for the Soviet Union. This is an "in the beginning" book, that let's you understand how things got this way.

Erika RS says

Those of you who know me, know that I am not much of a history person, and this book contains some quite heavy history (~740 pages of it). Despite my general aversion to history, I found the book quite interesting. This was aided, in part, by the engaging material. It was further aided by Acheson's writing style. The book was peppered with amusing anecdotes that made historical figures seem like real live people (wax earplugs are not to be eaten). The book was also very well organized. My favorite touch was that the year in which the action on a page takes place was printed on the inner section of the header of that page. Very nice.

Laura says

Often I couldn't put this down. Working in a fortune 500 fabless semiconductor company in 2013, I could identify with the wrangling to garner support, countering opposition without alienating, clarifying policy and all the beaurocratic wrangling. This book provided a foundation in understanding Russian diplomacy (and how even to this day they negotiate like 3 year olds who must check with Moscow before every little decision), the formation of the EU (NATO) and the seeds of middle east insanity. And it was published a year before I was born. Many hate Dean Acheson for the Korean war. This is a useful history lesson as we are poised to drop bombs in Syria. If Mr. Acheson were alive today and asked what to do, I imagine he'd advise, "just don't put anyone like Douglas MacArthur in charge!"

Rick says

Former Secretary of State, in a detailed fashion, writes of his 12 years in the State Department. I learned a lot from reading this book. He has points of view, so those come through clearly; but his specific recollections of events and discussions are very helpful.

Bill Manzi says

The Dean Acheson memoir, published in 1969, has a title that is actually very appropriate. Acheson was a State Department official serving under FDR, and later under Harry Truman, eventually rising to the position of Secretary of State. This memoir takes us on a tour of some of the most difficult, and momentous, times in American diplomatic history.

Acheson covers the critical post war period, offering first hand insights even for the period that he was out of government. That time presented truly difficult choices for the United States, with the decisions made delivering the post war system and consensus that we are all so familiar with. What were the issues, and how did the Post World War II world order come into being? Acheson covers the tough challenge that Stalin gave to the West immediately after the war, with a strong focus on the German question. The status of Germany post war, accepted and known now by our generation as western in outlook and governance, was not something that just happened. Josef Stalin put enormous political and psychological pressure on the West, including blockading Berlin, offering political inducements to the West Germans (potential re-unification

under a “neutral” political framework) and creating major political obstacles to successful four power governance and occupation of defeated Germany. As the Germans moved to rebuild and become part of the European and world community the diplomatic challenges were stark. Acheson covers them in detail, with a quick look at the Marshall Plan. As Europe rebuilt after the war the seedlings of the Common Market, and the E.U. were planted. That diplomacy required substantial balancing between French fears of German industrial and military resurgence, and the German desire to shed the occupation and become re-integrated into the European community. Acheson spends much time on how this progressed, and all of the problems that needed to be overcome. The long and expensive cold war between East and West grew out of this dispute, and Acheson gives us a great viewpoint on Soviet Russia and the inherent difficulty of negotiating with Stalin. The fiscal difficulty of picking up the West, economically and militarily, is also looked at, with some discussion of getting the “allies” to pick up a greater share of the military burden, and the diplomatic and domestic issues surrounding that question. Fortunately Acheson and President Truman recognized the realities and made the necessary investment that enabled the U.S. to “contain” the Soviet threat. Acheson covers how the U.S. picked up the burden in Greece as the British were leaving, holding off the threat of “losing” Greece to Soviet influence.

Acheson was the face of U.S. foreign policy, along with George Marshall, during the Truman years, and he took plenty of heat from a GOP controlled Senate. His views on China, and on the issue of “who lost China” to the communists, brought much criticism from the Acheson described “primitives” of the Senate. Acheson is quite emphatic that the serious errors of Chiang caused the loss of the Nationalists to Mao, (even producing an extensive China White Paper) and I do believe that history has vindicated that judgement. But that political argument, in my view, had negative consequences for the U.S. for years to come, impacting the major policy makers as they considered U.S. options in Vietnam, giving them a political fear of “losing” Vietnam and being subjected to the same type of political attacks launched on Truman and Acheson on the China issue, in my view making decisions based on that political fear, rather than on a pragmatic policy basis. Despite his characterization by the GOP as soft on Chinese communism Acheson continued to be a staunch opponent of recognizing the Mao regime in Peking.

Acheson took major heat after the Korean War broke out, with critics citing his speech that outlined the “defensive perimeter” of the U.S. that omitted Korea. The critics, upon the North Korean invasion, cited the Acheson speech as an “invitation” to the Soviets and North Koreans to launch the military action. Acheson was highly sensitive to this charge, and took great pains to rebut it in the book. He gives us a good view of the action in Korea, with a very strong, negative view of the actions of General Douglas MacArthur, and strong support for President Truman’s eventual sacking of MacArthur. The diplomacy involved in the Korean conflict, the Soviet error of leaving the U.N. in advance of the vote to oppose the North Koreans by the international community, and the connection of the Korean and Taiwan (Formosa) issues are covered extensively.

No Acheson book can be complete without mentioning that he operated in the period that spawned Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy, and the Acheson described “primitives,” are covered extensively, and the damages done by them were felt for years. Hyper-partisanship, and party hatred, did not start in 2016. As GOP Senator McCarthy and his minions terrorized the U.S. government, and the State Department especially, some in Congress spoke out against the madness. Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith, in her Declaration of Conscience, issued in 1950, (joined by 16 colleagues) said: ‘The nation sorely needs a Republican victory. But I do not want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horseman of Calumny-fear, ignorance, bigotry, and smear.” (Acheson, Dean Present at the Creation page 365) Of course Acheson was the subject of many of these attacks, and the back and forth with the Senate, and how this dynamic impacted foreign policy, is covered extensively.

Finally Acheson covers the policy adopted by the U.S. with regards to Indochina. Acheson exhibits a dim view of French policy, but concedes that U.S. policy makers, himself included, felt constrained by the need to counter the Soviets in Europe, and feared French backlash if the U.S. were to become too critical of the failed French policy in Indochina. He exhibits, at this early date, some of the same failures of thought that characterized U.S. policy makers in the decades to come, especially with regards to Ho Chi Minh. Acheson tacitly admits the failure, but confesses that even as he wrote the memoir he could not justify the policies, but could not think of a workable alternative. For those that think the study of history is a waste of time look at the early development of U.S. Indochina policy, and how ignorance of history helped to foster one of the greatest foreign policy disasters in U.S. history.

Acheson truly was “present at the creation,” being the State Department (not as Secretary) representative to the Bretton Woods Conference that established the post war financial system, including the IMF and the World Bank, working on the creation of NATO, as well as the economic agreements that started the European Common Market, and the E.U., and was one of the key architects of the “containment” policy designed to limit Soviet influence and expansion at a time of great strategic danger for the U.S. He was not the Secretary, but the U.S. recognition of the State of Israel in 1948 by President Truman was one of the major post war foreign policy decisions that helped to shape the new world order. (Both Acheson and General Marshall were opposed) Managing the British retrenchment world wide, especially in the Middle East, started with Truman and Acheson. He managed the German question, but was also responsible for concluding the peace treaty with Japan, helping to craft the post war order in that vital part of the world. Acheson designed the process that effectively prevented the Soviets from derailing the treaty, or making changes that would have been inimical to U.S. interests. His work there was outstanding, and is still being felt in a positive way today.

This book is very long, and could have benefitted from the omission of many minor details. Acheson is exceedingly deferential to President Truman but is not afraid to highlight areas of disagreement with his boss. He is less deferential to FDR, with whom he had some major areas of disagreement. I read this book the old fashioned way as it was not available on Kindle. Despite the length I am happy to have read it, and recommend it to those interested in how the post World War II world order was established. Acheson was a major intellectual force in the development of that order, and certainly one of the most impactful Secretaries in U.S. history.

Christopher says

I was thrilled to receive this book from the collection of one of my favorite history professors who was retiring at the time he gave it to me. Now, having finished reading this incredible memoir, I now realize what a wonderful gift this was to receive at all. Mr. Acheson's recollection of his years in the State Department from 1941 to 1953 is incredibly concise, but hardly ever boring. There are a few key aspects of this book that make it so wonderful to read: first, since Mr. Acheson chose to focus on his years in the State Department rather than on a general autobiography, there is more room to focus on all aspects of the diplomacy he dealt with during this period. In fact, if had added personal details about his life, it would have defeated the whole purpose of the book. The second key is his focus on personal diplomacy. In a book devoted solely to U.S. foreign policy, it can be very easy to get bogged down in minutiae. But by focusing on the personal diplomacy he conducted with his counterparts and other governmental figures (foreign and domestic) around the world, the reader gets a truer picture of how diplomacy is conducted than any other book on foreign policy that I have read. Plus, you have the added bonus of Mr. Acheson's short vignettes of important public

figures provides a key source of information on the important movers at the beginning of the Cold War. And finally, nearly every topic is covered meticulously, leaving a key record for Cold War historians to pore over in the future. I will say that the first 100 or so pages, when Mr. Acheson was Assistant Secretary of State during World War II, is a little dull as it appears that Mr. Acheson's duties only dealt with economic diplomacy, a relatively dull subject even in war. But once he becomes Congressional liaison, then Under Secretary, and finally Secretary of State, then it becomes hard to put down. I highly recommend this to anyone interested in Cold War diplomacy.

Kaitlin Oujo says

This was a serious commitment, but worth every second. I read straight through and thought I would be punishing myself, but I really enjoyed the experience of being taken through this man's career from his perspective. Really fascinating, a true must-read if you are a foreign policy junkie.
