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Dean Acheson

Washington, D.C.

August 1, 1957

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Interview with Dean Acheson by Forrest C. Pogue at former's office, Union Trust Bldg.
Washington, Thursday morning, August 1, 1957.

(Mr. Acheson's manner was free and open. Only occasional oddity of speech ('I swotted up').
Speech concise but not British to my ear. Obviously confident of his place in history. Not aloof.
In no case apologetic, (No angularity in face).

Had photos of Churchill and Truman together, of Hull, Marshall and Vinson.
(One of Holmes and Brandeis).

I spoke of seeing photo of Churchill and Truman in Kansas City. He said he understood it was now in museum. He said he liked the ones of Marshall and Hull. The Vinson one was a photo of a painting. I mentioned Vinson's great pol strength in Kentucky where I came from. Said he wasn't surprised. That Vinson had kind of approach and appeal which should help him in politics. Said he was great friend of Vinson but that the chief justiceship was a bad appointment. I said I was sorry at Vinson's death, but if he were going to die it may have been good for the country. I said I had not been too hopeful about Warren. I gather he was not hopeful yet. He said last great chief justice was Hughes. He knew that important thing was not what you like or think is right, but what is the law. (I said present situation is obverse of set-up under Roosevelt. Court going contrary to views of Congress in liberal way as the Nine Old Men went contrary to Congress views in the 1930's. Difference is that head of the court now is appointee of the President. May have spared us gt attack on court. I mentioned Lawrence's views. Said he hadn't seen them, but was sure they were terrible. I said O'Connor had said much the same and he gave a disgusted look. He said indeed this was obverse of sit in 30s.)

Went back to his own situation at time Byrnes came in. Resigned and was ready to go up to be with daughter at Saranac. Vinson found that he had resigned and went to Truman and Byrnes and said you are letting the only man go who knows anything about the situation in the State Dept. So he came over and said Truman wanted me to stay. I already had nice letters from Byrnes and Truman accepting resignation. So I stayed on, more or less to be acting Secretary of State while Byrnes was travelling.

Byrnes appointment was a bad one. He wasn't Interested in State Dept. And like many lawyers or politicians who come into the State Dept. he had one project which interested him. (Hull was the same). They were ready for the other 7000 people in State to go off on their own and everything went around in circles. (I said Byrnes apparently considered himself superior to Truman and didn't bother to pay much attention to him. Mr. A. said yes).

I didn't succeed any getting much organizing because of that man Russell Byrnes put in. (He is President of S. C. Univ. now). I would say something someone wouldn't like and they would take it to Russell and he would say or pay no attention to hire and I'll take care of it.

Now, about the China Mission. One day I was told Gen Marshall would head it. I went to a meeting with Mr. Truman and the General and General said I want a rear echelon. Mr. T. said what is that? Gen M said I want someone who will take care of things for me back here. So Mr. Truman said that's Acheson.

Then the General said he would like to have an officer assigned to State Dept. who would act as sort of liaison. I thought a Col Jim Davis would be good. But he was one of Hilldring's men. Hilldring was a good friend of mine, but he was not a man who would give up his executive officer. So I said to Gen M, I know a man, but I don't think you can get him. He said where he is. I said Hilldring has him. (I knew that Gen Marshall had saved Hilldring's active career during the war when his heart went bad). So Gen Marshall said I think I can do something. He called up and said this is Marshall. Do you know a man named Davis? Hilldring said he is my executive officer. Marshall said I need him will you have him transferred. And he was. Later Pat Carter took his place. Hilldring saw me a few days later and called me a g d sob. I pretended I knew nothing about it.

Here Mr. Acheson said that he had spent some time at School of Adv Internatl Studies (this in July 53) talking over things with Harriman, Kennan, Feis, Rusk, Jessup and several others and they had taped statements. Said he would let me have them; which he did. Says he has no papers; I figured I was in for a stormy time when I left State Dept. so I took no chances on violating some statute and ending up in Leavenworth or Lewisburg, so I took nothing. (He let me have two folders of statements).

As to Marshall's directive, a number of people in War Dept. and State worked on it. Gen Marshall was terribly busy with Pearl Harbor inquiry and had little time to work on directive. He did sit in with War Dept. planners some, and undoubtedly agreed with views of people there, but thinks he was too busy to have worked much on draft.

State made a draft; then Army made a counter draft; then we made another and final directive had some of all. No controversy; the usual sort of thing which comes when two different groups work on a thing. Army wanted something more precise than State was writing up. Probably resulted in getting a more specific directive. The original probably had a little too much of we think Chiang Kai-shek is a fine fellow, but if he doesn't behave kick him in the ass.

Truman told me he had asked Marshall to go over; give him what he needs. I was pretty ignorant on China. I hadn't studied the situation. I don't know how much Gen Marshall knew about the subject then.

There was a general view on the part of people who had been in China-- Army and State-- this not a pro Communist view-- Wedemeyer shared it although now he pretends he didn't--that Chiang Kai-shek was not the man. I took their view. Not true that pro-Communists drafted Marshall's directive. Vincent not pro-Communist.

Wedemeyer didn't think Chiang was any good. He wanted Chiang to stay south of the Yellow River and consolidate and then years later go to Manchuria. He warned Chiang against over-extending. (In here somewhere Acheson said Hurley was a character out of a comic strip).

I once asked Leighton Stuart and Feis if they thought we might have saved China. They said if a good bit earlier than when we started, we had decided to send men and massive sums of money and if we had made clear that Chiang could have title but be our puppet, we might have. Chiang

would have had to follow our orders and kept his word. But he wouldn't have kept his word to be our puppet.

Says he thinks he had only one talk with Marshall alone. Was in some confs with him and others. Did not sell Marshall on directive and neither did Vincent. Marshall did not fight directive which was given him. Acheson not responsible for directive; a number of people involved.

When General came back in April 46 two great phases achieved: one a truce and executive headquarters--the one Byroade was head of--he was good man--and negotiations on integration of troops and demobilization started. On the military side of matters I thought the General was remarkable; amazing how he got them to go along. May have been helped by the fact that each side, feeling that it didn't intend to keep its word, willingly agreed. The military was something he thoroughly understood.

On the political side matters took on a complexity an oriental complexity--which was somewhat foreign to the General's thinking. Things tended to escape from his control--he got lost in the trees--he didn't know where he was going. There was a geometric progression of confusion and complexity. One side would make a proposal. The other would say, we won't say no, but here are 3 amendments. The other fellow would say I have six amendments to that. And the other would say I have ten. After a while one had not the faintest idea of where he was. We needed someone who knew the Far East and the Communist mentality who might have said we aren't getting anywhere. Let's reappraise all this and see where we are. Chiang Kai-shek was confusing matters by breaking his promises. He kept over-extending himself until he got licked.

My impression is that from April 1946 until the end of the Mission things were out of control. The General didn't have the same sureness and deftness he had on so many things.

Interesting point: One day Marshall sent cable saying he needed an ambassador and that Wedemeyer was the boy. Truman had me in and he said we promised him we would give him what he wants, so it is Wedemeyer. He had Wedemeyer in and said it was all right with him. Then much later we got another cable from Gen Marshall and he said not Wedemeyer but Leighton Stuart. (Acheson said I didn't want either one). President said OK. Tell Wedemeyer the deal is off. I said thought you were the commander in chief, but I notice that you are having me do this. He said you go ahead. So I told Wedemeyer I must say he was fine about it. I noticed there was something bothering him and I asked him. He said on the strength of the cable he had practically bought out Brooks brothers in evening clothes, cutaways and the like. I said don't worry, just send the bill to us. We have a confidential account, which isn't audited. He said what will I do with the clothes. I said keep them, they won't fit anyone else. So he still has the wardrobe paid for out of the account.

Gen Marshall sent his reports back through Army channels to pentagon. They sent them to Carter who immediately brought a copy to President and one to me. I had told Gen Marshall that I would at once stop whatever I was doing and see to the messages. Carter used discretion and bothered me at once only if it was imperative, but when it was I was taken out of conference or from my desk to deal with it. If critical we would act a once. It was not put in the general chain of distribution of the State Dept. If it got to the Secretary that was terrible. It would go to his In

basket and Cassie Conner wouldn't know what to do with it. Byrnes didn't want to see the things. Sometime he would talk to me about the general progress but that was all. (If messages were put in regular circulation there were so many copies made, it got to be a great security problem. The security problem was terrible. The White House was about as secure as a sieve. Pat Carter would take the copies back after Mr. Truman read. My copy was available to the Secretary of State.

Toward the end of 1946 I began to notice something mysterious about the messages which indicated something as happening I didn't know about. It got very intriguing, so I said to Pat Carter what is this. He said you might find it a good idea to take it up with Mr. Truman. The President said haven't I told you? When Eisenhower went over I told him to tell Marshall I would have to make a change and asked if he would take the secretaryship of state. Gen Marshall agreed. I thought to myself here is a mess. I am going to get caught between my boss, who doesn't like the President, and the President. Here I know that my boss (Byrnes) is going to get the bum's rush and he doesn't know about it. I thought someone will try to pin a rose on me. I said to Mr. T I'm sorry I asked you now.

I went to see Mr. Byrnes and gave him my resignation for a later date. He said "What's this" and I said something about wanting to get out. Byrnes said that is a good idea. So in a day or two he said that doctor had told him he had a heart murmur and he wrote out a resignation. He took it over to White House, but brought mine back. Said Mr. Truman not interested in accepting resignation at that time, and he (Byrnes) didn't want to drop mine on him too.

(This followed the rumors about a row between Truman and Byrnes over Byrnes's handling of affairs. Byrnes had tended to act without reporting to Truman. He cabled me back from Moscow to get radio facilities ready for a speech. I thought I had better tell Truman. He didn't like it. Later he talked with Byrnes. I got two versions. Truman said they had a row; Byrnes said everything's fine. Mr. Truman tended to get straight to the point if he didn't like something).

Soon after Byrnes took over resignation there were a number of news stories on retirement of Byrnes. There were notes about a row, about a resignation and the like. For a time Byrnes had a habit of having Chip Bohlen, Russell, Cohen and me to come in at the close of the day and have some I. W. Harper, which he kept in his bathroom, with him. He sometimes got pretty tight. He would talk about various things. About this time he would mention occasionally rumors. Russell said Matt Connolly started them. Byrnes said nothing to them because no one was mentioned as secretary. Said no one they could appoint. Who would they get: Tom Connolly. Since I was mentioned as a possibility, I didn't feel like stating bow about Marshall?

On the 6th or 7th of January 1947 there was a story about Marshall. That evening going to the White House for a diplomatic reception I met Byrnes near the stairs. Byrnes said the Marshall thing worries me. I talked to Pat Carter and I think he knows more than he is saying. About that time someone said congratulations, Mr. Secretary, I hear you are going to lay your burdens down. Then they added something about Gen Marshall succeeding him. So he got the word at the White House, but not from the President. I must say he put on a good show, and acted as if he knew it all the time. Mr. Truman said only one or two curt sentences to him and no one could tell there was anything unusual.

I said do you think Gen Marshall was best choice for State at that time. (He had earlier said he doubted if anyone else could have done better under the circumstances in China). He said he was sure that Marshall was best choice possible. Had stature; cut off reaction politically to Byrnes leaving- if there had been any.

I said here would anyone have done better on China Mission. No. Perhaps we might have covered the retreat better. I said there are those in State and elsewhere who think that the General because of age or lack of knowledge or preparation dropped the ball near the end. He said the figure of speech is wrong. There was no ball to drop.

He said if we had been interested in keeping out of trouble, like Ike, rather than in trying to do the job, we could have kept out of trouble by putting it on someone else. As a matter of fact the 80th Congress was awfully lucky it didn't have the whole thing put on them. He had a speech prepared for MacMahon to give just before he got sick and died. He was going to demand the full text and that would have blown the roof off the 80th Congress. MacMahon got sick. Fulbright didn't have enough guts to give it. Also didn't have the standing. From the time China was talked, Cabot Lodge, Vandenberg and others were opposed to troops in China. The Republicans were cutting down on our money. If we wanted to cover our retreat, we could have demanded more money and troops and the Republicans would have been left with the colored baby.

At the end I asked if it was true, as Beal quotes McCardle in saying that Bradley said Acheson didn't work with Defense. Acheson said little done in that direction and that he worked closely with them. I said that Gen Bradley had told me a few days ago that Acheson spent hours with them.

(On earlier question of whether Marshall candid when he said he did not write his directive, he said he thought Marshall spoke with perfect candor.