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Dean Acheson

Washington, D.C.

October 2, 1957

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Interview with former Secretary of State Dean Acheson at his Washington office, Union Trust Bldg, October 2, 1957, by Forrest C. Pogue.

I noted briefly talks I had been having with Caughey, Hutchin, Gen Hull and others on the China Mission. I mentioned that they had no reserves about loyalty of Vincent but one did on Sprouse. He said he had no reservations. Possibly reserve about judgment of several.

Mr. Acheson said that one great trouble was that State Dept had fine Chinese specialist but few Soviet specialists. As a result they knew what was wrong with China, but didn't understand what Communists might do. Initially, their whole interest was in trying to get China to fight the Japanese. Chiang Kai-shek's attitude was the U. S. is going to have to win the war for us. So we will hold back, watch the Communists, save our stuff for later. We in State Dept. were cheerleaders for the United States in the fight against Japan. That was our main problem. Perhaps we should have looked beyond the war.

He said "The thing that impresses me is how little all of us knew all the way through." Said he was talking about that in his book. Take the decisions on Korea. They were the best we could think of at the time. There was a vast extent of what we did not know. I asked it was lack of intelligence. He said it wasn't that; it was lack of past experience. In part it was lack of confidence. I have been impressed with Churchill--who is assertive and confident about damn near everything. He is wrong about half the time, but he was confident. Now I was a person who kicked people into decisions, but I was not always certain. However, as I have said to Mr. Brandeis (I understand him to say he said it instead of the other way around) the moment you are 51 per cent certain, you have to be 100 per cent certain. You can't take up the roots of a thing every five minutes to see if it is growing. As I have said several times to people, once you have gone into a power dive it is too late to change.

I don't take the slightest pride in the MacArthur deal. Not one person--I, George Marshall, the Jt Chiefs--had the faintest belief that he was doing what he ought to do. What could we do? You may say we were grave failures? I would say you could make out a good case. I don't think any of us did very well. All of us were staying in our proper sphere--decency, law. Good teamwork, call it what you will--except MacArthur. It gave him the same power as the USSR has in a world where everyone is subject to restrictions except them.

I can remember Ridgway showing us the position of MacArthur's forces on the map and the sheer horror of the picture--the US forces in 8 or 9 separate units, totally unconnected and beyond their supplies. What do you do? Everybody was inhibited. The whole was the sum of its parts and something was missing.

I was shocked and horrified. So was Gen Marshall. I would say what are we going to do? Marshall refused to give a military judgment. He insisted on sitting on the civilian side of the table with me and would say no military judgments from me. What do we do? We are 17,000 miles away from the battle. We don't know the terrain except that it is bad. There were two things--Marshall said them a dozen times--(1) the way we have operated since the Spanish war is to trust the commander in the field (actually may go back to Grant). (This meant telling the commander what to do and what he had to do it with and saying go do it brother. You don't say

send this division here or there or use these supplies. Churchill does that and gets everything bollixed up). (2) We either relieve MacArthur or we leave it up to him.

It seemed to all of us that MacArthur had defied pretty clear (perhaps not as clear as they might have been) directives of 22d and 30th September by the JCS to stay in the southern part of North Korea.

What should we do? The soldiers say relieve him or not?

We thought it was dangerous, since the army was in a terrible position and his successor would have a hell of a thing. Then I would say to myself what do I do? I couldn't make the decision. I was afraid to do it. I would talk to the President three times a week. I would tell him each time that I was petrified at what I saw. My views are about those of the military advisers but I don't know what to say. Here are a lot of men who are certainly not unintelligent about these things and we are faced with a question which is insoluble with MacArthur in command. (But in history the thing which makes it hard is the thing which makes it hard).

The problems we had making decisions about Korea were involved in the China business. That is why I am talking on about this.

I read a piece in the AIR UNIVERSITY QUARTERLY REVIEW--intelligent criticism--by a man who believes that the commitment of four more divisions and pressing of counterattacks and limited bombing in Manchuria would have produced victory. Probably right. I don't know. But we didn't have the four divisions. Bradley was saying "watch yourself; what if they are sucking us in so they can hit us in Western Europe." Hoyt Vandenberg was saying you have all the air you need over there and I will not weaken SAC. Here are the difficulties. I won't say we were right. But the right solution was not so obvious at the time. It is easier now to see all the things. But Churchill would have done something--with assertiveness.

So far as what I thought about the China Mission. There was only an off chance that anyone was going to pull off the task which the Mission undertook. Both the Central Government and the Communists were trying to use negotiations as a base for maneuver.

People had more hope about success than they are now likely to admit. Chiang wanted us to push the discussions with the Communists. Once we had picked up these discussions (not ours but Chiang's) the best thing to do was to go along. Particularly since there appeared to be no alternative.

We got more hopeful after Gen Marshall's early success in the armistice arrangements and apparently saw on his talks about the fusion of the military.

We talked generally here and I asked if he felt that there really was no chance for success since neither side could give in. He said it thought it was right that the Communists couldn't have made concessions.

At this time we made the mistake of thinking there was a useful guiding analogy in the Communist activities in Western Europe. In both France and Belgium there were strong Communist movements which had been active in the underground. The Communists had entered the local governments--largely with the idea that they would get power--and had created a coalition. They had been beaten. We said if Chiang has sense and the heavier battalions he can absorb them.

He [Acheson] added the thing we left out was something you indicated a few minutes ago. We forgot that these were two countries and not two parties. I noted that USSR was in a better position to give material aid in case of Chinese Communists and he said yes.

I noted that one general had told me he was not certain that the Communists Initially were completely in the Stalinist camp or, vice versa. Acheson agreed. He said he was impressed by report of Stalin's conversation with Tito in 1948, as reported in that biography of Tito called Goliath or something. Tito said Stalin said he had been telling the Chinese comrades they had better join up and then later take over. They had disagreed and they had been proved right. Louis Fischer said that the Yalta agreement and other things had indicated to Stalin that Chiang was on top in China. That he thought we would be more ruthless than we were in backing Chiang.

I said that 'many people say that Marshall may have not hurt Chiang in 1946, since Chiang held the major cities at the end of the China Mission, but they felt that Marshall might have done more in the 1947-49 period. Acheson said I asked Leighton Stuart once whether we should have thrown our full strength to Chiang in late 1946 and early 1947 (Stuart was sick and he liked to come and talk, so I asked him about this). I said assuming that everything was OK to VJ day; was there anything we could have done after that which would have changed things. He said that there was only one thing that was possible and there were ifs. If Marshall had said at the close of his Mission we will give unlimited financial and unlimited military support and we will do this on condition we put in advisers in every part of the government. If you can imagine that either China or the US would have agreed to this arrangement. But Chiang would never have kept this agreement. Operations would have gotten out of our control and we would have been at odds with him.

I said but should we have accepted him as he was and tried to use him. Acheson said he did not believe that there was ever a point in the area of practicality where whatever should have been done could have been done. The question of whether Marshall or someone else should have waited a month longer, or given more money (say several billions) or sent troops or done a dozen other things leads to an argument over details of the treatment of an incurable disease. Chiang Kai-shek was doomed. He was doomed by hopeless incapacity, by the corruption of his government, by the past. Perhaps a Government should play a thing out to its end and leave it to the breaks of fate. However whether we did or not is unimportant and would have had no effect on the end result. Acheson said he left the State Dept in July 1947 and did not know the whole story after that. However earlier he had discussions on China policy with the Senate Committee. My judgment is that what Gen Marshall and Lovett and I recommended in the way of aid was always reduced under what we recommended. I doubt if an impassioned speech by the President would have done any good. I told you that before MacMahon died we talked of having him try

to force the release of secret information given before the Senate Committee. He was to pick up a speech of Connolly and prove up to the hilt that Vandenberg, Lodge and others said there we should take no military responsibility in China whatsoever. Of course Pat McCarran and a few crazy people wanted to give several billions. They did finally give \$150 million to Chiang to do with as he liked.

Henry Luce probably actuated by his early years in China. Most stubborn man I ever saw.

Doesn't blame McCarthy as much as he does Taft. Hoped to benefit politically. I said he wanted the Presidency too much, didn't he? Mr. Acheson agreed.

We talked about what Dulles had said in campaign. Says showed defects in his character.

Mr. A. said write calmly and from a wealth of facts when you touch the China Mission. Try to see if you can see the hearings. You have already seen more secret stuff than that. Get Wilcox to help you. Maybe we can get Green to help. You don't have to quote them. Write with authority and just say if the Committee will publish its hearings you will see that I am right. Wedemeyer could be proved to be a liar. Write so that people will say I never thought of it that way before.

I asked about the part Vandenberg played in a lot of this. He said that Vandenberg most important. Had no liking for Roosevelt. Trusted Mr. Truman more. Relations with Gen Marshall and me friendly, but no particular warmth. Great personal feeling for Lovett. Perhaps influenced by Hoyt Vandenberg. The Senator said, however, that Mr. Hull was responsible for his chant.

Said he helped Joseph Jones with his THE FIFTEEN WEEKS book. Details pretty well right. Says it is right about the fact that Marshall had little to do with Greece or Turkey. Big thing was that he told me not to allow its effect on his mtg at Moscow have anything to do with it. Thinks probable that Truman didn't know what Marshall was going to say at Harvard. Never dared ask quite. Says difficult to put your finger on who did what first, since the idea that we had to do something was in the air. It is just like saying one man wrote the Declaration of Independence. Many people wanted such a thing. (I mentioned that Gen Marshall told me of getting info from Bohlen and Kennan.) He said yes, but there were many others working on these things, but he may have felt that these were the only ones.

My Cleveland, Miss. speech was not the forerunner of the Harvard speech except in the sense that John the Baptist was a forerunner. I said we had to help. The big things in Marshall's were (1) that they would get together and tell us what they needed and (2) to invite Russia in. Some did not want Russia in. Said they would destroy it. Marshall felt they must be invited.

We didn't have a copy of the speech in our hands an hour before Marshall left. Marshall kept working on the draft. I finally called, Pat Carter and got a carbon and then had him see the General and read me the final thing. We didn't have the release ready for the press for hours.

Acheson talked with three British correspondents--Muggeridge (later of Punch), and someone else and told them to send everything on the speech; that it was important. One fellow--a chap named Balfour--treated it like a usual commencement address and sent it by ship. Bevin got it from the press and talked to the Foreign Office people. They said how about checking and seeing if it means what we hope or think it does. Kevin said no. That is not the point. It is enough he has suggested it. We will take it from there

(Gen comments-- Acheson looks like the man the Times-Herald showed him to be. Chipmunkish mouth; Br Guards Officer mustache; Ivy League clothes, not too well pressed. His speech is not too clipped; has a few oaths, some bits of slang, and a little vulgarity. Warm and human when he warms up. Pronounced in views and not mealy-mouthed. Strong on other people's faults and strong on his own. Is well read--quoted from several recent books. Type of man who could quote Plato and not seem self-conscious. His fine tape recorded statement on Gen Marshall filled with talk of honor and integrity seemed right and I felt that some of it applied to Acheson. However, he has a lawyer's sense of how to win a point and put it over. Seems to enjoy talking; not aloof; puts one at ease, with the result that I talk more than I should. Extremely outspoken about Chiang Kai-shek's incapacity. No mention of Eisenhower at any time in his talk. I saved the question of the removal of MacArthur until later. Spoke several times of the work of Herbert Feis)

I asked if he or others influenced Marshall much. Said absolutely not; that they gave him advice only when he asked and that was very little. Was clear from Truman that Marshall was to run the thing as he thought best.

I asked if perhaps some of the younger men in China may have been either pro-Communist or if they may have been fooled into thinking that Communists represented liberalism because Chiang was undemocratic. He said he would be more inclined to think they were activists who thought they were being realistic in assuming that Chiang was a blunt cutting edge with which to operate.