

Every other inch a diplomat

Fragments of My Fleece

By Dean Acheson.

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Reviewed by GEORGE W. BALL

Since I enjoyed Dean Acheson's friendship for almost four decades I am tempted, in reviewing his final book, to write not a critical comment but a memoir. The temptation is particularly compelling because the book so vividly evokes the flavor of the man. Unlike *Present at the Creation*, it is not major autobiographical history; nor like his earlier books is it a sustained argument about politics or foreign policy. Rather, it is a collection of what used to be called "occasional writings"—speeches, toasts, magazine articles, and little sketches or vignettes that the author rather whimsically chose to call "stories."

Yet, as this potpourri makes clear, Dean Acheson put the stamp of his strong personality on whatever he touched, revealing in everything he did or said a remarkable consistency. What he left on "the hedges of life" were not so much fragments of a fleece as bits of a finely woven garment in which one can invariably find certain threads, endlessly repeated and intertwined: candor and respect for excellence, frequently expressed as a disdain for cheapness, cant, and hypocrisy; a love of life and a lively interest in people; a refusal to confuse dullness with virtue, pomposity with wisdom, or solemnity with seriousness. This is a book filled with samples of that cloth.

It is tempting to sum up these qualities as "style"—though the word has acquired special coloration from its association with Camelot. But if one puts aside the overlay of the past decade, it is a word that comes easily when one thinks of Dean Acheson—provided, of course, it is taken in its larger meaning. "Style," wrote Schopenhauer, "is the physiognomy of the mind," and the physiognomy of Dean Acheson looked on the world with amused detachment, observing events not as discrete occurrences but as interrelated incidents in the long flow of history. Style for him was more than grace in writing or living—though he mastered both arts superbly—it was, in addition and most important, a mature coming to terms with life.

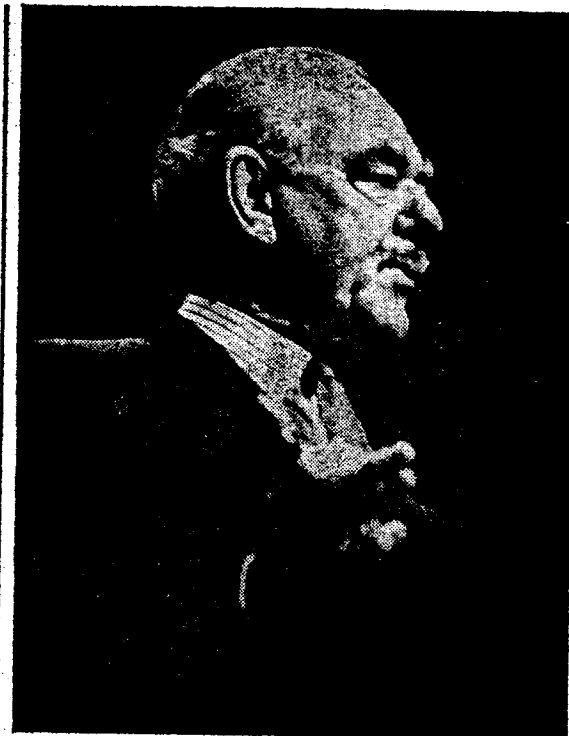
It meant, among other things, never hesitating to use a machete on the undergrowth of posturing and piety that turns so many of our public institutions into a damp swamp-land—a practice that often got him in trouble with

a specialized breed of conservationists. Thus, for example, in his famous speech reprinted in this volume entitled "The Arrogance of International Lawyers," he cut to bits the United Nations Security Council's decision to impose economic sanctions on Southern Rhodesia on the pretense that Rhodesia's declaration of independence from Great Britain created a "threat to the peace." Of course, the speech was received with outrage.

Yet, though Dean Acheson knew the joy of intellectual

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combat, this was not just *pour le sport*. As a lawyer who revered his profession, he could not stand to see the UN Charter—or any organic document—grotesquely misconstrued for a political purpose, while, as a seasoned practitioner of diplomacy and foreign policy, he was repelled by wordy resolutions aimed not at achieving a desired result but at giving the actors a moral glow.

Dean Acheson was an eminently practical man who did not like to waste rhetoric or resources in gestures, and his fundamental reservations about the United Nations resulted not merely from the belief that universalism was no substitute for the realities of power but also from the UN's tendency to institutionalize sanctimony. Thus, even had

there been a sound juridical base for the imposition of economic sanctions against Rhodesia, Dean Acheson would have opposed such action. In spite of the smug assurances of Prime Minister Harold Wilson that sanctions would produce a "quick kill," he knew they would only make the Rhodesians more obdurate and confirmed in their misbegotten racial policies—and five years of experience have proved him right.

"History repeats itself," wrote Philip Guedalla, "historians repeat one another"—but journalists offend more often than even historians. Repeatedly I have seen in obituary comments variations on the pronouncement that Dean Acheson "was the last living man to believe in power," as though after thousands of years the *cognoscenti* had finally discovered that power was out of season.

This is the kind of vapid talk that drew Dean Ache-

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son's scorn. He had lived too long, seen too much, and faced too many crises to hold a childish faith in the New Jerusalem. "In our relations with the world around us," he said in a speech reprinted in this book,

we can see—if we will only open our eyes—that one of the ideas we have discussed must be a guiding principle. Power can be limited only by counter-balancing power. Without that, treaties, international organizations, and international law are of no use whatever. The possessor of unopposed or unopposable power can sweep them aside and make his will law.

Such a view, he recognized, was often "regarded as

backward-looking, inflexible and unimaginative," but, he wrote, "do not let us worry about that. All this was said about the great ideas and actions which made their contributions to the prelude" to the independence of America.

If that was an unpopular idea when Dean Acheson made his speech sixteen years ago, it is rank heresy today, but for him the truth was not to be found through Gallup Rolls or in the fashion pages, but from logic and experience.

Yet, if he believed in the need to limit power by counter-balancing power, he by no means favored using force uncritically, nor was he unaware of the limitations of physical power. Large parts of the world were for him of only marginal strategic interest to the United States—areas where we should studiously avoid involvement—and, though he has been referred to as a hawk with regard to Vietnam, he recognized at an early point the need for a political solution. In fact, when I was in the State Department, in late April or early May of 1965 Dean Acheson spent three weeks at my request preparing a plan of action "for achiev-

ing our objectives in South Vietnam by shifting the struggle from the military to the political arena." This plan, which called for the South Vietnamese government to initiate programs of amnesty and social and political reconstruction "designed to invite the peaceful participation of Viet Cong adherents in the national life," had the purpose of substituting "political activity" for a "shooting war in one after another of the provinces of South Vietnam." Together with an able Washington lawyer named Lloyd Cutler, he developed it in meticulous detail and with brilliant insight.

Unhappily, like other peace-seeking efforts, it foundered because of Vietnamese weakness. Our representatives on the spot would agree to nothing that involved putting pressure on a Saigon regime too fragile to be coerced.

Undoubtedly, as he grew on in years, Dean Acheson came to enjoy his studied role as old curmudgeon who was no longer required to suffer fools gladly; yet he was always a scold with a purpose, refusing to yield an inch either to the moralists or the wishful thinkers. For he was a man with tastes of a high standard who did not share the present-day tendency to rate mush as intellectual haute cuisine.

But I must not give the impression that this is primarily a book of controversy. It is much more than that, offering something for all moods. It is, in a sense, the thoughtful conversation of a wise and witty man. It is a book of special appeal to lawyers, since it contains two or three chapters filled with penetrating constitutional analysis, but there is much here also that should be read by statesmen, newspaper editors, and columnists.

It is also a book for political scientists, since it contains comments not merely on our early constitutional experience, but also the earlier British experience that had helped to shape it. For, as was essential to any good legal scholar, Dean Acheson had a deep feeling for history. I almost wrote "a sense of history," but he would have thought that no compliment. To him "a sense of history" could be "a dangerous weakness in a public man" since, as the phrase is currently used, it implies that one plans his actions "in order to appear well in a great pageant of human life reaching back into the mists and moving on into the clouds." In other words, a "sense of history" was all too often "a form of concern with oneself or, in the vulgarized synonym, one's image." For that he borrowed a phrase from a *New Yorker* cartoon: "It's spinach and to hell with it." □