

Department of History
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Modernization of the State Department: Changes from FDR to Dean Acheson

1945-1953

Kyle Schwan

Cooperating Professor: Oscar Chamberlain

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Abstract

This capstone looks at and analyzes the changes in organization and administration of the United States Department of State from the middle of the 1940's through 1953. Looking at the organization of the State Department during these years will show the influence World War II had on the Department as well as how the Department grew in order to manage all of the new areas of interest of the United States Government. Along with this it looks at the role that each Secretary of State played in making changes to the State Department especially the decisions and actions taken by Dean Acheson. Official State Department documents along with Congressional records are used as well as the personal accounts of various people including Dean Acheson.

Introduction

As the United States was regrouping from World War II it needed to decide what to do with the massive war machine that had been created in order to be victorious. In many cases this war machine was dismantled and departments were disbanded. However, one department grew and grew exponentially due to the fact that the United States had been thrust into the front of world politics and world economics. This department was now required to oversee the entire world and assess any threats to itself and its allies. The department that was charged with the daunting task trying to keep up with the growth of the United States as a world superpower was the State Department.

The State Department is an ever changing department that has undergone numerous reorganizations. During the Second World War the State Department was small and undervalued however it grew and became one of the largest departments in the Government. The administrations of Franklin D. Roosevelt¹ and Harry Truman did a lot to change the shape and size of the State Department. Both of these men varied in how they used their own respective State Departments. Roosevelt dealt with issues himself and thus diminished the prestige of the State Department whereas Truman allowed the State Department to function on its own without his day to day control and input. Along with that numerous other people played a role in changing the State Department during this time and bringing it into its standing as a prestigious and honorable department of the government. The people who had a hand in these changes

¹ Throughout the paper I try to be as consistent as possible however whenever mentioned FDR and Roosevelt are the same person and stand for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

include Edward Stettinius and Dean Acheson to name a few. The State Department of the United States is a very powerful organization and without the transition it made from 1945 to 1953 due to the changing world political climate the department would have never been brought into the prominence that it has today.

Historiography

One of the most talked about sections of our national history is the years and events that surrounded the FDR and Truman Presidencies. Scholars have analyzed numerous parts of their presidencies and relationships. However, not a lot of work has been done on the overarching ideas and themes that were carried over and carried out from FDR to Truman. Numerous scholars including Jean Edward Smith and his biography on Roosevelt focus on his many decisions including the navigation of the Second World War. There is an evident change in the status of the State Department from FDR to Acheson. This change is rarely discussed and is often overlooked. Most scholars including Robert Ferrell who is one of the leading scholars on Truman skip the transition period and focus on either the dropping of the atomic bombs or how he handled the Cold War. My scholarship works to this gap that exists in the literature. The transition that occurred from Roosevelt to Truman was by no means easy on anyone and numerous decisions needed to be made in a short period of time after Truman came into power. By analyzing the changes that occurred and by showing how they were carried out from one administration to the next I hope to show how that this Transition played a large role in what happened. Along with this I also hope to show that the changes occurring in the State Department that coincided with Truman overtaking

power led to a revolutionized State Department that could deal with world events going forward.

The FDR Years and “Old State”

To begin to analyze the changes in the State Department we must look at the position the department was in before the changes started to take place. The State Department was not always the foremost area of decision making when it came to foreign policy. The State Department was a division of the government that had, over time, been neglected and had become dilapidated. This is evident even in the building that they occupied. “With the Bureau of the Budget it shared the old State, War and Navy Building...and had bureaus scattered all over town.”² By sharing the building with numerous other departments and not having a consolidated office, made communication within the department very difficult. The building also being that it was old had numerous other problems. Dean Acheson who was Assistant Secretary of State and then later Secretary of State when the department was housed in the State, Navy, and War building is known to have said that the building leaked as well as being uncomfortably hot all year round due to poor heating and no air conditioning in the building.³ This goes to show the fact that this important department of the government was not seen as important by the administration of the government. To begin with the administration of the State Department during WWII and the years that Roosevelt was in office, the department saw much control in the hands of Roosevelt himself. Some of

² Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), 9.

³ IBID, 6.

this was out of necessity and yet some was due to Roosevelt being an engaged and controlling leader. Roosevelt was a hands on leader and as Plishke says “President Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, set a record-breaking precedent for personal diplomacy...”.⁴ Plishke also goes on to say that “President Roosevelt, who clearly intended in many respects to be his own Foreign Minister...”⁵ sometimes had a rocky relationship with his Secretary of State. Another great example of this is written by Nicholas Evan Sarantakes. In his article he says “Roosevelt called Undersecretary of State Edward R. Stettinius Jr. to the White House and offered him Hull’s⁶ old post.”⁷ Sarantakes continues “The president said he knew with Stettinius, unlike the other names he considered for the post, that there would be no question about who was in charge. Stettinius agreed and then learned how intent Roosevelt was on controlling foreign policy”⁸ What this means is that Roosevelt had selected his guy that would comply with what he wanted as well as know who was boss. Along with this Roosevelt also at this meeting told Stettinius who all of his undersecretaries were going to be and he basically had no control over approving of them or not.⁹ What this means is that Roosevelt went on trips to deal with diplomacy in foreign countries instead of sending other members of his administration such as the secretary of state. There is nothing wrong with this practice carried out by Roosevelt except for the fact of the effect it has on the State Department. Due to this approach to foreign relations by Roosevelt the

⁴ Elmer Plishke, *U.S. Department of State: A Reference History* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press,1999), 330

⁵ IBID, 278.

⁶ Cordell Hull was the Secretary of State when Roosevelt won election to his fourth term. He was growing ill and decided to resign.

⁷ Sarantakes, *The Politics of Poetry*, 154.

⁸ IBID, 154.

⁹ IBID, 154.

value of the State department is greatly diminished as much of the work it does is in dealing with foreign governments. The department of state was very different from what we think of it today that many of the offices and functions of the modern day State Department were not even in existence. Roosevelt however, liked things this way due to the fact that issues would come to him unresolved and he could ultimately make the decisions.¹⁰ What we saw though is that the State Department was increasing in size and changing shape over time. By looking at the raw numbers we can see the changes that occurred.

The State Department increased in personnel and budgeted dollars throughout the history of the United States. This increase becomes very rapid around the end of WWII. In 1910 the State Department included a meager 234 staff members however by 1939, after the First World War and the imminent outbreak of the Second World War, the number of staff members only numbered 974. This seems like a rather small increase when you consider the number of changes and interests the U.S. has around the world in 1939 compare to 1910. During this period of time numerous things happened around the world including the First World War, the Great Depression, and the rise of communism and the Soviet Union. All of these numerous events needed to be monitored by the U.S. Government in some capacity. In order to keep up with all of these changes and specifically to meet the needs of the Second World War the State department explodes in size until 1945 and at this time includes 3,767 members.¹¹ This exponential growth was due to the outbreak of the Second World War and numerous

¹⁰ Sarantakes, *The Politics of Poetry*, 155.

¹¹ Plishke, *U.S. Department of State*, 308.

offices were created in order to deal with the enormous amounts of intelligence necessary to fight a global war. The expenditures during this period were in contrast to the rising numbers of employees in the State Department. The budget for the State Department in 1940 was rather small at \$24,003,329¹² The reason for this was due to funds being diverted to other places especially for the war effort. We can see that the size of the State Department increased however the increase was small until the middle of WWII when numerous new departments were needed to deal with numerous war time issues.¹³

Dean Acheson who was an Assistant Secretary of State during this time and who later became Secretary of State under Harry Truman said, "With some brilliant exceptions, the bureaucracy was unequipped for appraisals of capability based on quantitative and technical judgments and of intentions..."¹⁴ This comment from Acheson reflecting on his first years in the State Department paints a very interesting picture. All of the functions that we associate with the State Department today were not being carried out and in fact they were not even equipped to carry them out at all.¹⁵ One of the major functions that the State Department does is appraise each country to understand its political climate, economic situation, and military capabilities among other things. Even this essential process was not being carried out by the State Department. This is

¹² David F. Trask, *A Short History of the U.S. Department of State, 1781-1981* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Communications, 1981), 37.

¹³ The number of members in the United States State Department presented in this paragraph include the staff based in Washington D.C. only and does not include any staff of the United States State Department working in foreign offices.

¹⁴ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 16.

¹⁵ The State Department carries out a number of different functions including but not limited to creating reports on foreign countries, relaying messages to congress on matters of foreign affairs, and negotiating treaties or agreements between countries.

astonishing when you think about the fact that Acheson was writing this about the years of 1941-1945. During this time period the United States was in the middle of fighting in WWII and basically any expenditure for war purposes was approved. So an attempt to create an infrastructure that would have adequately served State Departments function as an appraiser of capability would have easily been encouraged. The overarching theme that is present throughout this time period is the activity and want to take matters into his own hands of FDR. FDR took matters of foreign relations that would normally have been carried out by a capable and knowledgeable State Department secretary and staff were done by himself. This control by FDR changed the State Department but when he left office, upon his death, the Department was left to reorganize and adapt to the needs of a new president who had little foreign relations experience.

Changes in the Post FDR Years

After the passing of the longest serving president of all time the United States was left in a precarious situation. It had to figure out a way to end the war and do so without a large loss in American lives. Also the new president was going to be crucial in post-war treaty discussions and the reshaping of Europe and essentially the world. The president that fell into this role and was asked to coordinate all of this activity was Harry Truman. Truman a man from humble beginnings in Missouri who was an unknown when he became vice president and thus president after the death of Roosevelt was put into a difficult situation. President Truman was a smart man and a natural leader. However, his largest shortcoming in performing the laundry-list of tasks that is asked of the president was in matters of foreign affairs. Truman had very little experience with matters of international significance and so he would require a large amount of help

from his State Department to be successful in these matters. Truman relied heavily on his State Department and so the Department needed to make changes in order for this to occur.¹⁶

The pushed to the side State Department as mentioned above was suddenly pressed into a much different role than what they had occupied under President Roosevelt. The man in charge needed more out of the State Department in order to be as effective as possible. One of the first people to try and change the State Department to fit the needs that were being asked of it was Edward Stettinius. Stettinius was the last of Roosevelt's Secretaries of State and so he was in charge of the department when Truman became president. The changes that Stettinius undertook did not begin when he came to be the Secretary of State but rather when he was still an Under Secretary. Being that his hands were tied diplomatically Stettinius turned to other efforts. One thing that Stettinius tried to oversee and change was the organization and structure of the State Department itself. Stettinius had great foresight and understood how neglected the State Department had become. He saw that any changes that the State Department was making were piecemeal and this was making it harder for the department to function as overlap and gaps were created in the carrying out of the State Departments functions. So upon observing this Stettinius, in January 1944, mandated major State Department reorganization.¹⁷ The changes that were mandated by Stettinius including reorganization to departments concerning financial and economic matters to departments concerning administrative matters. Stettinius however, only served as

¹⁶ Donald R. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 1.

¹⁷ Plishke, *U.S. Department of State*, 301.

Secretary of State for seven months, due to the death of Roosevelt and change over to the Truman administration, and never saw these transitions all the way through.¹⁸

The changes that Stettinius put into motion and designed were very important to the transition of the State Department. These changes pushed the department into a more modern organization and helped to deal with the demands of not only Truman but of the changing world political structure. The world had changed, the U.S. was one of the two remaining superpowers in the world, the need to stop communism was rising, and fixing the damages from WWII were just a few of the things that needed to be dealt with. When Truman came to office he decided to have George C. Marshall fill the vacancy that was created by Stettinius's departure. Marshall was an honorable war hero and did his best in dealing with the post-war world political climate as Secretary of State. His most famous act as Secretary of State was the creation of the Marshall Plan. This plan supplied economic aid to people living in Western Europe during the outbreak of the Cold War in an attempt to keep them from becoming Communist countries. Truman selected Marshall to serve as his secretary of state due to his experience. Since Marshall was a general in the army he understood what was necessary in order to repair the scars that had been left by WWII. Marshall moved into a different role as Secretary of Defense when the need to repair damages from the war were not as pressing. The State Department as a whole however did not benefit from its top position being held by Marshall as few reforms or changes in the Department took place. This was due to the massive amount of time that was required in order to oversee the treaty discussions and ratifications at the end of WWII and also with the outbreak of the Soviet

¹⁸Plishke, *U.S. Department of State*, 303.

Union and subsequently the Cold War. The Department did its best to function and was stagnant during this period as far as changes and modernization is concerned. This all ramped up again when Dean Acheson took the position of Secretary of State.

The Truman and Acheson Years

Dean Acheson was a highly respected Secretary of State in the United States and oversaw a department of the government that was on the rebound and need its prestige returned.. The lawyer from Connecticut who spent several years in the Roosevelt State Department was a great diplomat. One of the things that led him to be so successful was his relationship with Truman. Acheson and Truman were friends outside of politics and wrote each other numerous times after they each left office. Their relationship started as purely a means of necessity but as the two kept working in conjunction their personal relationship grew. This relationship helped Truman trust the decisions Acheson made regarding foreign policy issues. They were a formidable duo that had to deal with the start of one of the most impactful events in the history of the United States, the Cold War. Without the leadership of Acheson the United States and the State Department would most certainly not be in the same situation it is today.

Acheson walked into a State Department that had started a reorganization however never finished it due to either failures of leadership or priorities in other areas. All of this combined to put Acheson in a position when he took office that he needed to straighten out. Acheson writes in his autobiography that he needed to undertake a reorganization to help to turn around the “long-suffering institution”.¹⁹ He goes on to say

¹⁹ Acheson, Dean *Present at the Creation*, 254.

“The structural and operating reorganization that took place in stages throughout 1949 was to get lines of command and responsibility clear and simple.”²⁰ All of this work he undertook in order to fulfill the total list of duties that is required of the Department of State were essential. These changes undoubtedly led to the success of Acheson’s reign as head of the Department.

Upon taking office Acheson and with the help of Truman numerous acts were passed in congress which increased the size of the State Department. So in 1949 the State Department was approved to add more Assistant Secretaries to get to a total of 10 and later add 3 more Under Secretaries²¹²². All of these additions were needed in order to deal with the massive amount of information the United States needed to collect in order to protect the American people. Along with this the State Department also moved into a new state of the art building after 1947 which provided ample room for the Department to grow and perform all of the necessary functions we think of the State Department carrying out. One of these tasks was the appraisals of each country that were barely carried out previous to Acheson arriving in office. These appraisals are very important in order to assess what is happening in each country to know if intervention was ever needed on behalf of the United States. This new office space that the department moved into was quite the upgrade compared to the old State, Navy and War Building. The State Department had offices all around the world that needed to be

²⁰ Acheson, *Dean Present at the Creation*, 255.

²¹ Plischke, *U.S. Department of State*, 445.

²² The department grew from 20 to 32 offices. These included numerous geographic offices as well as numerous offices to deal with management including the Undersecretary of Management position. The Office for Global affairs was also set up in order to deal with human rights, environmental, human population and other similar offices.

managed and problems dealt with. As the interests of the United States grew so did the State Department. At the beginning of 1950 the yearly expenditure for the State Department had grown to \$350,855,733²³ which was a large difference when compared to the spending in 1940. This shows that the State Department was employing more people and just simply doing more. The State Department was ramping up and meeting the demands of the post-WWII world.

Conclusion

The victors of the Second World War were put to work immediately after the war trying to pick up the pieces. This required numerous things to happen which included a peace treaty, economic support for allies, and scaling back the massive war machine that had been created. This scaling back was a necessity in almost all departments of the government. The department that could not scale back but instead needed to increase in size was the State Department. The department needed to facilitate the changes that were occurring which is hard enough in and of itself however, it had other hurdles to get over. FDR had pushed the State Department to the side during the war and preferred to deal with matters usually distributed to the State Department himself. The State Department was then left in a position where it needed to restructure but also be at the forefront of the world political arena. This arena included numerous threats to the United States which included in the forefront the rise of communism in the Soviet Union as well as in China. Also attention was needed in order to administrate to a divided Germany and even more divided Berlin. The changes and modernization of the

²³ Trask, *A Short History of the U.S. Department of State*, 37.

State Department was not one person's work. This massive reorganization and expansion would have been impossible to be carried out by one administration or even one Secretary of State. Necessity was one of the largest driving factors that came to influence how fast and what changes took place, if any at all. There were many key players that saw into the future and noticed that the United States was going to have to adapt to keep up with the world as it was being reshaped following WWII. These key players include Edward Stettinius, Harry Truman and Dean Acheson to name a few. The growth of the State Department was visually evident with the construction of a new building, but its most visible sign was its expenditures. Another large change that occurred was the addition of 12 new offices in the State Department. These new offices dealt with a variety of new issues including offices to deal with issues of population, the environment and even international drug issues. All of these new offices were created in order to deal with a new brand of issues that were facing the United States government. As mentioned above these issues included the outbreak of communism, but even newer to the times issues of sustainability and international policing were issues that needed to be monitored and even dealt with. The United States role as a world superpower meant that they needed to insert themselves in the solving of these issues. The Department of State had grown from \$24,003,329 in spending in 1940 to \$350,855,733 in 1950.²⁴ This massive increase in spending shows the growth of the State Department and how it was being pressed into service. The State Department was at a turning point following the Roosevelt administration and it took men with foresight and knowledge to shape a department of the government and set it up for future success. Today we enjoy a State

²⁴ Trask, *A Short History*, 37.

Department that handles numerous political functions. Some of these include negotiating trade agreements, establishing relationships with foreign nations, and even managing situations of human rights abuses. Today's world requires an adequate Department of State that can handle a variety of situations that are thrown at it. The changes that occurred from 1945 to 1953 were pivotal in making sure that the Department of State was able to handle these changes.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

Acheson, Dean. *Official Conversations and Meetings of Dean Acheson (1949-1953)*. Frederick: University Publications of America, 1980.

This primary source I believe will be very valuable. I think it will be the gateway to the agreement or disagreement I am looking for. This source however contains a lot of information and wading through that information will prove to be slightly difficult.

Acheson, Dean. *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970.

This book is the autobiography of Dean Acheson's years in the state department. This book I believe will be very valuable as an insight into Dean Acheson's opinions and ideas. I am hoping this book will give me more information on the relationship and decision making between Truman and Acheson.

Truman, Harry S. *Off the Record. Edited by Robert H. Ferrell*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

This source will be very valuable. It is a collection of the personal and behind the scenes writing Truman did while in office. This book will show the inside feelings and emotions of the president while he is in office. Also the book will show most importantly the feelings Truman had toward Acheson behind closed doors.

Truman, Harry S., and Dean Acheson. *Affection and trust: the personal correspondence of Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson, 1953-1971*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

This book deals with the time directly after both Truman and Acheson are out of office. It will show the feelings the two men had for each other as well as look backs upon their careers and how they felt about things. This book will truly give an insight into their relationship especially at the end of their terms in office.

Truman, Harry S., Ferrell, Robert, H. *The Autobiography of Harry S. Truman*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980.

This book gives a detailed account of Truman's life. It will provide great insight into Truman's life and presidency. Hopefully this book will give insight into the relationship of Truman and Acheson while they were in office.

Secondary Sources:

Anslover, Nicole L. *Harry S. Truman: The Coming of the Cold War*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013.

This book I believe will provide good ground knowledge on the Truman presidency especially his policy surrounding the cold war. This book is very recent and so I am hoping it will include many sources that we now have at our disposal with today's modern technology. This looks to be a great book that takes an in depth look at the decisions Truman had to make.

Beisner, Robert L. *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006

This book gives a lot of information specifically on Acheson and his cold war policies and ideas. Hopefully by digging deeper into this source I can find information on the decision making process surrounding the cold war and the influence that the relationship he has with Truman plays.

Coates, Benjamin A. *Strategists and Rhetoricians: Truman's Foreign Policy Advisers, in A Companion to Harry S. Truman*, ed. D. S. Margolies. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 201.

This book is very interesting as it examines Truman's foreign policy advisers and shows what roles that they played as well as the influence that they showed.

Ferrell, Robert H. *Harry Truman and the Cold war Revisionists*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.

This book which is written by one of leaders in research and expertise on the Truman presidency will greatly improve my understanding of the cold war. This book looks below the surface of history to look at Truman and his response to problems that no one else ever had to deal with.

McCoy, Donald R. *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984.

This book provided me with my background information and basic timeline of information that I needed for Truman's presidency.

Plischke, Elmer. *U.S. Department of State: A Reference History*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999.

This book provides wonderful insight into the facts and figures of the state department over the years. It provided me with the raw data that supplied much of my arguments throughout the paper.

Sarantakes, Nicholas Evan. 1998. "The Politics and Poetry of Advice and Consent: Congress Confronts the Roosevelt Administration During the State Department

Confirmation Incident of 1944". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 28 (1). [Wiley, Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress]: 153–68.

This article provided great insight into the decisions made by Roosevelt and the inner workings of his presidency. This article talks especially about Roosevelt and his choosing of people that he thought should be in power.

Smith, Gaddis. *The American Secretaries of State: Dean Acheson*. New York: Looper Square Publishers, Inc., 1972.

This book is an overview of Acheson's time in office as secretary of state. It will provide insight into the many decisions Acheson and to make possibly even looking into the role that Truman had on those decisions.

Trask, David F. *A Short History of the U.S. Department of State, 1781-1981*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Public Communications, 1981.

This pamphlet from the State Department provided me with a good overview and basic information on the Department. This was my basic reference text for the State Department itself.