
The French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, explained privately to Acheson the plans he had been developing with Jean Monnet to place all French and German production of coal and steel under a joint high authority, which would be open to the participation of other European countries. As Acheson observed, the more the Americans examined the plan, the more they were impressed by it. Its genius lay in its practical common-sense approach: ‘what could be more earthy than coal and steel . . . ? This would end age-old conflicts. It was not exclusive but open to all European nations who wished to participate.’

Two days later, Acheson met Bevin in London. He found him in a distressing condition, recovering from major surgery and taking sedative drugs ‘that made him doze off, sometimes quite soundly, during the discussion’. Informed by the French of the Schuman Plan, an angry Bevin accused Acheson of conspiring with Schuman. Acheson acknowledged that he had been stupid in failing to foresee Bevin’s rage at not being consulted from the outset and the difficulties Schuman’s plan posed for the Labour government’s strategy of nationalised control over coal and steel. Despite all Acheson’s arguments, Britain made ‘her great mistake of the post-war period by refusing to join in negotiating the Schuman Plan’. Acheson welcomed the plan publicly as a most important development, designed to further a rapprochement between Germany and France and progress towards the economic integration of Western Europe which were objectives favoured by the United States government. ‘In this way we did our best to back the launching with a fair breeze. But Bevin was still growling.’

When Schuman and Acheson arrived in London, Bevin complained about the lack of consultation. When Schuman formally invited the British to join with the Benelux countries, France, Germany and Italy in working out the treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, the British refused. British GNP at this time was the second largest in the world, having only recently ceased to equal that of France and West Germany combined, and the British government did not want to be bound by the decisions of a joint European authority. It wanted to be able to pursue its own plans for the coal and steel industries. ‘Important but secondary’, commented Acheson, ‘was the national policy of special ties with the Commonwealth and the United States’, as well as the traditional determination of the British to go their own way. Britain, Bevin told Schuman, could never become an entirely European country.

On the eve of the Korean War the State Department had prepared a paper
which concluded that: 'No other country has the same qualifications for being our principal ally and partner... The British and with them the rest of the Commonwealth, particularly the older dominions, are our most reliable and useful Allies, with whom a special relationship should exist.' But, the paper noted, the British were inclined to make the relationship more overt than the United States felt desirable. They reacted strongly to being treated as just another European power. Acheson was not pleased. 'It was not the origin that bothered me, but the fact that the wretched paper existed. In the hands of trouble-makers it could stir up no end of a hullabaloo, both domestic and international... Of course a unique relation existed between Britain and America – our common language and history ensured that.' But, Acheson argued, unique did not mean affectionate. Sentiment, he bizarrely suggested, was reserved for America's oldest ally, France.

Acheson's real problem was that 'my own attitude had long been, and was known to have been, pro-British'. His annoyance about the paper 'was not caused by doubt about the genuineness of the special relationship, or about the real identity of Britain and American interests in Europe and elsewhere... My annoyance came from the stupidity of writing about a special relationship, which could only increase suspicions among our allies of secret plans and purposes and' – just as important to Acheson – give the Mayor Thompsons, McCarthy's and others 'proof that the State Department was the tool of a foreign power. So all copies of the paper that could be found were collected and burned.'

The European Coal and Steel Community Treaty was signed by the Six in April 1951. Exasperated by British resistance to schemes for European economic integration, both David Bruce, then US Ambassador in Paris, and Averell Harriman felt that the United States had been 'too tender with the British since the War'.

During the remainder of his stay in London, Acheson dined with the King and Queen, whom he greatly admired. Arriving at Chequers for lunch with the Attlees on a miserable spring day, the Achesons found the house 'noticeably colder than the outdoors'. Bevin tried to warm himself by huddling in the fireplace. Acheson resorted to 'the far more reliable device of straight gin'. As they entered the dining-room, Mrs Attlee thought it stuffy and had the Wrens who were serving lunch open the windows. 'As they did so, the curtains stood out.' The American female guests kept on their fur coats.

The Conservative victory in the British elections in October 1951 brought Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden back to power. Acheson and Eden attended the sixth General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris. At first, they got on well. 'Eden and I worked easily together, agreed on basic matters, where he was a resourceful and strong ally.' There were to be plenty of disagreements later. Eden, Acheson noted, was more cautious in departing from traditional policies, 'quite understandably, as he had been far more deeply involved in making...