

Foreword

Considering the linear mileage of the words written and spoken about John Foster Dulles during his lifetime and since, the public image of the late Secretary of State remains curiously distorted. As a man, he is widely believed to have been ponderous, humorless, puritanical, cold, forbidding, austere, and unbending. His foreign policy has been commonly characterized as doctrinaire, rigid, static, legalistic, moralistic, inflexible, and high-handed.

In some measure, Dulles himself contributed to his own caricature. If it helped to convince the world, and especially the Communist part of it, that the United States meant business and that its announced policies had backbone and muscle, then Dulles was not averse to being pictured personally as hard-nosed and unyielding. Moreover, in an age of expanding bureaucracy characterized by the rise of the “faceless man,” Dulles was strongly idiosyncratic; and nothing serves the purposes of caricature like idiosyncrasy. The lineaments of his features, his mind, and his character were strong—and they bred strong reactions. More than he intended, he satisfied the hunger of the American press and public for stereotypes. And while Dulles himself was complex, his stereotype performance was simple. While he grew in his job as Secretary of State, while he changed, revised, modified, qualified, and even occasionally yielded, the stereotype remained fixed and static.

Whatever else the interviews catalogued here accomplish, they should help to dissipate some of the myths that sprang up in Secretary Dulles’s wake and to correct some popular mis-apprehensions about him. He did not do, think, or say many of the things commonly attributed to him; and conversely he did, thought, and said a number of things seldom associated with his name. No thoughtful reader of any considerable number of these transcripts could possibly persist in picturing Mr. Dulles in the harsh outlines described above. Nor can the pat pejoratives of “doctrinaire,” “rigid,” “static,” etc., any longer be acceptable as apt descriptions of his foreign policy.

As a note of caution, however, the student of these transcripts should be reminded that this collection is itself somewhat lopsided. Most of the witnesses whose testimony is here recorded were “friendly.” Many made an obvious effort to be objective; some were critical, but very few could be called “hostile.” This is not the fault of the Dulles Oral History Project, its directors, advisers, or interviewers. Opinions of all sorts were solicited, but in most instances witnesses who presumably might have been unfriendly to Dulles simply refused to testify. If their refusals have produced an imbalance in this collection, the flaw, however regrettable, is hardly fatal. The case for the prosecution is documented elsewhere in detail, and anyone searching for unfavorable comments on Mr. Dulles will not have far to look.

The final “judgment of history” on John Foster Dulles will, of course, depend largely on who writes the histories and when they are written. No serious history of the man or of his work can henceforth be undertaken without a thorough examination of these transcripts.

The three blind men of ancient fable, after groping sightlessly around the body of an elephant, respectively identified the object under scrutiny as a tree trunk, a serpent, and a piece of rope. If the three had been three hundred, and if their separate findings had been collated by an intelligent naturalist, no doubt the elephant would have been fully identified and described. Without imputing blindness, or even myopia, to any of the witnesses whose testimony is collected here, I would urge the scholar who uses this collection to play the role of the intelligent naturalist. No single entry among these 282 transcripts affords a complete and accurate picture of John Foster Dulles or even any one phase of his life. Put them together, and a reasonably authentic and three-dimensional likeness will emerge.

Philip A. Crowl

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