

BOOK REVIEW

The Wise Men. By Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986, 853 pp., index, \$22.95.

Reviewed by AUGUSTA PIPKIN

It appears from the evidence of the Tower Commission Report that President Reagan might have avoided much of the current Iran-contra imbroglio had he simply chosen better advisors. The report's emphasis on the failure of the president's hands-off management style has raised important questions of who actually wields power at the White House. If current speculation is correct and Mrs. Reagan is the voice behind presidential policies,¹ she should well consider putting *The Wise Men* at the top of her husband's nightly reading list.

The Wise Men, by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, is a weighty biography (853 pages including index) of six of the most influential political advisors in the post World War II period. Two diplomats, George Kennan and Charles "Chip" Bohlen, two bankers, W. Averell Harriman and Robert Lovett, and two lawyers, Dean Acheson and John J. McCloy, all held governmental positions from the 1940s until 1983, when Harriman travelled to the Soviet Union for the last time. The book charts their private and public careers and the unique relationships that developed between the six, all giants in their chosen fields.

Dean Acheson, secretary of state from 1949 to 1953 and under secretary during the Berlin Blockade and the beginning of the Cold War, was a stiff, pompous man most often remembered, unfortunately, for his 1950 National Press Club speech excluding Korea from the U.S. "defense perimeter." He was a brilliant lawyer, and served Truman (whom he always called the "Chief") with an unswerving loyalty, remaining true to his president's ideals even after Truman's death. W. Averell Harriman began his lengthy career in public service as special envoy for FDR, served as ambassador in Moscow, and ended his career with State as ambassador-at-large. Harriman was a flamboyant though absurdly stingy man; he was driven by a real need to be involved in power politics, practically hounding Lyndon Johnson to death to allow him to negotiate the U.S.-Soviet agreement he was convinced would end the Vietnam War. But his confidence in his abilities, though annoying, was not

Augusta Pipkin is a candidate for the Ph.D. degree at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

1. William Safire, "The First Lady Stages a Coup," *New York Times*, 2 March 1987, p. A17.

entirely misplaced; up until his death he was considered one of the most talented U.S. negotiators ever to serve in Moscow.

Chip Bohlen was a prominent member of the earliest group of U.S. diplomats in the Soviet Union after recognition by the United States in 1934, was also at Potsdam with Roosevelt, and later became the American ambassador to the Soviet Union. An easygoing man with a flair for fun, Bohlen nonetheless managed to become a highly respected expert on Soviet affairs. Not so Bohlen's colleague, George Kennan. Kennan, like Bohlen, was one of the first Russian experts in the State Department. Author of the infamous "X" article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947 and also, to his chagrin, of the doctrine of containment, he was sent to the Soviet Union with Bohlen in 1934 and later served briefly as ambassador to Moscow. An introspective, tortured man, Kennan wore the mantle of power poorly and left the State Department, not entirely voluntarily, in 1952.

William A. Lovett, a brilliant economist and banker, was deputy secretary of war under Stimson during the war, later becoming secretary of defense under Truman. Lovett was a careful and meticulous thinker; he was the first to recognize the strategic importance of air power in bombing behind enemy lines. John J. McCloy worked closely with Lovett during the war, the two earning the nickname "heavenly twins." McCloy later served as high commissioner of Germany and "left government" to become president of the World Bank. By their own choice, both Lovett and McCloy remained behind the scenes for most of their political careers, and neither took part in Johnson's "Wise Men" meetings during the Vietnam War.

Collective biographies are difficult at best, and in *The Wise Men* Isaacson and Thomas have chosen to concentrate on six men who were not only largely responsible for the creation of postwar foreign policy, but whose policies and advice are still widely respected today. Potentially even more awkward, the authors have focused upon these men not just as policymakers, but as friends, drawn together by shared backgrounds and experiences as well as by the inexorable pull of Washington's power politics.

Isaacson and Thomas should be commended for undertaking such a formidable task. On the whole, they have done a remarkable job. *The Wise Men* manages to tread a fine literary line with delicacy and in some cases real subtlety; fundamentally it is a book about the men who shaped post World War II foreign policy, and the insights and prejudices that shaped those men. But at the same time the book attempts to analyze a surprising number of larger issues, such as the use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Through the thoughts and words of the six men, Isaacson and Thomas discuss the birth of the Cold War and the United States' reliance upon massive retaliation and assured destruction as the tenets of its Soviet policy for nearly 20 years. They provide glimpses into the frightening Saturday of the outbreak of the Korean War and the personal agony of U.S. involvement in Vietnam

for these six men whose policies, in one way or another, were responsible for the war. Isaacson and Thomas give us a unique analysis of the vision which these men held, both collectively and as individuals, of the postwar international system and how it should be constructed.

The book has been criticized for being too anecdotal and for fawning a bit too much over its subjects. According to one journal, Isaacson and Thomas “seem to respect the patricians for having more style than their modern replacements, many of whom speak English with a foreign accent.”² “The authors stack the deck for this conclusion,” the review continues, “by picking six lively characters who were important during postwar reconstruction — perhaps the high-point of America’s foreign policy.”³ But Isaacson and Thomas can scarcely be faulted for writing a book about six interesting men whom they happen to respect. On the whole, *The Wise Men* manages to rise above its essentially biographical roots to become a history of American foreign policy as well as of the men who created that policy. The book’s subtitle, *Six Friends and the World They Made*, is in some ways more appropriate than “*The Wise Men*,” an epithet used most often by Lyndon Johnson, a president whom all six men came to dislike and for whom — by the end of the Vietnam War — they had little respect.

The first hundred pages are less interesting than the rest of the book. Sketching the boyhood and early education of each of the six men, Isaacson and Thomas jump from one to another, firing off brief descriptions and anecdotes in rapid succession. These early chapters read like a Dickensian novel; not until past the halfway mark does the action begin and the introduction end. The narrative is also uneven, switching — at times awkwardly — from chronological biography to creative analysis. But these stylistic problems in no way detract from the overall strengths of the book, and once past the first chapters the authors seem to settle down and find their stride.

Isaacson and Thomas have approached their study in a comprehensive manner. Through numerous interviews and careful research (often involving unpublished papers belonging to the six men), the authors provide real insight into the workings of postwar policymaking. They are honest in their admiration of their subjects yet critical of their whims and foibles. The single most successful aspect of the book (and its most important contribution to the history of postwar U.S. foreign policy) is the identification of the beliefs and motivations of each of the six men as individuals with the policies actually developed by all six as a group. The authors state their thesis quite simply:

As individuals, Acheson and Harriman, Lovett and McCloy, Kennan and Bohlen, each had his own blind spots and shortcomings; alone, no single one of them could have guided the country to its

2. “The Magnificent Six,” *The Economist*, 28 February — 6 March 1987, p. 102.

3. *Ibid.*

new role as world power. Yet collectively, this small group of men, and those who emulated their example, brought to this immense task just the right mixture of vision and practicality, aggressiveness and patience. They came together at one of those moments in history when time and place, upbringing and character, fuse into a kind of critical mass, and give ordinary men the power to forever change the way things are.⁴

Few would dispute the importance of these men in formulating and implementing the policies of FDR and his successor, Harry Truman. Fewer still would deny the role they played in the creation of a new world from the ashes of the Second World War. Yet *The Wise Men* marks the first attempt to understand how these men shaped their own vision of that world, how they interacted with one another and with their presidents, and how they played their strengths and weaknesses off one another, remaining good friends in spite of public political differences.⁵ The authors themselves lament that “four decades later, the creators of the Pax Americana remain partially obscure figures, semiprivate men who preferred to exercise power discreetly and shunned the glare and tumult of politics.”⁶

Throughout the book we are treated to insights into what made these men tick and how their own ideas and ideals evolved. We see them as individuals — Harriman as ambassador-at-large, Kennan as the self-doubting yet intuitive thinker, Bohlen as the quintessential diplomat, Lovett and McCloy as the practical analysts and planners, and Acheson as the loyal though unyielding secretary of state — yet more importantly we see them as a group of men who quite literally “shaped a new world order.”⁷

Paradoxically, Isaacson and Thomas do not seem satisfied with the success of their own approach. Almost as if seeking to justify their choice of these six men as the architects of the United States’ postwar foreign policy, they have chosen to identify them as representatives of the “East Coast Establishment.” Certainly the six men did come from similar backgrounds: Groton, Yale, Harvard, Harvard Law. Their political leanings were more mixed, but whether Democrats or Republicans, all believed in a bipartisan approach to foreign policy. But the argument that there was some sort of “Establishment” to which these men belonged is out of place in a book which concerns itself primarily with the personal relationships between six great men and the policies they effected during their years as presidential advisers.

4. Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 407.

5. Isaacson and Thomas quote Grace Kennan, for example, as commenting that “Even though I got very upset by the things he [Acheson] said about my father, I remember that the Achesons were invited to my wedding and sent a present. . . . I was too young to realize that you can disagree bitterly on policy and still be friends.” *The Wise Men*, p. 581.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 407-8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

In fact, it appears that Isaacson and Thomas embarked upon their project precisely to find out whether there *was* such an “Establishment”. According to the *New York Times Book Review*, the two discovered that “a key element in the [1980] Presidential campaign was not a candidate or party, but an image of power and privilege: the American “Establishment”.⁸ The *Times* quotes Walter Isaacson as saying that “the notion of the Establishment kept coming up, both in the Reagan campaign and in the Carter campaign, not just from the candidates, but from the groups that hand [out] pamphlets with exclamation points and arrows.”⁹ Isaacson explains further that he and Thomas “found that the Establishment was a very nebulous idea, and that the best way to get at it was a biographical treatment of a group of men who were at the core of that idea.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, Isaacson and Thomas are awkward with their own argument, and fail to illustrate their point convincingly. When discussing the six and their successors, for example, they preface their discussion too many times with phrases such as “He was adopted by the Establishment, not born into it,”¹¹ or “He had long occupied a peculiar niche within the Establishment.”¹² Given the enormous amount of interesting material in the book and the success with which the authors transform biography into historical analysis, the presence or absence of an “Establishment” becomes irrelevant. Indeed, the argument becomes an addendum, and one with which the authors appear to be uncomfortable.

The Wise Men is strong enough to stand on its own without attempting to address the issue of the existence of a political “Establishment” or American elite. The authors do a wonderful job of analyzing and describing the “flavor” of one of the most important eras in American history. They have taken six men and used their interests and ideals to form a historical framework for that analysis. More importantly, this approach works, and the book is a pleasure to read. One does get the sense that theirs was a golden world, and one to which we cannot return. Isaacson himself confesses that “Today’s foreign policy making makes [him] nostalgic for this group.”¹³ But considering the present chaos of U.S. foreign policy we should be thankful that there are policymakers whom we can admire as creative thinkers, as architects, not just as artisans following a vague, ill-defined mandate from a disengaged president.

8. Mark A. Uhlig in Ronald Steel, “Cohort of the American Century,” a review of *The Wise Men*, *New York Times Book Review*, 2 November 1986, p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *The Wise Men*, p. 528.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 687.

13. “Cohort of the American Century,” p. 3.

