Secretary Acheson and the Defense of Korea

Irresponsible critics have repeated the false charge that Dean Acheson in his National Press Club speech of January 12, 1950, excluded Korea from the line which the United States would defend against attack. This false charge has been based on a quotation torn out of context and misinterpreted by those who use the Big Lie tactics. A full reading of this section of the Secretary of State’s remarks will show that Mr. Acheson differentiated between those areas for which the United States is directly responsible because of ownership (Alaska), occupation (Japan and the Ryukyus), plus the Philippine Islands, and those nations which are the general responsibility of the United Nations.

In his Press Club speech, Secretary Acheson warned that the United States, as a nation, would defend its possessions and occupied territories. Then he went on to say (and this part of the speech is never quoted by those who practice the Big Lie) that the entire “civilized world” under the Charter of the United Nations — definitely including the United States — would commit itself to defend those areas outside of the direct responsibility of the United States. These are Secretary Acheson’s precise words: “should such an attack occur — one hesitates to say where such an armed attack could come from — the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations which so far has not proved a weak reed to lean on by any people who are determined to protect their independence against outside aggression.” (italics supplied)

Secretary Acheson stated in concise terms what our action would be in the event of aggression. It is exactly what the United States and the United Nations did when the Republic of Korea was attacked on June 25, 1950: Secretary Acheson made it crystal clear and his prediction was accurate: the United Nations, supported by the United States, did move immediately to resist the aggression in Korea.

Those repeating this irresponsible charge should be asked: “why haven’t you quoted the full meaning of Secretary Acheson’s speech? Do you know that the full quotation shows the facts to be exactly opposite to your charge? Do you know that the United Nations and the United States did precisely what Secretary Acheson predicted in his Press Club speech?”

Attached is the pertinent quotation from Secretary Acheson’s Press Club speech of January 12, 1950.
"What is the situation in regard to the military security of the Pacific area and what is our policy in regard to it?

In the first place the defeat and the disarmament of Japan has placed upon the United States the necessity of assuming the military defense of Japan as long as that is required, both in the interest of our security and in the interests of the security of the entire Pacific area and in all honor in the interest of Japanese security. We have American and there are Australian troops in Japan. I am not in a position to speak for the Australians, but I can assure you that there is no intention of any sort of abandoning or weakening the defenses of Japan and that whatever arrangements are to be made either through permanent settlement or otherwise, that defense must and shall be maintained.

This defensive perimeter runs along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus. We hold important defense positions in the Ryukyu Islands and those we will continue to hold. In the interest of the population of the Ryukyu Islands, we will at an appropriate time offer to hold these islands under trusteeship of the United Nations, but they are essential parts of the defensive perimeter of the Pacific and they must and will be held.

The defensive perimeter runs from the Ryukyus to the Philippine Islands. Our relations, our defensive relations with the Philippines are contained in agreements between us. These agreements are being loyally carried out and will be loyally carried out. Both peoples have learned by bitter experience the vital connections between our mutual defense requirements. We are in no doubt about that and it is hardly necessary for me to say an attack on the Philippines could not and would not be tolerated by the United States. But I hasten to add that no one perceives the imminence of any such attack.

So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific is concerned, it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack. But it must also be clear that such a guarantee is hardly sensible or necessary within the realm of practical relationship. Should such an attack occur — one hesitates for reasons that are quite obvious — it might be said, but it is not in the nature of things that the United States could come into the conflict — the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations which as far as I know has not proved a weak reed to lean on by any people who are determined to protect their independence against outside aggression."

--- From: The text of the extemporaneous remarks made by the Hon. Dean Acheson, Secretary of State before the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., on January 28, 1950 (italics supplied)