WASHINGTON, Oct. 12—Dean Acheson, Secretary of State under President Harry S. Truman who exercised a deep, if not always visible, influence on United States foreign policy for more than 20 years, died at 6 o'clock tonight at his farm home in Sandy Springs, Md.

Mr. Acheson, who was 78 years old, was found slumped over a desk in his study. He was pronounced dead by the family physician, but the cause of death was not immediately determined.

Mr. Acheson is survived by his widow, the former Alice Stanley, and three children, Mrs. Dudley B. B. (Jane) Brown, David Campion Acheson and Mrs. William F. (Mary Eleanor) Bundy, whose husband was Assistant Secretary of State in the Johnson Administration.

In a statement issued tonight by the White House, President Nixon said: "The nation, the Western alliance and the world all share in the loss of one of their stanchest champions."

Mr. Nixon also said: "It is a measure of Dean Acheson's stature as a man and statesman that almost 20 years after his service of Secretary of State he continued to be recognized as one of the towering figures of his time. He was a man not only of great achievement but also of rare intellect, of rigorous conscience and of profound devotion to his country."

"I shall greatly miss both his wise counsel and his penetrating wit," the President concluded.

Bess Truman, the wife of the former President, said, "Oh, no," when informed of the death at her home in Independence, Mo. She said Mr. Truman would have no immediate comment, but added, "I know he'll be very disturbed."

A statement issued in New York tonight by the State Department, Secretary of State William P. Rogers said in part: "Dean Acheson was a distinguished Secretary of State and a statesman respected throughout the world."

An obituary is on Page 50.