

# George C. Marshall

## A Soldier and a Statesman

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## George C. Marshall: A Soldier and a Statesman

George Catlett Marshall, Jr. is a monumental figure in American history because of his roles in the military during World War I and II, and for his diplomatic work after his career in the military as a revered political leader. He was born on December 31, 1880 to George Catlett Marshall, Sr. and Laura Bradford Marshall in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. The Marshall family roots trace back to the aristocracy of Virginia, and include the distinguished Chief Justice John Marshall as a distant relative. As a young child, Marshall did not care for “the puffed-up family pride that infused his father” (Unger 3). Moreover, he quickly learned that he could not depend on social status and his family name to get through life; “he would have to make his own way in the world and stand on his own merits” when his father’s coal business suffered in 1890 (Willbanks 20). As a child, Marshall was always a poor student. Thus, he developed a desire to join the military, which no one in his family had previously done, besides Marshall Sr.’s minor actions as a soldier in the Union Army during the Civil War. His interest in the military probably also stemmed from his love of history, which was the only school subject that young Marshall displayed any type of affinity for. However, due to the fact that he was a poor student, he was unable to attend West Point, so he was forced to enroll in the Virginia Military Institute, where his brother Stuart had just graduated. Although there existed a family legacy at VMI, Marshall, Sr. called his son’s decision to attend VMI a “disgrace to the family” (Willbanks 21).

Throughout Marshall’s illustrious career as a soldier and a statesman, many authority figures doubted his abilities to succeed. His father was the beginning of much opposition that he faced in his life to become the “a model officer, dedicated professional, and true soldier-statesman” who “left an indelible mark on the Army, the nation, and the world” (Willbanks 58). Marshall was able to disprove his father’s doubts at VMI, where “the natural shyness and

reserve of the boy metamorphosed into the austere, disciplined, and rather distant character of the cadet” (Willbanks 22). Marshall was assigned to be the top captain in his senior year. When the Spanish American War began in April of 1898 while he was still at VMI, “the resultant expansion of the Army led to a sudden demand for officers that the US Military Academy could not meet” and competition to take the exam for non-West Point graduate commission was extreme (Willbanks 23). Once he had demonstrated his potential to his father, Marshall Sr. advocated for him intensely all over Pennsylvania to be able to take the exam; Marshall himself even barged into the White House uninvited and had a brief encounter with President McKinley. In the end, Marshall received one of the top scores and was appointed to Second Lieutenant in the Infantry in January for 1902.

Consequently, Marshall’s 43-year career in the army began, where he would work his way to eventually becoming a five-star general, and earn the title ‘General of the Army’. In May of 1902, Marshall departed on his first mission to the Philippines where struggles he faced included a cholera crisis and soldiers with low morale. As a result of disorganization and miscommunications with his authorities, Marshall basically served as the company’s commander, as well as the governor of the province. This was “the first, and not the last, time Marshall excelled in duties far in excess of his rank” (Willbanks 24). In August of 1906, Marshall went to study at the famous Infantry and Cavalry School in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The curriculum was extremely competitive and rigorous, but graduation was necessary to be able to attend the Staff College, then War College, and finally become a General Staff Officer. Marshall’s rigorous study habits showed that he capable of great intellectual ability; his time at Leavenworth was “the hardest work [he] ever did in his life” (Unger 28). Marshall learned tactical army skills, professionalism, and work ethic, and made interpersonal connections that

proved advantageous in his future military career. At Leavenworth, “young Lieutenant Marshall began to make a name for himself in the Army at large” (Willbanks 26). In 1913, Marshall returned to the Philippines, where he found himself in charge of 5000 men. Fellow lieutenant and future five-star general Henry H. Arnold said “that man will one day be army chief of staff” when he saw how well Marshall handled the unexpected situation (Willbanks 27). Marshall was promoted to captain upon his return to the United States in 1916.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Marshall was assigned to the First Division, the first combat element sent to Europe. It was his responsibility to prepare them for war but he lacked adequate recruits, equipment, and other resources. Marshall found his division “a ragbag of a unit,” with officers who were “largely recent civilians with, at best, six months of military training” (Unger 37). He was forced to train them on his own, without help from his authorities. When the division was practicing firing, Marshall wrote, “the only thing they succeeded in hitting was the horizon and the foreground” (Unger 37). When Major John J. Pershing visited the First Division, he began to criticize the commander and chief of staff when he saw the state they were in. Since Marshall knew they did not deserve these criticisms, he stood up for them against Pershing by informing him of all the hardships they had to endure. Marshall’s career very well could have ended that day, however, luckily Major Pershing was the type of person who was able to take dissension and constructive criticism well, even if it was from a subordinate. Pershing remembered Marshall for this, which would provide him with more opportunities in the future. Marshall had the courage to face his authority figure and stand up for what he knew was morally right. Throughout his long and illustrious career as a soldier and statesman, he had a reputation for always practicing selfless public service, which can be observed from his fearless and altruistic acts.

In 1918, Pershing assigned Marshall to his Operations force, in which Marshall helped to plan the Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne operations, which were a part of the final major Allied offensive. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the largest in United States military history, involving 1.2 million American soldiers. Marshall was responsible for moving 600,000 of them from the Battle of Saint-Mihiel to the Meuse-Argonne front, an incredible feat on his part. Marshall had proved that he was tactically and intellectually capable of being a competent soldier and officer. He continuously requested to be put into line duty so he would gain experience with troop command and be able to move up in the ranks, but his requests were continuously denied. In May of 1919, he was assigned as Pershing's aide-de-camp, where he was able to make connections with high officials, but had no opportunities to command troops.

In 1927, Marshall's next assignment was to the Infantry School in Fort Benning, Georgia, where he was given full control over the academic department and curriculum. Marshall used what he had observed and learned in World War I to better educate the future ranks of the military. He believed that World War I was an anomaly because of the trench warfare style of fighting, and knew that future wars would not be similar at all. He thought "army training and education should focus on surviving...where poor intelligence, bad maps, strange terrain, haste, and confusion would be the rule" (Willbanks 33). Trench warfare in World War I involved detailed planning and intelligence with ample communications, but Marshall knew that this was not how all wars would be fought. He believed that the military should be educated to make quick decisions with limited information. Marshall had the students "get down to the essentials, make clear the real difficulties, and expunge the bunk, complications, and ponderosities" to "develop a technique and methods so simple and so brief that the citizen officer of good common sense can readily grasp the idea" (Willbanks 34). He spent five years at the Infantry School,

which had a huge effect on the army because the United States would soon enter World War II in 1942.

Marshall developed a close relationship with the newly elected President of the Election of 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When Roosevelt began the New Deal to alleviate the effects of the Great Depression, Marshall became involved with the Civilian Conservation Corps, a project in which unemployed young men worked on various public projects together in camps, under the supervision and leadership of the Army. Marshall led 19 of these camps in the Southeast United States. He later called his work with the CCC “the most instructive service [he] ever had, and the most interesting” (Willbanks 35). It is clear that Marshall’s greatest priority in his life was his dedication to providing selfless service to his country.

In 1938, Marshall was named the Assistant Chief of Staff in the War Plans Division in Washington, D.C., where he quickly worked his way to promotion to Deputy Chief of Staff. Marshall’s main responsibility was to lay the groundwork in case of a need to mobilize the army quickly. In this position, he again had another encounter with someone much more important than him and stood up for himself. Marshall met with President Roosevelt in the White House to hear his proposed rearmament plan to increase the power of the air force and decrease the ground army. When Marshall was asked for his opinion, he said, “Mr. President, I am sorry, but I don’t agree with you at all,” because Marshall favored a balanced build-up of all arms (Willbanks 36). Just like he confronted Pershing 21 years earlier, Marshall was unafraid to stand up for his beliefs in front of his superiors, even in a career where hierarchy is incredibly respected and important. Marshall’s career once again could have ended on this day, but fortunately Roosevelt was like Pershing in the sense that they could both take constructive criticism well. Instead of hindering Marshall’s career as one might expect, his fearlessness and initiative to stand up for

what he believed in even enhanced his career, because it proved to his superiors that he placed meaningful service to his country as a priority over self-interest. In 1939, the incumbent Army Chief of Staff announced his retirement. While Marshall was a contender for the replacement, he had 33 generals who were senior to him. Marshall stopped people who wanted to campaign for him because “[his] strength with the army has rested on the well known fact that [he] attended strictly to business and enlisted no influence of any sort at any time” (Willbanks 37). This strategy of his worked, and Marshall began his job as Army Chief of Staff on July 1, 1939. In this position, Marshall had more power than any American officer before and since then, as he was in charge of the General Staff in Washington, commander of all field forces and the Army Air Corps.

Although Marshall and FDR disagreed on how the military should be expanding, they did agree on the fact that a systematic and meticulous expansion of the military was necessary in order to prepare for entering in another war, which seemed likely due to the conflicts arising in both Europe and the Pacific. Marshall fought for the resources that were needed in order to expand the ground army, while competing against the Navy, Air Force, and the Lend-Lease Act to Great Britain, which transferred arms and other supplies to foreign nations that had Congressional approval. Marshall fundamentally believed that the ground army was the most important component of the entire armed forces, and so he was “more than willing to speak bluntly to the President” in order to do what he believed was vital for the nation’s defense (Willbanks 40). Marshall ended up testifying in front of Congress for a total of 21 days and was able to receive historical amounts of Congressional appropriations for the army. In June 1941, “Congress passed a record-breaking \$9.8 billion that included a \$25 million discretionary fund

placed at the disposal of the chief of staff – a testament to the high regard in which Marshall was held” (Willbanks 40).

Marshall’s next dispute in his career was with the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson. After the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, the country’s first peacetime conscription, Marshall wanted to create Officer Candidate schools in order to allow qualified men to rise in the rankings, boost morale and make conscription seem more positive. However, Secretary Stimson believed the better option was to revive the Plattsburg Camp movement, which trained volunteers. Marshall did not think the army had enough officers to spare some to work in the camps. During this dispute, Marshall threatened to resign as Army Chief of Staff, but he won the conflict.

Marshall had significant contributions to the state of the Army during his tenure as Chief of Staff as he made many organizational changes. Marshall modernized the army by reorganizing the Infantry; he replaced all animals with motor vehicles, except in the Cavalry. Moreover, one of Marshall’s biggest challenges was to get the other officers working more productively. Although the country was in peacetime, Marshall “practically had to force the officer corps to move out and get things done, rather than endlessly debating decisions and accounting for every penny” (Willbanks 42). It is clear that Marshall held the Army in high esteem and genuinely believed that the state of the Army was critical to the nation’s defense and motivated others to think so too. In 1939, he established the Protective Mobilization Plan, which prepared the country to enter war by rearming the Regular Army and National Guard to full strength and mobilized the Guard. In addition, this act launched the Selective Services, because he believed that it was best for soldiers to start at the lowest level and then work their way up to being promoted. He understood what it meant to be a foot soldier, because they had to “make the most



exertions when [they are] tired, wet, and cold” (Willbanks 43). This way, the officers of the army would understand the rest of the foot soldiers, and the unit would work together more cohesively. Marshall also implemented the Louisiana Maneuvers, a program to train troops and practice tactics in preparation for entering World War II. This also allowed Marshall the opportunity to evaluate the current officers in the army, which led him to remove many senior officials; only 11 out of 42 generals in the Louisiana Maneuvers went on to have significant roles in World War II. Marshall’s experience in World War I was characterized by disorganization, a lack of communication, resources, and other necessities. Although Marshall was still able to be successful in that war, his work as Army Chief of Staff led to the “more uniformity, more careful inspection, more education, and more logical development” of the Army in preparation for World War II (Willbanks 44). After the United States officially entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Marshall completely reorganized the general staff and “implemented a more streamlined, centralized organization that served to enhance his own ability to control Army affairs” (Willbanks 46). His principle of selfless public service was again observed when he lowered the retirement age in the army, set upper age limits for officers, and created a new policy to allow for temporary promotions regardless of seniority during the war. As a result, “average age of a new division commander dropped from 59 years in 1939 to 49 in 1943” (Willbanks 47). Marshall was so dedicated to his policy that he offered to resign to set an example to the rest of the officers, even though he was far from the retirement age. Marshall did everything in his power to better the army and country, and because he so intensely believed in his cause, he was willing to sacrifice his own personal career in which he had worked so hard. Another significant impact that Marshall had in World War II was his selection of Dwight D. Eisenhower as a general because he “saw through Eisenhower’s unassuming, amiable persona

and discerned the logical thinker and natural leader beneath” (Willbanks 48). Obviously, Eisenhower would go on to have much success in the war and later become President.

Marshall began to show his skills as a statesman in World War II, as he had significant contributions on the diplomatic side of the war. First, Marshall strongly believed that the best strategy for the Allies was to focus their forces where it would have the biggest impact, which he believed to be in the Western European theater. He wanted the Allied forces to cross the English Channel and invade Axis-occupied France as soon as possible in order to weaken Germany. On the other hand, President Roosevelt agreed with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who wanted the Allies to invade North Africa. Roosevelt’s reasoning was that he needed to maintain American support for the war, and in order to do so he needed to show confidence and unity with Britain. At the Tehran Conference in 1943 between Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, Marshall finally saw his ideas come to fruition for a “coordinated Allied strategy, focused in the decisive theater” (Willbanks 51). Marshall’s views proved to be correct when Stalin supported Operation Overlord, which was the assault across the English Channel into Normandy, France, on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Marshall had “emerged as the dominant military voice in the Allied coalition” (Willbanks 51). At the Yalta Conference in 1945, Marshall ensured that the Allied coalition would stick firmly together until the end of the war to stop Germany and Japan from escaping defeat, and “by this time Marshall was more than a military strategist; he had risen into the realm of statesmanship” (Willbanks 52). During World War II, Marshall was the overall director of army operations and made the critical decisions to lead the American and Allied forces.

On December 16, 1944, Marshall was promoted to five-star general with the title ‘General of the Army’ in recognition of his significant. Even though he now had the highest ranking in the army, Marshall was still concerned about the well-being of the common soldier

because of his experiences in World War I, where he saw first-hand “the vital importance of morale and the way in which unnecessary hardships could degrade the combat performance of a soldier” (Willbanks 55). He had Hollywood director Frank Capra produce the *Why We Fight* films, and advocated for campaign medals and service ribbons in order to boost morale and let the soldiers know that the executives in the Pentagon cared about them. Marshall also cared deeply for the families of fallen soldiers. At the start of World War II, he wrote a personal letter to each family, but once the casualties began to amass this became impossible. Marshall still took extra attention and care to the letter of condolence which was sent out. On November 26, 1945, Marshall retired from military service. President Truman honored him by saying, “In a war unparalleled in magnitude and horror, millions of Americans gave their country outstanding service. General of the Army George C. Marshall gave it victory” (Willbanks 56).

After Marshall’s lifelong career in the military, he began his official career as a statesman. In 1947, Truman named him to be Secretary of State, where he reorganized the state department just like he had done previously with the army. Truman selected Marshall not only because of his diplomatic and military skills, but also because Truman knew “how effective Marshall could be with Congress and how capable he was of removing issues away from the arena of partisan debate” (Settle 157). Another theme that is observed throughout Marshall’s career is his commitment to staying apolitical. Throughout all of the conflicts that Marshall had to navigate through, he was always careful to stay apolitical, which is how he maintained a relatively clean reputation. His most significant accomplishment as Secretary of State, and perhaps his entire life, was the European Recovery Program, or the Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan laid out the plans for reconstruction of post-war Europe along with the rest of the world. Marshall became aware of the dire conditions in Western Europe and knew that those countries

were susceptible to being taken over by communism if their economies failed, and so once he realized that Stalin was not going to help, he came to believe that the United States must take “whatever action is possible to meet these problems...without delay” (Brower 72). In December of 1947, Marshall obtained \$522 million from Congress for emergency aid to Europe. He created the Marshall Plan in order to provide economic aid, rather than military aid, to these countries with five core principles. First, “aid must be given in consultation with the countries receiving it” (Brower 72). If aid was given without consultation, then America would seem patronizing and become resented; America needed to still maintain respect for these countries although they were in a poor state. Second, “aid must be given regionally and not to a favored nation in the hopes that others will follow its example”, in order to avoid pitting European nations against each other again (Brower 73). Third, “aid must be given with the long-term interests of the countries receiving them in mind” (Brower 74). This principle led to the containment strategy, which became the basis of American foreign policy during the Cold War. The United States tried to contain communism within the countries where it already existed, and protect other countries from its spread. For example, three days after the Korean War began on June 25, 1950, Congress removed \$208 million from the Marshall Plan budget, and increased military spending by \$4 billion in order to do so. Fourth, “aid cannot be open-ended; it must be given for a defined period of time” (Brower 74). The point of this principle was to ensure that “the Marshall Plan was not going to be a perpetual drain on the American economy” (Brower 74). Lastly, the fifth principle of the Marshall Plan is that “the aid provided must be equal to the task” (Brower 75). The purpose of the Marshall Plan was not to supply charity, but to “achieve the revival of a working economy” (Brower 75). The Marshall Plan was extremely effective, and was able to supply

Western Europe with aid that “let them get back on their feet without having to scrap their social welfare programs or cut wages to the bone to combat inflation” (Brower 76).

In 1949, he resigned as Secretary of State, and became the Secretary of Defense in 1950, where his main responsibility was to prepare the military for the Korean War. Marshall retired for the last time in September of 1951. In December of 1953, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for the Marshall Plan, and was the first professional soldier to receive this honor. At 78 years old, Marshall passed away at Walter Reed Army Hospital and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Marshall is the model soldier-statesman, and he delivered to his country selfless public service for 49 years of his life. His most significant role in American history was leading the United States and the rest of the Allies to victory in World War II, and is most remembered for his Marshall Plan, which guided the Western European nations to an economic recovery after the war.