

Richard Gilder Distinguished Lecture  
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George Marshall died in October, 1959, just two months short of his 79th birthday. Funeral services were conducted in the Chapel at Fort Myer, Virginia; there was no eulogy – this was at Marshall's request; and he was buried in Arlington. Determined to remain outside the circle of celebrity that embraced the great ones of the Second World War, and a zealous steward of his privacy in life, he has long since realized an ironic vindication, almost fifty years after his death, of his allegiance to a stern code of old-fashioned and republican (small "R") citizenship. The courting of fame, to Marshall, was both unworthy and toxic. You do what your conscience directs, always, as well as you can: and what such a life

may enable – this must be your only legacy. Thus you decline to write a memoir of your service to your country, which, in Marshall's words, has already compensated you adequately. You decline all wartime decorations and testimonials. In the speeches, lectures, public presentations required by your duties, as head of the Army, as Secretary of State, and as Secretary Defense, you ask the audience to forgive your drawing on your own, "personal," experience for an example you use to illustrate a point. The historian David Hackett Fischer remarks the common geographical provenance of Washington and Marshall, the Northern Neck of Virginia, and a common cultural heritage that cherishes privacy and discourages revelation of "feelings," opinions, familial information. Today Marshall subsists as the first word in a two-word phrase meant to communicate unstinted American generosity: (the)

Marshall Plan. As in: we need a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan, or for New Orleans, or for the deracinated Muslims living in France. Government must appropriate money to be helpful to some class or country or people who have suffered. (Marshall was Secretary of State for two years, from January 1947, to January 1949; eighteen months later he was called out of retirement during the Korean War to restore efficiency, authority, and calm, to the Defense Department; he was Secretary of Defense for a year.)

By will, talent, and serendipity Marshall seems always to have arrived at a new assignment at the moment the organization he had been asked to lead found itself confronting challenges truly gigantic. He was sworn in as Chief of Staff of the Army on the day Germany invaded Poland, September 1st, 1939. He became Secretary of State in January, 1947, only a month before

His Majesty's government informed Washington it could no longer sustain the faltering governments of Greece and Turkey.

Three weeks later he represented his country at the crucial Council of Foreign Ministers conference in Moscow, the fourth since the end of the war (March-April, 1947), the circumstances of the conclusion of which convinced Marshall that the United States must intervene, dramatically and massively, to save Europe from (in his phrase) “hunger, poverty, desperation, chaos”; two months later he offered his celebrated speech at Harvard, saying as much, but saying it in a brilliantly austere, calculated way, neither announcing a Plan nor casting the United States in the role of Generous Uncle; rather, asking the nations of Europe, together, to develop a scheme by which they might co-operate in assessing their conjoint needs, presenting such a scheme to the United States, which would offer

friendly counsel, and within the limits of its own treasury, and according to the constitutional usages of our country, would consider providing help. The fully-developed plan was completed, authorized and funded ten months later; two months later the Soviets imposed their blockade on Berlin, which evoked the successful Berlin airlift, the formation of West Germany, and, soon after, the North Atlantic Treaty and the NATO alliance. It is fundamentally for these services, at their heart the plan that Harry Truman told Clark Clifford must be named for General Marshall, that Marshall is celebrated, if not remembered, today.

Like those we call the Great Ones of that generation, mainly men, most born between 1880 and 1900, Marshall was exhausted by his labors. He was an elderly sixty-eight when he left the State Department, but a year earlier his dear friend and colleague Robert

Lovett described him to Felix Frankfurter as a "four-engine bomber flying on one engine." He had been sick, in fact, for the last six months of his tenure, and underwent a serious kidney operation at the end of 1948. He had told an old friend, at the end of the war, that he had had only nineteen days off since September, 1939; and this was a generation – the generation of Roosevelt, Truman, Morgenthau and Leahy, Eisenhower, Lucius Clay, Averill Harriman – that had little sense of the following century's useful discoveries about health, fitness, tobacco and what we call "working out." They were tired.

Marshall is not among the political or military leaders of the Second World War of whom the generations of Marshall's family's grandchildren know very much. Their recollections, refracted as they are, of his character and accomplishments in uniform are not

vivid. Of his forty-three-years' service in the Army, much of which transcended ordinary military responsibilities, they know almost nothing. Yet it was in the astonishing range and nature of those duties and responsibilities, which ranged from battalion command to the supervision of two districts of CCC Camps to advisory service to a National Guard division in Chicago, to Chief of War Plans, Chief of Staff of the Army, strategic counsellor to two Presidents and member of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, that he had so singularly qualified himself to serve as Secretary of State. Few men had come to the office better-suited to its labors than he; and he had been the colleague, student, and subordinate of one, and through him – Henry Stimson – a conscious descendant of another: Henry Stimson's mentor Elihu Root. There are strong linkages at work here. It was Root who, as Secretary of War, had decided to

increase the cohort of entering second lieutenants in the Army (1901) who made Marshall's commissioning in the Regular Army possible. As Secretary of State (1905-1909) under President Theodore Roosevelt, his services as initiator of certain Arbitration Agreements ( ) brought him the Nobel Peace Prize, an accolade tendered Marshall in 1953. Asked by a journalist what he considered his most important contribution to peace – the kind of question that exasperated him – Marshall gave an answer whose irony, perhaps lost on him, could not have escaped readers of the journalist's article: "... my effort to persuade the administration and Congress to get under way with the preparations for the inevitable war (in 1940-41). That was the hardest thing I ever did. (\*\*\*) Cray, p 730.) He accepted the award as "a tribute to the whole American people," and quietly declared that, however humbly he

might acknowledge his honor, it did "not seem as remarkable to me as it quite evidently appears to others ... the cost of war in human lives is constantly spread before me, written neatly in many ledgers whose columns are gravestones." (\*\*\*) Nobel Address). Few readers of the Nobel Address would have known that, each week, during the Second World War, he had sent a detailed report to President Roosevelt (and, after April 12th, 1945) to President Truman showing the costs: in Americans killed, wounded, captured, or missing; and for the first few months of the war he wrote individual letters to the families of all soldiers lost in battle.

In the delight and exuberance that distinguished David Halberstam's fresh discoveries and sudden aperçus (insights), he said to me, "What a mind Marshall had!" This was early in the summer of 2006, David was writing his book on the Korean War, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ , and he was describing a conversation Marshall had had with Army Secretary Frank Pace in October, 1950. Pace, only thirty-seven at the time President Truman appointed him Secretary, had accompanied the President to Wake Island for his famous meeting with General Douglas MacArthur – famous, certainly, in its time. The ostensible purpose of the meeting was to provide the President an opportunity to hear and consider MacArthur's strategy for the conduct of the Korean War – then in its fourth month and proceeding, so it seemed, successfully. There were two other purposes. Truman wanted to size up his Far Eastern commander, the most famous soldier in the world. Truman did not like what he knew of him. He had called him "a play actor and a bunco man"; in 2008 he would have called him a Hot Dog. Truman also wanted the lustre of MacArthur's reputation

and success to shine on him: congressional elections were only three weeks off.

MacArthur's stature and reputation were indeed at their pinnacle. His administration of occupied Japan was almost universally regarded as a model of enlightened, fair-minded, even progressive viceregal leadership. And his recent conception and implementation of the amphibious operation at Inchon, exactly a month before the Wake Island meeting, had, so it seemed, turned the war around overnight. It was a strategic masterpiece fit to be placed alongside Chancellorsville and Vicksburg as unexampled exhibitions of the military art. Within two weeks it had reversed UN fortunes in South Korea, had crushed the North Korean Peoples' Army in the South, and had, so it seemed, brought the United Nations forces to within months of decisive victory in the

war.

Marshall was then Secretary of Defense, called out of retirement yet again, now rising seventy, to oversee a massive build-up, administrative \_\_\_\_\_, and restore morale (in the cliché) in the Department of Defense. He had been in office less than a month. He did not accompany President Truman on the trip, and neither did the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who considered the meeting something of a charade. MacArthur acted the role of a Sovereign, he said; there was no reason to lend further dignity to his inflated reputation or ego.

More to the point: like the President and the President's special assistant, Averill Harriman, he both sensed and understood that MacArthur's views of a strategy appropriate to the successful completion of the war were different from – and perhaps

dangerous to – those of the Administration, the interests of the United States, and to those of her principal supporters in the United Nations.

The meeting duly occurred. The two principals, each in character, played their roles and fulfilled their missions. The affair was very carefully staged, the two men and their parties were together for less than three hours. MacArthur declined to remain for lunch, pleading the necessity of his return to important duty in Tokyo; Truman decorated him and wished him well, whether he had been fully convinced by what the General had told him notwithstanding. Subsequent encrustations of the encounter, mainly drawn from a Truman biographer twenty years later, can be ignored – those owe to the President's failing memory. What we do know, however, is that General MacArthur assured the President that

American troops could be withdrawn by the end of the year – "Home by Christmas," that indeed one division could be withdrawn even earlier and sent to Germany, and that, it was most unlikely that the Chinese would intervene in any significant strength. If they did, MacArthur said, "there would be the greatest slaughter." Plainly he was drawing on his experience in the South Pacific, from vivid and recent memories of tactical victories on battlefields which it had been possible to isolate from enemy reinforcement. MacArthur believed that overwhelming American Air Forces could irrupt any attempt by the enemy to reinforce the North Koreans.

Several days later Pace reported to Marshall. He might almost have been Kurtz's credulous protege in *Heart of Darkness*.

MacArthur had convinced him the war would soon be over. US

forces could be withdrawn and re-deployed where they were needed, in Germany. Throughout the war in Korea the Administration feared Soviet moves in Europe; North Atlantic Treaty forces were as yet scattered, relatively weak, and not yet integrated. Not only this: just a year earlier an American weather plane flying over the Kamchatka Peninsula in extreme eastern Russia had detected radiation in the atmosphere: the Soviets had detonated their first bomb, and done so at least two years before American expectations. To be able to assign several divisions to western Europe, which victory in Korea would assure, was a welcome consequence of the coming victory in the war.

Pace told Marshall the war would soon be over. Marshall's response made him wonder whether the general had heard him correctly. "That's troubling, Pace," he said. Pace repeated his

statement. Marshall explained his meaning. "The American people will be/are misled by a quick and easy victory like this – if indeed it will be quick and easy. They need to learn to shoulder burdens and costs like those they are bearing now. A quick, easy victory is damaging." "So you would say I was naive in thinking the war will soon be over, and that this is a good thing?" Pace asked. "No, Pace," Marshall replied, "I'd say you were incredibly naive."

(verify quotations in Cray, *Marshall*, p. \_\_\_\_\_ )

David Halberstam had fastened upon a critical aspect of George Marshall's stature. Put another way, Marshall, like President George Washington, so admired, even revered, as a "leader," was also a citizen and soldier of profound judgement, of acute understanding of the characters and motivations of men and the affairs of states. Like Washington (to whom he has been

compared, and often) he was a continuing student and scholar of the culture of his own country: of its politics, of the motivations of its people, of their queasy sense and appreciation of the nature and role of their armed forces – and of both the Army's standing in the American democracy and the public's views of the wars of their country: especially the war, whatever war, challenges their own generation. His stature and his judgements owed much to a common source. A journalist in January 1944 summarized: during the war "He had kept faith with the people. In a general's uniform, he stood for the civilian substance of this democratic society. *Civis Americanus*, he had gained the world's undivided respect. In the name of the soldiers who had died, General George Catlett Marshall was entitled to accept his own nation's gratitude."

(\*\*\*TIME, 3 January, 1944)

The date of the citation is important. Only four weeks earlier, on December \_\_\_\_\_, Marshall had absorbed what his colleagues imagined was a terrible professional, and personal, disappointment. For years it had been understood that, as the nation's leading soldier, and head of the Army since September 1939, he would command the principal American, and probably Allied armies that would invade Europe to defeat Germany. By the summer of 1943 the assumption had almost hardened into usable fact. Churchill, Stimson, General Eisenhower and others had begun considering collateral and subordinate assignments of other senior officers, American and British. The President had told Eisenhower that, though "every schoolboy knew the names of the great generals of the Civil War, Lee and Grant, Sherman and Jackson, no one knew the name of the Chief of Staff of the time (Henry Halleck). I'd hate

to think that, fifty years from now, no one knew who George Marshall was." On agonized reconsideration President Roosevelt made one of his best wartime decisions: defying all expectations, he appointed General Eisenhower to the Great Command – a command from which the successful incumbent went forward to the presidency. Marshall, Roosevelt had come to believe, had to remain in Washington, at the center of things: as the principal strategic advisor to the President and Congress, as the commanding presence on the wartime Combined Chiefs of Staff, and, indeed, as military commander "over the whole scene" (WSC), co-ordinating Army operations throughout the world. Roosevelt, in an act either subtle or cynical, had asked Marshall to state a preference: take the great command in Europe or remain as Chief of Staff. Marshall, understanding his man, refused to gratify him.

By such acts, and by a long history of acts of self-denial, of allegiance to his noblest instincts, of what we might call schooled selflessness, Marshall had earned the trust of President and Congress, American soldiers, and fellow citizens. The recitation of the facts of his military career, studded as they are with such anecdotes, testimonials, and demonstrations of dutifulness, all lodged in a figure of commanding, if somewhat opaque physical stature and appearance, had gone to the making of this *Civis Americanus* that the TIME Magazine editors extolled. And to such demonstrations of unselfregarding conduct and disinterestedness are linked remembrances, now almost mythic, of Marshall's fierce independence of judgement, and famous acts of moral courage, in which, very junior, he often challenged at what seems to be at grave professional risk leaders his superiors by many magnitudes.

Here is an example:

In \_\_\_\_\_ 1918, as Operations Officer of the only American division then serving in France, the First Division, Marshall was present for a visit of General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force. The division was raw, untrained, trying to compress into three or four months the preparations that would enable its soldiers to fight successfully against the German army in northern France. Pershing watched a demonstration staged by an infantry company capturing an enemy trench. He found it unsatisfactory, egregiously so, and, assembling the Division's officers after the demonstration, tore into its commander, General Sibert, and his staff. Pershing in full cry was a formidable castigator: stern, six feet four, icy in expression, immaculate in his high-collared blouse and cavalry

boots. He finished his talk, turned from the staff and began to walk toward his limousine. A voice called out, "Just a minute, General. There's something that needs to be said here, and since nobody else is prepared to say it, I will." "Who are you?" Pershing asked. "Major Marshall, Sir." Without pausing, Marshall now tore into Pershing. His aim of course, was less to tear into the AEF commander than to explain the First Division's predicament, and the reasons for its less-than-professional execution of a tactical demonstration. There is an echo here of Robert E. Lee's anguished rebuke of an officer who had complained of another commander's performance in battle, late in the Civil War. "Colonel," Lee rejoined, "Colonel \_\_\_\_\_ is a farmer. He is no soldier. He is doing his best for his country." Pershing listened, turned to leave, and Marshall laid a

hand, a restraining hand, on Pershing's forearm. At last he finished. When Pershing had finally driven off, Marshall was surrounded by brother officers, General Sibert among them, offering words of commiseration. Surely this would be the end of him as a member of the divisional staff. On the contrary. Thereafter, when General Pershing visited the First Division, he always asked to see Major, then Colonel, Marshall, to find out as much as he could about the Division and its progress.

The sociologist Howard Gardner, student of human intellect, the taxonomies of its measurement and assessment, asks what it means when a young executive whose work has already earned him a reputation for efficiency, probity, and high intelligence, suddenly seems to hazard that reputation, and his prospects, by speaking up and out in terms contradictory to the known positions of his

superiors. Gardner is here discussing leadership in hierarchical organizations, like the Catholic Church, and like the General Motors of the 1920s through the 1950s, and like the United States Army. He posits that the young person, usually a man or woman of unusual gifts, has already developed a supervening allegiance to the truth of an action, a judgement, a situation, an allegiance which transcends the fact of his subordination to a superior. He is declaring both his self-reliance and his independence; a warrant to speak out among those who, while his seniors, are actually members of the same freemasonry of mind to which the younger person's own judgements entitle him to enter.

The Pershing story is familiar to students of Marshall's life; it was to be repeated, not often, but always memorably, in other venues: most famously with President Roosevelt, when Brigadier

General Marshall contradicted the President before a gathering of some twelve officials, military and civilian, who were his seniors. Roosevelt, like Pershing, was neither angered nor resentful: in each case the senior was intrigued and engaged – so powerfully so that each man hired Marshall to a position of great consequence. Years later Marshall, by now the senior official himself, encouraged, even demanded his subordinates give tongue to contradictory, unexpected, or heterodox opinions. However conventional the Marshall affect, a senior American general, a soldier of stern mien and remorseless concentration, he always wanted to discover, and use, new facts, new discoveries, that could serve a necessary end.

Years ago I worked at Marshall's alma mater, the Virginia Military Institute. Towards the end of the academic year I would have occasion to look over cadet grades and academic rankings. I

remember being struck by the fact that, among cadets ranking near the top of a very demanding curriculum, there was always a small sprinkling of students with relatively meager scores on the ACT or SAT examinations – measurements of certain forms of intellectual aptitude. Most cadets at the top would have SATs, let us say, in the 1500s; occasionally, however, there would be an 1180 or an 1100.

Now testimonials to George Marshall's intellectual aptitudes as a young man are almost always guarded, in the light of his accomplishments much later, but they seem to agree he was "not a good student," was "not an intellectual," did not attain high marks, etc. Teaching at West Point in the 1970s, and later writing about Ulysses Grant, I encountered a phrase that recurred so often it sounded like a Homeric epithet. "Although a mediocre student ... " etc. It was rare that a brilliant cadet scholar became an accomplished

general: one was Robert E. Lee, another Douglas MacArthur, and much more recently, Wesley Clark. What has always fascinated me about George Marshall is what struck David Halberstam with such force, and which commended him so powerfully to his Undersecretary and great admirer, Dean Acheson. And of which such scholars as Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have considered: his mind, his capacity for judgement, the farsightedness of his judgements, the independence of mind that distinguishes both how he reached them and his willingness to implement them: schooled, trained, intellectual aptitudes of a kind that ordinary measurements of intelligence and school and college grades are almost useless as accurate assessors of a collateral capacity which is not intellectual at all: the capacity for growth – a capacity which we locate in the capacity not of mind, but of character.

Let me use a parallel example of what I mean. There is no more plaintive and misbegotten query than this: why don't we learn from history? Surely the question is trivial, and the answer obvious. We do learn from history; but our capacity to implement what we have learned to useful purpose is another issue entirely. We confound mind, on the one hand, and what we call character, on another. They are largely, but not quite, distinct from each other. Mind can be schooled, but the school of the kind of mind I mean, the mind of the statesman, the mind of Marshall, comprises such things as patience, concentration, forbearance, self-reliance, indifference equally to praise or ridicule, experience, and a restless, constant, unassuageable curiosity. These Marshall consciously schooled, developed, improved, monitored, all his life. They enabled the formation of such judgements as the following. (One obvious

caveat: minds like these are profoundly non-ideological: they do not fit, and cannot be made to fit comfortably, within the common ideological parameters of political conservatism or liberalism. Dean Acheson offers another: they are not, and can never be, what are called "military minds," that is, minds "dominated by military considerations" – those "relating to the use of force."

Acheson recounts Marshall's discussion of the great strategic debate, among the allies, between the advocates of an early cross-channel invasion of northern France and "the advocates of the Mediterranean invasion through the Balkans (and) the 'soft underbelly of Europe.'" (Sketches from Life, p 137). Here is how Marshall's mind made its way through the issue to its conclusion. He saw the issue as a question of time. What, he asked, would be the effect of a decision to pursue a Mediterranean strategy upon

Allied (chiefly American) offensive actions in the Pacific? To shift military and naval resources from Britain to the eastern Mediterranean "would require a vast amount of shipping in the European theatre, more troops, and might delay victory in Europe by as much as a year. The consequence could be to stretch out the time for decision in Asia into the congressional elections of 1946. (Marshall) went on to discuss the influences of the wars on elections in 1864 and 1918 ..." ibid 137

Two other examples. Early in 1943 Marshall, Chief of Staff, meets with Major General John Hildring, whom he has appointed to oversee the business of "organizing military governments for countries to be liberated or conquered. He says to Hildring, "I am turning over to you a sacred trust ... we have a great asset and that is that our people, our countrymen, do not

distrust us and do not fear us ... that is a sacred trust and ... I don't want you to do anything to damage this high regard in which the professional soldiers in the Army are held by our people ... " Marshall, in other words, at the very middle of a world war, his daily demands almost inconceivable in their range and variety, is thinking "in time," using his knowledge of history, and his sense of the political culture and heritage of his country, and its provenance, to charge a subordinate for crucial duties that will be undertaken, mainly, when the war is over."

(\*\*\* Thinking in Time).

Again, Acheson: Marshall had a mind schooled to the patient, deliberately unemotional assembly of all facts that could possibly bear upon a situation about which he would have to render judgement. These facts, and the "imponderables," elements that

could be, at best, only half-known, were held in suspension until a determination, a decision, was precipitated. There was a neutralizing emollient: what Eighteenth Century Americans called, their highest word of political praise, disinterestedness: the decision is made without calculation of its consequences to the maker of the decision. It is made after searching but never fearful, or harried, care.

Thucydides the historian whom Marshall instructed all Princeton students to know and understand before they entered into the duties of citizenship, wrote that a man who had all the knowledge in the world but lacked the ability to express it, was no better off than if he had no knowledge at all. Marshall was the best American exemplar of this public virtue of the last century. He knew how to communicate the burden of the truths he must convey

to the people, his soldiers, and sometimes most importantly the representatives of the people in Congress. His intellectual rectitude was so absolute that he could, and did, introduce evidence that hurt the case he was making. He talked to committees of the Congress like a family doctor: always the truth, always in language both clear and engaging, always with the respect a truly great soldier in our democracy feels for his masters, the citizens of his country.

Let me conclude this appreciation of George Marshall with two observations. He was a lifelong learner and reader of history, and like the ablest soldiers of the interwar period, 1919 to 1939, he used those years to enormous advantage: in thinking about the next war, in refusing to believe that experience of the last should superintend preparations for the next, and in identifying the ablest of a new generation of soldiers who would lead the Republic when

that war came, as it surely would. What had Omar Bradley, Joe Stilwell, Dwight Eisenhower, J. Lawton Collins, George Patton, Lucian Trustcott, Matthew Ridgway, James van Fleet, Walter Bedell Smith all in common: they were all Marshall men. His influence, his character, his mind, permeated the American army of the war, and afterwards. The cliché about great leaders surrounding themselves with men better than themselves breaks down in the case of George C. Marshall. I conclude by disagreeing with Winston Churchill's impassioned tribute: succeeding generations must not be allowed to forget his example. On two grounds: it is not his example they must not forget. It is Marshall, himself, they must learn, and know, and remember. (You will forgive my saying that he seems to me a rebuke). And it is in the conversion of knowledge into wisdom, and its deployment, unselfregarding,

unafraid, that they can most usefully serve his memory.