



General, Statesman and Pinehurst Retiree

**BY WARREN L. BINGHAM: IN THE NEWS & OBSERVER**

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White House security was lax in 1901 when a visiting fourth-year cadet at Virginia Military Institute walked past several guards to come face to face with President William McKinley.

The brash but polite cadet was there to plead his case for a chance at testing for an officer's commission in the U.S. Army, roles then primarily reserved for West Point graduates. It is doubtful that the moment with the president helped the cadet's cause, but fortune broke his way. Less than a year later the army made the young Pennsylvania native a second lieutenant.

By the 1950s, after a long career in the military and public service, the lieutenant of yore was a retired general, splitting his time between modest homes in Pinehurst and Leesburg, Va. In Pinehurst, he attended amateur golf tournaments, went to civic club meetings, rode horses, shopped at the A&P and took walks around the sandy paths of the village.

For the most part, the retiree lived quietly with his wife. Notably, there were exceptions when the couple hosted guests, including Harry Truman, Queen Frederika of Greece and Lady Astor of England.

You see, the old general was one of the greatest Americans of the 20th century: George C. Marshall, who died 50 years ago Friday.

Many recognize Marshall's name, but too few know much about him. He is most often associated with the European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan, the U.S. financial commitment to rebuild war-torn Europe after World War II. As secretary of state, Marshall sold Congress and the American people on the merits of the plan, which proved to be highly successful. For it, Marshall was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.

Marshall's accomplishments and contributions paralleled America's rise from an isolated provincial country to international superpower.

His career, spanning 50 years, was remarkable just for the positions he held: Army officer, Army chief of staff, Special U.S. emissary to China, secretary of state, president of the American Red Cross and secretary of defense. And just as important was the way he went about it -- passionately and selflessly, with unwavering integrity.

Despite a ponderous promotional path in the Army of his day, Marshall unfailingly accepted various posts from the Philippines to China to Massachusetts to South Carolina. No task was too small and no challenge too great. From the mundane duty of mapping the Texas desert to revolutionizing infantry training at Fort Benning, Ga., Marshall gave it his all and expected the same from those in his command.

After 37 years in the army, Marshall's patience was rewarded in 1939 on the cusp of World War II when President Franklin Roosevelt named him Army chief of staff. Over the next six years, Marshall would recruit, train, equip and organize an army that grew from fewer than 200,000 soldiers to more than 8 million. Marshall's ability to influence Congress was instrumental in installing the draft and in equipping the troops.

The general rubbed shoulders with the giants of the war, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. Many expected him to be named the supreme commander of Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion to liberate Europe from the Nazis. Marshall coveted the role. Had he been so bold to suggest it to Roosevelt, the position probably would have been his, but Marshall, never a self-promoter, left that decision to the president.

Desiring to keep Marshall's talents stateside, Roosevelt selected Dwight Eisenhower to lead the Allies in battle. Marshall was disappointed, but he poured himself into his role as chief of staff, fully supporting his friend Eisenhower. Churchill, no easy judge, declared Marshall indispensable as the organizer of victory.

By postwar, Marshall desired retirement, but he repeatedly answered the call to duty, serving tirelessly in the Truman cabinet, often meeting with Congress in support of the Marshall Plan or on matters related to the ever-developing Cold War.

By then, Marshall was well-known for his impeccable integrity, which often held sway with Congress. Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn said of Marshall, "He has the presence of a great man. He's simple, able and candid, and he'll tell the truth even if it hurts his own cause."

The general found pleasure in his simple retirement to North Carolina. His final illness began in Pinehurst in early 1959; he died on Oct. 16.

Marshall's life should be remembered, not only for what he did, but for how he did it. Though he made his mark over the first half of the 20th century, his exemplary life of hard work, integrity, selflessness and patriotism is well worth study. Such characteristics are timeless.

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