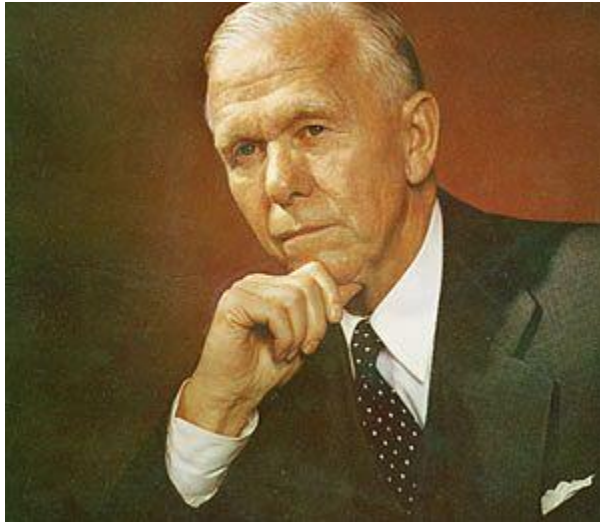


George C. Marshall: A Selfless Public



Credit: George C. Marshall Research Library and Archives

BRIAN SHAW TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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As with many great men and women who gave extraordinary service to our nation, George Catlett Marshall is waning from the national consciousness and memory. To military and diplomatic historians he remains a towering figure of the previous century. Two new books published this year were about Marshall or had a large part devoted to him. A major new biography of Marshall by Josiah Bunting, the former superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute, is due out this fall.

MORE

- [George C. Marshall: Remembering a Selfless Public Servant](#)
- [George Marshall's Virginia Roots](#)

As the generation that personally knew of Marshall and his many accomplishments fades away, the job of following Winston Churchill's pronouncement that "succeeding generations must not be allowed to forget his achievements and his example" becomes more challenging. Why should we remember Marshall? Or, to put a finer point on it, why should we continue to study the life and career of someone who's been dead for 50 years?

It is a fair question that demands an equally fair and objective answer. Indeed, there are many answers that all relate to Marshall's critical role in a time of international conflict and reconstruction.

Marshall was present at almost every significant event in the first half of the 20th century that marked the United States' evolution from an isolated, somewhat provincial nation to superpower. The roles he played in those events commend him to study by future generations.

Yet, as we contemplate Marshall, it is his absolute devotion to selfless service that stands above all others as the reason why we should remember Marshall today and why we and future generations should seek to emulate him.

Marshall's career is full of examples where he subjugated himself to a larger mission or a greater purpose. Perhaps the most famous example is Marshall's unwillingness to be an advocate for himself when President Franklin D. Roosevelt was deciding who would lead the D-Day invasion. Everyone assumed it would -- and should -- be Marshall. By not pushing for a position he had earned through more than 43 years of service, Marshall freed Roosevelt to make a decision to place an outstanding field commander -- Dwight D. Eisenhower -- in charge of the invasion, while letting Marshall, the consummate "organizer of victory," provide the resources and political acumen necessary for that victory.

Less than 24 hours after Marshall retired from the Army he was asked by President Harry Truman to accept a mission to China to try to mediate a settlement between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung. Although Marshall knew the mission was difficult with a low chance for success, he accepted it without hesitation and spent the year in futile negotiation before returning home to take up another challenging position: secretary of state.

Perhaps the most important example of Marshall's selfless service came not as the result of one action or one decision, but in the accumulation of a series of appearances, testimonies, and statements he made before Congress over his long career. Members of Congress knew that Marshall would always speak the truth and would always give a straight, unvarnished answer. The mission or the task were never about him.

He rejected congressional appropriations if he thought they were not needed. Conversely, when he came to Congress with requests, they were MARSHALL,

Page E5 supported by fact and reduced to the most essential element. He asked only for what the Army or the nation truly needed and he justified every penny of every request. Can we imagine that happening today?

It was Marshall's professional and personal credibility and his integrity, grounded in his selflessness, that allowed him to convince a negative and hostile Congress to support what has come to be recognized as the greatest success in the history of U.S. foreign policy: the Marshall Plan.

At the end of the war in Europe Marshall received many plaudits and much praise. Perhaps the most fitting tribute came from the grizzled Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, on V-E Day.

"I want to acknowledge my great personal debt to you, sir, in common with the whole country," Stimson said to Marshall. "No one who is thinking of himself can rise to true heights. You have never thought of yourself. Seldom can a man put aside such a thing as being the commanding general of the greatest field army in our history. This decision was made by you for wholly unselfish reasons."

Stimson continued: "I have seen a great many soldiers in my lifetime and you, sir, are the finest soldier I have ever known."

We hear much talk today about the need for national service and "giving back" to our communities and to our nation. As we think about those commitments we should remember George Catlett Marshall who did not "give back." He simply gave.

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