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Remembering the Marshall legacy



From the RoundTable blog

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Fifty years ago, a towering figure of the 20th century passed from the world scene. A pre-eminent soldier in America's pre-eminent war, an internationally acclaimed statesman and above-reproach public servant, George Catlett Marshall stands as an iconic exemplar of our greatest generation despite the passage of five decades. His sterling record still shines for notable achievement without hint of personal scandal, selfish pursuit or nauseating self-promotion so much a part of our contemporary age.

From humble beginnings in western Pennsylvania, Marshall rose steadily through the ranks of the U.S. Army after his graduation from the Virginia Military Institute in 1901.

He saw service with the "doughboys" in World War I as the overall U.S. commander Gen. John J. Pershing's able operations chief during the storied Meuse-Argonne offensive in 1918. After the "war to end all wars," Marshall served in a variety of posts and assignments; among them, he built and administered camps for the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps in southeastern United States.

At the onset of the 1941-45 war, President Franklin Roosevelt promoted Marshall to Army chief of staff from which he presided over the largest military buildup in American history, taking the army from fewer than 200,000 to nearly 8.5 million men and women. Ahead of his time, Marshall included women in their own corps and cleared the way for military service by African-Americans and Japanese-Americans.

From this perch, five-star general Marshall oversaw not only the planning, strategy and conduct of America's global struggle against Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and militaristic Japan, but also the tempest-tossed inter-Allied diplomacy and cooperation so crucial to defeat the forces of darkness. So prized was Marshall's contribution that Britain's lion-hearted Prime Minister Winston Churchill pronounced him "the true organizer of victory."

During the pivotal immediate post-World War period, Marshall struck enduring fame as secretary of state in the Harry Truman administration. Europe lay in ruins and the Soviet Union menaced the countries west of the Elbe River with its conquering Red Army poised in Moscow's East European satellite states for an assault into Western lands.

The Cold War came to test the United States many times over during the next four decades. But it was in the early, perilous days that Marshall, together with President Truman, Dean Acheson and George Kennan, set down the containment strategy that every subsequent U.S. administration took up. In the end, their policies proved enduring and ultimately triumphant.

As secretary of state, George Marshall laid the cornerstone of the containment policy with the plan that bears his name. The Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Program) provided funds on a self-help basis and American ingenuity for the rebuilding and unity of a destitute and divided Western Europe amid its own war-torn history and against Moscow's threatening ambitions. It helped garner a Nobel Peace Prize for Marshall, the only soldier ever to receive that award.

Marshall wrote no self-flattering autobiography, served on no corporate boards, took no post-service perks and set an example of selfless service that is unmatched by any high-ranking U.S. policymaker since.

His passing a half-century ago is an occasion to remind us all of the integrity and decency in the American political character and to reinspire us to seek, through his example, a richer heritage of untarnished leadership.