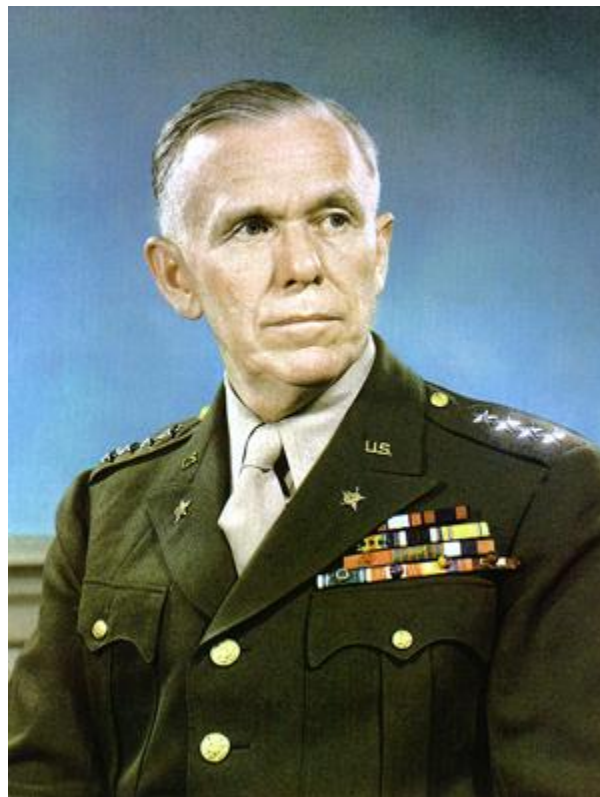




Robert Edsel's Blog

REMEMBERING A GIANT

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Last Friday was the 50th anniversary of the death of General George Marshall.

Time magazine had a simple tag line to its December 1943 cover when he was named its "Man of the Year": "He armed the Republic". Winston Churchill referred to him as "the organizer of victory." His name was George Catlett Marshall. On this day 50 years ago, the commander of the largest army this country has ever assembled to fight the greatest war the world has known, died. Sadly, his name rarely is heard when asking almost anyone, even veterans, "Who was the greatest general in our nation's history?"

First a little background: Marshall first entered the U.S. Army in 1901. By 1919 he had become an aide-de-camp of General John J. Pershing. He was a key war planner and later educator at the Army War College. He later served for 3 years in China. At least one of the publications he wrote,

Infantry in Battle, is still used as an officer's training manual. In 1939 he was selected by President Roosevelt to become the Army Chief of Staff. He would hold this position for a period of 6 years, until 1945. In 1944 he was awarded—over his objection—a 5-star rank, the first such award of its kind. (In keeping with his selfless demeanor, General Marshall didn't believe that such recognition was necessary as he could perform all his tasks with the rank of 4 stars.)

The General was not without humor: The rank of 5-star general was the equivalent to that of Field Marshall, a rank that did not exist in the United States. General Marshall once commented that he was glad the United States never created such a rank as he would have been referred to as "Marshall Marshall."

In 1939 he assumed leadership of an army with only 188,000 soldiers. 188,000!!! Within five years he would successfully lobby Congress for the necessary approvals to build the most modern, complex war machine in history with more than 8.3 million men and women in uniform. When former General Electric CEO Jack Welch and so many other well-known business titans discuss the topic of leadership and building organizations, this accomplishment really gets put into proper historical perspective. It is, like so many of the events of World War II, an unimaginable achievement.

Even when his service during war had ended, General Marshall continued to perform great deeds for this country—and the world. Within just two days of his "retirement", President Truman asked him to return to China in an attempt to broker peace between Communist and Nationalist forces. In 1947 he returned home to become the Secretary of State, a role which would earn him the most name recognition of his career. Once again, that notoriety came over his objection. While delivering a speech at Harvard University in June 1947, General Marshall outlined his vision for the "European Recovery Plan", as he referred to it until the day he died. Of course, the world today knows it as the "Marshall Plan". For this great achievement he would be recognized once again as Time magazine's "Man of the Year in 1948". He was also honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.



Photographs of plaques on the facade of the Hotel Talleyrand I took while visiting Paris

General Marshall's service to the United States also included a brief period as President of the American National Red Cross which was interrupted when war in Korea commenced. Once again, General Marshall was asked to serve his nation, this time as Secretary of Defense, where he served for a year before retiring from politics for good in 1951. He would enjoy retirement but for eight years before dying on Friday, October 16, 1959.

His record of service and career are truly inestimable. A few years ago, then Secretary of State Colin Powell was asked why his office had two portraits of his hero, General Marshall, to which he replied: "George Marshall recognized that the Western democracies were in uncharted waters after World War II, with both dangers and opportunities ahead. He had a vision that was built to scale for the challenges of that moment in history. He wasn't afraid to think boldly. He **was** afraid of what would happen if we didn't think boldly."

Where is such leadership, such vision, such courage among leaders today??? Perhaps if we spent a little more time studying history to learn about great leaders such as George C. Marshall, we would have a much better idea of what kind of leadership is possible today? No doubt, leaders today would stand only in this giant's shadow.