



The News-Gazette: Our View

Remembering Marshall On Veterans Day 2009

It's been 50 years this fall since George C. Marshall died.

That means that many of you reading this weren't even born then. That doesn't mean, though, that Marshall, his actions and what he stood for are simply words in history books.

Just last month, an article in Newsweek magazine made reference to Marshall in discussing whether or not General McChrystal should have voiced his opinion in public about what should be done in Afghanistan. Marshall, the writer said, would have argued that military men should express their opinions to the civilian leadership in private, and then if they disagreed with the policy decision, resigned.

And our current national leadership has certainly not forgotten Marshall. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr., each representing the three principal positions held by Marshall, attended a luncheon at the State Department last month commemorating the 50th anniversary of Marshall's death.

That event was sponsored by the George C. Marshall Foundation — yes, the folks who work in that building on the southwest corner of the parade ground at Virginia Military Institute.

Now, the Marshall museum and library in that building is one of those institutions that many of us who grew up here probably take for granted and probably can't remember the last time we were there. And, yes, most of us probably don't know much about Marshall himself.

But this, the 50th anniversary of his death, is a good time to take another look at Marshall and his museum.

Marshall's military career stretched from 1902, the year after he graduated from VMI, until the end of World War II. His most famous role during that career was that of Army chief of staff, from 1939 until 1945, when he got the Army and Army Air Corps ready for war, reorganized the Army and led it throughout World War II. Winston Churchill called him the organizer of the Allied victory.

After he retired from the Army, he continued to serve his country, most notably as secretary of state. His department crafted the European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan, which helped rebuild Europe after World War II. "The Marshall Plan was as bold and visionary a demonstration of American leadership as any in our history," Hillary Clinton said at last month's luncheon in Washington. "And it is a model today, as we face up to our own vast responsibility."

Marshall was lauded by all of the speakers at that event in Washington, including Gates, who received the Marshall Foundation Award that day. "He made himself an ideal that we should all aspire to emulate," said Gates.

Perpetuating Marshall's legacy is the mission of the George C. Marshall Foundation, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2014. The foundation was established in 1953, with the museum and research library building opening its doors in 1964.

Since then the museum has become one of Lexington's leading tourist destinations, drawing up to 30,000 visitors a year during the good tourism years. The library, meanwhile, attracts scholars, students and amateur historians to its shelves, which contain more than a million documents relating to Marshall, his contemporaries, World War II and the Marshall Plan. The library contains the only complete set of Marshall Plan documents.

The foundation also offers a wide range of educational programs, including the Marshall ROTC Award Seminar that brings top cadets from 245 colleges and universities to the campuses of VMI and Washington and Lee every summer to learn about leadership and national security.

And the foundation, which currently employs 14 fulltime and four part-time people, is not standing still. It's endeavoring to embrace the changing technology, using YouTube for instance, and is in the process of digitizing all of its archives for placement on its Web site. Many of its documents are already online, so that people throughout the world can readily access them. "We're trying to keep his legacy alive and relevant," explained Rick Drake, spokesman for the foundation.

As we celebrate Veterans Day today, we salute George Marshall and the important work of the Marshall Foundation. We also remember all of our veterans, from those of World War II to those of today's wars. We mourn the loss of those killed in the mass shooting in Fort Hood, Texas, last week. And we pray for peace.

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