HARVARD HEARS OF THE MARSHALL PLAN[1]

Fifteen Years ago Secretary of State George Catlett Marshall addressed the first postwar Commencement at Harvard. This is the story of his epochal speech.

By Robert E. Smith

AS the endless line of degree candidates and dignitaries formed in the Old Yard at Harvard's first fully normal Commencement since the war, George C. Marshall chatted with Edmund M. Morgan, then Royall Professor of Law. Morgan, who was to escort the Secretary of State in the procession to the steps of Memorial Church, mentioned that Marshall's apparent anxiety about his coming performance was unusual. "He assured me that he was expected to say something of importance," recalls Morgan, "Who expected it? He did not specify."

Secretary of State Marshall and General Bradley on the steps of the Fogg Museum.

Even President James B. Conant, who had entertained the old General at his house the evening before, was not led to expect a major address from Marshall. But word of Harvard's honorary degree to Marshall and his appearance at the University had leaked to the press 24 hours earlier. The *New York Times* that morning wrote, "He is expected to de-

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liver a speech which perhaps will include an important pronouncement on foreign affairs."

In Cambridge, however, the capacity crowd of 15,000 showed up in the Yard not so much in expectation of seeing history made, as simply in awe of the man. Few public figures before or since have inspired such admiration among those in the Harvard community as George Catlett Marshall.

Behind the macebearer in the traditional procession to the Memorial Church steps, Morgan escorted Marshall before a group of 11 other distinguished honorary degree recipients. Among them that day were T. S. Eliot, James Wadsworth, I. A. Richards, J. Robert Oppenheimer, George Henry Chase (former dean of Harvard), W. Hodding Carter, Jr. (editor of the Delta, Miss., *Democratic-Times*), Frank L. Boyden (headmaster of Deerfield Academy), and Gen. Omar N. Bradley, the other afternoon speaker.

Secretary of State Marshall in the Commencement procession.

In the parade of caps and gowns, Marshall, dressed in a business suit and with hat in hand, slowly walked to the platform and acknowledged the appreciative applause along the way. A loud ovation greeted him as he reached the stage.

After conducting the traditional morning ceremonies and awarding the first 11 honoraries, Conant finally reached General Marshall, "an American to whom freedom owes an enduring debt of gratitude, a soldier and statesman whose ability and character brook only one comparison in the history of this nation."

As Marshall and the other dignitaries adjourned to the Twenty-Fifth Reunion Class Marshal's luncheon, the crowd thought that it had seen most of the show. But Marshall's

speech at the afternoon Alumni Association meeting was still to come.

WHAT later became known as the Marshall Plan had actually been born closer to the Kremlin than to Memorial Church. Shortly after accepting President Truman's call to re-turn from China (where he had been ambassador) and become Secretary of State, Marshall led the American delegation to the Moscow Foreign Ministers' Conference in April 1947. After a fruitless meeting with Stalin and Molotov in private, Marshall was convinced that the Soviet Union was stalling in European recovery action, that Europe needed help fast, and that only the West could and would provide that help. Piecemeal aid to Greece and Turkey--the "Truman Doctrine" of 1946-7--not only failed to help Europe as a whole but also did not "scare" Russia at all.

On the return plane trip from Moscow to Washington, the new Secretary of State had conveyed his thoughts to other members of the delegation, John Foster Dulles, Benjamin V. Cohen, Walter Bedell Smith, James Burnes. Out of the failure of the Moscow Conference came an offensive strategy for the United States.

Marshall, in late April and early May, combined his ideas with recommendations from the State Department and the White House. As the proposal for American aid to a unified Europe developed, it was generally referred to as the "Marshall Plan" in staff meetings. The President fostered this term, Truman says in his memoirs, "because I wanted General Marshall to get full credit for his brilliant contribution to the measure which he helped formulate." This is probably why Truman chose not to make a speech similar to Marshall's when the President had an appropriate occasion two weeks later--as the main speaker at Princeton's Commencement, June 17.

The Administration launched a trial balloon for its European recovery program May 8. Truman's mother was sick in Kansas City at the time, and so he authorized Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson to replace him at a meeting of plantation owners in Cleveland, Miss. Acheson omitted the particulars, but his general message was clear: the United States ought to be conscious of Europe's post-war plight and ought to offer aid.

The public reaction to this having been satisfactory, relates Laird Bell, Harvard Class of 1904, then President of the Alumni Association and the man responsible for inviting Marshall to speak at Harvard, "the Secretary of State determined to go all out for what has become known as the Marshall Plan, and a speech was prepared accordingly. The question was then the rostrum from which it should be delivered. Two or three suggestions were made, and then the Secretary remembered that he had been invited to receive a Harvard degree and that seemed a highly suitable occasion. He therefore indicated that he would like to accept and of course was welcome."

As Washington wrestled with its plan for European recovery in the spring of 1947, Harvard University had been selecting its honorary degree candidates and inviting speakers for the afternoon Alumni Association meeting. General Marshall had not been available in earlier years when a number of the leading generals and admirals of World

War II were nominated for honoraries; by custom, degrees are awarded only when the candidate is present in person (General MacArthur has yet to pick his up).

Some time before Commencement Day 1947, Bell had renewed the invitation to Marshall to attend the Harvard Commencement and to speak. Again he declined. Bell, as President of the Alumni Association, was authorized to select speakers from a confidential list of honorary candidates from the Corporation, Harvard's governing board. Bell had told President Conant that he was not about to name any high brass like an admiral or a general; but the President of the University replied that that would never do, the public would not stand for it. So Bell selected General Bradley, at that time Administrator of Veterans Affairs, as one speaker.

Two days before Commencement, the State Department called Bell to say that the Secretary of State would be glad to speak at Harvard after all, although he did not want it to be the major speech of the day. "Thus I wound up with two generals instead of none," recollects Bell, a prominent lawyer in Chicago. "I did not realize how historic the occasion would be."

THE atmosphere was neither tense nor expectant as the program proceeded as usual at the afternoon Alumni Association meeting: the National Anthem, the Alumni President's talk, an address by the Governor, the two scheduled addresses, and the 78th Psalm. Then Republican Governor Robert F. Bradford of Massachusetts rose and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen--the Secretary of State." Amid an appreciative ovation, Marshall stepped to the rostrum.

"President Dr. Conant, members of the Board of Overseers, ladies and gentlemen," Marshall began, "I am grateful-touched by the honor accorded me by the authorities of Harvard---overwhelmed as a matter of fact. These historic and lovely surroundings, this perfect day . . . 'this wonderful assembly," said the General,--"a tremendously impressive thing for a person in my place."

From there, the Secretary began his prepared text, "I need not tell you, gentlemen, that the world situation is very serious." Fidgeting with his glasses, rarely looking up from his notes, speaking undramatically and sometimes inaudibly, George Marshall went into a somber description of Europe's losses--"the visible destruction of cities . . . factories, mines, railroads . . . long-standing commercial ties, private institutions, banks, insurance companies, and shipping companies" in short, the--"dislocation of the entire fabric of European economy."

It was a simple, 20-minute speech without oratorical flourish or verbiage; it revolved around one unmistakable fact,

> **It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace.**

This was undoubtedly not the first time, in public or private, that this thought had been expressed; but from that point historians would date America's foreign aid to Europe and America's policies on the Cold War. Historians would treat that moment as a landmark in

American foreign policy. And from that point, Harvard University would come to expect --or at least hope for--a major policy pronouncement from its Commencement speakers. Upon invitation, most would-be speakers would be reminded of Marshall's history-making address and many would allude to it in their own speeches.

Marshall led to his main point by saying,

> **The remedy lies in breaking the vicious circle and restoring the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole.**

The audience and the press considered this the keynote of Marshall's pronouncement. (MARSHALL PLEADS FOR EUROPEAN UNITY, said the *New York Times* the next day.) The General continued:

> **Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist. Such assistance, I am convinced, must not be on a piecemeal basis as various crises develop. Any assistance that this government may render in the future should provide a cure rather than a mere palliative.**
>
> **Any government that is willing to assist in the task of recovery will find full cooperation, I am sure, on the part of the United States Government. Any government which maneuvers to block the recovery of other countries cannot expect help from us. Furthermore, governments, political parties, or groups which seek to perpetuate human misery in order to profit therefrom politically or otherwise will encounter the opposition of the United States.**

Here, and at the end of his talk, Marshall cut off the applause--lowered the impact by moving quickly to his next point. As the audience rose to applaud the end of his address, the Secretary took off his glasses, leaned forward on the lectern, and reached into his pocket for some scribbled supplementary remarks. Then he reiterated his earlier point, "the vast importance that our people reach some general understanding of what the complications really are, rather than react from a passion or prejudice or an emotion of the moment." It was this gesture that led many members of the audience to believe to this day that the "Marshall Plan" was an impromptu stroke of genius that the General happened to toss out at the end of his prepared address,

"AFTER the speech, the applause was tremendous and the distinguished guests crowded around the Secretary," reports Bell. The audience surely grasped Marshall's plea for European unity, but few if any were aware that day of the significance of his plans for the United States' role in European recovery.

"I was much impressed . . . as were many of the others I talked to," says Conant. "However, I am frank to say I had no suspicion that the speech would turn out to be so epic making. That it was a major speech there could be no doubt, but since none of us knew that it would be immediately picked up by high-ranking officials of foreign countries; we could not anticipate the subsequent developments."

The immediate favorable response by foreign officials was not accidental. "Unbeknownst to Marshall; Undersecretary Acheson had called in key English correspondents, briefed them on the upcoming proposal and urged them to dispatch the full text of Marshall's remarks in their papers," according to a member of that year's senior class, Douglass Cater, Class of 1947, now Washington editor of *The Reporter*.

"I am told that the British Embassy in Washington, for economy reasons, failed to cable the text. Thus it was that when Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and others sought to find out more about what Marshall said, they had to turn to the press." The speech evoked great enthusiasm from Bevin and it was he who later organized Europe's unified positive, response.

AT the time Marshall spoke, the United States had already given $11 billion post-war aid. In the summer of 1947 England and France invited the European nations to a conference to plan cooperation (Russia declined the offer). The Commission of European Economic Cooperation then set its specific needs in September, as President Truman investigated the capacity of the U. S. economy to help. In November, satisfied that we could help materially without serious disruption of the domestic economy, Truman called a special session of Congress to appropriate half a billion dollars for interim aid. On December 19, immediately after the failure of the London Big Four Conference, Truman submitted the first official version of the Marshall Plan to Congress. April 3, 1948 (one year after the Moscow conference), the President signed the Foreign Assistance Act, granting through the Economic Cooperation Administration and other agencies $17 billion in grants and loans over a four-year period.

At the midpoint ceremony of the Marshall Plan in 1950, General Marshall said, "Looking again at the conditions prevalent in the spring of 1947, and again considering the situation at this moment, I can only feel that one near miracle has been accomplished. We must work for, and expect, another miracle."

Conant, in a letter to Marshall a year later, said, "Your speech at the Harvard Commencement of 1947 will always remain an honored memory at Harvard."