

## Published 1954 Interview with Marshall

### “THE STORY GEN. MARSHALL TOLD ME” Hitherto Unpublished Views on Fateful Decisions of World War II

SOURCE: *U.S. News & World Report* 47 (November 2, 1959): 50–56  
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The following office memo from John P. Sutherland explains the origin of this story:

*“After his retirement from public life, but before he became seriously ill, I had three long conversations with General of the Army George C. Marshall.*

*“In these conversations, the General unburdened his feelings about many controversial subjects on which he maintained strict public silence during his lifetime. These included the events leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the decisions made at the Yalta Conference that brought Soviet Russia into the war against Japan, the use of the atomic bombs that ended the war, and postwar U. S. policies in the Far East.*

*“I took notes, including verbatim quotations, with General Marshall’s knowledge and permission. His only stipulation was that his words not be made public during his lifetime.*

*“The interviews began at his home in Pinehurst, N.C., on March 29, 1954. We talked during the afternoon, and the General took me for an automobile ride to see the countryside. The next conversation started on the morning of April 6, 1955. We had lunch together, then resumed our talk in the afternoon. I also visited General Marshall at his Leesburg, Va., residence. In all, we spent at least six hours together. I also telephoned him on occasion to recheck certain points and statements.*

*“After each meeting, I immediately wrote a full account and filed it away. With the death of the General on Oct. 16, 1959, these conversations now can be printed in accordance with the understanding made at the time.*

*“Here is the story General Marshall told me.”*

Mr. Sutherland's article follows:

## **PEARL HARBOR: Was Warning Of an Attack Withheld?**

In the book, “The Final Secret of Pearl Harbor,” written by Rear Adm. Robert A. Theobald (U.S.N., Ret.), who was serving at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese struck, the author pinned the blame for the surprise attack on President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Admiral Theobald wrote that General Marshall must have been under presidential orders not to inform Pearl Harbor of impending danger. A congressional inquiry in 1946, by an 8-to-2 vote, absolved Mr. Roosevelt of blame for the surprise attack.

“This is not true,” General Marshall said of the accusations. “This is not true. It is as though a couple of people had been on the bank fishing and had made up the story.

“Why must this go on and on? Congress went into this, I think, nine or ten times. I answered every question as honestly as I could.

“In fact, my honesty got me into trouble. I remember they asked me where I was on the evening of December 6—the evening before the attack on Pearl Harbor. I tried to be honest. I tried to remember and I couldn't. When I told them that, not only the Congressmen but the press got after me.

“It wasn't until some time later that Mrs. Marshall reminded me that I was with her. Mrs. Marshall had fallen a few days before and several of her ribs were broken. I was with her in the bedroom. We were having dinner, she reminded me.

“President Roosevelt was trying to avoid war. I remember in 1940, when he was trying to keep within a 50-billion-dollar debt limit and was cutting out some of the defense measures I proposed. In 1940, before France fell, I advocated 11 million dollars for defense housing in Alaska.

“I couldn't even get this. Congress cut it out and President Roosevelt concurred. You don't remember what it was like then. The Army had little or nothing. Now they are saying President Roosevelt wanted war.

“When I wanted that little 11-million-dollar appropriation, newspapers and columnists came out against me. They said I was trying to drag this country into war. You know what a small amount 11 million is now. And then, after France fell and I asked for 10,000 planes, the press and Congressmen condemned me because they thought this request was too small. But I was only trying to be practical. We could, of course, have built many more planes, but getting engines for them was another matter. At that time, 10,000 engines a year was all we could expect.” [\(Return to top.\)](#)

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## **YALTA: Charges of Big Blunders Are Answered**

Early in 1945, the war in Europe was drawing to a close. A few select Americans knew the atomic bomb would soon be ready. Some high officials urged President Roosevelt not to pay a high price to get Russia into the war against Japan. Yet concessions vital to Soviet Russia in the postwar period were given to the Russians at Yalta in February, 1945. General Marshall was asked why.

“It’s easy to say now what we should have done, “ he replied. “But the circumstances then called for the actions Mr. Roosevelt urged. We didn’t even know the atomic bomb would work until the Potsdam Conference in July, 1945. The Yalta Conference was in February of that year. We had no idea of the destructive power of the atomic bomb. We could only guess what it really was, since there were no actual tests prior to July. In fact, we planned on using atomic bombs in the invasion of Japan.

“I was for Russia entering the Pacific war. We needed everything we could get to save American casualties.”

General Marshall denied implications that he had actually shaped any of the decisions at Yalta. “I was not present at any of the Yalta political discussions,” he said. “I was not the President of the United States.”

General Marshall did affirm, however, that, shortly before the Yalta meeting, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, of which he was a member, reported:

“We desire Russian entry at the earliest possible date consistent with her ability to engage in offensive operations . . . “

As to the question of whether Russia’s entry into the Pacific war had much weight in forcing the Japanese to surrender, General Marshall said this:

“I think the surrender was brought about by the helplessness of the situation—the defeat in Okinawa, the destruction of practically all shipping in the China, Yellow and Japan Seas, the elimination of the Japanese Navy, the isolation of the Japanese forces in North China by the loss of sea control and by the intervention of the Russian forces in Manchuria, with the destruction of that [Kwantung] Army, the bombardment of the Japanese land installations by Admiral Halsey’s Fleet [Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., Commander, U. S. Third Fleet], the terrific bombing of Japanese cities by our Air Force and, finally, by the explosions of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“The last-mentioned, in my opinion, precipitated the surrender by months.”

Returning to the Yalta decisions, General Marshall said:

“People think that I was in on everything, but that is not true. I had the Army to think about. My thinking was military thinking. I would make a decision without considering the political consequences. That was for the politicians.

“You mentioned the price we had to pay to get the Russians into the Pacific war. The motivation was to save the lives of Americans. I did not ask the terms, or point out what political concessions the U.S. and Britain should be willing to make. My job was military planning.”

The General was reminded that, a month before Yalta, Maj. Gen. Leslie R. Groves, chief of the Manhattan District Project, sent a top-secret message to him on atomic fission. It read: “The first bomb, without previous, full-scale test, which we do not believe will be necessary, should be ready about 1 August, 1945 . . .” General Marshall said:

“President Roosevelt thought that Groves was too optimistic. The military really had no conception of what the bomb would do until one was exploded. The bomb wasn’t tested until five months after the Yalta Conference.” [\(Return to top.\)](#)

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## **USING THE A-BOMB: How The Decision Was Made**

General Marshall said that, even after the first atom bomb was exploded in New Mexico on July 16, 1945, there were questions about how to use it in the war and reservations about its ability to speed war’s end.

“When we got the bombs we had to use them in the best possible way to save American lives,” he said, “I heard all kinds of discussions on how we should use the first one. Some wanted to drop it on the Sea of Japan. But we didn’t know how it would work in water. It might be a dud or get out of control. We just didn’t know.

“Others wanted to drop it in a rice paddy to save the lives of the Japanese. But we only had two, and the situation demanded shock action. After using these two bombs against Japan, there would be nothing in reserve.

“We didn’t want the theater commanders to get too optimistic about the new weapon, so we didn’t tell them about the bomb until the last minute. We didn’t tell General Arnold [General of the Army Henry H. Arnold, Commander, U.S. Army Air Forces] until January, 1945, that we were trying to make a bomb.

“General Spaatz [Gen. Carl Spaatz, Commander, U.S. Strategic Air Force, Pacific] didn’t hear about it until Potsdam, and General MacArthur [General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, Allied Supreme Commander, Southwest Pacific] didn’t know until just before the bombs were sent out to the Pacific.

“We had to assume that a force of 2.5 million Japanese would fight to the death, fight as they did on all those islands we attacked. We figured that in their homeland they would fight even harder. We felt this despite what generals with cigars in their mouths had to say about bombing the Japanese into submission. We killed 100,000 Japanese in one raid in one night, but it didn’t mean a thing insofar as actually beating the Japanese.

“In the original plans for the invasion of Japan, we wanted nine atomic bombs for three attacks. Two were to be used for each attacking army, or six in all, in the initial attack. And then we were planning on using the other three against Japanese reserves which we were sure would pour into the areas.

“General MacArthur would have been in command of the three armies, although we had a fight with the Navy about that. The operations were to be similar to the ones at Normandy, with General Bradley [Gen. Omar N. Bradley, Commander, 12th Army Group], commanding one of the armies.

“At that time we didn’t know the real potential of the bombs. We felt that the nine of them would be necessary. We also felt that the Japanese would fight more tenaciously than ever before. Churchill [British Prime Minister Winston Churchill] estimated that we would sustain 500,000 casualties. I don’t know what it would have taken. D-Day was to be Sept. 23, 1945.”  
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## **ARMY VS. NAVY: “There Was Constant Squabbling”**

General Marshall recalled some of the interservice rivalries that arose during the fighting of a global war.

“There was constant squabbling between the Navy and the Army all during the war,” he said. “The Navy thought we could win against Japan by waiting it out and starving them to death. The Air Force boys thought we could bomb them into submission. Until we [the Army] saw what the atom bomb could do, we were convinced that we had to go in after them. We could see that starving them and bombing them with conventional bombs wasn’t going to win the war.

“Japanese supply depots were spread out all over the islands. They had lost their Air Force and their Navy, but they still had their rifles, their machine guns, their artillery and their infantry. There were only two ways to win the war - either by going in after them or by shock. The atomic bomb was the shock action.

“The Joint Chiefs had a hard time reaching decisions. Admiral Leahy [Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, President Roosevelt’s military Chief of Staff], General Arnold and I would be for something, and Admiral King [Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet and Chief of Navy Operations] would be against it. We didn’t really vote on plans and such, but we tried to be unanimous when we acted.

“On time King absolutely refused to go along on a decision, so we just bypassed that solution and tried something else. If we did a thing, it was unanimous. Now there are reports that King and the Joint Chiefs weren’t unanimous on decisions. We were always unanimous, but we had a hard time reaching decisions.

“Early in the war, Washington intercepted Japanese messages which explained that a certain Japanese admiral could be reached at Midway Island. That was his address until a change of orders. We were holding Midway, and at first we thought it was a trick to pull our naval forces into that vicinity, but we finally decided that the message was valid, not a trick.

“The Japanese divided their naval forces into two groups-one headed for Midway, the other for the Aleutians. Actually, a full-scale Aleutian invasion was planned. But we stopped them at both places. The Aleutian invasion had been anticipated and the code break allowed us to defeat them at Midway.

“There was little to stop them with in the Aleutians, but, since we knew they were coming, we sent up a squadron of fighters at a secret air base and we gave naval torpedoes to our B-26 crews up there.

“Those torpedoes started a fight with the Navy. When the Army Air Corps asked for the torpedoes, the Navy gave them a flat ‘no.’ I insisted on it just the same. The Navy was forced into it. But their naval instructors who were supposed to teach the Air Corps men how to use them gave such poor instructions—and it was intentional—that the Army men never did learn how to arm those torpedoes properly.

“The Japanese did invade the Aleutians. But when they saw a small fighter flying out over the ocean it was suggested to the Japanese admiral that we had a lot more up there than we did. On top of that, one of our B-26s dropped a torpedo on the deck of one of the Japanese ships. It didn’t go off, but it gave the Japanese fleet the idea that we had a lot of potential in the Aleutians. They deposited small forces on Attu and Kiska, and got out.” ([Return to top.](#))

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## **ON MacARTHUR: Some Disputes Described as Bitter**

General Marshall spoke of his disputes with General MacArthur, who, he said, felt that the victory in Europe was being overemphasized at the expense of Asia. General Marshall thought victory in Europe should be sought first.

“When we decided to win the war in Europe first,” he said, “this made General MacArthur feel that he was being neglected. There was some bitterness, some curtness.

“During the whole war, MacArthur proposed operations in almost every case. We would approve them or propose modifications. But sometimes he would submit the proposals after he had already started his actions.

“When plans for the invasion of Japan were going forward, he urged me to put him in command of all the invasion forces. I always had to consult with the Navy. They objected to the General, but they would have been overruled.

“During the war, I made it a practice never to personally answer letters from my officers. I’ll tell you the reason for this.

“I sent a personal communication to General Short [Lieut. Gen. Walter C. Short, Commanding General, Hawaiian Department, in 1941] at Pearl Harbor and he misunderstood it. He felt that the personal communication was telling him something different from what I sent through official channels. Now, I don’t want to go into all of this, but I told you this much to show you why I never answered letters from my officers except by official channels.

“Eisenhower [General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commanding General, Allied Powers, European Theater of Operations] wrote voluminous letters, but I never answered him personally. He probably wondered why I didn’t, probably does to this day. The same held for MacArthur. But he would get angry about it. He would communicate to me personally, but he always was answered through official channels.

“After World War II, I made one exception in this case and later I regretted it. It was during the Korean War. MacArthur had split his army and was taking a beating. We thought we should do something, maybe send him a letter of sympathy. We felt sorry for him. That is, he was in a bad spot and we wanted him to know that we understood and that we sympathized with him. I wrote him a personal letter pointing out that we understood the difficulties he faced. Later, when President Truman dismissed him, he permitted part of this personal letter to be quoted. I feel that this letter should have been kept personal.”

General Marshall was asked if General MacArthur supported the Yalta decision to bring Russia into the closing phases of the war against Japan. General MacArthur has said that his views on the matter were “never solicited;” that, had his view been requested “with reference to Yalta,” he would “have recommended against bringing the Soviet into the Pacific war at that late date.”

“It seemed to me that MacArthur wanted the Russians in the Pacific war, but I can’t remember clearly,” said General Marshall. “He did propose operations in almost every case.”

After Russia declared war on Japan on Aug. 8, 1945, General MacArthur made this statement: “I am delighted at the Russian declaration of war against Japan. This will make possible a great pincers movement that cannot fail to end in the destruction of the enemy.”

Shouldn’t that be regarded as an indication that General MacArthur favored Russian participation, General Marshall was asked. He replied:

“This was a psychological-warfare statement that had to be made at the time whether MacArthur was in favor of Russian help or not.”

General Marshall declined further comments about his relations with General MacArthur, saying, “I am afraid that some of my answers might be misinterpreted. Some people might say that I am trying to defend myself or accusing General MacArthur.” ([Return to top.](#))

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## **WITH FDR: Showdowns About Criticism, Security**

General Marshall always admired President Roosevelt and said so. But there was more than one showdown with the wartime President.

“There was an article in one of the magazines that criticized the President,” he recalled. “I remember that it made him very angry, and he decided to ban the magazine from all our overseas bases for the remainder of the war. In fact, he was going to go through with it until I stopped him.

“I felt that he was going too far, and I told him so. It finally got to the point where I told him that if he did this thing I would resign and tell the nation why I resigned. The President didn’t think I was serious. But he soon found out that I was, and his order was never carried out.”

The General said he was in a “state of despair” early in the war when top-secret documents were lost for days at the White House. Then he instituted an airtight security system.

“I was in my office one day,” he said, “and I took a call from one of my junior assistants. He started talking about one of the Japanese messages we had intercepted and told me what interesting reading it was. He wasn’t supposed to know anything about it.

“Where did you learn about that?” I asked. It wasn’t long before I found out that these messages were being passed all around. Some office secretaries had even read them. This was one of the major secrets of the war. We had broken down the Japanese code, and it was a decided advantage for us.

“I checked up on this and found that at one time over 500 people were reading messages we had intercepted from the Japanese. I learned that at the White House these messages were being passed back and forth. Everybody seemed to be reading them.

“I asked for an appointment with the President and made him promise to restrict these messages. I called in high officials and told them that if they didn’t stop this they would never see another message.”

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## **KOREA: One Regiment “Saved” Half of Country**

General Marshall answered a charge which he said was made by “irresponsible” Congressmen and writers. It was the charge that the U.S. was duped into letting the Communists grab the northern half of Korea at the end of World War II.

“I’ve read a lot of criticism in the papers about how the diplomats got together and divided Korea along the 38th parallel,” he said. “These diplomats, it was said, should have known better. They were inviting war, the congressmen and columnists said. It didn’t happen that way at all. Do you know what really happened?”

“We intercepted a Japanese message. The message was from the Japanese commandant in Korea to the Japanese headquarters in Japan. It said that the Communists were pouring into Korea and that if the Americans would attack they would surrender all their forces.

“They were afraid of what the Communists would do to them, and they had a legitimate worry. Up to that time, we had planned to attack Korea. But MacArthur’s forces were spread out thin, and he felt that he needed at least a corps to invade Korea. But when we intercepted this message we knew we could go in with a smaller force. And we did. We went in with a regiment.

“One regiment saved half of Korea from the Communists. But, to hear the Congressmen, the editors, tell about it, and the Washington writers, we didn’t do the job nearly as well as they could have done it. We had sold out to the Communists.

“I had to do a lot of things because I was forced into it by public opinion. An example of that was calling up the National Guard during the early days of World War II. We knew better, but we were forced into it. They had no equipment, nothing to fight a war with, and they couldn’t be supplied. But they were called into federal service because public opinion willed it.

“But I got my way during the Korean War. They wanted to call out the whole National Guard again, but I wouldn’t stand for it.



“I learned early to try and be one step ahead of public opinion and those Congressmen and newspapermen who either help to divert it from its proper perspective or who help shape it.”

He told of another experience.

“The Japanese had landed in the Aleutians, and American forces in 1943 were about to drive them out. I knew that, as soon as they were driven out, there would be a clamor in the Congress to get the boys back home or transfer them to some other theater.

“Consequently, long before American forces invaded Attu and Kiska, I called in General Somervell [Gen. Brehon B. Somervell, Commander, Army Service Forces] and told him he had to have ships ready to move forces out of the Aleutians. Somervell explained that it was impossible, that every transport ship was assigned or needed for other theaters of war. But I ordered him to produce at least one ship. I would then have something to tell those Congressmen.

“Finally, we got one transport ship, and when the Japanese were driven out of the Aleutians, that one transport ship was steaming up there to bring back troops.

“I had guessed correctly. As soon as we had complete control of the territory there, the Congressmen started asking what was being done to get the boys back home. I explained that transport already had been sent up. That ship brought the Fourth Infantry back.”

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## **THE PRESS: Criticism in Peace, Criticism in War**

General Marshall said he had been “a target of the press” for years.

“In 1940, they were saying I was leading the country into war,” he said. “A year later, the same people were saying I wasn’t building up defenses fast enough. The criticism went on all the time. It has never stopped.

“When I was in the Far East as a representative for President Truman—shortly before I became Secretary of State—I met General Eisenhower, who was on tour. He said he had talked to Mr. Truman and that the President wanted me to be Secretary of State. The President had told Eisenhower that he was afraid to put it in writing because the story might leak out.

“I couldn’t accept right away because I had a job to do where I was. So I devised a code to let the President know when I was ready to take the job. I told Eisenhower that I would close a letter to Mr. Truman with a certain word when I was ready to become Secretary. He carried this fact back to the President.

“So there were just the three of us who knew about this. Well, when I wrote that letter with the code word, one of those columnists came out with a story that he had ‘documented proof’ that I would be Secretary of State. I would like to see his ‘documented proof’ sometime.

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## **CONGRESS: Politics Blamed For “Irresponsible” Charges**

General Marshall would not mention his principal antagonists by name. He referred to them as “that Senator,” or “that Congressman.” He said that most of the charges made against him “could be traced to politics.”

“Those who come out with irresponsible charges against me are trying to create issues so they can keep their jobs. It’s politics. They are afraid of being defeated at the polls and they look for issues. I believe we could have a more responsible Congress if these politicians weren’t so worried about keeping their jobs. That is a problem, but I have evolved a simple plan that I believe would stop a lot of these reckless charges.

“If a Representative or Senator could be paid by the Government for one, or maybe two, years after being defeated, he wouldn’t be so afraid of defeat. He wouldn’t need to make these reckless charges. I would like to see such a plan carried out.”

General Marshall seldom talked about President Eisenhower. Once, he asked: “How is he doing up there?” But he had been reading the newspapers, knew that the President was under criticism and that more was on the way.

“I knew it would be this way,” he said. “I knew that he wouldn’t like it once he got up there with those politicians.”