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Hon. Robert A. Lovett

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Interview with Robert A. Lovett, former Secretary of Defense and Assistant Secretary of State for Air, at his office, 59 Wall Street, New York, Oct 14, 1957, by Forrest C. Pogue.

(Mr. Lovett was not as tall as I had imagined from his photographs. He is a pleasant person and after a short time makes one feel at ease. He had a fairly small office with a number of photographs of people with whom he had worked. There were two photographs of Gen Marshall--one of the usual type and the other describing Lovett as his right arm. Mr. Lovett had a cold, so he had me sit across the office from him so I wouldn't catch it. Despite the distance, we had a good talk).

I asked him about Hanson Baldwin's notion that Gen Marshall did not appreciate the importance of air power early. He said Hanson is wrong. Of course, air power was subordinated in the Army because of pauperism. It took three years to buy a B-15. We got the wings one year, fuselage next, and the rest another. You have to take into account the fact that airpower was not accepted as doctrine until really the air strikes in the invasion of France by the Germans focused attention on the tactical support arm. The strategic usage of airpower was not appreciated until we got in the war.

Marshall was not slow in appreciating airpower certainly at the time I went down.

I went abroad at the request of a foreign government in June 1940. The war was on and the Germans moving into Paris. I had a chance to see firsthand and talk to a man who had seen airpower used. (I had become a pilot in 1916 and served as a naval airman; I was interested in air). I kept up my interest all through the succeeding years. I came back from Europe convinced that this country would be in the war.

I spent several weeks on the Pacific coast in airplane plants. We were abysmally weak. We had not appreciated the potential striking power of planes. I wrote out a short report--about three pages--on what I saw and thought. Jim Forrestal, a neighbor and a close friend, asked to see the report. He gave copies to Judge Patterson and Colonel Stimson. They asked if I would come down and be assistant secretary of war for air. I went first in November 1940 as special assistant. They had to keep the secretary job open until the Navy could do the same.

Starting in 1940 we were terribly weak. It was the orders by British and French governments which gave us our start. We built additional plants with their money.

Toward the summer of 1941 it became apparent that we had to go into moderate reorganization in the Army and that the only way we could get effective airpower was to get a high degree of autonomy in order to compete with Signal Corps, Ordnance, etc. for materiel. Stimson backed me on drive for autonomy. (Arnold had much of this in his book).

This was put up to Gen Marshall and a group consisting of McNarney, Kuter, Hoyt Vandenberg, and Hansell made a study of the type of autonomy needed. By the early winter of 1941 we were in pretty good shape because we had talked the aircraft companies into accelerating their programs without much appropriations. They gambled on getting them. We were particularly deficient in big bombers and interceptor fighters.

In March 1942 autonomy was given to the Air corps. Before that there was a GHQ air force, C of S Air Corps, and CG Air. Made very little sense to have three headquarters. We got the new organization set up largely with Gen Marshall's help. Couldn't have been done otherwise. He was a loyal supporter to Gen Arnold all the way through. In the report which Gen Marshall wrote he pays an extraordinary tribute to airpower. Thinks the amount of autonomy sufficient. Excessive authority makes the services fight between themselves. The General gave everything he could give. The Battle of Britain had a lot to do with the development. You have to take into account the fact that the Navy wanted to get into the war and couldn't. They had to use Army planes for anti submarine activities and that nearly killed them. They wanted to get into the Pacific. It is understandable that they should emphasize their type of planes. King said we should have convoys. Marshall helped to get a settlement.

Gen Marshall gave Arnold what was fair under the circumstances. He recognized that hazards of flying were abnormal and permitted flight pay and quick promotions.

Agrees with Gen Marshall that there were not enough top flight staff people in the Air Corps. They borrowed many from the Army. Got a lot of dugouts (infantry officers who were too old for combat work but who knew army administration) to run administration and some did damn well. He agreed with Gen Marshall that it was not feasible to cut the Air Corps loose from the Army. There was not enough strength and depth to manage it. We were scattered all over the world. We started with 7600 officers and 28,000 men. Expanded to nearly 3 million. We got George Harmon and Trubee Davison to recruit civilians. We got some first rate people. For example the law people at Wright Field were from the best law firms in the country. Of course they couldn't do everything. They wouldn't know how to administer army regulations in East Anglia nor how to survey out an automobile. Here we could use the old infantry officers.

The Air Force was a very strange thing. The fact that I was a civilian had nothing to do with it. I ran the air force when Arnold had his first two heart attacks. Of course this was done through directives from the Secretary of Army.

The air corps was really run as a separate entity just as if it were a task force or a theater command. Gen Marshall kept supervisory charge. He put Gen Arnold on the Jt Chiefs of Staff as you probably know.

As for general appraisal of Gen Marshall--I worked so closely with him I am entirely biased in his favor. I don't suppose there has been a relationship as close as that we had. I am endlessly grateful to have had a chance to work with him. Of course I worked far closer to him in State and Defense than in the Army.

The State Department job was a terrible chore for the old man. I came down in May and helped work on the Marshall Plan and took over as Undersecretary on July 1st.

Here Mr. Lovett took out a copy of a letter from Brendan Bracken to Philip Graham of the WASHINGTON POST relative to Graham's letter relative to Bryant's THE TURN OF THE TIDE. Bracken says Alanbrooke was a professional ---

Feels that Brooke was superior to Marshall as soldier, but Marshall was far more than that. People had veneration for Marshall. A great modern war requires so many qualities which Marshall had in great measure. Had a great influence on Roosevelt who stood in a sort of awe of him. (Lovett said he thought this was true--Roosevelt didn't joke with Marshall). Marshall marked by gravity. Moral distinction. Above rivalry. His greatness is a mantle. Grave of nature.

Lovett said he agreed with most of these things. Then spoke of Marshall's temper. Under certain circumstances when he gets sore he is the most terrifying man you ever saw. Reminds you of an old time Methodist minister's description of fire and brimstone. He could burn the paint off the wall. As someone said when he got mad it seemed all 12 Apostles stood at his back. However he used enormous restraint during World War II.

Truman's feeling that Marshall was the architect of victory was not something put on. Like Roosevelt he stood in awe of this man. When Truman said he was the greatest living American that was true. He wouldn't be what he was if he didn't have fire. He was best under emergency type of pressure. Didn't get excited.

He had an instinctive sense of the right thing to do. Speaks of how Arnold and others decided he was a great officer when they saw him dictate a field order in the Philippines. During the war Marshall had an uncanny sense of what the enemy might do.

Patton was a very difficult fellow but he was scared to death of Gen Marshall. Marshall kept him because he could keep an Army on its toes. I spoke of fact that it was Gen Marshall who really saved Patton before the landings in Normandy, although Secy Stimson gave credit to Eisenhower. Lovett said he thought Stimson probably didn't see the letter.

Here he interjected a statement about Eisenhower. Said he thought he was picked as much for his public relations competence as for his military competence. He was not among the great generals. He was most engaging and could get along with the British and the French. These same qualities were decisive in the decision to bring him back from Columbia and send him to SHAPE. Marshall knew he could supply plans and field generals who could carry out the orders. So Eisenhower was a first class choice. The boys in the field had to have different qualities. Bradley was a honey.

Mr. Lovett shook his head sadly over some developments of late. Says he thinks they should have accepted the result in Suez and welcomed it. Says what he dislikes most about the present set-up in Washington is the sanctimonious tone with which everything is said.

Mr. Lovett said he would rank Marshall in broad strategy at the top. Whether he was better than MacArthur in his heyday he doesn't know, but does know MacArthur was not good in Korea.

As to Alanbrooke's criticisms and other statements, Mr. Lovett said he felt that many of these views were conditioned by the moves of Russians into the picture. Take a look at the recuperative power of Germany today and think what it would have been like if we hadn't moved. Particularly it was important to take out the rocket sites. The British were pretty damn

wobbly when the V-1s and V-2s became to come in. I was there when they started on June 12-13 and it was very unpleasant. Some 77,000 dwellings were hit by them. All these things had to be taken into consideration. Could the British maintain their position and their will to fight. If Peenemuende was still untouchable and if the Germans could go on manufacturing indefinitely what then? In another six months the Germans would have had jet planes and then where would we have been. I think the experts are quite wrong in arguing against Cross-Channel strategy.

The real things behind the Alanbrooke book are (1) the money it will bring in and (2) his bitterness over not getting the command. Yet at the time the offer of the command was made to him it was based on the fact that it was assumed the British would furnish most of the force. This point is brought out in the Bracken letter.

Bracken notes that Alanbrooke had a peppery temper. He adds we owe a lot to Alanbrooke but not as much as the book claims.

Marshall would have loved the command, but Roosevelt recognized that the man who ran things in Washington was bigger than the man who commanded in the field.

King went to Roosevelt and said if you take Marshall this will fall apart. Marshall was the great rallying point.

I had dinner with Eisenhower in Algiers when the Prime Minister shanghaied Marshall and flew him over. I was at the Prime Minister's right and I said I was certainly surprised to see Gen Marshall over here. The P.M. said he was nearly as surprised as you are—he, meaning Marshall. Churchill added that Marshall was the greatest figure in the war.

We were down to see Gen Marshall about two weeks ago and my wife asked if he had read the book. He said just some passages. He said don't take it so seriously. Bracken says Churchill not offended by Alanbrooke's statements about him.

The British air people, I am told, are critical of Alanbrooke's book. One man said he is a North Irishman with sensitive feelings. At the end of the day he would vent his spleen in his diary. I was warned about that. This man said that Alanbrooke used his diary as a crying towel.

Thinks Portal was a bigger man than Alanbrooke. Thinks Alexander the next big man on the British side.

Marshall had a sense of dedication and felt he was subject to call of duty. He loathed the China mission. Then he got called to be Secy of State. Then to Defense. I told him I would go with him any time he called except one. I said if they make you Ambassador to Israel, don't ask me to go. I had enough of that problem as Undersecretary. I was acting secretary about 70 percent of the General's tour of duty, since he was sick or away much of the time. I got the full brunt of Israel.

Mr. Lovett said that Gen Marshall always called him Lovett until a recent visit when he called him Bob and that it almost frightened him as if it presaged something. He said he was shocked

by the General's appearance. He had been down last fall, and I recall that we took down a television set which Gen Marshall had been sent by the Lovetts as a present.

Mr. Lovett said he would be glad to talk with me further and that he would tape record something if I liked.