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Where Have You Gone George C. Marshall?

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Where have you gone George C. Marshall? Dr. Forrest Pogue’s illuminating authorized, four-volume, 1,900 page, biography of George C. Marshall published between 1963 and 1987, is the definitive, indispensable account of the “true organizer of victory” and America’s global role in the post World War II world.¹ Pogue’s masterpiece is an enduring monument to the life of one of America’s greatest soldiers, statesmen, humanitarians, peacemakers, and architects of success. The historian Douglas Freeman once observed that when Marshall’s colleagues asked themselves what were his most noble character virtues, they immediately turned to Thomas Jefferson’s testimonial to George Washington: “His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decisions.”²

“Succeeding generations,” Winston Churchill insisted, “must not be allowed to forget his achievements and his example.”³ Marshall was a leadership genius whose guiding principles are timeless and worthy of emulation. Yet after 14-plus years of endless conflict following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and for considerable spans of the last half-century, the United States has largely ignored his example. In an era when too many of our public and private leaders are more interested in their personal or special interests, and more concerned about prestige than selflessness, it is absolutely necessary to reflect upon how Marshall would have prevented the best military in the world from misguided, endless wars and provided the world’s lone superpower with the strategic vision to navigate in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment.

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The Republic has been blessed that in its bleakest hours it has managed to find a George Washington, an Abraham Lincoln, and more recently Franklin Roosevelt and the cadre of marvelous military officers he assembled, among whom General Marshall was unsurpassed.⁴ Those who are troubled about the future of the U.S. military should ponder the stewardship and foresight of General Marshall in periods of storm and tribulation. If we can appraise the value of institutions in part by the leaders whom they have brought to harvest, the U.S. military should be happy to be exalted through Marshall.⁵ Marshall was far from being a military conformist. Marshall's independent critical thought, temperament and counsel have been guiding beacons for generations of Americans. "I am a United States Army general," Daniel Bolger begins in *Why We Lost*, "and I lost the Global War on Terrorism."⁶ The expostulation is not his alone, but one that demands further examination of how decisions and events could have taken form and how America's leaders proved unequal to the test.

"Speaking truth to power," is the contemporary idiom expressed when articulating one's thoughts. Leaving nothing "between the lines" is expected, but seldom received in the necessary time to alter a course of events. Principled criticism and dissent were hallmarks of outstanding organizations and Marshall believed they needed to be nurtured and encouraged rather than expelled. As an aide to General John J. Pershing for five years, Marshall discovered that Pershing appreciated honest criticism and had the extraordinary ability not to take an affront personally; rather, he used it to strengthen the issue or position at hand. This level of professionalism and two-way dialogue was a lasting trait that Marshall employed throughout the remainder of his service. Marshall gained invaluable experience while preparing Pershing for meetings on Capitol Hill, where a co-equal branch of government holds significant power in raising armies and advising and consenting on foreign affairs. It would teach Marshall not only the political craft of the possible but in the temperance of democracy. Marshall's unwavering refusal to hyperbolize or to resort to pandering made him an indispensable witness before a Congress that was skeptical of the administration. Marshall's respect for Congress in the development of foreign policy stands as a model of what the Constitution calls for with "checks and balances."

Pogue reveals countless enduring principals and strategic advice that largely has been forgotten. Marshall was exposed to both the personalities and intricacies of politics and business, not only in Washington DC, but also in the course of frequent travels through the country. As Chief of Staff of the Army, Marshall would compel his staff to disagree with his decisions. "I am disappointed in all of you." When asked for a reason, he replied. "You haven't disagreed with a single thing I have done all week."⁷ He did not select a staff of "yes men" but one that would challenge his assumptions and perspectives. He yearned for a diversity of opinions from a variety of different viewpoints so that he fully understood the complexities and nuances of issues prior to making a decision. Marshall remained "above" politics and accepted the principle of civilian control over the military. Marshall had a unique savvy for informing Presidents flatly where their military or political ideas were misplaced, and yet not be fired.

Contrast Marshall's example of candor in his career with our political and military leaders in 2002 to 2003 and their decision to invade Iraq. The experience and intuition of many senior officials guided their judgment to oppose the use of force, but for political reasons or loyalty they decided to "go along" with the faulty decision. Namely, Secretary of State Colin Powell, who reveres Marshall and was often characterized as the reluctant warrior, decided to make his reservations known to President George W. Bush, but did so in a less than persuasive manner. Additionally, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the principal military advisers to the President, failed to sufficiently challenge the wisdom of invading Iraq and seemed to be detached from the preliminary planning of the invasion. As a result, they made themselves extraneous to the formulation of strategy and became the administrators of an operation they barely constructed. Exacerbating the problem was the destructive, hyper-controlling McNamara-like climate that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld fostered within the Pentagon. When Army Chief

of Staff, General Eric Shinseki testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2003, he stated that “something on the order of several hundred thousand” troops would be needed for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. This ran counter to what Secretary Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz wanted to hear, but history would judge him to be correct. A conformist, sycophant culture developed where obedience and “careerism” were expected at the expense of candor and respectful dissent. Moreover, a generation of leaders would not only ignore Marshall’s example of moral courage, but also Senator J. William Fulbright’s principled dissent regarding the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, today Professional Military Education schools across all the services assign only nominal readings on Fulbright, Marshall, or anything else on the topic of principled dissent and candor. Unless one learns these historical case studies on their own, senior officers will miss profound lessons and may be condemned to repeat past follies.

Marshall’s curiosity propelled his insights on history, terrain, culture and international relations. Throughout his professional career, he retained his boyhood curiosity and a detective’s itch for inquiry. At every new duty assignment and on travels throughout the globe, he discovered that all too frequently history was employed to present a highly flavored nationalistic point of view. Marshall was a pragmatic military scientist, tinkering with what he had until it worked better, as opposed to an intuitive genius who changed the nature of warfare. As a teacher he sought ways to stimulate the thinking of his students and he provided them with an atmosphere and the conditions in which bold experimentation might flourish. Intellectual curiosity and cultural exploration are characteristics of strategic leaders. This breed of leader often possesses foresight, a trait that should be considered as essential as technical and tactical expertise when selecting officers for promotion and command. A broad liberal arts education is perhaps a stronger foundation for success in today’s environment than the present concentration focused on science and technology. The complexities in the world and the solutions to be discovered are grounded more in art than in science. However, many officer commissioning sources do not yet acknowledge that philosophy.

Marshall’s career was replete with several teaching assignments at military schools where he mastered the instructional material and effectively taught young officers how to be independent thinkers. Lacking the proper grounding in languages, international relations or troop management, an officer of this earlier era had to train himself, and Marshall was no different. Marshall provided his officers the opportunity to disagree at times on questions of military education, regardless of rank, and fostered an attitude of tolerance of ideas that encouraged intelligent counterarguments. He had his own staff of deliberately chosen “Marshall Men” whom he admitted personally, and who had served recently with troops and found themselves sympathetic to his pragmatic approach.

One of the paramount lessons that Pogue delivers is how frequently in the decades since Marshall’s time that American leaders have failed to make a similar effort to explore the possibilities for avoiding confrontation under far less desperate and pressing circumstances than Marshall encountered. Marshall aimed at toning down the growing anti-Soviet hysteria and McCarthyism in the United States immediately following the end of World War II. He remained a voice of moderation and reason, urged a policy of firmness based on strength, but disavowed the ideological anti-Soviet bombast found in political and media pronouncements.⁸ Marshall, like George F. Kennan, wanted to avert irreparable schisms through the pending Cold War between the West and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its satellite nations. Marshall’s “opposition to sending American military forces to intervene in the struggle in China between Chiang and Mao is seen by Pogue as Marshall’s awareness of entanglement from which withdrawal would be difficult.”⁹ This caution, Pogue maintains, led Marshall to limit U.S. expansion of the Korean War. Marshall’s refusal to let the United States be sucked into a hopeless civil war in China or to be made subservient to Chiang Kai-shek’s corrupt regime stands as a

model that subsequent administrations should have followed in modeling relations with Third World dictatorships.¹⁰ His military judgment as opposed to spurious geopolitical theories resulted in not spreading American forces too thinly following the tremendous sacrifices of World War II. Marshall demonstrated a profound distaste for anything that resembled militarism and was a proponent of strategic patience.

During the Cold War, the fear and spread of communism formed the overarching ideological rationale for American foreign policy and for the deployment of U.S. military forces and resources. It is likely that Marshall's influence on President Dwight D. Eisenhower impacted the President's decision largely to stay out of Vietnam. However, subscribing to the "falling domino" theory and its potential impact on Southeast Asia, the Johnson Administration committed the United States to an unnecessary, unsuccessful, and tragic war in Vietnam. General (Retired) Matthew Ridgway, another protégé of Marshall's, was highly critical of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam. During testimony to a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing and in a *Look Magazine* article published in April 1966, he echoed the teachings of Marshall and opined, "The falling-domino theory—if Vietnam falls, then Laos, Thailand and all of south Asia will collapse—is a theory, I have never accepted. Like many other premises upon which people tend to rest their position, it is deserving of more searching analysis than it generally gets."¹¹ Ridgway reflected upon his vast experience and knowledge of South Korea and South Vietnam to exhibit the dissimilarities. In South Korea the line of battle was determined, the enemy was clearly identifiable and the populace supported the fiercely patriotic civilian leader, tenets that did not exist in Saigon. This was exactly the kind of principled dissent, sound judgment and candor that Marshall championed.

Marshall's experiences during occupation duty in the Philippines in 1902 taught him the complexities of occupying foreign countries as well as the challenges of self-government. As a second lieutenant, he received no formal education or training about administering a large territory and serving as its governor. Marshall was determined to apply his lessons learned from the Philippines to reconstruction following World War II. In 1942, he and members of his staff recognized that officer-administrators would need to be trained for the tasks of military government. A School of Military Government was subsequently established that enabled successful German and Japanese occupations. Not learning from previous case studies, the U.S. approach to building host nation capacity within the Department of Defense has delivered mixed results at best in Iraq and Afghanistan. General Marshall would most likely be very disappointed and dumbfounded with the failure of fusing strategy with military operations on the ground.

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, and the commencement of the Global War on Terrorism, Washington D.C. once again espoused an ideology for setting national agendas which included simplistic, flawed analysis. Violent extremist terrorist organizations replaced communism as the dogma that, if ignored, threatened to sweep across the world with grave ramifications for freedom, liberty and economic prosperity. President George W. Bush's dire concerns regarding Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction and channels to al-Qaeda fostered America's invasion of Iraq. Neglecting Iraq's mammoth sectarian, historical, religious, ethnic, economic and strategic complexities, the Bush Administration launched Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Disregarding virtually all the lessons of Pershing, Marshall, Eisenhower, and Ridgway, General Tommy "Shock and Awe" Franks deployed insufficient forces to Iraq and then soon retired from the Army leaving the debacle for others to manage.

Rick Atkinson, a Washington Post reporter embedded with the U.S. Army during OIF, wrote that then Major General David Petraeus would often extol those around him by saying, "Tell me how this ends."¹² Ironically, Petraeus, in 1987, wrote his Doctor of Philosophy dissertation on *The American*

*Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era.*¹³ The 328-page dissertation contained the lessons learned on the shortcomings of the nation's leadership in Vietnam and expounded on how to prevent another similar debacle. Petraeus's initial actions, however, did not demonstrate that he had learned the lessons of the Vietnam failures, or that he shared his concerns with his chain of command prior to the initiation of the Iraqi War. In fact, one of his mentors was General Jack Keane, then serving as the Army Vice Chief of Staff, who was in a position to receive constructive principled dissent and articulate those concerns to the National Command Authority. Petraeus certainly did not act in the spirit of constructive principled dissent advocated by General Marshall. Additionally, the Department of Defense's voluminous headquarters staff and bloated bureaucracy handicapped military operations and resulted in discord and dysfunction, compared to the unity of command and synergy that President Franklin Roosevelt had given Marshall to train the force, select its commanders and plan and conduct operations. Not only were America's political and military leaders in Vietnam and Iraq strategically encumbered, but so was the organizational structure, to include the Joint Chiefs of Staff, combatant commanders and the National Security Council.

Marshall understood that when it came to military policy, it was necessary to comply with the spirit and intent expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. One of the nation's utmost trials is harmonizing the demands of defense with the ideals of democracy. Marshall insisted that the citizen-soldier, Pogue reminds us, not the regular professional soldier, should form the bedrock of the U.S. military both in war and peace. He favored the Selective Service System as the fairest and most effective method of raising millions of men quickly for the task of fighting World War II. Marshall accepted slowness in preparation for defense as a part of the American attitude toward war and the prevention of elective, ill-advised conflicts not supported by Congress. Marshall opposed a large standing Army as un-American, and now after 14 plus years of conflict with an all-volunteer force comprised of less than one percent of the population, he again was prescient. Dr. Andrew Bacevich, an authority on civil-military relations, wrote in 2012, "A people untouched by war are far less likely to care about it."¹⁴ Just as the National Security Act of 1947 and the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 addressed the deficiencies at the time of the national security enterprise and mandated defense reform, another similar reform is required to address the concerns that Marshall would have identified today. However, the prospects of challenging the "military-industrial-congressional complex" and its web linking money, the military, industry, Congress and foreign policy, will require a level of moral courage not witnessed since Marshall.

Marshall's strategic prowess and character prevailed over political agendas, cranky allies, service rivalries and totalitarianism. While in retirement, Marshall refused several lucrative offers to write his autobiography. He stated that it would be unethical to sanction a tell-all book in order to profit from his service to the country; nor would it be appropriate to benefit from sacrifices made by the citizen-soldiers. He relented only after President Truman repeatedly urged him to write his memoirs. Marshall agreed in 1956 to write his biography with the proviso that neither he nor his family would receive royalties from the sale of the book. Instead royalties would be used to establish the Marshall Library and Museum at his alma mater, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), in Lexington, Virginia. This act is another example of General Marshall's selflessness and serves as an admirable example for others to emulate.

Perhaps the most touching incident Forrest Pogue relates about the stature and international reputation of Marshall occurred in 1953. President Eisenhower asked Marshall to head the American delegation to the coronation of Elizabeth II. As he was being escorted to his seat in Westminster Abbey the entire audience reverentially rose to their feet. Perplexed, he gazed around to see who the luminary was. It was General Marshall himself! The United States can only hope that its future brings countless

“architects of victory” with Marshall’s humility, self-effacing personality, unswerving honesty, and dignified simplicity, a model for all in service of the Republic. It has been 56 years since General Marshall’s passing. Many subsequent strategic and military architects have failed at the country’s peril. The country could find a winner now if only it just would follow his example.

¹ Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General 1880-1939*, (New York, Viking Penguin, 1963), *George C. Marshall: Ordeal and Hope 1939-1942*, (New York, Viking Penguin, 1966), *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory 1943-1945*, (New York, Viking Penguin, 1973) *George C. Marshall Statesman 1945-1959*, (New York, Viking Penguin, 1987).

² Pogue, *George C. Marshall Statesman 1945-1959*, (New York, Viking Penguin, 1987), p.521.

³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the President of the United States: 1960-1961*, p. 691.

⁴ Forrest C. Pogue, “George C. Marshall: Statesman 1945-1959,” review by John F. Melby, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Spring, 1988), pp.135-137.

⁵ Forrest C. Pogue, “George C. Marshall: Education of a General, 1880-1939,” review by Russell f. Weigley, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 353, (May, 1964), pp. 195-196.

⁶ Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General’s inside account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014) p. Xiii.

⁷ Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Ordeal and Hope 1939-1942*, p. ix.

⁸ Forrest C. Pogue, “George C. Marshall: Statesman, 1945-1959,” review by William E. Pemberton, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Jun., 1988), pp.313-314.

⁹ Forrest C. Pogue, “George C. Marshall: Statesman, 1945-1959,” review by Vincent P. DeSantis, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1998), pp.320-322.

¹⁰ Ed Cray, “General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman,” review by Daun van Ee, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Jan., 1991), pp.123-124.

¹¹ Matthew B. Ridgway, “Pull-out, All-out, or Stand Fast in Vietnam?” *Look*, April 5, 1966.

¹² Rick Atkinson, *In the Company of Soldiers*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), p.6.

¹³ David Petraeus, *The American Military and the lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era*, (Ann Arbor, MI: U-M-I, 1987) p.i.

¹⁴ James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, January / February 2015, p. 89.