

Homage to General Marshall

DEAN ACHESON

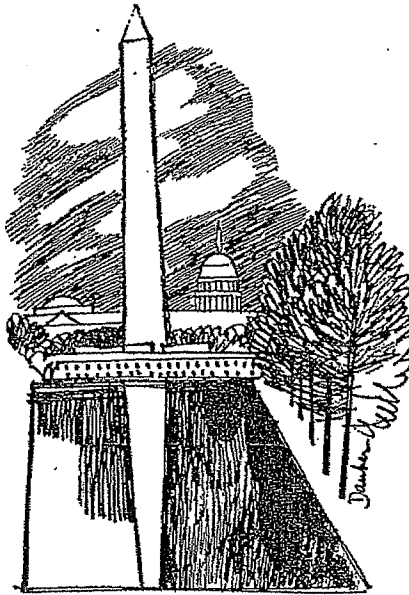
THE MOMENT General Marshall entered a room, everyone in it felt his presence. It was a striking and communicated force. His figure conveyed intensity, which his voice, low, staccato, and incisive, reinforced. It compelled respect. It spread a sense of authority and of calm. There was no military glamor about him and nothing of the martinet. Yet to all of us he was always "General Marshall." The title fitted him as though he had been baptized with it. He always identified himself over the telephone as "General Marshall speaking." It seemed wholly right, too. I should never have dreamed of addressing him as "Mr. Secretary"; and I have never heard anyone but Mrs. Marshall call him "George." The general expected to be treated with respect and to treat others the same way. This was the basis of his relationships.

President Truman has put his finger on another foundation of General Marshall's character. Never, wrote the President, did General Marshall think about himself. This is true and deeply significant. The ego is the ultimate corrupter of man. One who controls it has the strength of ten, for then, truly, his heart is pure. General Marshall's ego never got between him and his task. "If you want to hit a bird on the wing," said Justice Holmes, "you must have all your will in a focus, you must not be thinking about yourself, and equally, you must not be thinking about your neighbor; you must be living in your eye on that bird. Every achievement is a bird on the wing." General Marshall lived in his eye on the task in hand.

With General Marshall self-control came, as I suppose it always comes, from self-discipline. He was, in a phrase that has quite gone out of use, in command of himself. He could make himself go to bed and go to sleep on the eve of D day, because his work was done and he must be fresh for the decisions of the day

to come. He could put aside the Supreme Command in Europe in favor of General Eisenhower, because his plain duty was to stay in the Pentagon dealing with that vast complex of forces which, harnessed, meant victory. And he not only could take criticism but demanded it. One illustration will suffice.

General Marshall read a speech badly. But he was a master of exposition, without text or notes, of a



subject that he knew from end to end. Anyone who heard during the war one of his outlines of the military situation, the strategic plan, with its consequences and requirements, will never forget it. After he became Secretary of State, a few of us whose suggestions and criticisms he had commanded pointed out these truths to him and suggested that he try without text a speech restricted to a single subject, which he would master. The general agreed, chose the Press Club in Washington, and required us to attend as what he called the jury.

As a test of method the speech was a complete failure. As a speech it was a great success. The very enthusiasm

and applause of the audience led the general to expand upon subjects he had not intended to discuss until the speech was quite deflected from its original purpose and, though a good speech, did not say what he had intended to say.

The jury assembled in the general's office immediately after the event. In he came, rather glowing from the reception he had had to see the solemn, disapproving faces. For a few moments, with healthy combativeness, he fought against the verdict; then said that, of course, we were right and that he would read the wretched things in the future, as that seemed the lesser of the evils.

For most men—especially prominent men—a public performance deeply engages their vanity. It is hard to think of Winston Churchill or Franklin Roosevelt asking for or accepting a judgment of subordinates about their speeches. In fact, it would take courage bordering on foolhardiness to venture a criticism to either. But the author of the Marshall Plan wanted it and accepted it. He knew that he must speak carefully and specifically. His job required this. If it involved reading, at which he knew he was not good, he cheerfully accepted the verdict. Who knows or cares, today, whether the audience at Cambridge on that warm June afternoon in 1947 really knew that they had heard the greatest peacetime offer in history and were stirred? But the proposal was clear and the whole world was stirred when it realized the full magnitude of the Marshall Plan.

General Marshall had the capacity for decision. This is surely God's rarest gift of mind to man. An amalgam of mental ruggedness and objectivity (decision and self-analysis are incompatible), it requires the courage to accept responsibility and to act on information that must always be incomplete. I remember how impatient he became listening to interminable balancing of "on the one hand" with "on the other." "Don't fight the problem," he would burst out; "decide it!"

This reminds me of a remark of Justice Brandeis when, as his law clerk, I pointed out that a draft opinion of his had not answered all the arguments of losing counsel. "Some questions," he said, "can be

decided even if not answered." And the justice went on to point out that the process of decision did not require that one view should be accepted as wholly right and the other view, as wholly wrong. It was enough that the scale of judgment tipped. That was decision. Thereafter action required one to go forward wholly committed.

The capacity to decide does not necessarily mean the capacity to decide rightly. But I believe that General Marshall will be found as the years go on to have been gifted, also, with that combination of wisdom and intuition which makes for right decisions.

THESE GIFTS were shown in the decisions that led to the Marshall Plan. The idea, as has been pointed out often, was the work of many minds. But three decisions of the greatest importance were made by General Marshall. The first was to act, and to act immediately. His negotiations with the Russians in early 1947 had convinced him that no agreement could be reached because they thought that Europe would disintegrate through economic collapse and that they would inherit the bankrupt estate. The reports of his staff led him to believe that this could happen. He concluded that it must not be permitted to occur. That, to him, meant action at once. The difficulties in the way might have seemed insuperable to anyone else, but to him they merely called for extra effort.

The second decision was that the plan for European recovery must come from and be devised by the Europeans themselves. The United States should stand ready to furnish the means that Europe could not supply; but it should not, and would not, offer or impose an American plan. Our role would be to help those who energetically and co-operatively helped themselves. The arguments on the other side are easy to imagine. What, write a blank check? Ask others to write the specifications which we must fill? But the plan never would have succeeded without the decision he made.

The third decision was perhaps the most difficult of all: that the offer should be made to all of Europe and not merely to Western Europe.

There was plenty of advice the other way. The Russians, if included, would sabotage the plan. Congress would never appropriate the money. But the general was adamant. If Europe was to be divided more deeply and more lastingly than it was already, Moscow had to do it, not Washington. It was done by Moscow.

Distinguished memoir writers have criticized some of General Marshall's decisions during the war when he was Chief of Staff. Doubtless some of these decisions are subject to criticism. But, as one looks back over the vast congeries of his judgments—involving, as they did, the use of our whole manpower (how much in the army; how much in production), the development of weapons, the priority of theaters of war, strategy within theaters, the personnel of command—the result, compared with similar judgments in any other war we have fought, is vastly impressive. To Secretary of War Stimson it was more than this. "I have never seen," he said, "a task of such magnitude performed by man." Consider, for instance, General Marshall's selection of officers for high command compared with that of General Halleck in the Civil War. General Marshall knew the Army list backwards and forwards and had served with every senior officer on it, and many not so senior. Before the war he had cleared the decks by a judicious series of retirements. There were no McClellans, Burnsidés, Hookers, or Popes among his selections.

General Marshall never answered his critics. It would have been wholly out of character for him to have done so. But, more than this, he had a sort of sympathy with them. His decisions, he said more than once, were adopted and were largely successful. Why should he now try to prove that his critics' views could not have succeeded? If they wished to justify their views, it was their privilege. This tolerance of criticism, this willingness to let the record speak for itself without interpretation by him, is supremely typical of him.

This is not the place, nor am I equipped, to review and defend General Marshall's military decisions—though I am persuaded that it can and will be done most successfully. It is enough here to point out, as Sir Winston Churchill has done, that

among the deficiencies of hindsight is that, while we know the consequences of what was done, we do not know the consequences of some other course which was not followed. This need not, of course, blind us to the causes of disaster. But it should make us hesitate to criticize actions which were eminently successful on the ground that some other course might have been even more successful.

General Marshall was dead set against memoirs, autobiography, or diaries—that is, by himself. He refused to criticize others. But his own course was clear and so were his reasons for it. We talked about it many times. First, he would say, half humorously, that he believed in a division of labor. It fell to some people to be caught up in doing things, in a world of action. Others were qualified to analyze, appraise, and record what had been done.

He was not qualified, he would say, to do this. Perhaps Caesar was, perhaps Sir Winston was, but he was not. Furthermore, he did not propose to try, because—and these are almost his exact words—however great his responsibilities were, his view was at best incomplete and limited. Some of the factors involved were inevitably hidden from him. Therefore, should he write or speak from the viewpoint of his limited knowledge, his words might be construed by others to be critical of men for whom he had the highest respect and admiration. I wonder how many men have ever had such fundamental humility or so delicate and punctilious a sense of honor.

I must not leave the reader with the impression of an unbending and stern man. General Marshall could be and often was formidable. But he could also relax when he wished to, and he had humor.

One drizzling Sunday morning during the war the general in his raincoat was sitting on a box pulling weeds out of his Leesburg lawn, when General Bedell Smith arrived from European headquarters. General Marshall told him to go ahead with his report. Meanwhile he went on pulling weeds. When the rain began trickling off General Smith's nose, he burst out, "General, do I have to report standing here in this rain?" "Certainly not," said General Marshall; "turn that pail over and



sit on it." But they went into the house.

One of his most engaging traits was his ability to leave any gathering when the time to go arrived. A courteous word to his hostess, or to the chairman, or to the audience, and he was gone like a shot. He had no patience with that insufferable species, the doorway talker, the dallier over departure. When he was through, he was through—and off he went. One of his departures has always seemed to me perfect. Cabinet officers have to have their portraits painted, a process in which often the painter runs afoul of the sitter's self-esteem. For one of his official portraits the general sat patiently many times, courteously responding to all the painter's requests. Finally, the portrait was done. The general said his good-bys and started to leave. "Don't you want to see the portrait, general?" asked the painter. "No, thank you," said the general and left.

General Marshall's recreation was truly recreative and refreshing. He was not one for games indoors or out. He loved to ride a horse, to go bird shooting, and to work in his garden. There he was always experimenting. One spring he had learned that the Indians used to put fishheads under their hills of corn. So he did, with some complaint from the household and great interest on the part of the neighborhood cats.

As a raconteur General Marshall ranked high, and surprisingly, in

view of his official brusqueness and taciturnity, he loved to spin his yarns. At one time when Mrs. Marshall was in the hospital he dined occasionally alone with us. In those evenings he talked about his boyhood in Pennsylvania, his early years in the Army, and people he had known—and delightful talk it was. With a boyhood friend he discovered the law of supply and demand. In the ruins of a burned-out barn they set out some tomato plants, and produced the largest, most luscious tomatoes in town which brought premium prices in the local stores. To their joy, quantity was added to quality. More and more of these delicious giants poured from their vines until they had glutted their market and prices had collapsed.

WHEN there were the long nights, at the turn of the century, for the first lieutenant of cavalry in command of a lonely outpost in northern Luzon, newly separated from his bride, the first Mrs. Marshall, enduring with a brother officer the interminable tedium between the monthly steamer calls. One evening an idea occurred to him. Over a year or more his wife in almost every letter referred to her weight. She had gained so much, or lost so much. They decided to work out her present weight. Starting with an approximate weight on their departure from the States, Lieutenant Marshall went through the letters calling out

the gains and losses, while his colleague kept the tally. In the end they came to the disconcerting conclusion that Mrs. Marshall weighed minus fifteen.

And so it went, until on the stroke of nine o'clock the general made his bow and was gone. On my last day as Under Secretary of State, June 30, 1947, the general told me that the President wished to discuss some matters with both of us before I left office. We went about noon to the Presidential office, where the talk seemed to me curiously inconsequential. Then a sizable group in the rose garden attracted my attention, and my amazement as I recognized my wife, my children and grandchildren. At this point the President and the Secretary of State took me out and conferred on me the Award for Merit. No other words of approval or disapproval of my service ever passed the general's lips. None was needed.

That day did not, as we both supposed at the time, end our work together. A little over four years later the general came back once more on the call of the President to be Secretary of Defense in the hard days of the Korean War. President Truman has spoken of the strength and wisdom that he brought to the government. It cannot be overestimated. One thing only can I add which throws yet another light on the character of this noble and generous man.

When he returned to the cabinet, I was Secretary of State, the senior cabinet officer. To all of us it was natural and proper that next to the President deference was due to General Marshall. But he would have none of it. The Secretary of State was the senior officer to whom he punctiliously deferred, not only in matters of protocol but in council as well.

I can think of no more fitting words with which to take leave of him than those of the only man I know who could be said to be cast from the same classic mold. On V-E day Colonel Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, concluding his address to the U.S. High Command, said to General Marshall, "I have seen a great many soldiers in my lifetime and you, Sir, are the finest soldier I have ever known."

