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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**GEORGE C. MARSHALL; THE FORGOTTEN MASTER STRATEGIST**

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MILITARY THOUGHT AND THE ESSENCE OF WAR  
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## **GEORGE C. MARSHALL; THE FORGOTTEN MASTER STRATEGIST**

General George C. Marshall, United States Army, is one of the greatest strategic leaders in the history of the United States. His legacy is directly responsible for significant contributions to the successes of U.S. foreign policy, armed conflict and resultant peace brokering. He is without equal in the strategic realm, and as such, warrants a dedicated analysis in Course 5602 at the National War College in future years. The absence of such in-depth consideration makes him a “forgotten master.” For this analysis, a dissection of his achievements while serving as an Army leader alone support the need to study Marshall.

In the 1920’s and early- to mid-1930’s, the American citizen felt that little threatened the Nation and its ideals. There was a period of inward reflection as America dealt with her economic woes in peace in the wake of the devastating Great War. As the end of the 1930’s drew near, Europe appeared ready to implode violently, against a mural of Japanese hegemonic explosion. Many could see the potential threat to the U.S. approaching, but nearly as many chose to ignore it. There existed a minority cadre of citizens who openly preached of the building threat to the U.S. and the possibility of fighting in an unwanted war, but few of them had the strength or the authority to do anything but watch it happen.

George Catlett Marshall was one of the minority who could envision the U.S. being dragged into conflict. As Deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army from October 1938 to June 1939, Marshall began a crusade to sensitize the political and military leaders around him to the real threat and the consequences of not readying the nation’s armed forces. He

understood war's "vital importance to the State" asserted by Sun Tzu and knew he could affect two of Sun Tzu's fundamental factors of war: Command and Doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

Nominated as Chief of Staff in July 1939, and confirmed in September, he would take the helm of a small, hollow force of about 200,000 Regular Army soldiers and nearly as many National Guardsmen (there were 16 nations with larger armies in the world at the time). He would do so with a well-conceived and clearly articulated vision of the threat to the U.S. and its forces, as well as a strategy to rectify deficiencies and shore up the forces responsible for protecting the Nation and her interests around the world. Marshall would serve six years in the Army's top uniformed post, through periods of war and of *preparation for war*. He brought insight, urgency and commitment to the seat, and his successes were undoubtedly what kept the United States and her Allies victorious. Winston Churchill, in a cable to Washington, dubbed General Marshall "the true organizer of victory" for the Allies.<sup>2</sup>

A true Marshall understudy would point to his earlier career experiences as the lessons for eventual success as a strategist and leader. In his senior roles later, Marshall retrospectively recalled a grossly unprepared and unwieldy American fighting force engaged in World War I. The soldiers fought with armament of French or British manufacture, as there was little significant mobilization of American industry in time to support the effort. The force was poorly trained, and had there existed a TPFDD<sup>3</sup> at the time, the timelines in effect would be parsed in increments of years (after declaration of war by Congress) vice weeks or months for troop deployments. As American military

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 63-64.

<sup>2</sup> Ed Cray, *General of the Army George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 515.

<sup>3</sup> Time Phased Force Deployment Document – A Joint Staff planning tool that illustrates the flow of forces (quantity and order) for combat deployment as a function of time.

and political leadership became acutely aware of their predicament, there began a frantic and poorly controlled rush to take corrective action. The result was wasteful, inefficient and nearly ruinous courses of action. Congress approved massive war budgets, and both the members and the American public demanded and expected nearly instantaneous results. The lack of such unrealistic results was a source of public outcry and rage. Marshall's memory was indelibly stamped with this image, and he was resigned to not allowing the process to repeat itself some twenty years later.

General Marshall was committed to increasing the size of the Regular Army, fully arming and properly training it, and doing so in a controlled and sensible manner so as to ensure a "balanced force" resulted. This methodology was not unlike his earlier total overhaul of instruction and technique at the Infantry School at Fort Benning. He proceeded "quietly and gradually, because [he] felt so much opposition would be met on the outside that [he] would be thwarted in [his] purpose."<sup>4</sup> He fought to increase the ranks well beyond the inadequate nine Regular Army and eighteen National Guard divisions on the books at the time. He understood what Clausewitz meant by "the best strategy is always *to be very strong*."<sup>5</sup> The National Defense Act of 1920 authorized more troops for this post-Great War period, but the lack of sufficient Congressional appropriation kept the units undermanned and with inadequate equipment. Even in light of Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, this battle for manpower was taking place in an era when President Roosevelt saw room for only modest increases in Regular and Guard troops (17,000 and 35,000 respectively). Like most presidents, Roosevelt had to gauge the public tolerance for increases in war readiness, be it more money or more men.

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<sup>4</sup> General Marshall, in an interview for the George C. Marshall Files, 4 Dec 1933 – Forrest C. Pogue, Education of a General 1880-1939 (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 249.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz. On War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 204.

This was compounded by the impediment embodied in Secretary of War Harry Woodring, a non-interventionist who stood firmly on a principle of neutrality and refused to advocate even modest military increases of any sort. Woodring was a public embarrassment as well, fighting a public power struggle with his Assistant Secretary Louis Johnson. And Johnson, an air power fanatic, saw little need to increase the size of the ground combat force, and as such, was of little help to Marshall in his quest for a more robust force. Marshall the strategist overcame these “intellectual dinosaurs,” tactfully and methodically.

Marshall saw the need for a strong industrial base in support of military hardware needs. He pursued adequate funding for war stocks during the time of peace. He knew that appropriations approved at the start of a military conflict did little to aid the effort; by that point, it was simply too late. Additionally, he saw the need to manufacture and procure the war material stockpile necessary to equip and sustain the troops that would be mobilized in the event of war, but were not currently serving on active duty. The horrors of the material shortages that plagued the American troops in WWI could not be felt again.

George Marshall, viewing the current state of army organization and tactical doctrine through his wide strategic aperture, made one of his most effective improvements a priority. Marshall reorganized the structure of the fighting Army into corps and field armies. Using President Roosevelt’s meager increase in Regular and Guard end-strength as a catalyst, he created corps and field army headquarters, and reorganized the army division from four large, undermanned regiments into three smaller, more mobile and more lethal regiments with full manning. He created the bulk of

modern supporting units of specialization, such as military police and engineers, logistical units, artillery, etc. He unified the Regular Army and National Guard units and required that they train as an integral team, an important element of a successful wartime force. He championed the “lost art” of large-scale maneuvers at the corps and field army level. He knew the challenges of this art, likely impressed upon him while serving on the staff of the First Army in 1918, when he planned and supervised the successful movement of 500,000 men and 3,000 artillery pieces to the Argonne front in France. His insight was so keen that he not only saw these maneuvers as a necessity, because he witnessed the successes of European forces who were skilled in these maneuvers, but also saw it as a way to bring the best of our Army officers to the forefront as a test of leadership and skill. He was forever in search of the “military genius” and the “calm rather than the excitable head” that Clausewitz tells us to whom we should “entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country.”<sup>6</sup> Within one year as Chief of Staff, he won approval for funding for large-scale maneuver exercises, one involving over 70,000 men and robust opposing forces. They tested and refined recently developed doctrine, techniques, and organizational structures. The exercises also incorporated the Guard personnel. These dramatic advances were personal crusades of Marshall’s and resulted in one of the most significant improvements in the readiness of U.S. armed forces in history. This was a defense transformation of such a magnitude that even the current Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld -- a strong proponent of transformation -- might not have been able to envision. Over three decades earlier, in the Spring of 1911, in preparation for an exercise, Marshall had trained a signal corps

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<sup>6</sup> Von Clausewitz, 112.

company staff using a non-troop rehearsal method that is considered to be the precursor for today's command-post exercise (CPX).<sup>7</sup>

But Strategist Marshall did not focus solely on the combat forces of the Army. He looked within his own staff hierarchy as well. He first saw the lack of representation of the Army Air Corps on the General Staff as a deficiency, and sought to correct it. There was little corporate understanding within the staff of air issues, and in a common opinion, there existed a "strong anti-air bias."<sup>8</sup> He worked hard to force the air and ground officers to understand each other and work synergistically. He envisioned an independent air corps that planned and executed warfare in a complementary manner with the ground element. His understanding of the benefit of air power rivaled that of Giulio Douhet or Billy Mitchell. The difference, though, was that Marshall kept it in perspective, and saw it as one variable in a larger equation. The second staff structure inefficiency he eradicated was the inability of the Army Chief of Staff to delegate authority, force subordinate staff officers to work together and allow resolution of conflicts at the lowest possible level. The Army's flat organizational structure provided for 61 staff officers to have direct access to the Chief of Staff, and 380 field commanders reported directly to him. Any leadership analysis model today would highlight the inefficiency of such a decision-making structure and the probability of overwhelming the leader at the apex. The War Department Reorganization of March 1942 was the execution of Marshall's realignment vision he harbored from the day he took office.<sup>9</sup> It brought about efficiencies and increased capabilities, with the genesis of such entities as

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<sup>7</sup> Pogue, 113.

<sup>8</sup> John T. Nelsen II, General George C. Marshall: Strategic Leadership and the Challenges of Reconstructing the Army, 1939-41 (Carlisle, Pa: U. S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1993), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Nelsen, 71.

the Operations Division of the General Staff, and the three peer Army commands of the Army Ground Forces, the Army Air Forces, and the Supply Forces.

The “Forgotten Master” also dedicated a portion of his strategic vision to improving his professional and personal relationship with Admiral Harold Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), and saw active cooperation with the Navy as the future of successful military planning. He saw the wisdom in cooperating with a sister service in equipping, training and fighting, in a manner codified by the Goldwater-Nichols Act nearly fifty years later. In January 1940, Marshall scheduled the Third Division to conduct a joint amphibious exercise with the Navy; the result was a resounding success, with favorable post-action reports from Navy and Army commanders alike. Additionally, Marshall proposed, and the CNO agreed, to establish an informal Joint Air Advisory Committee, which engaged on air matters of mutual interest and concern between the two services.

One cannot adequately assess George Marshall’s strategic acumen without discussing his manner of dealing with the President and the Congress. Marshall was, relatively speaking, an unknown with little or no clout in the ranks of the Nation’s elected leadership. He did not strive to become unduly familiar with the President, as many others did. He was intentionally formal and businesslike. Initially, this manner caused an awkward distance between the two, but over time, Marshall earned the respect of the President. He kept all discussions from drifting off to personal issues or levity, thus denying the President the strategy of discarding advice by laughing it off or tip-toeing around an issue, as Roosevelt did with so many of his closer circles.<sup>10</sup> Marshall was frequently called before the Congress to testify on military matters. Congress was as tough on his reconstititional strategy and budget as was the President, but Marshall kept

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<sup>10</sup> Pogue, 324; Cray, 144; Nelsen, 23.

the pressure on. His steadfast quest to implement a coherent and controlled rebuilding strategy won over many Congressional members. He would earn great respect on the Hill. Despite frequent disappointments in achieving desired strategic gains with the President, Marshall remained a loyal administration team member, and refused to plead his case behind the President's back. He was pressured to take his issues to the American public directly, but refused. He was pressured by some members of Congress to exceed the administration's stated positions. He again refused. He earned a rightful reputation as a man with no hidden agendas, and prevented a misperception that he was leading a charge to push the Nation into an unwanted war in Europe. As a Washington outsider, Marshall ensured he fulfilled his obligation to keep Congress informed of the actions and needs of his office, while maintaining an ear to the ground on their side as well. For example, he assigned a member of his personal staff to maintain a formal liaison with Bernard Baruch, a wealthy banker and confidant to several presidents, including Roosevelt, and close ally of many members of Congress. This interlocutor proved invaluable in allowing Marshall an avenue to communicate informally with both branches of the government. Marshall established a Legislative and Liaison Division on the General Staff, headed by a general officer, to manage communications with the Congress and staff issues for and from the Legislative Branch. Marshall went after and won the direct support of the Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, who helped him get President Roosevelt's attention focused on the true and dire needs of the Army, programmatically. Though Morgenthau got Marshall an audience with Roosevelt and a modest amount of attention, it took a forceful and committed Marshall to walk up to the President's desk and "demand" a three minute uninterrupted soliloquy on the state of the

Army. Once delivered, Marshall's argument won a full session the next day with the President, and the Chief of Staff achieved the financial support for treating the service's shortfalls. In another instance, after watching a round-robin session of dutiful nods in agreement to one of Truman's stated strategies, Marshall responded, when queried, "I am sorry Mr. President, but I don't agree with that at all."<sup>11</sup>

When Grenville Clark, a prominent New York lawyer and partner with future Secretary of War Henry Stimson, embarked on a mission to establish selective service as the manner in which the U.S. would raise its army fairly and efficiently, neither Marshall nor the President were in a position to support the initiative. Marshall was concerned that the training of massive numbers of new recruits would overtax his methodically increasing all-volunteer force. He was keenly aware as well that if he supported such a proposed bill before Congress at its outset, it may be seen as *his* bill rather than a popular civilian proposed initiative and would thus be met with resistance. Continued bad news reports from the fronts in Europe and Stimson's eventual appointment as Secretary made passage of the bill a likely success. When the political climate was right, Marshall endorsed the plan and the bill was enacted in law. The result was Regular Army and National Guard force totaling 1.4 million men by 1941; there were 36 divisions and 64 air groups by the time Japan attacked Pearl Harbor that December. The manning zenith would see a force of eight million men. The Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, saw Marshall as one of the most influential individuals to ever testify before a Congressional committee. He had earlier predicted that the votes were not there to pass the Selective Service Bill, and believed that Marshall's leading the fight had won over the votes. Marshall was directly responsible for the federalization of the National Guard, and fought

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<sup>11</sup> Pogue, 323.

a very emotional battle to have the terms of the National Guardsmen extended beyond one year, succeeding against all odds.

General Marshall focused his military strategy on defense of the Western Hemisphere from European powers, and on the increasing possibility of becoming ensnared in the fighting in Europe. With the already existing fear of encroachment by Japan in the Pacific compounded by Japan's entering an alliance with Italy and Germany, the need to plan for the possibility of a two-front war was obvious. The result, unquestionably due to Marshall's forceful leadership and insightfulness, was RAINBOW 5, a war plan for a two-theater, "Germany-first" war. This plan is nearly unanimously credited as the basis for American success in World War II. At the Arcadia Conference, which met for three weeks in December, 1941 and January, 1942, Marshall was one of the first vocal proponents of the concept of unity of command within an alliance. He overcame strong opposition to his proposal that one military leader oversee the entire Allied fighting force. He lent decisive support to the British proposal for a Combined Chiefs of Staff, and won support for the headquarters of this staff to be situated in Washington, DC. This Anglo-American wartime structure had little outside support, but Marshall pursued its establishment untiringly. Like RAINBOW 5, many believe the embodiment of Marshall's strategic imperative of unity of command was a critical key to Allied success in the war.

Critics of Marshall cite a lack of personal combat action and a paucity of command -- an armchair quarterback on a staff far from the fronts of combat -- as undermining his pedigree to lead civilian or military organizations in the development of strategy or the conduct of war. Though lighter in these assignment credentials than many of his

contemporaries, Marshall had done his share. He commanded a regiment, the largest tactical unit of the army of his time, in China for three years, during two tense periods. He had been in the field and commanded combat troops. Each time he tried for an additional assignment in command of fighting troops, his request was “buried” to keep him available for significant strategic planning assignments.

Marshall made his mark on American history forging strategy and policy as a military officer who achieved the rare 5-star rank, as a Presidential envoy to China, as Secretary of State and as Secretary of Defense. His achievements in postings after his retirement from the Army are equally as impressive as those described herein, and will make for a crucial section of the 5602 course in years to come. His experience base covered the entire spectrum possible, but he was careful not to overstep the bounds of each office he held. As a civilian, he allowed the military leadership to do their job without interference. As a military officer, he stayed apolitical and responded diligently to his civilian oversight. He hired the best and most capable subordinates and allowed them to do their jobs to achieve the vision and goals he established. He understood the nature of human beings, the will of nations and their pursuit of their interests, and the character and conduct of war. For these reasons, the concrete examples outlined herein, and many more like these, we should consider George Catlett Marshall a master strategist of unequalled skill and insight. For this he is, at the National War College, truly a “forgotten master strategist.”

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