



# AMERICA'S FINEST GENERAL

GEORGE C. MARSHALL'S LONG SLOG THROUGH THE RANKS  
TOOK HIM TO POWER, VICTORY AND GREATNESS—FIVE STARS,  
INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM AND A NOBEL PRIZE

BY KEVIN BAKER

**T**here is a theory about the affairs of men that great leaders appear when we need them the most, that events seem to summon them in some mysterious way. The United States has indeed been blessed to have had such great men—and women—emerge during most of its greatest trials. But there was nothing mystical about it. There is, for instance, no greater example of emergent American leadership than that which arose during World War II. Its accomplishments were a tribute to all of the principals involved, to the traditions of both American democracy and the nation's armed forces, and a tribute to stellar civilian-military cooperation.

The appointment of George Catlett Marshall as Army chief of staff on the eve of World War II—and then, later, as commander of the entire Allied war effort—may now seem to have been the only logical choice. This is thanks to the surviving reputation of the man—his unflappable personality, his efficiency and dedication, his unbreachable dignity and integrity. But his was a job for which there was no precedent: coordinating the greatest war in human history, through multiple military theaters on opposite sides of the world, in conjunction with courageous but self-interested and willful Allies of nearly every description. What was it that led an

**Recognized early in his military career as “an exceptionally capable man,” Marshall—as Army chief of staff—in turn promoted such promising young officers as Dwight Eisenhower to leadership positions in World War II.**

OPPOSITE: FOREGROUND: U.S. ARMY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; BACKGROUND: U.S. ARMY/NATIONAL ARCHIVES



American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to pick *this man* for the job—and to back him to the hilt through the darkest and most difficult days of that war?

The answers lie in the nearly inscrutable mind of that president and in the judgment of his closest counsel, Harry Hopkins, a figure deemed by most of the country's newspapers at the time to be an outright menace to the republic.

If anything, the brilliance of Marshall's selection has come by now to be somewhat overstated. It is only technically true, as *Time* wrote,

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that he was promoted over some 34 higher-ranking generals. Army tradition maintained, with good reason, that a chief of staff must be able to finish the customary four-year term in the job before his mandatory retirement age. This immediately jumped Marshall over all but three senior officers, and only one of these, Lt. Gen. Hugh Aloysius Drum—a man whose tireless self-promotion Roosevelt despised—provided serious competition.

Marshall's qualities shone from the first like a well-buffed brass button. As far back as 1907, during his stint at the Army staff college at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., his superiors found him “an exceptionally capable man.” When Marshall was still a captain, his commanding officer responded to an efficiency report question on whether he had the “desire to have him under your immediate com-

mand in peace and in war?” The officer wrote, “[Yes] but I would prefer to serve *under his command*.... He should be made a brigadier general in the Regular Army, and every day this is postponed is a loss to the Army and the nation. ... He is a military genius.” When Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur made Marshall senior instructor to the Illinois National Guard in 1933, former Vice President Charles Dawes exclaimed, “*What!* He can't do that. Hell, no! Not George Marshall. He's too big a man for this job. In fact he's the best goddamned officer in the U.S. Army.”

he had embarked on the great adventure of the 20th century from a small place; in his instance, Uniontown, Pa. He did not hail from some distinguished fighting family; his father had fought briefly in the Civil War for neither the Union nor the Confederacy, but with a home guard unit defending the neutrality of Augustus, Ky. George Catlett Marshall Sr. had gone on to make a small fortune in the coal industry that was literally shifting the ground under Uniontown.

Before long there was another tectonic shift, as his father lost most of his



**Son of a once well-to-do family, Marshall (highlighted, above) came into his own while attending the Virginia Military Institute. He first put his command skills to use as a young lieutenant in the pre-World War I Philippines.**

Quality aside, by 1939 George Marshall was fast approaching his 60th birthday and running out of time. Four years earlier, on the eve of his 55th birthday, and still a colonel after 33 years of outstanding service, he had written gloomily to his friend and old chief, General of the Armies John “Black Jack” Pershing: “I have possessed myself in patience, but I’m fast getting too old to have any future of importance in the Army.”

Marshall's military career had always been a gamble, one that threatened to smother his remarkable capabilities in obscurity. Like so many Americans,

fortune in land speculation. The junior Marshall was never poor, but his suddenly reduced circumstances gave him another reason not to simply follow in his father's footsteps or continue what had become the Marshall family tradition of resting on the laurels of their Virginia ancestors, who included John Marshall, the nation's first great chief justice.

Just what made Marshall choose the military remains something of a mystery. In 1897 America, few careers could have been less promising. The Army totaled all of 25,000 men. It had finished wrapping up American Indian resistance out West, and its largest engagement of the decade so far had been suppressing the 1894 Pullman strike in Chicago. Nor was there much chance of young George

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getting off on a good foot in his chosen vocation. The Marshalls were Democrats in predominantly Republican Pennsylvania, which meant a recommendation to West Point was highly unlikely.

Instead, George set his sights on Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, Va., perhaps because his older brother, Stuart, had attended and expressed his belief that George would “disgrace the family” were he to follow. Traditions aside, however, VMI grads were not required to enter service, and by the turn of the century few did. There were only 10 VMI

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alumni in all of the Army by 1890. Stuart Marshall had become a chemist at an iron works. George had never evinced any particular love of military traditions and was considered little more than a fair student and a shy, amiable boy.

But at VMI he came into his own. He made cadet first captain of his senior class, the most prestigious position in the school; became a good student and a dogged tackler on the gridiron; developed, for the first time, the taciturn, aloof personality that would serve him so well in command.

That persona would be honed to a fine edge by the trials of a career in the peacetime Army—and by his marriage. Elizabeth “Lily” Carter Coles was a local beauty, known for her mastery of the piano and her flirtatious

manner. Marshall was smitten from the moment he heard her through an open window, playing some favorite old tunes of his mother’s. Despite the fact she was several years older than he was, they married soon after his graduation. But on the night of their wedding Lily informed George she suffered from a defective mitral valve in her heart, a condition that made it too dangerous for her to have children—or to engage in sex. This may sound like Gothic romance by way of Tennessee Williams, but Marshall apparently remained devoted to her throughout their 25-year marriage,

tion for this was all of \$116.67 a month, on which Marshall also had to support his wife and mother-in-law. He did not make captain until 1916, 14 years after joining the Army.

World War I brought a quickening. Arriving in France with the 1st Division, he broke a leg when his horse slipped in the mud and fell on him as he rode up to the front lines. He had the leg bound and stayed in the field, an action that won him a field promotion to colonel and the promise of a brigade. It would not be honored. Instead, Marshall was transferred to the General Staff—six days before the “Big



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**Initially too forthright for Franklin Roosevelt’s taste, Marshall eventually won FDR’s trust, so much so that Marshall led the president’s third inaugural parade, above, on Jan. 20, 1941.**

which ended with her sudden death in 1927.

His military career was the typically long slog between isolated foreign outposts and dusty Western forts. Like most junior officers of the time, Marshall soon found that being a commissioned officer meant outsized responsibilities, accompanied by little pay and few promotions. His first assignment as a second lieutenant was on Mindoro, in the Philippines, where, according to historian Stanley Weintraub, “He was in effect, at 22, the military governor of an isolated island the size of Connecticut.” His compensa-

tion for this was all of \$116.67 a month, on which Marshall also had to support his wife and mother-in-law. He did not make captain until 1916, 14 years after joining the Army.

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Red One” lost almost all of its field officers killed or wounded in a counter-attack. Chafing at Pershing’s Chaumont headquarters, Marshall nonetheless put together the plans to move 600,000 men, 3,980 guns, 40,000 tons of ammunition, 34 evacuation hospitals, 93,032 horses and all attendant supplies behind the lines, from the Saint-Mihiel salient to the jumping-off point for the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, without drawing the notice of the enemy—a successful logistical feat that won him the nickname “Wizard.”

It also earned him a job as Pershing’s aide during his commander’s stint as chief of staff. But it cost him his best early chance at a general’s star. Officers who had led men into battle, such as MacArthur, leapt ahead of him. After five years as Pershing’s

right-hand man, it was back to another round of far-flung assignments: three years in China as executive officer of the 15th Infantry Regiment followed by five years as assistant commandant of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Ga.

Personally, Marshall's life became somewhat easier. While at Benning he met and married Katherine Tupper Brown, a lively, intelligent widow who provided him with both the stepchildren he loved and a companion with whom to spend weekends endlessly improving the permanent home and garden they would at last acquire in Leesburg, Va. Surgery to remove a hyperactive thyroid made his pulse more regular and eased a stress level and temper he had worked hard to control for years.

With the election of Roosevelt and the advent of the New Deal in 1933, Marshall was tapped to get the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) off the ground. Designed to put hundreds of thousands of destitute young men to work reclaiming land, planting trees and repairing the infrastructure of our national parks, the CCC was a noble idea in theory. In reality, it meant organizing nearly 300,000 young men into 1,330 camps in the space of three months—for starters. Of all U.S. institutions at the time, only the Army had anything like the command structure necessary to take on such a task.

Marshall headed efforts in Georgia and South Carolina, mustering in boys who his wife reported were “rather frail, anemic-looking youths, half-fed, with poor carriage, and nearly always with poor teeth”—the result of extended homelessness and little food. According to an assistant, Marshall “ate, breathed and digested the many CCC problems,” and Katherine found he was “fascinated by the opportunity he felt it afforded to build up the minds and bodies of the youth of this country.”

What Marshall was doing was literally creating the American Army of the future. After six weeks of shelter, medical care and regular meals the boys im-

proved visibly, and the work provided useful training for Marshall's officers, who had never had the chance to deal with logistics on such a large scale.

Yet time, and opportunity, continued to slip away. Marshall was well-liked and admired in Congress and the War Department, but nothing, it seemed, could be done to hurry things along. When Pershing appealed directly to the president, Roosevelt wrote Secretary of War George Dern, asking, “Can we put him [Marshall] on the list of next promotions?” The answer was no—the chain of seniority could not be broken. Not even the president of

Wash. He made the most of it, excelling in the Army's war games, and in the fall of 1938 Roosevelt appointed him deputy chief of staff and recalled him to Washington—only to have Marshall nearly ruin everything with one intemperate remark.

At a White House meeting on Nov. 14, 1938—during which Roosevelt and his senior advisers were seeking ways to address the appeasement of Adolf Hitler at Munich and the now virtually inevitable war—the president's focus was on airpower. He knew the still heavily isolationist Congress was loath to build up America's ground



**After the U.S. entry into World War II, FDR came to rely even more on Marshall, here conferring with the president at a break in the 1943 Allied conference in Casablanca.**

the United States, it seemed, could help him.

Marshall's despair about the course of his career was understandable. If he did not make general soon, he was likely to miss out on any significant command, and if he did not get a second star by 1940, he would never be chief of staff.

Then—success.

**I**n 1936 Pershing and Marshall's many other military and civilian backers won out. Marshall got his general's star and an assignment commanding a brigade in Vancouver,

forces, but he thought it would approve an increase in aircraft production if only as a deterrent to the Nazis—and warplanes could also provide vital aid to Britain and France, something else for which he could not ask Congress directly.

At the end of his presentation, the president solicited opinions from all the brass and the cabinet and subcabinet members he had convened. Each voiced his agreement. Then he turned to Marshall, who bristled at the continued neglect of the Army he loved.

“Mr. President, I am sorry, but I don't agree with that at all,” he said, a remark Marshall said ended the conference right there and drew a “startled look” from the president. Once out the door, his associates told him he had just ended what was surely the brief-

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est tour in Washington ever recorded. Marshall professed not to care, figuring he would at least get a field command, though surely he could not have been so sanguine at losing any hope for the post he had coveted his whole career.

It seemed that all his hard work, all his character building—of himself and others—had been negated by one ill-considered remark. Except it hadn't been.

“I want to say in compliment to the president that that didn't antagonize him at all,” Marshall reflected. “Maybe he thought I would tell him

“It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health to the world”

the truth so far as I personally was concerned, which I certainly tried to do in all our conversations.”

This was probably correct. Roosevelt would not have blamed Marshall for failing to understand a political ruse—that was his department, after all—but critical to his control of an American government that grew exponentially during his term was the ability to keep his thumbs in every pie; to find honest, savvy subordinates willing to tell him things cabinet secretaries and official department heads might not. The proof he recognized this ability in Marshall was that the general left his first White House conference with a piece of Roosevelt's brain—Harry Hopkins.

Though administrator of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and soon to become secretary of commerce,

Hopkins' most important post was as Roosevelt's all-around troubleshooter, sounding board, most trusted adviser and confidant; almost an extension of the president himself—a role that grew with the onset of the war. He was the civilian equivalent of Marshall, the honest and selfless public servant, even if their personalities were very different. Hopkins would prove an invaluable conduit between Roosevelt and Marshall. He had been at the general's first, rocky conference in the White House, and a few weeks later he set up a meeting during which Marshall laid out all the grim deficiencies

public works money to use rebuilding Army posts and Navy bases, and supporting highways, bridges and airports—preparing for the coming storm.

Marshall's concern, his ability to analyze the situation and lay out clear ideas for what must be done, sealed the deal—and the best management team America would ever field for a major war. In the spring of 1939 the departing chief of staff, General Malin Craig, dithered over whom to recommend as a successor. But Roosevelt had made up his mind. In late April he offered the job to Marshall, whose only condition was the right to speak his



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**The ties that Marshall (third from right, above, in England in 1942) made with world leaders, such as British PM Winston Churchill (at far right), forged his postwar role as statesman.**

the Army now faced after so many years of willful neglect.

These were not unknown to Hopkins, or to his chief. For years Roosevelt and Hopkins had skirted the intent, if not the letter, of the law regarding public works programs by devoting some \$250 million in relief funds to War Department projects. Early on in the New Deal, when public works money had gone to build a number of badly needed warships, Congress had made it clear that expenditures for any such potentially bellicose purposes were not permitted. But after 1935 Hopkins and FDR had quietly put

mind, no matter how much FDR might not like it. The president, convinced he'd made the right choice, agreed.

Marshall himself always attributed his appointment to Hopkins' influence. Theirs was an immediate friendship, cemented during the move to war. The new chief of staff took office on the fateful day of Sept. 1, 1939, and he later told author Robert Sherwood that Roosevelt didn't develop complete confidence in him until after the war had actually started—probably in part because Marshall so resolutely resisted FDR's usual techniques for disarming people. He tried never to see the president at night and refused all invitations to his residences at Warm Springs and Hyde Park, determined to keep their relationship on a purely professional basis.

Yet Roosevelt seems to have already been sold on Marshall by Pearl Harbor. Rather, there is the sense Roosevelt took some time to prove *himself* to Marshall. A break seemed to come when MacArthur, at his wit's end trying to hold onto the Philippines, passed along a half-baked plan to have the islands declare themselves neutral, in the hope his forces would then be allowed to peaceably withdraw.

"We can't do this at all!" an astonished FDR told Marshall and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, ordering MacArthur not to surrender "so long as there remains any possibility of resistance."

"I immediately discarded everything in my mind I had held to his [Roosevelt's] discredit," Marshall later recalled, impressed by his firmness. "Roosevelt said we won't neutralize. I decided he was a great man."

Hopkins, for his part, maintained, "The only thing I really want to do, as my contribution to the success of this war, is to arrange for General Marshall to establish and maintain free access to the president." Even when Marshall's place with Roosevelt was secure, when he no longer needed Hopkins' help, they remained close friends, bonded in loss as well as purpose. One of Marshall's beloved stepsons, Allen Brown, died in the fighting in Italy, while Hopkins' son Stephen, just 18, was killed in action on Kwajalein, in the Pacific. Both men would make it through the conflict, though Hopkins survived only a few months after it ended.

**M**arshall's most lasting contribution to his country's welfare still lay ahead. Named secretary of state by President Harry S. Truman in 1947, the general would lend his prestige to what would become known as the Marshall Plan, to aid a Europe still staggered by World War II. (Presidential adviser Clark Clifford wanted to call it the Truman Plan, but his boss wisely desisted, knowing the greater impact Marshall's name would have.) Speaking at Harvard's commencement that spring, Marshall argued: "It is logical that the United States should do

whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health to the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace. Our policy is directed not against any country, but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos."

The plan proved to be both a brilliant material victory and a propaganda coup. An infusion of \$13 billion in U.S. aid over the next four years sent Western Europe soaring into a new era of prosperity and democracy, while Stalin ordered the Soviet bloc countries to turn down the offer of assistance—as Truman and Marshall had figured.



**President Harry S. Truman (congratulating Marshall, above, following a 1945 award ceremony) made the general secretary of state in 1947 and then of defense in 1950.**

But even this didn't mark his last stint of public service. When Truman's secretary of defense, Louis Johnson, imploded under the pressure of the Korean War in 1950, the president brought Marshall, by then age 70, back yet again to rally the U.S. war effort and preserve the South Korean state. In 1953 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, making him the only American general ever so honored.

His efforts also earned him from some quarters the sorts of scathing, conspiracy-mongering attacks his friend Hopkins had endured. In Marshall's case they came mostly from

Senator Joseph McCarthy—and sadly, even Marshall's protégé, Dwight D. Eisenhower, a man who owed everything to him, would not defend Marshall in his rush to be president.

The betrayal appeared to matter little to Marshall, who wrote Ike a congratulatory letter on his election. He understood, no doubt, he had won the greater battle, had paved the way to put a man very much like himself into the White House; another of that remarkable generation of American leaders who moved so adroitly from war to peace and back again as the situation required. All of them, Marshall

and Eisenhower, and also Roosevelt and Truman, and their aides and allies from both major parties and from the ranks, would become the heroes of what historian David Fromkin would dub "the time of the Americans." Their United States was, as Fromkin writes, one that "thrived on challenges and had learned...to try to do what others said was impossible." To an astonishing extent they succeeded—none more so than George Marshall. **MH**

*For further reading Kevin Baker recommends Thomas Parish's Roosevelt and Marshall: Partners in Politics and War; David Fromkin's In the Times of the Americans; and Stanley Weintraub's 15 Stars: Eisenhower, MacArthur, Marshall—Three Generals Who Saved the American Century.*