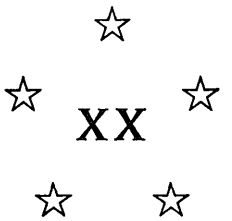

XX

The Future and the Past

"For almost forty years . . . you have been preparing for the position you now hold. . . . Today we hope you can lay aside your honors and your burdens and make friends with your youth."

—Uniontown's Welcome, September 9, 1939, written by Mary Kate O'Bryon

MARSHALL on September 1, 1939, had arrived at his long-sought goal. The tremendous task of leading the Army in a period of world conflict was something he had not foreseen, but had he known the trials which would confront him in the next six years, his choice would not have been different. From Pershing he already knew the burdens and the cares of the Chief of Staff, and he accepted them.

He had prepared for four decades for the post he now assumed. How thorough had his training been? He had attended military schools which fitted him to be a lieutenant or a colonel, but there was no way then—and perhaps not now—to train a general or a chief of staff. Neither specified courses nor years of apprenticeship were enough for that. Experts said that the top commander of fighting men must have led soldiers in battle, but the three principal aspirants for the office of Chief of Staff in 1939—Drum, DeWitt, and Marshall—had won their reputations in the first World War as staff officers. Others insisted that they should

be graduates of West Point, but not one of the three had received such training.

Judged by today's requirements for high command, no institution—civilian or military—at the turn of the century provided proper grounding in languages, international relations, troop management, or psychology of leadership. Lacking such instruction, the officer of an earlier era had to train himself. And for this he needed a belief in himself, an intense desire to know, the capacity to grow, the trait of self-discipline, and a compulsion to excel in his chosen field. Marshall had them all.

Despite his limitations as a student, Marshall at an early age exhibited a bent for command. Classmates recall his drilling them at school, their surprise that such a self-willed boy could share leadership with Andy even at play, his steady rise to positions of authority at VMI. His passion to succeed had an element of weakness. As a youngster he avoided those activities and subjects in which he could not do well. As he grew older he saw the danger and deliberately set tasks for himself for which he had no special aptitude. At Leavenworth he undertook the tedious routine of training a horse and in the Philippines he took apart an automobile's engine and put it back together again—to prove to himself that he could do it.

Throughout his life he kept his boyhood curiosity. On every new post, on every trip across the country, during his visits to new places, he searched for local history. The highways and byroads of the Philippines, the battlefields of Manchuria, the church where Jeanne d'Arc was baptized, the remains of old Fort Vancouver—all these caught his interest. He pumped the knowledgeable for their special information and tried to learn the trade secrets of every specialist he met. In short, he had a scholar's itch for inquiry, but never quite a scholar's intentness on systematic investigation of a topic.

His reading over the years was voluminous and wonderfully diffuse. Biography, personal accounts of military expeditions, and general works on American and European history fascinated him, and he sought relaxation in popular Westerns and occasional novels. Once he astounded his officer students at Fort Benning by revealing that he found his pointers on the writing

of a good term paper in a current fiction favorite, *Daddy Long Legs*. Some of his associates deplored his lack of academic accomplishments, saying that he had made no proper study of Clausewitz and had only textbook knowledge of other masters of the art of war. They also regretted his insufficient knowledge of the totalitarian ideologies of his time. To these charges Marshall would have been the first to plead guilty. Like most officers of his generation, he studied the practice of arms and not the theory. Like most of them, he had read little in political theory, international economics, or advanced science. In these matters he was not far behind most of his military and political contemporaries. In one particular, the duties of a soldier in a democracy, he was better informed than most. By inheritance, by training, and by prolonged work with civilians, he was aware of the strength and weaknesses of democratic government, and he was wholly prepared to fit his role to that system.

Marshall's education came primarily from constant study of his trade. He learned what made the Army work and then sought to improve the way in which it accomplished its purposes. Although a "student" by Army standards, he was not known as an original thinker. He was a pragmatic military scientist, tinkering with what he had until it worked better, rather than the intuitive genius who changes the nature of warfare. As a teacher he sought for ways by which to stimulate the thinking of his students and he provided an atmosphere in which bold experimentation might flourish.

In the study of strategy and tactics, Marshall suffered the same handicap as most American commanders in the period between the great wars: the lack of an opportunity to command large bodies of troops in the field and the lack of any need to think in terms of international relations. So far as the small American Army could give him practice he had it. In China for three years, he commanded a regiment during two periods of tension when clashes with Chinese troops seemed almost unavoidable. At Fort Benning for five years, he worked with well-trained and well-equipped demonstration units and the pick of the young infantry officers of the Army. In the five years before he came to Washington, he worked with units of brigade and division

size, leading the Red Forces each summer in maneuvers. To a considerable degree he was aware of the important changes the truck, the tank, and the airplane were bringing to modern warfare, although he could not, of course, foresee all that World War II would develop. Perhaps most important, his duties with the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Guard gave him a knowledge of the future citizen-soldier that few other top commanders would possess.

A week after he assumed office Marshall traveled back to his birthplace for a homecoming to which he had been invited several months before. He made of it almost a ceremonial return to the wellsprings of his youth, as if renewing his strength in preparation for the future. At the close of an afternoon of visiting scenes of his boyhood around Uniontown, he spoke to four hundred guests at the new White Swan Hotel, built on the site of the old tavern he had known as a boy. In these surroundings his mind turned to the past, and he spoke of the history of his native country. "There was a great deal of history and very important history written in that vicinity," he said. "And there was this great life of the nation which flowed through the National Pike and stopped overnight at the inn, just two blocks beyond the house where I lived as a boy."

He spoke of hunting pheasant along Braddock's trail and of picnicking at his grave. A mile beyond was Fort Necessity, where Washington had built his first fort and then had been forced to surrender to a superior force of French and Indians—nonetheless marching out with the honors of war. A favorite trout stream arose out of a deep ravine in the mountain near the place where Washington had surprised a small force under Sieur Coulon de Jumonville and killed the French leader and several members of his party. Marshall that evening recalled the words of Thackeray: "It was strange that in a savage forest of Pennsylvania, a young Virginian officer should fire a shot, and waken up a war which was to last for sixty years, which was to cover his own country and pass into Europe, to cost France her American colonies, to sever ours from us, and create the great Western Republic; to rage over the Old World when extinguished in the New; and, of all the myriads engaged in the vast contest, to

leave the prize of the greatest fame with him who struck the first blow."

So George Marshall, at the beginning of a long and trying assignment as Chief of Staff, mindful of his attainment to the highest post the peacetime Army could give, and fully aware of the grave crisis in world affairs, harked back to the days before the founding of the Republic and to the deeds and men who influenced the affairs of nations. In his closing passages, he reminded his hearers of their heritage and their good fortune, with peaceful borders, prosperity, and freedom to do as they liked. Of the stern times he saw ahead he added: "I will not trouble you with the perplexities, the problems and requirements for the defense of this country, except to say that the importance of this matter is so great and the cost, unfortunately, is bound to be so high, that all that we do should be planned and executed in a businesslike manner, without emotional hysteria, demagogic speeches, or other unfortunate methods which will befog the issue and might mislead our efforts. Finally, it comes to me that we should daily thank the good Lord that we live where we do, think as we do, and enjoy blessings that are becoming rare privileges on this earth." [1]

His quiet appraisal of the international conflict, which he foresaw might one day involve the United States and transform the world even as the opening battle of the French and Indian War had changed the eighteenth century, was characteristic of the man. Aware that he worked within the grand sweep of history, he proposed to approach his tasks with calm determination. In his rock-like resolution, born of inner strength and forty years of education for generalship, more than in the technical mastery he so surely grasped, lay George Marshall's strongest weapon for the coming trials.