

George C. Marshall

1953

“Two words above all others became his guide - as he underlined it years later in an address to the graduating class at his old military school - the words honor and self-sacrifice.”



It may seem surprising to consider a career soldier for the Nobel Peace Prize. General George C. Marshall was in no way a pacifist, and was the head of the largest army the United States ever fielded. But in the aftermath of the Second World War, Marshall's efforts to rebuild a devastated Europe earned him the respect and praise of millions, including his wartime enemies.

George Marshall was the youngest of three children. The Marshall family lived near Pittsburgh, where the steel and iron industries provided a good living for his father in coal production.

He dreamed of attending the Virginia Military Institute, or VMI, but his brother Stuart, a VMI alumnus, begged their mother not to let him apply. Stuart was sure that Marshall would fail and bring shame to their family.

Fortunately, Mrs. Marshall did not agree and, at the age of sixteen, George Marshall began his studies. He quickly realized that there were two ways one could excel at the Institute. The first was academic, the second as a military cadet and, so, he decided to become the best soldier at the entire school, a goal he achieved by the end of his second year and maintained throughout his time at VMI.

Marshall earned the respect of his peers, subordinates, and superiors. He discovered that giving an order was easy, but it took more for the order to be successfully carried out. One important aspect of leadership for Marshall was to be an example. If he expected his men to work hard, he had to be willing to do the same. He was unfailingly honest, and as a result his men learned to trust him without reservation.

After graduating from VMI, George Marshall entered the Army and was deployed to the Philippines. Ten days before deploying, he married Lily Coles, who remained stateside. Marshall was sent back to the Philippines in 1913, commanding 5,000 troops in training exercises and demonstrating the talents that would make him a top general.

In 1917, the United States entered World War I and Marshall was put in charge of leading the U.S. 1st Infantry Division across the Atlantic. The troops were eager to fight, but completely under-equipped and without proper training. Marshall did his best to create an effective force that could fight a modern war, where machine guns, tanks, and chemical weapons had replaced horse cavalry, swords, and single shot rifles.

After the war, George and Lily Marshall lived together while he worked in Washington, D.C. and, later, in China where Marshall's men provided security to Americans in the northern part of the country. Tragedy struck upon their return to Washington, D.C. in 1927 when Lily suddenly died while in recovery from surgery. George Marshall now found himself alone.

Eventually, a new assignment would change that. He became the head instructor at Fort Benning, Georgia—the army's largest training center. While there, he met new people, took part in outdoor activities, and eventually met Katherine Brown, a recent widow with three children. Three years after the loss of his first wife, Marshall remarried at the age of 50.

1880 – 1959

- **President Roosevelt once called General Marshall by his first name. The look on Marshall's face was enough that Roosevelt never did again.**
- **In Europe, there is a training center and a bridge named for Marshall in Germany, as well as a museum in Holland.**
- **In the US, the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, several public schools, a street in Pittsburgh, and the George C. Marshall Foundation in Lexington, Virginia are named for him.**
- **The U.S. Post Office has issued two stamps in his honor.**

“If man does find the solution for world peace, it will be the most revolutionary reversal of his record we have ever known.”

The 1930s saw the arrival of another enemy at America's door: the **Great Depression**. Marshall himself took a pay cut in order to remain in the Army. When he was posted in 1933 to South Carolina, many soldiers were unable to feed their families on army pay. Marshall taught his men to grow their own food, and helped establish Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) projects throughout the South. The CCC was part of President Roosevelt's **New Deal**, and its goal was simple: put young men to work. It was overseen by the Army, and Marshall continued the program in Washington State. While many of his peers didn't like the CCC, Marshall once again decided that personal glory was less important than the needs of the country. He saw the CCC as a means of creating strong, hardworking citizens.

As tensions rose in Europe, George Marshall was nearing the end of his military career. He'd only recently become a general, and at 58 his dream of heading the entire U.S.

Army seemed out of reach, especially with 30 other generals ahead of him in line for the job. However, his many talents made him stand out among his peers and President Roosevelt made Marshall Army Chief-of-Staff in September 1939, promoting him from a one-star to a four-star general overnight.

At the same time, Hitler's troops launched their **blitzkrieg** into Poland, igniting another war in Europe. Marshall agreed with Roosevelt that neutrality could only be maintained by being ready to fight. But as he studied the global situation, Marshall felt it inevitable that the United States would eventually be dragged into the conflict. The people of the United States did not want war but Marshall remained a strong advocate of military preparedness.

In December of 1941, the United States was torn out of neutrality by the attack on Pearl Harbor. When the United States declared war on Japan, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. In the first, dark months of the war, it seemed that the Axis Powers were well ahead of the Allies. As always, George Marshall wished he could take the lead on the battlefield and enter the fighting. But his skills in organizing the war meant that he would spend most of the war behind a desk in Washington. By 1943, the Allies were turning the war around. Marshall's careful planning, unflinching honesty, and hard work made a huge impact on Allied efforts. He began to plan a major operation that, if successful, could end the war in Europe.

Marshall wanted to send U.S. and Allied forces through Great Britain, over the English Channel, and into German-occupied France. President Roosevelt agreed, despite the British preference to invade through Italy instead. The plan, called Operation Overlord, was to become the largest military operation in history. While Marshall had hoped to be given command of this operation, he honored the request of President Roosevelt and stayed in Washington. Operation Overlord was a success, and in less than a year the Germans had retreated back to their own country. By spring of 1945, the war in Europe was won.

George Marshall's work did not end when the Germans were defeated. He began shifting soldiers and supplies to the other side of the world, where the Japanese were still fighting desperately against the Allies. President Roosevelt had died in the spring of 1945, and Harry Truman was now **Commander-in-Chief**. He asked Marshall about how the U.S. might use the newly invented atomic bomb to end the war with Japan. Marshall felt that whether or not to use the bomb was a political decision, not a military one and he felt that the President, not a general, should decide.

The Second World War ended soon after, and George Marshall, now in his sixties, was prepared to retire. In fact, he and his wife had just returned home to Virginia from his retirement ceremony when the phone rang. It was President Truman, and there was trouble in China between the Nationalists and the Communists. He asked Marshall to go try and create a truce between the two groups.

Marshall, of course, accepted the request. But the tensions among Chinese factions were impossible for Marshall to resolve, and in 1947 he returned to the United States. He was then made U.S. Secretary of State, and was given the task of rebuilding Europe. National boundaries were in disarray, food was scarce, and the Soviet Union saw an opportunity to act aggressively in Eastern Europe. By 1947, the European economy was still well below pre-war levels. Winter was especially harsh that year, and both food and coal were in short supply everywhere. Marshall worked with officials from European countries and the U.S. State Department to produce the European Recovery Program. The ERP, which came to be known simply as the Marshall Plan, involved huge donations of American aid to Europe. In today's dollars, the Marshall Plan would total about \$130 billion.

The Marshall Plan worked. By the end of the four years, Europe's economy had surpassed pre-war levels. The transportation and manufacturing infrastructure that had been decimated during the war was rebuilt. The plan was also seen as a way of keeping the Soviet Union from dominating the region. Russia's Eastern European satellites, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, were invited to take part, but Russia kept them from coming.

In 1953, the Nobel Committee gave George Marshall the Peace Prize for his efforts to rebuild Europe after the war. For George Marshall, the success of the European Recovery Program was not his final bow. He resigned the State Department in 1949 to become head of the American Red Cross. Unlike the International Committee of the Red Cross, which served prisoners of war during World War II, the American Red Cross had a very poor reputation among servicemen. Marshall worked to improve the organization's image, but was recalled in 1950 by President Truman and asked to become U.S. Secretary of Defense. Despite their occasional differences, Truman later called Marshall "the greatest living American."

Marshall resigned from office for the last time in 1951. He died in 1959, having served his country for over forty years.

Vocabulary Terms

1. Great Depression
2. New Deal
3. concur
4. blitzkrieg
5. colonies
6. theatre
7. dictatorship

8. Commander-in-Chief

Discussion Questions

1. What career do you think George Marshall's guidance counselor might have recommended he pursue? Why? (Level 2)
2. How did George make up for his lack of natural academic ability? (Level 1)
3. What was life like in America while George Marshall was growing up? (Level 1)
4. What great accomplishments did Marshall achieve in wartime? (Level 1)
5. What was Marshall's dream as a military leader? Why didn't he realize it? (Level 1)
6. What made it possible for Marshall to prepare the Army for the Second World War? (Level 2)
7. What was the Marshall Plan? How did it merit recognition by the Peace Prize Committee? (Level 2)
8. What example does Marshall provide for achieving goals and being a leader? (Level 3)

Introductory and Extended Exercises

A. Before reading, ask students to quiz five adults over 40 about the Second World War:

1. Who were the most important American military leaders in World War II?
2. Who was the highest ranking American soldier?
3. Who planned the invasion of Normandy?
4. What was the Marshall Plan? What did it accomplish?

When students return with the answers, complete the biography and ask students the same questions. Discuss why and how the answers are different.

B. Ask students to name the essential qualities of character that George Marshall exhibited throughout his life. Write them on the board, and make a short list of the most popular answers. Then ask students to choose one quality to write a single paragraph about. Topics could include:

1. An example the student has seen of the quality
2. The quality the student most admires, and why
3. How the quality connects with the achievement of peace

C. Following either of these exercises, ask students to do further research and create an essay outline on an important subject raised in the reading or subsequent discussion.

Technology Option

Research the amount of damage done by Allied forces in Europe during the Second World War in five different countries. Then research how much aid each country received under the Marshall Plan, and how it was used.

Watch Marshall's films online (see bibliography below)

Bibliography

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