



Book Marshall

Lessons in Leadership (Great Generals)

H. Paul Jeffers and Alan Axelrod
Palgrave Macmillan, 2010
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Recommendation

George Catlett Marshall Jr., a revered soldier and statesman, served as US Army chief of staff during World War II and later as secretary of state and secretary of defense. A born leader, Marshall was, as Sir Winston Churchill described him, “the noblest Roman of them all.” He stood resolute for what he believed and, as authors H. Paul Jeffers and Alan Axelrod make clear, the world is a better place because he did. Indeed, Europe would not exist in its present state if not for the Marshall Plan that rebuilt its shattered nations after World War II. *BooksInShort* recommends Jeffers and Axelrod’s short, readable biography to those interested in the attributes that leadership demands, as demonstrated by the luminous life of George Marshall.

Take-Aways

- George Marshall was the top cadet at the Virginia Military Institute.
- Marshall snuck into President William McKinley’s office in the White House to request an officer’s commission in the US Army.
- Marshall played a key role in preparing American combat troops for World War I.
- After the war, Marshall became the de facto head of the US Army.
- At Fort Benning, he developed the infantry tactics that would help win World War II.
- Under Marshall, the US army expanded from less than 200,000 soldiers to more than five million.
- Marshall had a genius for placing military leaders in ideal, individualized assignments.
- Marshall wanted the post of supreme allied commander for the Normandy Invasion, but President Franklin D. Roosevelt kept him in Washington, DC.
- After the war, Marshall instituted the Marshall Plan for successfully rebuilding Europe.
- Marshall is the only military leader ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Summary

The “Wizard”

George Catlett Marshall Jr. was born in 1880 in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. He attended the Virginia Military Institute, graduating as the top cadet officer. To win an Army officer’s commission, Marshall traveled unannounced to the White House, managed to meet with President William McKinley, asked for a commission and got it, even though McKinley had no idea who Marshall was.

“George C. Marshall’s was the vision, the skill and the force behind the American victory in World War II.” (General Wesley K. Clark, Ret.)

Marshall held numerous US Army staff assignments and developed a sterling reputation as a “teacher, a planner, a brilliant tactician, a peerless logistical manager – in short, the ideal staff officer.” Some of his men called Marshall “Dynamite.” One referred to him as the “Wizard.” A senior officer’s efficiency report cited Marshall as a “military genius.”

“For Marshall...war was a set of problems, and the only way to solve problems was to work the problems, one by one.”

During World War I, General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing commanded the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France. Marshall became Pershing’s “fastest-rising officer” while he worked on preparing America’s untested forces for action. He spoke bluntly, always telling the formidable Pershing exactly what the AEF needed to do to improve its operations. He never pulled his punches. After the war, Marshall continued to work for Pershing in the US. Because Pershing did not care for administrative routine, Marshall “functioned as the true head of the army.” Marshall later ran the academic department at Fort Benning, Georgia. There Marshall tested “new infantry techniques and battlefield mobility” tactics. His work “lay the foundation of warfighting doctrine for World War II.”

Army Chief of Staff

In 1938, Marshall worked for the Army’s chief of staff, General Malin Craig. The US Army was small (fewer than 200,000 men in uniform), poorly equipped and underfunded. If war came, the nation would be in big trouble. Rapid expansion was in order. Craig quickly made Marshall his deputy chief of staff. That same year, Hitler threatened war in Europe unless Germany was permitted to annex the Sudetenland. In response, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sought \$500 million to modernize and expand the military.

“Marshall was all about professed self-control and military decorum.”

In 1939, Roosevelt nominated Marshall as Army chief of staff. He began his duties on July 1, the day the Nazis invaded Poland. By 1940, Marshall commissioned the creation of the so-called “RAINBOW” war plan, designed to fight “a two-ocean war.” The US would soon need Marshall’s plan. The next year, on December 7, the Japanese attacked the US naval fleet at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii. Americans demanded instant, all-out retaliation against Japan. Marshall successfully counseled the tactic of “Europe-first” military operations.

An Eye for Talent

Marshall invariably picked the right generals for the right commands and duties. Marshall chose Brigadier General Dwight D. Eisenhower to develop a plan to rescue General Douglas MacArthur’s forces, which were trapped in the Philippines after the Japanese attack. During “war strategy meetings” between Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Marshall championed the concept of “unified command[s] in each theater of operations,” calling for “one supreme commander for all service branches – army, navy, air – for both the United States and Britain.” This organizational scheme proved instrumental to the Allies’ victory. Military leaders from both nations objected to the plan. However, Marshall successfully convinced Roosevelt and Churchill that winning demanded such an arrangement.

“Whatever the identity of the enemy in the field, for Marshall, the deadliest foe was confusion, therefore, the first objective was to defeat it.”

In 1942, Marshall promoted Eisenhower to head the War Plans Division. He instructed Eisenhower to develop a strategy to win a “global war waged on the land, at sea and in the air by a disparate group of allies.” Eisenhower did so, targeting Germany for the first major offensive by the Allies. Marshall agreed to the plan and Roosevelt approved it. Eisenhower then became “the US commanding general in the ETO [European Theater of Operations].”

“Marshall perceived that without the strong presence of the United States in global affairs following the Great War...Germany, Italy and Japan were able to make a second world war inevitable.”

Eisenhower’s first major campaign was Operation Torch, which encompassed the invasion of North Africa and the campaign against Vichy (pro-Nazi) French forces. In the Pacific, US Marines were on the offensive “at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.” British and American bombers attacked Germany. The US Army now had “five and one-third million men” in uniform, up from a “million and a half men” in 1941. Marshall planned, organized and supervised this massive mobilization.

“Born warriors like Napoleon or (as he was already proving himself) George Patton were rare, but natural staff officers were even rarer.”

The US Army suffered heavy losses against the Germans in North Africa – at Kasserine Pass in Tunisia. General George S. Patton Jr. then took over command of II Corps and things began to turn around for the Americans. In May 1943, the Germans and Italians in North Africa, including German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s famous Afrika Korps, surrendered to the Allies. The Allies’ next major push would attack the “soft underbelly” of Europe – Sicily and Italy. The Sicily invasion turned into a bloody spectacle.

“The hallmark of Marshall as a military executive had always been the genius that guided him to put the right man in the right spot.”

Patton commanded the Seventh Army during this operation. While he performed brilliantly as a general, Patton was a constant concern for Eisenhower and Marshall. Eisenhower referred to Patton as his “problem child.” Patton’s temper often got the better of him, leading to incidents in field hospitals where he slapped two enlisted men he considered malingerers. These incidents gained wide notoriety and, with Marshall’s concurrence, Eisenhower disciplined Patton.

The Normandy Invasion

Patton thought that Marshall would choose him to plan and direct Operation Overlord, the Normandy invasion. However, Marshall agreed with Eisenhower that General Omar Bradley would be the best man for this job. Patton ended up serving as a decoy, fooling the Germans into thinking that he would lead the main invasion at Pas-de-Calais. Marshall hoped to be appointed Supreme Allied Commander for the invasion. But Roosevelt needed Marshall as army chief of staff and kept him in Washington, D.C. Roosevelt made a smart decision. Marshall was brilliant in his top command role. In recognition, *Time* magazine honored him as the 1943 “Man of the Year.”

“The Marshall Plan became perhaps the most spectacularly successful foreign policy program any world power has ever produced.”

On June 6, 1944 – D-Day – “an invasion armada of 4,000 vessels” crossed the English Channel carrying American, British, Canadian, Australian and French troops for an invasion of Normandy. The US troops attacking Normandy beaches outnumbered the entire 1939 US Army. While Marshall did not participate in the “tactical planning and execution” for the Normandy landings, he handpicked the superb team that did: Eisenhower as supreme commander, Omar Bradley running the Twelfth Army Group, Leonard Gerow in charge of V Corps, Joe Collins commanding VII Corps and Raymond Barton heading the Fourth Infantry Division. Later, George Patton took over the Third Army.

“Although he had been the senior general of the US Army, Marshall wanted to ensure that economic, not military, means took precedence in executing the Truman Doctrine.”

Marshall was responsible for the superior training and quick modernization of the army, the giant conscription force that he helped to create almost from scratch. And he was the guiding force for the “unified command” structure and the “efficient staff bureaucracy” that helped win the war.

Operation Dragoon, “the invasion of southern France,” followed the Normandy assault. Next, Operation Cobra began with major air bombardments of German field positions, paving the way for Bradley’s Twelfth Army Group to advance beyond the “Norman hedgerow country.” Patton’s Third Army gained so much ground that Operation Cobra transformed “from a breakout” into a full-fledged Allied attack on Germany. As troops advanced eastward, Marshall played the diplomat, convincing the British and Americans that his strategic planning did not favor one army over the other. Throughout the war, Marshall handled this difficult assignment with grace and tact.

“There is a beast in every fighting man which begins tugging at its chains, and a good officer must learn how to keep the beast under control, both in his men and himself.” (George C. Marshall)

By September 5, the Allies had moved “more than two million Allied troops and 3,446,000 tons of stores” into France. In the Ardennes Offensive, which became the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans counterattacked. This engagement turned into the American army’s toughest battle in Europe. Patton and his Third Army staged a valiant counteroffensive “that broke the back of the German army.” As the war in Europe came to an end, Marshall advocated for an active US role in the rebuilding of Europe. As Roosevelt’s health deteriorated, Marshall increasingly exercised not only military but also political authority.

The War Ends

Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, and Vice President Harry Truman became president. On May 7, the Germans agreed to “unconditional surrender terms,” ending the war in Europe. But Japan continued to wage brutal – and clearly unwinnable – war. More and more American soldiers were dying in the Pacific theater. Seeking a quick end, the US dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese sued for peace and World War II was over.

“If I have to explain at this point that I am not a traitor to the United States, I hardly think it’s worth it.” (George C. Marshall Jr.)

On November 30, 1945, of his own volition, Marshall stepped down as army chief of staff. At Truman’s request, Marshall went to China to negotiate the terms of a peace between Chiang Kai-shek and his nationalist forces, and Mao Zedong and his communists. Marshall spent a fruitless two years seeking an agreement between them. He then returned to the United States to become secretary of state under Truman. His return to the US spelled the end of the “Marshall Mission” and the resumption of the Chinese Civil War. Mao won the war in 1949 and established the People’s Republic of China.

The Marshall Plan

Marshall believed that the US should make every effort to rebuild war-torn Europe. He fully supported Truman’s postwar policy to contain communism. The Soviets, seeking to exploit Europe’s weakness, did not want the broken European states to recover from the devastation of World War II. Marshall thought economic assistance was the best way to accomplish the “so-called Truman Doctrine.” The “Marshall Plan’s,” essence: The US agreed to fund the rebuilding of Europe, but let each nation spend the money as it saw fit. In 1948, Congress approved the Marshall Plan, which successfully rebuilt western Europe.

“The American public, suffering from what Eisenhower and others called ‘victory fever,’ was becoming increasingly resistant to additional call-ups of men for a war they believed was all but won.”

In 1949, Marshall retired as secretary of state. In 1950, Truman named him as America’s third secretary of defense. The US was at war in Korea, where MacArthur headed “United Nation forces” fighting North Korean and Chinese troops. By 1951, the UN voted to quit fighting. Truman and his aides agreed to forego trying to reunite Korea, settling instead on driving the North Koreans back behind the 38th parallel. MacArthur publicly objected to this policy. He was a bold, brilliant military leader, but he was insubordinate to Truman, his commander in chief. After conferring with Marshall and other top generals, Truman relieved MacArthur of his command. The famous general returned home to a hero’s welcome and delivered a televised speech to a joint session of Congress, repeating his desire to achieve total victory in Korea.

“Throughout its history, the U.S. Army had been notably deficient in creating an adequate level of staff officers – the ‘middle management’ of a military force.”

Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy had been charging that traitors and communists had infiltrated the Truman administration. MacArthur’s impassioned speech seemed to lend credibility to his charges. On June 14, 1951, McCarthy delivered an unfocused speech “on the Senate floor” in which he denounced Marshall, placing him “at the head of a ‘conspiracy...to diminish the United States in world affairs’.” He claimed that through Marshall, the country “shall be contained, frustrated and finally fall victim to Soviet intrigue from within...” Influential politicians quickly condemned McCarthy for his attack on Marshall. Adlai Stevenson, the future Democratic Party presidential candidate, termed McCarthy’s speech a “hysterical form of putrid slander.” More than anything else, it was McCarthy’s intemperate ravings against Marshall that turned public opinion against McCarthy, leading to his eventual downfall.

Nobel Peace Prize

On September 12, 1951, Marshall resigned as secretary of defense. In 1953, he received the Nobel Peace Prize for the Marshall Plan. He remains the only military leader to win the award. In 1959, Marshall suffered two strokes. He died on October 16. Marshall is buried at Arlington National Cemetery, not far from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

About the Authors

H. Paul Jeffers, a prominent military historian, wrote 70 books. The late Alan Axelrod wrote history books and business books with historical roots, including the *BusinessWeek* bestsellers *Patton on Leadership* and *Elizabeth I, CEO*.
