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GEN. GEORGE C. MARSHALL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL MILITARY ETHIC

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I want to say, first of all, that you are the saints of your profession. Most of you are high school teachers. This is the most important period of education in the life of a young person—13 to 17, as opposed to 18 to 22. This is where you can really inculcate the fire, the love of learning, and the habits that will last over a lifetime.

A common story, which most of us have heard, features a prominent citizen's death in a small town, probably in the American Heartland. He is in his mid-80s, perhaps even a little bit older. His best friend gives the eulogy. When the eulogist mentions that the man who has died served at Normandy, there is a great deal of whispering in the church. What are the people attending the funeral saying to each other? Well, it's perfectly obvious—"I never knew that." The extraordinary feature of that generation, with which we are losing contact at the rate of about 1,200 a day, is that they did what they did and didn't think, or talk much about it. We are losing physical touch slowly with that generation.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted in the 1830s, when visiting the United States that the last signer of the Declaration had died. This was the only Catholic signer, as it happens, Charles Carroll of Maryland. And Tocqueville was struck by the country's sense of loss of its "physical touch" with one of the founders. And I think many of us feel that way about "the greatest generation." Which raises the question: Why are we, as amateur scholars of the military—military buffs—fixated on two wars in particular, the Civil War and the World War II? Americans know a great deal about these two conflicts and very little about the Great War in between, the war in France, in which America's participation was quite brief, and in which U.S. casualties relative to those of the Germans, the French and the British were quite small. But you may remember, during the last six weeks of the war in France, from September 26 until the armistice, 26,500 Americans were killed and 105,000 wounded. Our actual experience of combat was brief, but extremely costly. And yet, most people have forgotten World War I.

There are many links between the Civil War and the World War II. We tend to forget them. I'm going to talk a little about George Marshall within his generation. Marshall was born in 1880, the same year as Douglas MacArthur. He grew up in a small town, a suburb of Pittsburgh, surrounded by veterans of the Civil War. For that generation, that was their "great generation." If you were 20 years old and had fought at Chancellorsville or Antietam or Gettysburg, you were still a relatively young person in the early 1890s. You'd be in your middle or late 40s. So if you were a doctor, a lawyer, an executive, a teacher in small town America, you were the person that people looked up to. Yet, the great military figures of that war were the people you aspired to be if you had any interest in the military.

Some of the links between the two wars are quite charming and unexpected. For example, Henry "Hap" Arnold, the chief of the Air Corps in World War II, was decorating workers at a B-29 factory in Wichita in 1943, and the foreman introduced a woman in her 70s, saying, "This is our best worker" The woman was Helen Longstreet, widow of the Civil War soldier James

Longstreet. He had lived a long life and married a young woman. Consequently, you still had people serving in World War II who had those connections to the Civil War

Many of you, if you are historians, know the word “prosopography,” an alluring subset of history concerned with the study of groups united in some purpose or by some chronology. The prosopography of Civil War leadership is very interesting. The most important prosopography in our history is that of the American founders. Henry Steele Commager talked about periods of extraordinary fluorescence in human leadership and human talent in history. He detailed the Athens of Pericles, Elizabethan England, Renaissance Italy, and particularly the American founders. How was it that at that time in our history we had a number of people born roughly between 1730 and 1750 who grew to be such extraordinary human beings allied in a common purpose—people of astounding versatility? Where did they come from? Commager makes the point that once you clear away the debris of great challenges bringing forth great leadership, you have to look very seriously at the way people were raised and how they were educated. What did they study? What did they read? What were their parents’ expectations for them? They were not obsessed with SAT scores, there were no Blackberries, no one cared if you went to Princeton or the University of Virginia. You went up to your room at 7:00 at night, and if you were John Adams, you read Plutarch, and you were given no rewards for reading Plutarch. This is essentially Commager’s thesis.

The generation of George Marshall, the American generation born between roughly 1880 and 1900 or 1905, was also such a generation. The British historian Paul Johnson considers it the “ablest in our history, almost as good as that of the American founders.” This is the generation bounded roughly by 1880 extending all the way up to include the people that led the United States during the Cold War, Walter Isaacson’s so-called “wise men.”

Before discussing Marshall, in particular, I need to begin with a personal story. In September of 1997, I was in the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hall at the Virginia Military Institute. I was looking at the Corps of Cadets who were sitting at rapt attention and listening very earnestly to a speaker who was the president of the first class at that time, or the senior class. The Corps was in a sulfurous mood. After a nine-year progress through the courts, the Supreme Court had ruled—by a vote of seven to one—that the Institute must admit women. (I don’t know how many of you have been through situations in which your college or your school which was all-women’s or all-men’s goes coed, but it absolutely unhinges people. They become irrational and very hard to manage. It is as though Western civilization has been threatened itself.) In this case, the opposition to female students had been very strong. This young man stood up, looked at his classmates and friends and quoted Marshall.

In the story, Marshall had been asked what he had learned working for John Pershing in World War I. Marshall said the most important was that if you were a subordinate officer, when you were given an order with which you disagreed, you must call yourself to account to execute that order with re-doubled and visible enthusiasm and efficiency. That was your obligation. This is what the British call “hard cheese.” This was a brave act by this young cadet. The issue was fought; VMI had fought the good fight for a long time. It had become a very emotional issue. But to see this young man remind his fellow Cadets that they were to behave themselves and do it properly, which they did, was an interesting reflection on the influence and impact that Marshall still had at that school.

George Marshall was born in 1880, and was an exact contemporary of his imputed rival Douglas MacArthur. Marshall, incidentally, did not *do* rivalry but subsequent historians have imputed some kind of a rivalry there. His provenance was Virginian. He was a collateral descendant of Chief Justice John Marshall, and interestingly, a grand-nephew of Charles Marshall, who was one of General Robert E. Lee’s young men. Lee traveled with a group of three or four young men who looked after him, wrote his speeches, among other things. Charles Marshall had the same relationship to Lee essentially that Abraham Lincoln had with John Hay. It is useful to remember, as I have said, that Marshall grew up in the shadow of the Civil War. He knew many veterans of the Civil War.

When he was a cadet himself at the Virginia Military Institute, he was surrounded by veterans,. His early living heroes were members of the returning National Guard unit from western Pennsylvania coming back from Cuba, and later on, from the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. Watching this, we think, confirmed Marshall’s early romantic impulse to become a soldier. After commissioning, Marshall’s first assignment was in the Philippines where he was responsible for the security of the island of Mindoro; a place the size of Connecticut. He was a second lieutenant and had just one associate. The war was over. He was dealing with the insurrection. He was more or less alone. Mail came every six weeks. Here is the school of responsibility and self-reliance. No expectation of reward except General Lee’s famous general orders number nine. “It will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed.” That’s it! No house in the Hamptons, no BMW, your kids don’t get into Princeton— none of the appurtenances of success in this country. Instead, “You did it, and you know you did it.” A rapid sequence of assignments, mainly to schools and National Guard units, followed. On one occasion, as a first lieutenant, Marshall took charge of an Army division in maneuvers and successfully defeated the enemy aggressor. The general watching all of this said that Marshall was a military genius, and his reputation would one day threaten that of Stonewall Jackson. (Imagine if you were a lieutenant and somebody said that to you.)

In 1917, as Operations Officer of the First Division, Marshall sailed to France. Before that, he had an experience that made a profound impression and significantly influenced him early in World War II. He was working as an aide to General Franklin

Bell at Governors Island in New York, First U.S. Army Headquarters. Through the First U.S. Army, a number of early units were sent over to France. Five or six young lieutenants came by one day and asked to see General Bell. Major Marshall said, "He's not available. May I help you?" "Yes, sir, all of us have been married in the last couple of weeks. We're hoping for an extra two days of furlough before we sail for France to be with our young wives." Permission was, of course, granted. Within four months, all were dead. Marshall took from that the following lesson: to commission young men who have been to what we would call "high class Eastern colleges," and who were well-born, simply because they were the beneficiaries of that kind of privilege, and perhaps had had two or three weeks of drilling with a rifle in Plattsburg, was not a good way to train young officers. First of all, it was undemocratic, but secondly, however brave, however ardent you might be, if you were not properly trained and had not proven yourself as an enlisted man, you should not be commissioned. And Marshall believed that until he died. During the early days in World War II, he and Henry Stimson, Secretary of War, had a long argument about this. Stimson wanted to continue commissioning people that way. Marshall, on the other hand, insisted that the only people to receive commissions—aside from medical doctors, chaplains, perhaps dentists—should be West Point graduates or people who have been through Officer Candidates School (OCS). And he had Omar Bradley, one of his protégés, went down to Fort Benning and established OCS. Stimson was extremely angry. (A stout-hearted Republican, Stimson was Secretary of War under Franklin Roosevelt from age of 74 to 78. Roosevelt hired him because he was good, and he had been Secretary of War 35 years earlier under William Howard Taft. At the age of 51, Colonel Stimson volunteered, and went to France as an artillery battery commander. This gives you a sense of what he was like.)

In the mid-1950s, several volumes of a lengthy study of Civil War leadership appeared by historian Kenneth Williams. It was entitled "Lincoln Finds a General." Ulysses Grant was not "brought east," as they used to say, until 1864. He was then made commanding general of all Union forces, and promoted to the grade of lieutenant general, our first to have a regular appointment as a three-star general since George Washington. My point is that it took President Lincoln some three years to find, consider, hire and promote Grant to his new eminence. This appointment soon led to the accelerated promotion of men like William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan. Now hold that thought just for a moment.

In the summer of 1942, less than six months after Pearl Harbor, the Army was preparing for what would be its first offensive in the Atlantic theater, operation towards the invasion of North Africa. The retinue of senior American generals at the start of the war, on active service, comprised Douglas MacArthur, Charles Marshall, Joseph Stilwell, George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, Courtney Hodges, Walter Bedell Smith, Robert Eichelberger, Walter Krueger, Mark Clark, Lucian Truscott, and a coterie of colonels soon to command divisions, among them Albert Wedemeyer, J. Lawton Collins, Matthew B. Ridgway, Forrest Harding, James M. Gavin. They were all there in positions of responsibility at the start of the war—that array of talent. How were they, to borrow a phrase, all present at creation? The Army of the 1920s and the '30s was what Marshall called "a little sketchy thing." Its average strength was 130,000 soldiers and 13,000 officers. The latter were almost never promoted. Among them, men who had fought in France and who had become majors and lieutenant colonels were all reduced in grade two ranks in 1919. In other words, you were a lieutenant colonel, now you're a captain. Your pay was suitably adjusted downward. Those who were commissioned right after the Armistice were to park in the grade of first lieutenant for between 15 and 18 years. They called their insignia the "bar sinister." Yet, consider this. When the West Point class of 1915 assembled in June 1940 for its 25th reunion, only a month after the Germans had invaded the low countries, only some five percent of that class had left the Army. The equivalent for the West Point classes of 2000-2005 of people who have left of attrition is between 50 and 60 percent. I draw no conclusions, but it is interesting to compare those numbers.

Those who had remained during this slack, arid, inter-war period studied, learned and taught their profession. They *heard* their calling. They *learned* each other. They had leisure to think, to ponder, to write. Much of the time was uninterrupted. The culture of what we may call "visible busyness" had not yet infected the way that we live—soldiers and civilians both. Since there were so few commands available, officers exploited unusual interests and eccentricities. Joseph Stilwell had three tours of duty in China; he learned Mandarin fluently. Eisenhower spent time working for General Pershing on his memoirs, as well as learning industrial management. Forrest Harding, working for Marshall, put together an important compendium of World War I tactical situations—infantry and battle. Wedemeyer spent two years at the German Kriegsakademie. During Marshall's tenure as assistant commandant of the infantry school from 1927-1932, about 1,200 students passed through the school. Two hundred became general officers in the 1940s. Do the math. If you were a captain and you were 27 or 28 years old at the Infantry School in 1927, in 1943 you were the perfect age to be a general in the Army. Napoleon said the perfect age for a general was 40. Somebody reminded Grant of that, and for one of the few times in his life, Grant smiled.

The important thing is that during this period in the 1920s and '30s, this fallow period, powerful and ethical lessons were taught. As a student at the Infantry School, you were expected to stand up and argue your solution to tactical problems no matter how far they deviated from the expected norms and the conventional—the school solution. Originality was encouraged and rewarded. Writing or arguing the conventional, the safe answer, did not make people think you were smart. It made them, Marshall in particular, think you were dull. In making officer students better students and scholars of the profession, he was teaching them essentially an ethical lesson, Specifically, saying things to please superiors, responding to the goad of ambition rather than answering the calls and claims of truth will get you nowhere in the Army as it should be. Marshall had understood that the worst source of lessons in how to fight a German enemy, if the enemy was to be Germany once again, were the lessons presented by America's brief experience at the end of World War I. Independent thinking—rather than mute allegiance to

doctrine—was the whole purpose of the Infantry School. Students were expected to respond under pressure to difficult tactical problems, and to explain their solutions without notes. Professors were not allowed to use notes when they lectured. They were to be self-reliant, and self-reliance in leadership depends upon courage, which is habitually called upon.

The ethical leadership of George Marshall provided many lessons including: an officer never is to take the counsel of his ambition. He became the intellectual tutor of Dwight Eisenhower. You do not angle for assignments, for promotions, or for choice positions. When the Secretary of War asked Joseph Stilwell if he was ready to take up what would become a mission impossible in China in 1942—the winter of 1941-1942—Stilwell said simply, “I’ll go where I’m sent.” That’s the kind of answer that people like Stimson and Marshall liked to hear. Marshall himself, during the full length of the war, would not permit himself to receive a decoration. He refused all honorary degrees and any tributes, honorifics, or decorations. He told his aides that if any was given him, they would be fired. When Admiral Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations, sought five-star rank for the most senior officers of the Navy and the Army, Marshall discouraged him abruptly. King wished to call himself “arch admiral.” That was his suggested term. This provoked ill-concealed merriment among many people in Washington. Marshall, of course, did not want to be called “Marshall Marshall.” There was some suggestion that we should have field marshalls, as well as generals. Against the advice of his aide—the young Dwight Eisenhower—Douglas MacArthur allowed himself to be given the title “Field Marshall” by the Philippines in 1937.

In his short biography of his father-in-law, Agricola (the pro-consul in Britain in the first century B.C.), the Roman historian Tacitus remarks that “To praise him for his acts of courage was to insult him and to misunderstand him. Choices and decisions which many men would labor over, finally choosing the harder or more dangerous right over the easier wrong, were to Agricola simple matters of execution. That was the way he was. He had consciously made himself that way.” Like Agricola, Marshall, a Victorian, was very much an artifact of his own conscious making and his life-long superintendence. Selflessness was one of the things he taught himself. In the Army, this selflessness meant doing one’s work without calculation of risk or reward.

There are many famous demonstrations of this selflessness. I will highlight just two of them. One is interesting and in a way, quite funny, and involves General Pershing and another general, William Siebert. In the early fall of 1917, Pershing was in France visiting the First Division. This was the only division in France at that time and Pershing liked to visit troops. If you were in the First Division, you could expect that Pershing would come to see you often. Pershing was a very formidable presence—stern, unbending, very direct on duty. He concluded his visit, by asking to be shown a demonstration called “battalion in the capture of a trench.” And watching the whole division in a review, he concluded his visit by asking General Siebert to assemble all of the officers of the division so he could speak to them. He then said, “I have rarely seen a poorer demonstration. I am ashamed of you. I am disappointed by the division’s efficiency, ashamed, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything worse in the U.S. Army.” He looked around the officers, stared at them, and then turned from the assembly and began to walk toward his limousine. “Just a minute, General. There’s something that needs to be said, and if nobody else will, I guess I’d better.” “Who are you?” “Major Marshall, sir, Operations Officer.” “What do you have to say for yourself?” “Nothing for myself, but you need to know the reasons for our difficulties for what you have seen. This division marched almost 30 miles overnight to give you your review. We have done everything in our power with very little to work with in a very brief amount of time.” Pershing resumes his walk to the limousine to hear Marshall say as he’s walking away from him, “I’m not finished.” The great man turns around, more of the same. Pershing makes a lame, almost apologetic farewell and says something like, “Well, we have our troubles, too, up at Headquarters,” and he leaves. All of the officers gather around Marshall. General Siebert puts an arm around his shoulder. All are certain he will be sent away immediately. On the contrary, on his next visit, and every visit thereafter, Pershing insisted that Marshall brief him before he did anything. Five months later, he made him his senior aide, a position that Marshall held for five years. Incidentally, Pershing was a very great military commander, but he hated administration. He couldn’t stand being in the office and going through papers. So, when Pershing was chief of staff, Marshall was a lieutenant colonel, virtually every piece of paper that went into Pershing’s office came back with a notation “LTC Marshall,” meaning “Please George, do this for me so I can go out and do other things.” I say this only to indicate that Marshall was receiving an extraordinarily high level of political military education as Pershing’s aide.

Another incident occurred on November 14, 1938. Marshall was now a Brigadier General. He was the Deputy Chief of Staff, very much the junior man in an audience which had been assembled at the White House, about 14 senior people including the Secretaries of War and Navy—to listen to Franklin Roosevelt pronounce on an important element of the country beginning to prepare itself for what might come. The President had made an enthusiastic argument for a huge increase in the production and procurement of what, in those days, were called war planes. “We must have 10,000 planes as soon as they can be manufactured. The planes will act as a deterrent. They do not require hundreds of thousands of soldiers. We will not use them unless someone attacks us. Everyone OK with that?” Everyone nodded. “What about you, George?” Marshall was sitting by himself down at the end of a sofa. “Do you agree?” “No, Mr. President, I don’t agree at all.” The same Pershing-like sequence was repeated. Marshall’s colleagues were shocked. As they left the Oval Office together they said, “Nice knowing you. Have you ever been to Guam?” Marshall later said that he was offended by the President’s “first naming” him. Marshall was quite a starchy person. “I objected to this misrepresentation of our intimacy. Within six months, FDR had asked Marshall, junior to all of the obvious candidates, to be the head of the Army. Now, he did not make a habit of boldly challenging authority in ways which were discourteous, but he always spoke out when he had the facts.

Marshall, as a representative of the military before Congress—one of the important elements of military leadership in those days and today—was to act as an advocate for the administration’s policies. Remember that in those days there was no hoard of frisking deputy assistants. There was Marshall, Admiral King, Mr. Stimson, Frank Knox, and the President. That’s how things operated. And they did pretty well. He was always an austere presence at the witness table, but calmly and pleasantly responsive to questions from Senators and Congressmen. No aide was allowed to accompany him. No papers were visible. He assumed his questioners were American patriots and men as anxious to see the war finished as quickly and cheaply as he was. He wore almost no ribbons or decorations. Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn noticed that Marshall habitually offered evidence that hurt his own case when such evidence seemed demanded, if you were completely honest. Later in his career, as Secretary of State, making his presentation in behalf of the plan for European recovery— the Marshall Plan--which is how most people remember him, he stressed the huge costs and the sacrifices that would be demanded of all, and indeed, the uncertainty of success.

This was a period of extraordinary accomplishment in U.S. foreign policy, the administration was strongly Democratic, and the Congress, both Houses, was strongly Republican. By now, Marshall’s reputation for rectitude, uprightness, self-mastery and sheer wisdom virtually guaranteed that the things he advocated would receive an earnest and usually favorable reception from Democrats and Republicans alike. By executive order in March, 1942, Marshall was made principal advisor to the President on matters of strategy. His position vis-à-vis the President was the same as Admiral King’s was for the Navy. There was a much smaller scaffolding of Defense Department so-called “defense intellectuals” than today. Incidentally, Marshall, according to Peter Drucker, was the greatest “picker of men” in American history. His ability to identify people of talent when they were very young and move them ahead so that they would be in important positions when the time came for their services was unsurpassed.

In any community of persons brought together for some common purpose—schools and colleges, as well as military organizations—leaders emerge. By far the most potent means of creating an ethical environment is the power and authority of one’s own example. Marshall’s was an example which represented the standards of the Army—an army appropriate to an American Democracy, as it should be. He was austere, committed to doing the mission with the minimum of cost necessary to complete it, and in which advancement within was to be achieved only by demonstrated mastery of duty. Marshall was to the Army of 1945 what Grant had been to the Union Army and the Duke of Wellington had been to the British Army. He was its exemplar, and he was known and admired as such.

It’s interesting that of all of the great World War II figures, Marshall is the one least well-remembered. In fact, when David McCullough, the most popular and excellent historian of our time, ran a seminar at Dartmouth College, not a single member of the seminar he taught could identify George Marshall. Mercy.

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