Review Essay

The Definitive Biography of George C. Marshall*

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George C. Marshall: vol. 1, ***Education of a General 1880–1939,*** with the editorial assistance of Gordon Harrison, foreword by General Omar N. Bradley; vol. 2, ***Ordeal and Hope 1939–1942,*** foreword by General Omar N. Bradley; vol. 3, ***Organizer of Victory 1943–1945,*** foreword by General Omar N. Bradley; vol. 4, ***Statesman 1945–1959,*** foreword by Drew Middleton. By Forrest C. Pogue. New York: Viking, 1963, 1965, 1973, and 1987. Pp. xvii, 421; xvi, 491; xviii, 683; and xix, 603, respectively. Each volume includes bibliography, notes, and an index. Appendices include "Marshall and Pearl Harbor" (2: 429–35) and Marshall's address at Harvard University on 5 June 1947, announcing the European Recovery Plan (4: 525–28). Available as a clothbound set (with the earlier volumes reprinted): vols. 1 and 2, $24.95 each; vols. 3 and 4 (with illustrations), $29.95 each. Penguin paperback edition of vol. 4 only (1989), $12.95.

WITH the publication, in 1987, of the fourth and final volume of this biography, Forrest C. Pogue has concluded a project begun some thirty years earlier, when he became director of the George C. Marshall Research Center at Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia.

* This essay was originally published in the *American Committee on the History of the Second World War Newsletter* 40 (Fall 1988). The editors of *JMH* thought that it should be given wider circulation and that it would appeal to our readers.

The result is not only the definitive account of the life and times of a great soldier-statesman, but—because of Marshall's key role (he became U.S. Army chief of staff on 1 September 1939, the day Hitler attacked Poland)—an extensively documented, carefully balanced account of America's global role in the Second World War.

The first volume, on Marshall's life and career until his appointment as chief of staff, provides insight into his personal and professional development, as well as into the growth of the U.S. Army (in which he was commissioned in 1902) and its role in the Philippine Islands at the beginning of the century, in France during World War I, and in China in the 1920s. Particularly important was his assignment (as a colonel) in the late 1920s, to the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. There, as assistant commandant and head of the Academic Department, he undertook "an almost complete revamping of the instruction and technique."[1] During his five-year tour of duty at Fort Benning, he worked with a large number of officers (either as staff members or students) who would later serve under him as generals in the Second World War, including Bradley, Collins, Ridgway, Bedell Smith, and Stilwell.

Pogue also brings out, in the initial volume, that Marshall's appointment as army chief of staff in 1939 was anything but inevitable. Promoted to brigadier general only in October 1936, he had been named deputy chief of staff in October 1938. But at the time he was appointed, replacing General Malin Craig, who had been due to retire in September 1939, he had been outranked by twenty-one major generals and eleven brigadier generals. All but four of those outranking him did not come into consideration, however, for they would not have been able to serve the full four-year term of a chief of staff before reaching the age of sixty-four. For all practical purposes, therefore, Marshall was fifth on the list. Among the factors contributing to his appointment over the four ahead of him (Generals Hugh A. Drum, John L. DeWitt, Frank W. Rowell, and Walter Krueger), according to Pogue, were the personal impression that he made on President Roosevelt and the backing that he received from a number of supporters, particularly from General Pershing, whose aide he had been after World War I, and from Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins, with whom he had established a very good working relationship.

It was "surprising," writes Pogue early in his second volume,

> that Roosevelt ever selected Marshall as Chief of Staff. In temperament, methods of work, approach to domestic and interna-

1. Pogue, *Education of a General,* 249.

> tional problems, general viewpoints, even forms of relaxation, they differed remarkably. Roosevelt's mercurial nature, flashing intuitiveness, and helter-skelter handling of administrative problems contrasted sharply with Marshall's reserve, careful judgments, and passion for orderliness. . . . General Marshall at times doubted the President's capacity to lead the country in a great emergency. He admitted later that not until after Pearl Harbor, when he saw him act swiftly and decisively, did he conclude that Roosevelt was a great man. "I hadn't thought so before. He wasn't always clearcut in his decisions. He could be swayed."[2]

The second volume covers the period from the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 to the turn of the tide three years later—marked by successes at Guadalcanal, at El Alamein, and in Northwest Africa. The book is, above all, an account of how Marshall went about building up the army of fewer than 200,000 (including the U.S. Army Air Corps) of which he assumed leadership in September 1939, and how it was that he worked so effectively with others in doing so—with Hopkins, the president's confidant, with Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, and especially with his direct civilian chief, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, as well as with Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy. Pogue skillfully weaves concise biographical sketches of these and (in the course of the four-volume work, many other) major figures into his account, thereby providing insight into the personal (and often partisan political) context of the issues under consideration.

The key figure was, of course, the commander in chief himself, President Roosevelt, with whom Marshall deliberately maintained a more distant relationship than many others in his entourage. Pogue writes that Marshall

> winced at first-name familiarity and was not won to it because it was practiced by the President of the United States. Learning that his air of reserve sometimes cut short some of the persiflage used by Roosevelt to evade ticklish topics, the Chief of Staff carried his stiffness to the point of declining to laugh at the President's jokes. It is doubtful that Roosevelt ever enjoyed Marshall's company. From the General's standpoint the important thing was that the President respect him and accept his advice in military affairs.[3]

2. Pogue, *Ordeal and Hope*, 22-23. The quotation is from Pogue's interview with General Marshall on 14 November 1956.

3. Ibid., 23.

Pogue's balanced treatment of Pearl Harbor in the text is supplemented by two appendices on the subsequent allegations and inquiries, "Marshall and Pearl Harbor" and "Relief of General Walter C. Short."[4]

The third volume, covering the years 1943-1945, takes its subtitle from a tribute to General Marshall by Prime Minister Churchill; in March 1945, as victory in Europe neared, the prime minister radioed the chief of the British Mission in Washington to give Marshall his "warmest congratulations" and to "say what a joy it must be to him to see how the armies he called into being by his own genius have won immortal renown. He is the true 'organizer of victory.'"[5]

The second and third volumes (together with part of the fourth) do indeed document Marshall's central role as "organizer of victory." No less important, however, from the point of view of an historian of World War II, these volumes provide an invaluable perspective on the course of the global conflict as a whole, reflecting Marshall's key role in coordination and command—not only as chief of staff of the U.S. Army, but as a member of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and of the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff.

The fourth and final volume, *Statesman, 1945-1959,* overlaps with the third in its treatment of the Far East during and after the war. The coverage of the China Theater during the war (with Stilwell's assignment in the China-Burma-India Theater and his relief by Wedemeyer in a reconstituted China Theater) is followed by Pogue's clearly written, well-informed account of Marshall's unsuccessful postwar attempt to bring about a compromise between the Nationalists and the Chinese Communists.[6]

On returning from China in January 1947, Marshall became secretary of state and, within months, the chief proponent of the postwar recovery program that bore his name. It was by no means a foregone conclusion that the Marshall Plan would be approved, funded, and implemented, particularly in the bitterly partisan political atmosphere of the late 1940s. However, Marshall, who was strictly nonpartisan and commanded respect among Republicans and Democrats alike, effectively supported the recovery program in protracted hearings on Capitol Hill and in an extended series of speeches across the country. Ten years later, in an interview with Pogue, Marshall said that he had worked on the passage of the plan "as if I was running for the Senate or the

4. Ibid., Chapter X, "The Fatal Week," 218-31, with backnotes on 468-69; appendices, 429-38.

5. Pogue, *Organizer of Victory,* 585.

6. Pogue, *Statesman,* 31-143 (chapters 3-9).

presidency." It had been "a struggle from start to finish," but he was proud to say that "we put it over."[7]

That Marshall was far less successful in Near Eastern policy, is brought out in chapter 20, "Marshall, the United Nations, and Palestine." With the British relinquishing their Palestine Mandate and withdrawing on 15 May 1948, there was imminent danger of armed conflict between the Jews, who planned to declare the independence of their new state of Israel, and the Arabs, who were determined to destroy it at the outset. Marshall's policy, which was being advocated by the U.S. delegation at the U.N., was to avert violence by establishing a temporary trusteeship under the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations. This might be done without prejudice as to the ultimate rights or claims of those involved, and it might make it possible to work out a political settlement acceptable to both Arabs and Jews. This approach was totally unacceptable, however, to those supporting immediate U.S. recognition of Israel (and an end to the previously enforced restrictions on shipment of arms to the Israeli). Clark Clifford, a White House aide, arranged for the announcement of the U.S. recognition of Israel late in the afternoon of 14 May 1948—without prior notification of the U.S. delegation to the U.N., even though the Palestine question was being debated that very afternoon. The strongly pro-Israel Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the U.S. delegation to the U.N., wrote to Marshall that the United States had been damaged in the United Nations by the way in which this matter had been handled.

In September 1950, a year and a half after having retired from his position as secretary of state, General Marshall returned to the cabinet one last time to serve as secretary of defense. He initially had planned to serve for only six months, but remained for a year, during which he strengthened the armed forces, greatly improved relations between the Defense Department and the State Department (under Dean Acheson, with whom he had an excellent working relationship), and helped the president over a possible crisis over the firing of General Douglas MacArthur.

In 1953, Marshall received the Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1956, having convinced his friends that he would not write his memoirs, or even any short article of reminiscence, Marshall agreed to become involved in the biographical project that ultimately led to the work under review. President Truman had suggested to his secretary, Joseph Short, a Virginia Military Institute graduate, that his school should build a Marshall Library. With Truman's assurance that he would

7. Ibid., 244-45.

issue a directive for government departments to make available copies of papers pertinent to General Marshall's career for the library, a group of prominent V.M.I. graduates and the president of neighboring Washington and Lee University formed the George C. Marshall Research Foundation to collect the general's papers and plan a library and museum.

Meanwhile, Marshall agreed to cooperate with the program, giving interviews to a potential biographer, with the understanding that he wanted someone who would not ask questions that could easily be answered from the papers, that the historian not be of his own choosing, and that no money resulting from the biography should go to him or his family. (Royalties from the work based on his interviews and papers were to go to the research foundation.)

Interviews with the historian selected by the Marshall Foundation, Dr. Forrest C. Pogue, began in the fall of 1956. It was evident that the general was becoming very frail, but his memory was good. In spring 1957, however, he complained of being unable to recall details and proposed postponing interviews. Except for short questions involving single responses, they were not resumed. Early in 1959, Marshall suffered a stroke that left him crippled. He died later that year at Walter Reed Hospital.

The "Epilogue" with which Pogue concludes the fourth volume (pp. 514-521) is a fine character sketch of the man whose life and times as a whole are the subject of this grand work. Marshall was fortunate, and so are we all, that he found a biographer with the capacity to appreciate his extraordinary contribution to the world in which we live and with the scholarly dedication and the writing ability to present it in the form of this minutely detailed and thoroughly documented, yet eminently readable biography. Forrest Pogue's masterpiece is an enduring monument to the life of one of America's greatest soldiers and statesmen.