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George C. Marshall and the "Squeakings of Democracy"

Larry I. Bland

Given the all-pervasive nature of World War II's impact on American society, scores of socio-cultural history topics might profitably be studied using the published papers of U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Catlett Marshall. Examples of the kinds of issues Marshall had to deal with include where, how, and with what the United States should fight; the role of women in the war effort; racial segregation and social mores in the army and surrounding its camps; who was required to fight, why they did so, and what they got out of doing it; who was permitted to become an officer; the rise of what came to be called the military-industrial complex; and labor practices, politics, and military-media relations. This essay looks at Marshall's relations with the radio and print media between 1939 and 1945.

In September 1942, Marshall received a letter from a retired army officer of his acquaintance. The colonel was incensed by acerbic columnist and radio commentator Drew Pearson's sarcastic references to the army's incompetent "brass hats," and he wanted the War Department to do something about Pearson. "I think you have allowed yourself to be unduly irritated by the squeakings of democracy," Marshall replied.

If we were to take issue with the various illogical or totally unjustified public statements that are made over the radio, in the press, or on the floors of Congress, there would be little time for the business of conducting the war and I think a loss rather than a gain in prestige.

Marshall did not mention that he considered such efforts a serious political mistake and ultimately futile.¹

Marshall became leader of the army ground and air forces on 1 September 1939. He was already a media-savvy leader, thick skinned (like any successful politician or experienced bureaucrat), given to seeing problems in a broad, historical context, and having a sophisticated understanding of America's societal values and its civil-military relations.

Marshall often told congressional committees that they could fire away at him, because he viewed issues from a coldly logical perspective, reserving his emotions exclusively for Mrs. Marshall. His attitude toward reporters and commentators was as follows:

Criticism, justified or otherwise, is to be expected. In fact, it is as inevitable as a Congressional investigation, but when its nature or purpose is to cause disunity within the Army, I say, direct such criticisms at me personally, but leave the Army alone. Don't tear down what you are striving so hard to build up.²

It is interesting to compare Marshall with his opposite number during the war, Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations. King was arrogant and supremely confident of his own righteousness. He distrusted the press in general, and his attitude was often reciprocated.³

In October 1942, the Navy's combat problems in the Solomon Islands led to severe press criticism of King's leadership and the Navy's abilities. Marshall publicly stepped in to absorb some of the heat before both the navy and American grand strategy were damaged. He had already had to act to calm some very choppy seas caused by publicity about the June 1942 battle of Midway.⁴

Marshall made other attempts to assist King with his press relations, including sending him to talk with Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard Newspapers chain. Howard said he would help, but he told one of Marshall's assistants, "The Admiral is so thin-skinned that if you sprinkle baby powder on him it will raise a rash."⁵

²Speech to the American Legion, 15 September 1941, ibid., 2:609-10.
⁴On the Solomons problem, see Memorandum for the Secretary of War, 29 October 1942, Marshall Papers, 3:413; regarding Midway, see Marshall to Allen Merriam (Dallas Times Herald), March 7, 1943, ibid., pp. 220-21.
At various times, Marshall helped Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, Joseph Stilwell, Chiang Kai-shek, and the British with their American press relations. The largest group of documents on a single subject in the Marshall manuscript collection concerning World War II is the chief of staff’s directives to the War Department Bureau of Public Relations.

Disdain like Admiral King’s for the writings of generalist, time-pressed reporters is the norm in the military then and now, and probably among professionals in all specialties. The justification for this attitude goes something like this: Reporters and commentators don’t understand our field and our problems and yet they show a lack of proper respect toward us; they report things we’d just as soon remain unreported; and worse, they presume to criticize us without being members of the club.

This disdain is considerably sharpened when those professionals see themselves as the chief defenders of the nation, its culture, or even of Western civilization itself. Outsider criticism, then, may be seen as un-American or even bordering on treason.

Many Vietnam War supporters in the 1970s and ’80s, developed the idea that the media were in large part responsible for the country’s troubles in that war. In publishing its multivolume official history of the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army Center of Military History made a special effort to undermine this myth. Nevertheless, a partial result was that the military has effectively controlled the press in and near combat zones since the 1983 invasion of Grenada. As Napoleon Bonaparte was alleged to have asserted, “three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than 1,000 bayonets.”

The powers available to Marshall during the 1940s to rule the media were significantly weaker than they have since become. Marshall scanned nine newspapers every morning to see what bayonets might be present. He was often disappointed and sometimes incensed with what he read. The political and morale impact of the press on the army was particularly strong during the 1940-41 mobilization period.

In response to some wrongheaded reporting by Drew Pearson in October 1941, Marshall wrote to his four army commanders to warn them of what was coming and to preclude their blowing off steam in public.

Our problem here is to avoid having columnists, radio men and the press generally involve us, with deliberate intention, in

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denials or assertions regarding leading, and frequently baseless statements. It is news to them to keep the pot boiling, and it is very difficult for us to determine just when to intervene and how to go about it. Anything that suggests a limitation on the freedom of the press produces an instant and general reaction with a variety of counter accusations, not necessarily relevant to the particular issue.\footnote{Marshall to Lieutenant General Ben Lear, 25 October 1941, \textit{Marshall Papers}, 2:65.}

Marshall tried to be proactive rather than reactive. In December 1940 he sent about twenty newspaper men on a tour of facilities to demonstrate that the army was indeed doing things in an expeditious and financially responsible manner. Criticisms of camp construction by syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler early in 1941 caused Marshall to send him in the chief of staff's personal airplane to a number of the new posts, such as Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In short order, Marshall could report that Pegler's “reversal of form is almost revolutionary.”\footnote{Marshall to Major General Jacob L. Devers, 19 March 1941, ibid., p. 452.}

Stock in trade for reporters and columnists was and is unsolicited advice on all aspects of army activities. Marshall told a World War I friend in August 1942 that much of this was

over-enthusiastic backing of some panacea to bring the war quickly to a conclusion; new weapons, new methods, new this or that. One after another, things of this sort have been brought up, heavily played up in the press and then it has been discovered that they were utterly impracticable or would cause serious damage. A good bit of this comes from the necessary dearth of news regarding military happenings, the press and commentators playing up other things to provide news interest.\footnote{Marshall to Major General Frank Parker, 21 August 1942, ibid., 3:312.}

Marshall also listened to radio news and commentary, which he realized was an increasingly important medium. “This morning on my drive to the office,” he told his Public Relations chief a few weeks after Pearl Harbor,

I heard Earl Godwin on the radio. He was referring to Mr. Hertz in his relation to the improvement of mechanized and motor transport operations. The general sense of his talk was that Mr. Hertz [who had founded the Yellow Cab Company]
was a great expert and it was hoped that his introduction into
this affair would result in a great saving to the tax-payer;
whether or not Mr. Hertz could overcome the opposition of the
"brass hats" Godwin did not know, but it was certainly impor­tant to the tax-payers that he be given that authority, and so on
and so on.

I want you to explain to Godwin in words of one syllable the
difference between the taxicab operations in a city and that
under a field commander who is responsible for victory or
defeat. There cannot be a number of separate bosses. There are
many applications for Mr. Hertz’s technique, and he has sub­mitted a very valuable report, most of which is of practical
application but a material portion of which is based on igno­rance of how a military force operates and how responsibility
must be centralized.

Godwin is a pretty good fellow as I understand it, but I think
a definite effort must be made to educate these commentators,
otherwise they will carefully educate the public to think that
everything of a military nature is wrong and only civil practice
is right.\(^\text{11}\)

 Sometimes Marshall’s press problems went beyond the question of
whether civilian peacetime methods and ideas would work in combat. The
following are five of the many possible examples, any one of which is a wor­thy research topic.

The first is the 1941 OHIO movement. Legislation passed in September
1940 providing for a peacetime draft and the federalization of the National
Guard stated that those called up should serve no longer than twelve
months. That authority was due for reauthorization in August 1941, and
Marshall wanted the time the men had to serve extended by up to six
months; otherwise, he argued, the Army, which had been drastically reor­ganized to accommodate the past year’s massive numerical expansion,
would disintegrate in the autumn of 1941.

This was a big story, and reporters scurried around to army camps in the
summer of 1941 asking trainees what they would do should service-time
extension pass Congress. “These boys,” Marshall recalled later,

\(^\text{11}\) Memorandum for General Surles, 20 January 1942, ibid., 3:73.
\(^\text{12}\) Marshall Interviews, p. 308.
were very fond of talking and the representatives of the magazines, particularly *Life*, would go from camp to camp. Of course, a young man to be consulted, and results of consultation to be published, felt very much enlarged in importance. And he talked freely and at length and, of course was very vehement. All that made it quite hard to manage.\(^{12}\)

They would, they said, desert—go OHIO: Over-the-Hill-in-October. The bill passed the House 203 to 202 in mid-August 1941—at the very time Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall, and various military advisors were secretly meeting at the Atlantic Conference off Newfoundland. The U.S. Army was spared nearly complete disintegration just prior to Pearl Harbor.

The second example of Marshall's press problems falls under the heading of "leaks." Washington was and is perhaps the world's "leakiest" capital. Before Pearl Harbor, some members of Congress liked to request restricted data from the army and then leak parts of it to the press for political reasons. Senior army officers too often blabbed to the press, sometimes innocently, sometimes in order to affect national or service policies.

An example of the latter was the 4 December 1941, leak to and publication in certain anti-Roosevelt newspapers of the complete army mobilization plan in the event of war. Only the attack on Pearl Harbor three days later prevented this from being a memorable cause célèbre.

An example of a potentially disastrous leak through ignorance occurred in late June 1943. Major General Alexander Patch returned to Washington from the South Pacific and discussed at a luncheon the shooting down by American planes over Bougainville of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the man who had planned the Pearl Harbor attack. Some stories appeared in U.S. newspapers. The Japanese immediately changed one of their key codes, and American cryptanalysts feared that their entire codebreaking operation against Japan—probably *the* great American intellectual accomplishment affecting the Pacific war—was in danger. Moreover, disclosure would likely have had repercussions with the Germans, who used a distantly related encryption system.

Patch assured the chief of staff that the role of codebreaking in the Yamamoto attack was common knowledge in the South Pacific. Marshall told Patch to keep his mouth shut, henceforth, and instigated enhanced

secrecy procedures.\textsuperscript{13} Japanese Intelligence failed to grasp the implications in the stories or, perhaps, even to read them, but such affairs are one example of why "loose-lips-sink-ships" posters were so common during the war.

Third on my list of problems for Marshall was the African-American press, located primarily in politically sensitive northern cities. Black editors had been campaigning vigorously against segregation in the military since 1940. For financial and climatic reasons, Marshall had directed that most training bases be in the Deep South—something he later admitted was a major error with regard to blacks. Southerners jealously guarded their legal segregation and Dixiecrat legislators threatened that excessive deviation from Southern norms would provoke reprisals on the army.

Marshall had helped to arrange a pilot training program at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The African American press was opposed to a facility in Alabama, since it would be segregated, and launched a campaign against it. Marshall found the institute’s president—a gradualist and accommodationist—very helpful in offsetting press criticisms.\textsuperscript{14} On the morning following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Marshall had a scheduled meeting with the Conference of Negro Newspaper Editors. Despite the intense press of other business, he kept it.

Fourth problem: Another minority issue that provoked a good bit of press squeaking was the idea of women as members of the Regular Army—as opposed to being auxiliaries as in World War I or in the navy in World War II. Marshall was a vigorous proponent of women in the army, and knowing how important the first year would be, he chose the best leader for the organization he could find: Oveta Culp Hobby, the bureaucratically and politically experienced publisher of the \textit{Houston Post}. And he protected her and her organization—the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.\textsuperscript{15}

When Marshall was able to line up the political support in mid-1943, he converted Hobby’s auxiliary into the Women’s Army Corps and gave its members access to the same ranks and entitlements as Regular Army men. He even obtained permission to have some WACs serve in combat zones. Conservatives were not enamored of these steps, and many enlisted men were not anxious to be relieved of their desk jobs by women and thus made available for combat.

\textit{Sub rosa} opposition to the women expanded in the spring of 1943 into a major “slander campaign” of rumor and sexual innuendo that was hurting

\textsuperscript{14}Memorandum for General Richardson, 4 June 1941, ibid., 2:525–26; editorial note, ibid., 3:9.
\textsuperscript{15}Memorandum for the Secretary of War, 18 March 1942, ibid., pp. 135–37.
WAC morale and recruiting. Marshall counterattacked vigorously and successfully with a press and letter-writing campaign and a personal appeal in his favorite medium, a film encouraging WAC recruiting.16

The last press problem resulted from an accident and a policy decision: l'affaire Darlan of November-December 1942. One of Marshall's chief concerns during World War II was to minimize American casualties. During the November 1942 Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa, this could best be done by persuading the defending Vichy French forces to surrender with little or no resistance to the landings.

Reactionary Admiral Jean Darlan, commander-in-chief of Vichy France's armed forces, happened to be in Algiers when the Allies landed, and American leaders twisted his arms vigorously to convince him to issue a cease-fire order. The liberal press in both Britain and the United States exploded with indignation, blasting the War Department and Marshall's protégé, Dwight Eisenhower, supreme commander of Operation Torch, for collaborating with such a nasty fascist.

Certain reporters, most notably Walter Lippmann, endeavored to help the War Department handle this issue. Marshall radioed Eisenhower on November 20: "Do not worry about this, leave the worries to us and go ahead with your campaign."17 Marshall had learned an important lesson, however, and he appealed to friends among the members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors to appoint a committee to serve as a contact with the Chief of Staff in the event of another such incident, as Marshall said, "so that the editorials throughout the country might be properly influenced."18 In general, it seems to have worked.

One could go on at considerable length multiplying examples of Marshall's relations with the media during World War II. In March 1949, after he finished his two years as Secretary of State, Marshall received from the Overseas Press Club a gold-plated typewriter in recognition of his positive relations with the press (and of his ability to type).

Marshall was resigned and rather stoic about the squeakings of democracy. As secretary of defense in 1951, he told the new graduates of both West

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18 Memorandum for Colonel Young, 6 January 1943, ibid., p. 507.
Point and Annapolis that when they felt that the politicians and the press were behaving badly toward them, they needed to remember that they were officers in the military of a democracy, and not let the normal squeakings get to them.19

He remarked to Eisenhower in March 1945: “Making war in a democracy is not a bed of roses.”20 But then, Marshall was widely regarded as a good gardener.

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19 These June 1 and 5, 1951, addresses are in Speeches, Secretary of Defense collection, George C. Marshall Papers, Marshall Library.