

“Marshall, Stimson, Roosevelt: Strategic Decisions, 1940-1945”

Josiah Bunting III

Early in the last century the English writer and biographer Lytton Strachey wrote that no definitive history of the Victorian Age could ever be written. “We know too much about it,” he said. Its student must, as it were, row his boat over the surface of that broad reservoir, stopping from time to time to lower a bucket into its depths, at random, examining the contents collected this way. It is by such deliberately indirect means that we are most likely to learn things truly useful, illuminating. This odd philosophy of history is offered in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, an assembly of four short biographies: of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, General Gordon, and Thomas Arnold. None is longer than eighty pages. Each is memorable for its style and pith. The studies are written in a tone of arch sympathy, of, sometimes, snotty condescension. But we feel, reading them, that we are not being denied the true substance of each subject. They seem distillates of broad knowledge and study, though they make no pretension to what a later age calls serious scholarship.

We are two generations removed from Franklin Roosevelt’s wartime White House. The culture of commemoration of the war, in which we have lived since 1991, is now dissipating. Perhaps we know too much about it. It has had a long run: fifteen years from the commemoration, the fiftieth anniversary events, of Pearl Harbor, in 1991, to this past summer’s sixtieth anniversary of the ending of the war, in Europe, and, in August, with the victory over Japan. Thousands of ceremonies, interviews, movies, visitations, television series, essays, books were its fruits. These fifteen years have been filled with reconsiderations of every aspect of the war: and especially with what the war has revealed to Americans about themselves—and also, what the obsessive fixation on the war seems to remind us, perhaps warn us, about what we have lost as a people. We are right to be wary: are we not but hungry prisoners of an inescapable nostalgia—of a romantic nostalgia that both softens and distorts our impressions of the America of our grandparents and parents’ young adulthoods? When I was at Fort Bragg in the summer of 1967 a sergeant said to me that he wished we could have Moshe Dyan lead us in Vietnam. He would get us out of what journalists were already starting to call a quagmire. And in Washington in 2005, do we not, hearing the name of George Marshall—thanks to Katrina and Rita it was being heard often, badly misappropriated—do we not think; why do we not have such pillars of

calm rectitude, judgment, forbearance, dignity in our own distracted and clamant age? Surely Marshall and his generation of wartime leaders would solve and settle our problems national and international. Yes, but even now we remember: there was no Anderson Cooper, no Chris Matthews, no Maureen Dowd—no cable news channels with their nervous, crowded screens covering all news all the time; prying, clutching, breathlessly sharing all matter of information and opinion dredged up, it would seem, only from the floor of Lytton Strachey's vast lake. Could Marshall and Henry Stimson, and their President, and all their generation of leaders appointed and elected—how could they have withstood the ceaseless and invigilations and feverish fixations on their lives and work? What would the media of our time do with the President's not fully discontinued relationship with Lucy Rutherford, or with the Pearl Harbor hearings and the guilt of those who left us insufficiently prepared for the terrible consequences of a surprise attack on a surprise target? or with an executive mansion in which nighttime guests, Churchill and Hopkins and sometimes minor dispossessed royalty, wandered about the hallways at 2am, after an evening of drinking, watching movies, exchanging gossip like adolescents in boarding school? As for boarding schools: what would what would the media have made of what a later age, fifteen years later, began calling "The Establishment"? in which a crew of Episcopalians, educated in the same two or three nurseries of character, the same two or three universities and their "exclusive clubs," the same two or three law schools, the same two or three banking houses and law firms—in which such men, all were men, came to Washington and seemed to run everything having to do with the war? How would these icons have stood up? Would they have survived into the 21st Century as the paragons of wisdom and rectitude we now honor?

It is hard to know. Early in his presidency, as Arthur Schlesinger pointed out (**), Franklin Roosevelt decided he wanted a government less orderly than it was inventive. He was comfortable, in the ambience of nourishing chaos. It was congenial to his temper; he knew he could master it; he was, perhaps, the political equivalent of historian Lytton Strachey—his search for answers to implement would not be comprehensive, but restlessly instinctive, intuitive. Justice Holmes's famous evaluation of President Roosevelt is at least half-right: he did have a first-class temperament for the work and the times in which he operated—it is curious how little, in 2005, we consider temperament when we judge fitness for elective office: all is character, resume, positions, papers, intellect. But the useful essence of Franklin Roosevelt's character was

precisely its comfortableness with the chaos of multiple conflicting opinions, with the crabby and intemperate and disappointed extrusions of those around him, equally with the magisterial and stern and character of two of his three most important wartime advisors, Henry Stimson and George Marshall. The third was of course Harry Hopkins, whom Churchill called Lord Root of the Matter, who more purely represented Franklin Roosevelt to other countries' leaders than anyone else: other countries meaning Britain and Russia. The point must be stressed. If one adds to this triumvirate of Marshall, Hopkins, and Stimson the names of Morgenthau, Ickes, Cordell Hull, Robert Patterson, Robert O. Lovett, Frank Know, John McCloy, Ernest King, William Leahy, and considers the histories of each man, his own politics, his own character, one has deployed a cohort dense with talent, energy, "character" of the kind that sustains forthrightness and stubborn allegiance to ideals and ideas. It is among Franklin Roosevelt's greatest achievements, and it is surely a test of any democratic leader: his willingness to surround himself with such talent, and to nourish a climate within which all know that their opinions, however heterodox, are welcomed; and in which previous political positions and party affiliations do not engender suspicion, but, quite to the contrary, sincere interest. The relationship, in this regard, between the President and Wendell Wilkie is instructive. A final comment: These multiple relationships were not what Jean Edward Smith has called locker-room friendships. And so far as its establishment character is concerned—towards which our own age now condescends—while it may have promoted a sympathetic understanding among those of the same "background" it did not interfere with their judgments or the forthrightness with which such judgment was communicated.

The President hired Henry Stimson as his Secretary of War in June 1940. Stimson was then 73 years old. He was born when Andrew Johnson was President, had served as Secretary of War under President Taft, as a colonel of artillery in World War I, as Secretary of State under President Hoover. The adjective "flinty" probably suits him as well as any other. His own heroes and mentors were Elihu Root (whom both he and George Marshall favored, with regard to character and sense of duty) and Theodore Roosevelt: In 1940, he represented that persistent admixture, as a Republican, of granitic conservatism on matters social and fiscal, and aggressive internationalism rooted in, a favored Stimsonian word, righteousness. He was an ardent partison of conscription and had spoken out forcibly in its need and its behalf in the months before President Roosevelt called him from his corporate law practice, to offer him the job.

Of the American titans of the last century—among them both FDR and Marshall, certainly—none more successfully resists our confidence that we know what he was like, really like, than George Marshall. There are homely anecdotes and gentle notations of humanizing frailties; and there are begrudged expressions of strong emotions from his own pen. But not much. Marshall was a determinedly functional being; and he watched over his privacy with zeal. He was the vigilant monitor of his own obscurity. “Marshall” is not anonymous or obscure, but “George Marshall” remains for most a remote presence, an unknowable and distant entity, a noble piece of statuary. He is a man whom succeeding generations will celebrate but not know—a Cardinal Newman, a Marcus Aurelius. His name is now employed as a lazy synonym for unstinted American generosity—we need a Marshall Plan!—yet we still hear persons of a certain age speak of him as though he were some sort of secular saint, a being in whom were fused elements of character and spirit, and mind, but rarely found in the same person. He is not easily animated. Long before he had settled himself into the physical expression we know through photographs—a composed frieze of disciplined authority and functionality, with the faintest lineaments of a somber remorse, the expression of a man who has always heard the “still sad music of humanity,” — long before, he had become an object of his own conscious manufacture; and through deliberate monitoring had kept that artifact in perfect running order, such that, at last it became the Marshall we believe we know: the embodiment of dutifulness, rigor, schooled intelligence and judgment, pitiless accuracy in his ability to test and to judge other men, farsighted in the way Thucydides was farsighted, inner-directed. And like his coadjutor Henry Stimson he managed to retain an ardent native curiosity—which Dr. Johnson defined as an addiction to making inquiries about things—and a cultivated alertness to the usefulness of men and things new to him. One of his two acknowledged heroes was Benjamin Franklin. Churchill’s doctor Charles Wilson wrote that it was “not what Marshall did, but what he was, that lingers in the mind. His goodness seemed to put ambition out of countenance.” Lost in these beautiful words, however, is the fact that it was what he was that made what he said an did so potent. His inner life was jejune, it seems. Churchill’s antidote to mental fatigue was full-bodied, eager immersion in another testing activity altogether: painting (which he was led to discover after being fired as First Lord, after Gallipoli), literature, architecture; Marshall’s was stillness, an absence of strenuous intellectual or aesthetic labor—a besought, private calm that would underwrite renewal for the next assigned task. He lived his wartime life according to a

metronomically-regulated daily calendar: he imposed the order necessary to achieve his many, enormous, missions.

He was universally revered by the officers, most of them ten or fifteen years younger than he, that he had identified in the 1920s and 30s, as being men on whom the country could depend for strong leadership in the next war—a war which, he always sensed, would occur, and which would draw in the United States. Again, like Stimson, he had an uncanny and shrewd eye for that certain kind of talent that functions efficiently, selflessly, wisely, in the service of large causes. Stimson would bring to the War Department (he was appointed Secretary of War at the end of June, 1940) Judge Patterson and his Undersecretary, and the likes of John McCloy, Robert Lovett, Harvey Bundy, as his assistants; Marshall's accessions—a list that might be prolonged indefinitely—embraced Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton, Mark Clark, George Patton, Al Wedemeyer, Brehon Somervell, J. Lawton Collins. Bradley records in his memoir that he was never comfortable in George Marshall's presence, and Marshall's official biographer Forrest Pogue wrote that it was doubtful that the President was ever comfortable around him, either. He admired him and grew to respect his character and judgment enormously, and to depend on him: but it was not, again to use a phrase of Jean Smith, a locker-room friendship. Their first serious meeting was not propitious for Marshall—this was in 1938, in October, in the White House, where Marshall as the most junior member of a group invited to discuss defense needs, heard the President argue that the country should commit itself to building 10,000 warplanes at once. Senior heads nodded; FDR asked Marshall if he went along: “No, Mr. President, I don't agree with that at all.” FDR looked startled; Marshall's colleagues wished him well in his next posting. But FDR, eight months later, appointed him head of the Army, Chief of Staff—and even here, at the moment of supreme professional attainment, Marshall did not hold back. He warned the President that he would have to bring him bad news, probably often. The President made what Marshall called his cigarette-holder gesture, a kind of airy wave; Marshall caught him up, warning him again. “It may be unpleasant,” he said. His conversational rigor must have braced even FDR. Quite so, we can imagine him thinking. Thereafter Marshall always refused invitations to Hyde Park and Warm Springs, and kept himself remote from as much socializing around President Roosevelt as he possibly could. He did not laugh at FDR's jokes; his “affect” discouraged any easy intimacy. Dean Acheson found FDR's grand seigneur manner repellent; Marshall found it not useful. But what had always sustained Marshall, all through a long Army

career in which he was a marked man—marked out early for a rare talent for military service in positions of authority—was his allegiance to a certain code, to principle, accompanied by an earnestness and tact, that did not so much excite envy in colleagues as it did admiration, the admiration of professionals for a man who did not seem actuated by vulgar ambition.

Two of FDR's choices—to accept Operation Torch and definitively forego an allied invasion of northwestern Europe in 1942 or 1943 and, second, when the main invasion and its necessary preparations were definitively set in motion (at the Quebec conference) that its supreme commander should be Dwight Eisenhower and not George Marshall—these two choices, were the President's, and he made the first against the spirited and steady counsel of Stimson and, particularly, General Marshall, and the second against that of Harry Hopkins and Stimson, and confounding the expectation of Winston Churchill. In each decision, FDR was right, and his counselors wrong. It is at the intersection of their deliberations, the way they engaged, argued, moved, tortuously, often if not usually in circumstances of fatigue, exasperation, incomprehension, tactical dissimulation, wariness—at the intersection that our interest lies. How did these crook-taloned birds consort together? What was the nature, in today's tired metaphor, of their chemistry? It must be said, first, that FDR chose both these men to serve in the largest office of the Republic, other than his own, for the great crisis towards which the country was moving irretrievably. Neither was an obvious choice, neither Stimson nor Marshall. each was known for his moral obduracy and steady if rigorous outspokenness. The appointments do enormous credit to Franklin Roosevelt. It is the invariable insigne of an inspired leader in a democracy that he hires the best person available, but what does “best” mean? A former Virginia governor said to me last month that the most useful advice he ever had was that he should never hire for his administration anyone who had ever worked on his political campaigns. Disinterestedness must be an invariable criterion: doing what is right, not what may be politic. The calculations of partisan debts and friendships must be allowed no place in the populating of strong administrations. Hire those who, you sense, can best do what it is likely they may have to do; risk the awkwardness and odd relationships in which natural affection is unlikely to grow. By all means have your Harry Hopkins at your side; but for your chief officers ignore, ultimately, what is called “chemistry.” And do not hire people known to have what the English call a bee in their bonnet. Hire people who are wise, who have judgment, who tend not to be self-righteous, —wise as distinct from ideologically sound or “clever,” verbally facile.

Of Isaiah Berlin's two types of successful democratic leaders Franklin Roosevelt plainly exemplifies the "natural political being," the politician who possesses "antennae of the great possible delicacy, which conveys them, in ways impossible to analyze, the perpetually changing contours of events and feelings and human activities around them... [who] ... deploy an instinctive, at any rate incommunicable, knowledge of where to look for what one needs, the power of divining where the treasure lies..." "Roosevelt was a magnificent virtuoso of this type." (***) He worked, he moved, by intuition, by an alertness to the potentialities of the possible, by a temperamental preference for delaying and withholding judgments, and without particular compulsion to justify decisions that instincts were slowly, in ways hidden from associates, were precipitating. He was, of course, of an eupeptic disposition—it is easy to see why he remained a particular hero of Ronald Reagan—and this sometimes led observers to believe he had no capacity for hearing "bad news." They were of course wrong. And when he seemed a creature of influence, they did not see that those impulses had themselves been in hidden compulsion. Stimson and Marshall particularly feared FDR's susceptibility to the personality, and its blandishments, of the Prime Minister. And Stimson did not hesitate to admonish, sternly admonish the President, when he caught him in acts of dissimulation: these acts were often idle, a consequence of simple rhetorical cowardice of the kind of which we are all guilty—yes, yes, I agree with you, I will see to it, etc. — occasioned by a desire to appear to be agreeing with the Prime Minister: but they were dangerous. During the Arcadia conference in Washington, late December, 1941, FDR agreed with Churchill's proposal that shipments or armaments and munitions designated for the relief of Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines might be diverted to Singapore, if it appeared they could not get through to McArthur. Marshall and Stimson found out the next morning, and the latter confronted FDR, who denied the agreement. But Stimson had seen a minute of the conversation, caught FDR out, and made him pay. Stimson and Marshall, the stern, Cromwellian monitors of their chief's political behavior. A contemporary wrote in his diary: "to begin with, a democracy is at a great disadvantage against a dictatorship when it comes to war ... and a government with one big man in it, and that man a grave danger in many respects, is in a powerless way ... politicians still suffer from that little knowledge of military affairs which gives them unwarranted confidence..." (***) Alanbroke Diaries 31 March 1942). The Chief of the Imperial General Staff is writing of Churchill: but FDR's senior soldiers, though they admired and loved him, were not free from such

condescensions.

In March, 1942, almost two years after becoming Secretary of War, Henry Stimson read the following paragraph in Article Six of Executive Order 9082, the order which caused the most important reorganization of the War Department since the implementation of the famous Root reforms at the beginning of the 20th Century:

The Secretary of War is authorized and directed to prescribe such functions, duties, and powers of the commanders and commands of the army of the United States and the agencies of the War Department and to issue from time to time detailed instructions regarding personnel, funds. ... and other matters as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this order. Such duties by the Secretary of War are to be performed subject always to the exercise by the President directly through the Chief of Staff of his functions as Commander-in-Chief in relation to strategy, tactics, and operations.

Stimson of course knew that such an order was being prepared, and it struck directly at his understanding of the purposes of another significant reform, dating from 1902, that directly subordinated the Chief of Staff to the Secretary of War, at whose pleasure he served. The equivalent today, for example, would be a direct chain from the President through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (there was no equivalent at the start of World War II), bypassing the Secretary of Defense when he wanted to.

It was what the English call a fair weather system, one that accommodated the wishes, talents, and personality of a particular president; and one which succeeded because of the character/s and the relationship of the Chief of Staff, George Marshall, and the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson. Churchill in his biography of Marlborough extols what he called the self-effacement of warriors of genius, Prince Eugene of Savoy and Marlborough, coequals in the allied coalition against Louis XIV. With Marshall and Stimson the word, the phrase, is perhaps even more apt. Neither was perhaps a warrior of genius; but each deployed organizational talents of the first order; each was a model of self-command; each consciously resolved not to allow the order impair, in any way, a working relationship that was the most important of the war: the relationship between themselves; and their own relationship with the President.

A word about this, latter, relationship, and then a case history.

The effect of the new order was perhaps not what had been intended by its authors. An

implication, unstated, and perhaps barely considered, was that the Secretary of War was to devote part of his energies to the unpredictable, unanticipated consequences of war—other than those related directly to the quotidian requirements of tactics, logistics, campaigns in theatre. Indeed Henry Stimson's contributions at their most influential were to be found in, first, his own ability to attract to the War Department four or five deputies of enormous talent and aptness for their duties—Lovett, McCloy, Bundy, Patterson most famously—Patterson as the newly-created Undersecretary for logistics, material (); and John McCloy as a kind of fireman whom Stimson could send on any mission that needed _____. And, second, as a wise and disinterested counselor to the President, sustaining counselor to the Chief of Staff—he was Marshall's senior by about fifteen years and had known him since a brief period of service together in France, in 1917. And finally in identifying for himself subjects that needed, in his estimation, the close attention and supervision no one else was providing: the whole issue of Japanese relocation, of segregation in the Army—for example; of the potential, development, and final commitment to use the atomic bomb; and of a host of less momentous questions that required the uninterrupted attention of a wise counselor and executive. Each of these three itself could and perhaps should have had its own Undersecretary; and to each Stimson brought attitudes, biases, inherited _____ which remain acutely controversial to this day.

FDR's decision to accept the British insistence that the only serious option for 1942 was the invasion of northwest Africa—this decision for Operation Torch followed a long and familiar sequence, a pattern. It was the ultimate precipitate of seven months' of earnest engagement and deliberation: face-to-face meetings by FDR and Churchill, in Washington; similar meetings in England—Marshall and Hopkins with Churchill and Alan Brooke; much conversation and extended correspondence; regular meetings by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, in Washington; emollient and sub rosa explanations and advance warnings provided Marshall by his friend Sir John Dill, head of the British military mission in Washington.

A pattern, a process that accommodated multiple and continuing adjustments to the needs and demands of logistics, available manpower, the terrible dangers of transportation—meaning a north Atlantic in which German submarines continued to sink allied shipping at appalling rates, the state of training of the prospective forces, early commitments to launching an invasion across the Channel—commitments which, however, were not full-bodied agreements to be executed according to a fixed timetable: all these factors drove FDR's decision—perhaps it is more

accurate to call it an acceptance of the British refusal to support any cross-channel venture in 1942. The forces were not available to make it successful. It could not seriously gratify the Russian demand for a satisfactory Second Front. It would be no more than a trivial annoyance to the German High Command in its Russian campaign. And conditioning the whole was the ineffaceable, terrible, memory of British losses in France in 1914-1918. Germany was not to be defeated, Churchill believed, by the immediate and overwhelming concentration of gigantic power on the coast of Normandy—that was an understandable by naïve American notion. Their soldiers were not ready—in training or in numbers. Two things more: the disingenuousness of courtesy demanded the British not forthrightly tell the Americans that their talk of early invasion was wrong-headed, but rather go along with them for awhile, humor them; and, finally, the President's understanding, in Marshall's words, that the public had to be entertained. The German army must be engaged by American soldiers at an early date.

Between December 1941 and September 1942 a series of transatlantic visitations occurred, in which the Stimson-Marshall dogma of an early return to the continent be prepared, and in which both Stimson and Marshall argued that any dispersion of force, including especially American commitments to sustain British needs in the Mediterranean, would delay, perhaps by a year, the ultimate victory over Germany. At one point, so great was their exasperation and disappointment, that they threatened to shift the American offensive to the Pacific. FDR called their bluff, and rejected the maneuver out-of-hand. Ultimately Stimson and Marshall acquiesced, Marshall with as faintly-censorious grace as he had ever permitted himself. On November 8th, 1942, 70,000 American soldiers waded ashore in northwest Africa.

The chronology of the final decision to launch Overlord in 1944, and with it, the chronology of the selection of its commander, is simple enough. And at the Quebec conference (), August, 1943, Churchill confirmed his earlier understanding with the President, that the commander of the invasion would be representative of the country which would be making the largest contribution, in men, to it. It would be an American; and the presumption was that it would be Marshall. If any appointment of any senior general to any post during World War II may be said to have been taken for granted, this was surely the one. So, just before lunch on the 15th, did Churchill inform his own military chief, Alanbrooke—to whom he had once promised the command. Churchill also told Alanbrooke that Eisenhower would be returning to the United States as Chief of Staff, and that Ike's successor in the Mediterranean would be Harold

Alexander. By early October word of Marshall's prospective appointment had leaked out in Washington, causing great embarrassment to the administration, not excluding the imputation that getting Marshall out of Washington was part of a nefarious British plot, concocted with the connivance of Harry Hopkins, "to turn the War Department into a department of the New Deal." (Pogue, 272). There was as well an exchange of letters between Marshall's great mentor, General Pershing, now almost eighty and living in Washington, and the President. Pershing argued vigorously that Marshall must stay in Washington, at the center of affairs: that he should not be sent "to a tactical command in a limited area." FDR rejoined, guilefully, that he wanted Marshall to be the Pershing of World War II, and that this would not be possible if he remained in the capital.

In the early planning for the next major allied conferences, Cairo-Tehran, November-December, 1943, Stimson, fearful that Marshall would be denied the command, sought to assure the President remained committed. Just before the Americans left for Cairo he gave Harry Hopkins a letter from which he urged Hopkins to act as advocate in Marshall's behalf: "I believe," he wrote, "that Marshall's command of Overlord is imperative for its success." (Pogue OV 299).

Stimson was now determined that Overlord could be brought into being, sustained, executed, and the great campaign against Germany brought to successful completion only by the early appointment of George Marshall as its supreme commander. Only Marshall, Stimson believed, had the force of character, the communicated resolution, the manifest disinterestedness, the stature, to lead the operation: the obduracy, in a strange way reminiscent of U.S. Grant's, to resist the continuous British arguments, most persuasively articulated by Winston Churchill, in behalf of various other subsidiary goals—what Stimson called the English propensity for "dispersion debauch." And Stimson wrote in his diary that he knew that "in the bottom of his heart it was Marshall's secret desire above all things to command his invasion force into Europe; that I had very hard work to wring out of Marshall that this was so, but I had done so finally beyond the possibility of misunderstanding." (p. 442. On Active Service).

En route to Cairo the President's party debarked at Oran, in Algeria. Eisenhower conducted a brief tour of the ancient Carthaginian battlefields, first for General Marshall and Admiral King; and then next day, at the scene of more recent fighting, for President Roosevelt:

Here occurred an interesting and important discussion. FDR used the occasion to say to

Eisenhower that losing Marshall as his Chief of Staff would be hard, but that Marshall deserved the command. He said, “Ike, you and I know who was Chief of Staff during the last years of the Civil War but practically no one else knows ... I hate to think that fifty years from now practically nobody will know who George Marshall was. That is one of the reasons I want George to have the big command—he is entitled to establish his place in history as a great general.”

Here it seems to me is the quintessential Franklin Roosevelt. Already fearful of the consequence of losing George Marshall from his immediate counsels at the center of affairs, knowing that Eisenhower—Marshall’s devoted acolyte is also a possible candidate for the command that he, Eisenhower, does not wish to serve in Washington during the time of the climatic events of the war—here he adduces reasons for giving Marshall the great command for reasons that have nothing to do with the question of who can most usefully, successfully, discharge its duties. He is saying, “We owe it to Marshall”; but no justification for an appointment is less convincing than this.

Two weeks later, at Teheran, Stalin informed FDR and Churchill that he would have no confidence in the allied determination to carry through the Normandy invasion until its commander was actually named, and on the 4th of December, back in Cairo—I am radically telescoping the sequence—FDR undertook, in the way utterly characteristic of his means of communicating news either fraught or unhappy, to an associate, sent Harry Hopkins to Marshall’s quarters to sound him out on the command. What did he think? What did he want?

FDR already knew what he wanted Marshall to say, namely, that he could most helpfully serve the cause by remaining in Washington. But he knew Marshall would not even venture to express a preference. That was who Marshall was.

And by now George Marshall had long since become the man he had schooled himself to be. His biographer calls his refusal to gratify the President and his agent Hopkins an “exercise in self-denial.” It was not: it was the response his conscience prompted: and the prompting of conscience to Marshall was an automatic obligation, an order. He would not want the President to feel constrained in any way, he said, in making his choice for the command. He would “wholeheartedly” support whatever choice was made.

Hopkins reported back to the President that Marshall insisted the President alone must make the choice. Marshall met FDR the next day. Twelve years later he told Dr. Pogue what

had, as he remembered it, transpired:

the quotation p. 321. ...I just repeated again in as convincing language as I could that I wanted him to feel free to act in whatever way he felt was to the best interest of the country and to his satisfaction and not in any way to consider my feelings ... Then he evidently assumed that concluded the affair and that I would not command in Europe. Because, he said, “Well I didn’t feel I could sleep at ease if you were out of Washington.”

And again, quoting Marshall’s biographer, in a beautifully formulated sentence. “Renouncing his great ambition, Marshall delivered the charge he had most coveted into the safekeeping of...”

FDR had obviously been tending towards the decision he made, and Marshall sensed this. Marshall understood, also, the reasons for the decision and found them compelling—however those reasons may or may not have taken form in the President’s mind. If there is such a thing as intellectual magnanimity, he must have known that Eisenhower was more suited to the command than he, Marshall, would have been. Ike was almost eleven years Marshall’s junior; physically robust and full of energy; classically a “people person,” a rare admixture of icy intelligence and irrepressible, communicable, fully human sympathies and enthusiasms. The decision to keep George Marshall in Washington, and appoint Dwight Eisenhower to command Overlord was the best decision, about people, that FDR made. Marshall had furnished the candidate; Roosevelt made him the commander—a commander, moreover, who would be the beneficiary of the remarkable cohort of senior American generals all of whom Marshall had identified, trained, tested, and promoted: the deepest reservoir of military talent, not excluding that of the Civil War, in American history.

Little commentary is needed, and my time is exhausted. In the film version, 1990, of Henry V, the narrator Derek Jacoby, scorns to seek for lessons in the Agincourt campaign of 1415. Take the episode for what it was; think of Prince Harry and English valor. I point out only this lesson: that, even making the necessary allowances for what World War II engendered in American government and leadership—a circumstance that will never be repeated, even remotely—we see virtue and value in presidential leadership that draws to it, not the best and brightest, but the wisest and most disinterested: the least ideological and the least overtly “political.” We note the particular necessity in our democracy of compulsive presidential

communicativeness—not a “spokesman” for an administration, but a president, who by temperament or discipline is a goodhearted and forbearing advocate for the strategy and policy of his wartime administration. As to Mr. Stimson and General Marshall: the former, at the end of the war, told Marshall who like all great men had no idea how to accept praise, and was deeply abashed by it, “You, Sir, are the finest soldier I have ever known,” and did not hesitate to accord President Roosevelt the same accolade as a wartime leader. Gibbon in his Autobiography remembers a visit by the great radical parliamentarian Charles James Fox, the political enemy of the Younger Pitt. “Charles James Fox came to see me today, and gave me such a character of Pitt his rival, as only one great man gives another...” The constructive magnanimity of spirit which untied these men is their final gift to their successors. What have we done with it?



This lecture was given by Josiah Bunting III as the Second Annual Alvin H. Bernstein Lecture of the Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies on November 29, 2005.