
Reviewed by Wilson Miscamble (University of Notre Dame)

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2021)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

William A. Taylor and his collaborators in this edited volume aim to accord George C. Marshall his proper due for his crucial role in American foreign and defense policy in the period after World War II. In a thoughtful introduction, Taylor acknowledges the voluminous scholarship on Marshall and his role in World War II, but he argues that scholars have placed less emphasis on Marshall's actions in the critical decade that followed the war. There is some truth to this claim. Marshall has rarely emerged as a fully developed figure in discussions and analyses of postwar foreign policymaking. He appeared less interesting than some of his notable subordinates. For example, when Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas published their best-selling collective biography, The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made (1986), they included Robert Lovett, John McCloy, Averell Harriman, Charles Bohlen, George Kennan, and Dean Acheson. George Marshall did not make their cut. Taylor and his co-authors seek to redress any past neglect and to display how Marshall was a pivotal figure in the postwar decade.

Along with Taylor's introduction and a foreword by the distinguished editor of the Marshall papers, Mark Stoler, this work contains nine solid chapters and a conclusion which Taylor also supplies. Each chapter provides background on a specific issue and then seeks to identify Marshall's distinct contribution. The areas examined cover the following: the battle over universal military training (UMT); Marshall's effort to mediate the Chinese civil war; the emergence of the United States Air Force; postwar national security policy; the shaping of nuclear policy; the European Recovery Program; the development of NATO; the Korean War; and the racial integration of the US Army. Most of the essays are fine summaries of Marshall's efforts but they don't break especially new ground. Yet their combined impact contributes to a heightened appreciation of Marshall's role in policymaking across a range of areas.

Taylor himself leads off the substantive chapters with a thoughtful reflection on Marshall's effort to have the United States adopt universal military training. This essay not only provides insight into Marshall's thinking about American national security in the postwar era, but it also clarifies that Marshall was hardly successful in all of his undertakings, as UMT was rejected by Congress.

Providing further evidence for Marshall's significant failures, Katharine Riest examines the general's mediation efforts in the Chinese civil war in 1946 and records his unsuccessful efforts to secure some kind of coalition government. This is well-worked territory and those familiar with
Daniel Kurtz-Phelan’s *The China Mission: George Marshall’s Unfinished War, 1945-1947* (2018) will not discover anything particularly original here. Perhaps Riest could have raised some more challenging questions about Marshall and this mission. Was it a fool’s errand from the start, given the enmity between the two sides? Was Marshall played by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai? Was Marshall in some ways ill-suited for the task, given that his very rectitude and decency made it difficult for him to understand the goals of either side in China and the impossibility of his task?

John Curatola presents Marshall as “a strategic visionary” during World War II who oversaw the construction of an air fleet capable of global reach (p. 61). He notes Marshall’s close relationship with General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold and how their collaboration spurred the growth of American air power. Notably, however, Marshall never saw air power as “a panacea or substitute for balanced forces” during the war (p. 71). Curatola points out that Marshall paved the way for the birth of a distinct US Air Force and extends credit to him for this. Notably, Marshall’s role is more as a member of a strong supporting cast rather than a main actor.

Sean Kalic asserts that Marshall served as “a vital architect of the national security policy of the United States that persisted for the duration of the Cold War” (p. 85). Yet in his portrayal Marshall emerges more as a contributor with others in the development of American strategic policy. He comes across less as an architect and more as the delegator and validator of the work of his able subordinates, who collectively developed American policy during the critical years of the Harry Truman administration. Similarly, Frank A. Settle Jr. reveals that while Marshall was “one of the few senior-level officials who participated in or witnessed all the major decisions involving nuclear weapons during the first decade of the atomic age” (p. 106), he was never the decisive voice in developing atomic strategy.

Michael Holm takes on the important task of exploring the great foreign policy initiative with which Marshall's name is associated: the American effort to provide economic assistance to Europe in the postwar period. He covers some fairly familiar territory for specialists in the field by providing significant background to the Marshall Plan and then the details of its formulation. Holm also engages the debate over the impact of the Marshall Plan. He clearly aligns himself with those scholars who judge the plan a great success, not only for its impact on European economic recovery but also for its political ramifications in fostering greater European integration.

Ingo Trauscheiizer traces Marshall’s contributions to the formation of NATO through two distinct phases. He demonstrates Marshall’s early support for some kind of military assistance to provide defense for Western Europe. He notes, however, that Marshall retired in January of 1949 and handed over responsibility for the actual negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty to his successor as secretary of state, Dean Acheson. The more interesting, and original, part of this essay is Marshall’s contribution to putting real military flesh on the skeletal guarantees of the NATO treaty during his service as secretary of defense from 1950 through 1951. Marshall wanted to build a credible deterrent force and he had some success in this effort, spurred along by the enormous increase in defense spending following the outbreak of war in Korea.

Jared Dockery provides more details of Marshall’s service as secretary of defense in his essay tracking Marshall’s leadership of the Pentagon during the Korean War. He provides substantial background demonstrating that many of the key players during the Korean conflict were Marshall’s protégés. The obvious exception was General Douglas MacArthur, to whom Marshall had reported when the latter was Army chief of staff in the 1930s. Dockery clarifies that Marshall and MacArthur differed over strategic priorities. Marshall be-
lieved that Europe was more vital to American security than was Asia, whereas “MacArthur was always oriented to the Pacific” (p. 193). Dockery takes us through the familiar stages of the Korean conflict and reveals that Marshall worried about it becoming a “world disaster” if it escalated into a general war with China (p. 198). Marshall’s caution led him to support the restraints placed on MacArthur after China’s major intervention in the conflict in November 1950. Dockery’s work sensibly relies upon and can be supplemented by Alan Millett’s excellent *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (2010). Dockery also clarifies well how Marshall played a central role in making the Truman administration’s case for significant increases in defense spending during his year as secretary of defense and that he directed this increased funding not only toward the conflict in Korea but to the defense of Western Europe and Japan.

Jeremy Maxwell offers a brief essay that purportedly looks at Marshall’s contribution to the racial integration of the US military in the postwar period. The thrust of his essay, however, seems to be that Marshall was a mentor to General Matthew Ridgway and that it was Ridgway who, out of combat necessity, did the serious work of integrating African Americans into regular Army units during the Korean War. Ridgway emerges as the leading figure in the story and the one who finally fulfilled Truman’s June 1948 executive order to desegregate the armed forces.

Taylor provides a conclusion that leans towards hagiography and affirms the label of “good and faithful servant” (p. 241) among the many encomia applied to Marshall by notables like Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, and Winston Churchill. Few would challenge Eisenhower’s observation that “as soldier and statesman, General Marshall devoted his entire life to selfless service to his nation” (p. 246). The more debatable question, however, centers on the extent of Marshall’s influence in the postwar decade and the impact of his efforts. Taylor suggests that Marshall’s role in the early Cold War is “unique for any one American” (p. 247). A case can be made for this claim given the multiple roles that Marshall played, and especially through his leadership of both the State Department and the Defense Department. Historians who want to grasp better Marshall’s specific contributions will surely benefit from reading the essays in this volume. Yet the very essays included in the collection tend to undercut the broad argument for Marshall’s unique role. Viewed together, they leave an impression of Marshall as an important contributor but hardly a dominant figure in the making of postwar American foreign policy. He had a special gift for delegation and he drew forth impressive contributions from various capable subordinates. It hardly disparages Marshall to clarify that along with Harry Truman he helped lead a team effort.

While Taylor and his colleagues have covered some key matters, there are noteworthy areas that their volume does not explore. Surprisingly, there is little discussion in the volume about Marshall’s opposition to Truman’s decision to recognize the state of Israel. Marshall and his State Department assistants raised serious questions about the creation of the Jewish state and Truman rejected their advice. This controversial matter warrants a distinct essay. Additionally, there might have been greater attention given to Marshall’s slow movement to recognize the threat that the Soviet Union represented. As Trauscheiwizer indicates, the scales fell from Marshall’s eyes only at the Moscow Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in March/April 1947. What does this tell us about Marshall’s perspicacity regarding the Soviets? The importance of Marshall’s conversion regarding the limits of cooperation with Moscow might have been emphasized further for the light it sheds on how the containment strategy was implemented in practice. The essays might also have combined to explore further the Truman/Marshall relationship. Truman’s admiration for Marshall was great but how they worked together is a matter for fur-
ther examination, as is understanding better Marshall's attitude to Truman and how it evolved over time. Indeed, a valuable contribution of this admirable collection is that it might prompt additional consideration of George C. Marshall and some of the key elements of postwar foreign and security policy to which he contributed.

Wilson D. Miscamble is professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950 (1992) and From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War (2007), among other works.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56230

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.