

1

Lifeline

Like the Gettysburg Address, it was a short speech. George Marshall took just twelve minutes to read his Harvard commencement address that on June 5, 1947, outlined the ideas behind the Marshall Plan. Firsthand reports of the commencement describe Marshall as a speaker who played with his glasses, kept his eyes focused on his text, and was often difficult to hear. But by the time Marshall finished, he had set in motion America's coming of age as a superpower in a way that would take the nation far beyond its World War II triumphs.¹

Marshall's decision to speak at Harvard and receive an honorary degree from the university was a last-minute one that came after years of saying no to the offer. In January 1945 Harvard president James Conant wrote to Marshall to inform him that the governing board of the university had voted to award him an honorary degree of doctor of laws at its June commencement. Marshall declined the award, telling Conant that as long as the war continued, he believed that he should not leave Washington to accept honors of any sort.

In 1946 Conant again wrote to Marshall, this time to offer him an honorary degree at Harvard's 1946 "Victory Commencement," at which those honored would include General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower; Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander

of the Pacific Fleet; General Henry “Hap” Arnold, the retiring chief of the Army Air Forces; and General Alexander Vandergriﬀ, the Marine Corps commandant. Marshall again refused, but this time because, at the request of President Truman, he was on a diplomatic mission in China, trying to broker a peace between the Communists and the Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-shek. By early 1947 Marshall, now secretary of state, still had no plans to go to Harvard for an honorary degree, despite a third invitation from Conant.²

The timing of political events finally convinced Marshall to accept Harvard’s invitation. In the spring, as a result of the worsening economic situation in Europe, Marshall thought it essential to make the case publicly for a new program of foreign aid. As he recalled in a 1956 interview, an invitation to speak at the University of Wisconsin in late May fell too early, and an invitation to speak at Amherst on June 16 came too late for his purposes. Harvard on June 5 was just right. On May 28 Marshall wrote to Conant to say that he would be happy to come to Harvard for his honorary degree. “I will not be able to make a formal address, but would be pleased to make a few remarks in appreciation of the honor and perhaps a little more,” he told Conant.³

On May 30, Marshall sent a memo to his aide General Marshall “Pat” Carter, asking him to have someone “prepare a draft for a less than ten-minute talk by me at Harvard to the Alumni.” Carter selected the State Department Russian expert Charles “Chip” Bohlen, who had accompanied Marshall to a recent Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow, to do the initial draft of the speech, but before the drafting was over, the speech would reflect not only Bohlen’s ideas but the thinking of a number of State Department officials, in particular George Kennan, the head of the Policy Planning Staff; Will Clayton, the undersecretary of state for economic affairs, and Dean Acheson, the undersecretary of state.⁴

Marshall later said that the speech really began when he combined Bohlen’s and Kennan’s suggestions with his own, but the day before he flew up to Boston with General Omar Bradley,

who was also being honored by Harvard, Marshall was still rewriting. “The speech was not finished when I left Washington, so I worked with it on the plane and then at Conant’s house,” Marshall recalled. He worried about the controversy that his speech might cause. He wanted his speech to be heard without generating advance publicity, and he made a point of not showing what he had written to anyone in Congress. Marshall did not even give President Truman a final draft to look over. Dean Acheson later remembered that in order to have a State Department press release ready before Marshall spoke, he had to pry the text of Marshall’s speech out of General Carter over the telephone at the last moment.⁵

By comparison with the solemnity of Harvard’s 1946 “Victory Commencement,” the 1947 commencement was a relaxed and joyous occasion, marked by the awarding of 2,185 degrees, in contrast to the 583 given out in 1946. “From beginning to end it was a big and busy Commencement Week in the old style,” the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* boasted. “On Commencement morning the Yard resumed its prewar appearance of bustle and subdued excitement.”

On a cool and sunny Thursday morning the long academic line formed, as customary, by 9:30 for the march to the commencement exercises in Tercentenary Theater. The applause that followed from the audience of seven thousand was loud and prolonged, but it was not just for Marshall, who, in contrast to the World War II military leaders honored at the 1946 commencement, chose to appear in civilian dress array—gray sack suit, white shirt, blue necktie—rather than in uniform.

The twelve Harvard honorees for 1947 formed a particularly distinguished group. In addition to Marshall, they included General Omar Bradley, the atomic bomb lab director J. Robert Oppenheimer, the poet T. S. Eliot, the literary critic I. A. Richards, the Deerfield Academy headmaster Frank Boyden, the publisher Hodding Carter Jr., and the University of Chicago president Ernest Colwell. At the commencement ceremonies Marshall was awarded

a degree that cited him as “An American to whom Freedom owes an enduring debt of gratitude, a soldier and statesman whose ability and character brook only one comparison in the history of this nation.” But otherwise, nothing special was done on Marshall’s behalf. The morning exercises, with their opening prayer and Latin disquisition, followed their long-established routine.

After lunch the afternoon alumni meeting began at 2:00. Five speakers were scheduled to address the alums before Marshall. First came Laird Bell, the president of the Harvard Alumni Association; then Robert Bradford, the governor of Massachusetts and a retiring member of the Harvard Board of Overseers; and after them, three of the honorees, General Bradley, Ernest Colwell, and I. A. Richards. As Marshall’s handwritten note on the cover of his seven-page speech indicates, it was 2:50 before his turn finally came.⁶

Marshall opened his speech by thanking Harvard for the degree that it had bestowed upon him. “I am profoundly grateful and touched by the great distinction and honor, a great compliment, accorded me by the authorities of Harvard this morning,” he declared. “I am rather fearful of my inability to maintain such a high rating as you have been generous enough to accord to me.” Then, with only a brief warning, Marshall changed the tone of his remarks. In language that took its power from his directness and his deliberate avoidance of metaphor, Marshall began to explain the crisis Europe faced.

“I need not tell you the world situation is very serious,” Marshall began. The “long suffering peoples of Europe” faced an economic breakdown that showed no signs of curing itself, and the majority of Americans, living in a land untouched by war, understandably found the severity of Europe’s plight difficult to comprehend. Our prosperity had made empathy difficult. The media had only confused the country with their reporting. Europe’s problem, Marshall insisted, “is one of such enormous complexity that the very mass of facts presented to the public by press and radio make it exceedingly difficult for the man in the street to reach a clear appraisal of the situation.”

Europe's ills, Marshall went on to say, were not merely a consequence of the death and the destruction brought on by the war. The real worry was "the dislocation of the entire fabric of European economy." The "modern system of the division of labor upon which the exchange of products is based" was breaking down throughout Europe. Raw materials and fuel were in short supply. Machinery was not working, and rather than plant crops they could not sell, farmers were withdrawing their fields from cultivation and using them for grazing.

The situation put the governments of Europe in an impossible bind. They had no choice, Marshall believed, except to use their foreign money and credits to provide for the basic needs of their people, but having taken this step, they were trapped in a situation in which, instead of improving their long-term prospects, they exhausted the funds required for reconstruction of their economies. The problem was not one that Marshall saw changing with the passage of time, given Europe's needs for the next three or four years. Outside help was necessary. Europe could not recover from the war unassisted. "The remedy," Marshall argued, lay "in breaking the vicious circle and restoring the confidence of the people of Europe and the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole."

Marshall believed the humanitarian case for relieving Europe's suffering was important. But he understood the political realities of 1947 well enough to know that he also had to argue for increased European aid on the basis of American self-interest. He did so without hesitation. If Europe remained weak, "the consequences to the economy of the United States should be apparent to all," Marshall warned. "It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of the normal economic health in the world without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace."

In making this appeal to American self-interest, Marshall was, however, unwilling to play up the anticommunist card. He thought, as his special assistant Charles Bohlen later wrote, that earlier in the year there had been "a little too much flamboyant

anti-Communism” in the text of the president’s March 12 message to Congress proposing the Truman Doctrine for dealing with the Soviet Union’s threats to Greece and Turkey. Marshall opted for a different political emphasis in the language he used. American aid would not be employed against other nations but against the forces that deprived people of their dignity.⁷

“Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos,” Marshall insisted before going on to declare, in a passage that placed equal stress on America’s openness and resolve, “Any government that is willing to assist in the task of recovery will find full cooperation, I am sure, on the part of the United States Government. Any government which maneuvers to block the recovery of other countries cannot expect help from us.”

But what form should such aid take? Here Marshall was both ambitious and humble in the foreign policy strategy that he proposed. The purpose of American aid, he argued, should be nothing less than “the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.” Half-way or stopgap measures would not do. It was important to break with the timidity of the past. “Such assistance, I am convinced, must not be on a piecemeal basis as various crises develop. Any assistance that this Government may render in the future should provide a cure rather than a mere palliative.”

At the same time Marshall was not prepared to say that America knew what was best for Europe. He believed that it was essential for America to be a global leader without seeking global dominance. In a June 4 letter to Senator Arthur Vandenberg, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Marshall had spelled out his thinking. “Of course the United States wants a Europe which is not divided against itself, a Europe which is better than that it replaces,” he wrote. “But we should make it clear that it is not our purpose to impose upon the peoples of Europe any particular form of political or economic association. The future organization of Europe must be determined

by the peoples of Europe.” In his Harvard speech Marshall, using language borrowed from a George Kennan memo, made the same point. Unilateralism was not an option for America as far as he was concerned.

“It would be neither fitting nor efficacious for our Government to undertake to draw up unilaterally a program designed to place Europe on its feet economically. This is the business of the Europeans. The initiative, I think, must come from Europe,” he stated, as he put forward the idea of Europe as a region. Marshall believed that the European nations must figure out how to act in concert and come up with a plan of their own for using the aid they received. “There must be some agreement among the countries of Europe as to the requirements of the situation and the part those countries themselves will take in order to give proper effect to whatever action might be undertaken by this Government,” Marshall observed. “The program should be a joint one, agreed to by a number, if not all European nations.”

At stake in the foreign policy initiative that he proposed, Marshall believed, was nothing less than “the whole world’s future.” Shortly after becoming secretary of state, Marshall had observed of the postwar world, “We have had a cessation of hostilities, but we have no genuine peace.” At Harvard, Marshall returned to the same theme. Americans, “distant from the troubled areas of the earth,” needed, he warned, to make sure they did not turn their backs on the values for which they had fought World War II. “[T]he difficulties I have outlined can and will be overcome,” Marshall confidently told his Harvard audience as he neared the end of his speech. But the task was not easy. It would require “a willingness on the part of our people to face up to the vast responsibilities which history has clearly placed upon our country.”

The challenges that lay ahead, Marshall believed, were as much matters of psychology and vision as economics, and in a passage that he added to his original text, Marshall emphasized the need for Americans to see the crisis in Europe as a test of their patience and willingness to engage the world. “But to my mind it is of vast importance,” he declared in a conclusion that

was as much a plea as an observation, “that our people reach some general understanding of what the complications really are rather than react from a passion or a prejudice or an emotion of the moment.”⁸

At Gettysburg, Lincoln was, as the historian Gary Wills has pointed out, deliberately abstract in defining how the sacrifices of the Civil War would give new meaning to the idea of equality found in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address makes no specific mention of changes in the Constitution or of financial compensation to benefit the freed slaves. Lincoln described the ideals on which America must govern itself in the future, and he refused to get caught up in specifics. At Harvard, Marshall, heeding Dean Acheson’s warning that concrete proposals would only generate congressional opposition, adopted a similar strategy. As a close reading of his speech reveals, Marshall offered his listeners and the nation a set of principles for how America should meet its foreign policy obligations in the post–World War II era.⁹

He proposed abandoning the historic isolationism that dominated United States foreign policy in the years following World War I and that in the late 1940s continued in the conservative wing of the Republican Party led by Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio. Marshall had on his side the leading internationalists of the State Department—George Kennan, Dean Acheson, Charles Bohlen, and Will Clayton—as well as the influential Arthur Vandenberg, a former isolationist, who in a historic 1945 speech on the Senate floor broke with his party and his own past, declaring, “I do not believe that any nation hereafter can immunize itself by its own exclusive action.” But in 1947 Marshall himself made the best public arguments for peacetime America to abandon its old isolationism.

In a Princeton University speech on Washington’s Birthday in 1947, Marshall had laid out the reasons why such a historic change was justified. “Twenty-five years ago the people of this country, and of the world for that matter, had the opportunity to

make vital decisions regarding their future welfare,” he observed. “I think we must agree that the negative course of action followed by the United States after the First World War did not achieve order or security, and that it had a direct bearing on the recent war and its endless tragedies.” Four months later, the ideas voiced by Marshall at Princeton had become the framework of his Harvard speech.¹⁰

In calling for a break with the past, Marshall was not calling for a break with the lessons of contemporary history. Critical to the anti-isolationism of his Harvard speech was Marshall’s belief in the application of New Deal–style government economic intervention to American foreign policy. With the Bretton Woods agreement and the formation of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, America had done much by the mid-1940s to improve the global economy by stabilizing exchange rates and making credit more available to nations in need. But in his Harvard speech, Marshall saw that additional steps were required. He was unwilling to trust monetary policy or a traditional market economy to halt what by 1947 the State Department was calling Europe’s “severe economic, political, and social disintegration.”

Like Franklin Roosevelt, who in his First Inaugural declared, “The people of the United States have not failed,” Marshall did not hold the citizens of Europe responsible for their economic woes. He saw them as the victims of institutions that no longer worked. In 1933 Roosevelt asked for broad executive power to get the institutions of America operating again. Fourteen years later at Harvard, Marshall, without recourse to the rhetoric of the New Deal, proposed a parallel form of government action to help stabilize Europe. For the Marshall Plan nations, the American government would, as Elizabeth Borgwardt points out in *A New Deal for the World*, use its vast resources to alleviate suffering and facilitate a return to normalcy.¹¹

In his Harvard speech, Marshall advanced the idea of European unity. After his return from a trip to Western Europe, the undersecretary of state for economic affairs, Will Clayton, had been outspoken in proposing a “European economic federation”

and predicted, "Europe cannot recover from this war and again become independent if her economy continues to be divided into many small watertight compartments as it is today." At Harvard, Marshall incorporated Clayton's thinking into his speech by calling for "some agreement among the countries of Europe as to the requirements of the situation" and by declaring that America's aid program should be a "joint one." Marshall refused to tell the Europeans how they should organize themselves, insisting that America should limit itself to "friendly aid in the drafting of a European program," but there was no mistaking Marshall's belief in the need for Europe to act as a community in which economic cooperation trumped economic rivalry.¹²

Marshall's emphasis on linking European economic reform to American foreign aid reflected his belief that poverty and chaos were breeding grounds for communism and that the Truman administration's containment policy toward the Soviet Union needed a more sophisticated economic component than it had in mid-1947. George Kennan had made this argument with great force in a May 23 Policy Planning Staff memo in which he described conditions in Europe as a breeding ground for communism and cautioned against "a defensive reaction" to communist pressure. America could be most effective, Kennan insisted, if it moved "to combat not communism, but the economic maladjustment which makes European society vulnerable to exploitation by any and all totalitarian movements." Marshall took this breeding-ground idea and elevated it into a general principle that applied not only to postwar Europe but to societies everywhere. In Marshall's speech, "economic health in the world" became vital for every nation because without it, desperation and chaos were sure to follow.¹³

The result was that from Marshall's speech there flowed not only an outline of the requirements needed to achieve peace but an expanded definition of America's national security. Since the end of the war, military leaders such as the future secretary of defense James Forrestal had argued, "Our national security can only be assured on a very broad and comprehensive front." The point was one that the army and the navy had no trouble making on the

basis of the terrible destruction of World War II and the growing importance of air power. In his Harvard speech, Marshall, without saber rattling, gave fresh credibility to these same ideas by linking national security to humanitarian aid and economic redevelopment. But Marshall also went further. He argued for a future that would have no room for American triumphalism. The inescapable conclusion of Marshall's Harvard speech was that America could not rely, as it once had, on the oceans surrounding it for protection, nor could America regard military superiority alone as a guarantee of safety. America needed allies.¹⁴

Only a powerful nation could define its national security in such broad terms and promise to be engaged in the world beyond its borders. It was a combination of might and obligation that Marshall had spoken about in 1945 on his retirement as army chief of staff. "Most of you know how different, how fortunate is America compared with the rest of the world," he had observed in his Pentagon farewell speech. "Today this nation with good faith and sincerity, I am certain, desires to take the lead in the measures necessary to avoid another world catastrophe, such as you have just endured." By the time of his Harvard speech, Marshall's ideas had ripened to the point where he now spoke of America's might and obligations in terms of "the vast responsibilities which history has clearly placed upon our country," but even more revealing than the shift in tone was Marshall's unwillingness to minimize America's new status. His description of 1947 America was a self-conscious acknowledgment of America's coming of age as a superpower.¹⁵

In lesser hands such a description might have amounted to hubris. But in his Harvard speech, Marshall did not call on Europe to accept a Pax Americana as it had once accepted a Pax Britannica. Marshall's description of the leadership role that he envisioned for America in postwar Europe was inseparable from his belief that America should act in concert with the European nations that it proposed to help. Marshall was proposing that America respond to Europe's postwar vulnerability by seeking new ways to be a partner, rather than by trying to dominate it. Franklin Roosevelt had

made the same point during World War II. With victory in sight, FDR observed in his Fourth Inaugural, “We have learned that we cannot live alone, at peace; that our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of other Nations, far away.” At Harvard, Marshall picked up where Roosevelt left off, insisting that the long-term interests of the United States were not served by imperial models of control. The world in which Marshall saw America playing a lead role was one that rested, he hoped, on shared power. As long as Marshall had anything to say about it, America’s voice would not drown out the voices of other nations still weakened by war.¹⁶

At a time when virtually every foreign aid package sooner or later gets compared to the Marshall Plan, it is difficult to imagine that the momentousness of Marshall’s speech was not fully understood immediately. Senator Arthur Vandenberg’s description of Marshall’s Harvard speech as a “shot heard round the world” does not strike us as hyperbole today. Vandenberg’s appropriation of Emerson’s famous line from “Concord Hymn,” written in praise of the Minutemen, captures the revolutionary nature of Marshall’s ideas. Marshall’s emphasis on multilateralism and bipartisanship, his insistence that America should not dictate to its allies, and his belief, as he later put it, that “democratic principles do not flourish on empty stomachs” seem not only modern but a repudiation of the way America has conducted its post-September 11 foreign policy.

But it was hard for Marshall’s audience and the nation to grasp at once all that he had put before them. On June 5 no actual Marshall Plan existed, no concrete legislative proposals awaited analysis. As George Kennan observed a month later in a Policy Planning Staff memo, “Marshall ‘plan.’ We have no plan.” When the June 14 *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* printed the text of Marshall’s speech, the *Bulletin* called it the Marshall Doctrine because it did not have an official name to give the text.¹⁷

Dean Acheson had not wanted Marshall to speak at Harvard. “I advised against it on the ground that commencement speeches

were a ritual to be endured without hearing,” Acheson later admitted. But once Marshall made it clear that he intended to speak at Harvard, Acheson did his best to alert the Europeans to the significance of Marshall’s ideas. On June 2, Acheson met for lunch in a private room at the United Nations Club in Washington with three British journalists, Leonard Miall of the BBC, Malcolm Muggeridge of the *Daily Telegraph*, and René MacColl of the *Daily Express*, in order to discuss American policy initiatives with respect to Europe. The meeting, which Miall later described in *The Listener* and in a 1977 interview for the Marshall Research Library, alerted the British journalists to the new State Department thinking and made them very sensitive to Marshall’s speech. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express* featured Marshall’s address in their morning editions on the day after Marshall spoke.

Miall did even better. On June 5, he was scheduled to fill in as the host of a popular BBC radio program, *American Commentary*. Given an advance copy of Marshall’s speech on June 4 by the British Embassy press officer, Miall now felt more certain than ever of the significance of Marshall’s speech; he made the speech the centerpiece of his *American Commentary* program. His broadcast was heard in England by, among others, Ernest Bevin, the Labour Party’s foreign secretary. “It was like a life-line to sinking men,” Bevin said of his first response to Marshall’s words. “It seemed to bring hope where there was none. The generosity of it was beyond our belief.”¹⁸

America’s uptake was not so immediate. In his memoir *My Several Lives*, Harvard president Conant, who had entertained Marshall on the evening of June 4 and spent most of June 5 in his company, wrote of Marshall’s speech, “I had not understood its meaning when I heard it.” Conant’s reaction foreshadowed what was to come in the next few days. The June 6 *Washington Post* featured Marshall’s speech under a headline that declared, “Marshall Sees Europe in Need of Vast New U.S. Aid,” but the *Post* was an exception. New York’s leading papers took at face value the State Department’s downplaying of Marshall’s address as “a routine commencement speech.”

Stephen White, Harvard Class of 1936 and an editorial writer for the *New York Herald Tribune*, was the only out-of-town reporter to cover the speech, and his story, as he later angrily complained, was minimized by his editors. It played second fiddle to the *Tribune's* lead story by Tom Twitty and a headline that read, "Truman Calls Hungary Red Coup an Outrage." A similar prioritizing of the news took place in the *New York Times*, which led with the front-page headline "Truman Calls Hungary Coup Outrage, Demands Russians Agree to Inquiry." The feature story in the *Times* was James Reston's "Yalta Breach Seen." Then came Albion Ross's "U.S. Called Enemy by Reds," and finally there was Frank L. Kluckhohn's account of Marshall's speech. In the next day's *Times*, Mallory Browne's "Britain Set to Take Urgent Steps to Follow Up Marshall's Program" was relegated to page six.¹⁹

The newspaper response to his speech was just fine with Marshall. He had been secretary of state less than six months. He wanted his ideas discussed, but he did not want the Senate and the House to feel that he was pressuring them to approve a plan that he had already formulated. After years of testifying before Congress as army chief of staff, Marshall knew that his hardest work in making European recovery a reality was just beginning. For a program of this scope, he needed bipartisan support.