On the morning of June 5, 1947, Secretary of State George Catlett Marshall stood before an audience of graduates, parents, and guests to receive an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. After awarding 11 other honorary degrees to such luminaries as General Omar Bradley and poet T. S. Elliott, as part of Harvard University’s 286th commencement, President James Bryant Conant, called Marshall forward. Conant 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.” The audience knew the allusion to George Washington was well earned.

Like Washington, Marshall had an inauspicious childhood. The third of four children, born on December 31, 1880, he lacked signs of future greatness. He was a poor student (except in history). As biographer Ed Cray noted, “mathematics, grammar, and spelling gave him particular problems... The fear of failure and thus rejection lay heavy on the gangling boy.”

Yet, like Washington, what Marshall lacked in formal education, he made up for in determination. Despite the opposition of his older brother, who thought he would dishonor the family, Marshall entered Virginia Military Institute (VMI) at 16. Hazed as an entering “rat,” he was forced to squat, naked, over a bayonet. When he collapsed and cut himself—he was still weak from a recent bout of typhoid fever—he refused to report the violation of hazing rules. This earned him the respect of his peers, a step on his way to election as First Corporal for his second year, First Sergeant for his third, and First Captain as a senior, the highest cadet military rank.
Commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, Marshall rose slowly through the small, peacetime army until he came to the attention of General John “Black Jack” Pershing during World War I. Yet he did not earn his first star until nearly 56, with help through Pershing’s intervention. By then recognized as a master at training and logistics, Marshall was summoned to head the War Plans Division in Washington, DC, reporting on July 1, 1938.

Like Washington, Marshall also developed a reputation for confronting authority. On November 14, 1938, he attended a White House meeting where Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) announced a plan for 10,000 planes, noting he would ask Congress for 20,000 but expected the request to be halved. After others agreed, he turned to Marshall, who was alarmed. “Mr. President, I am sorry, but I don’t agree with that at all,” Marshall said, knowing the army lacked enough trained pilots and munitions for the large fleet. As Marshall recalled, the president looked “startled” and the meeting ended. As everyone left, “they all bade me good-bye and said my tour in Washington was over.”

Yet Marshall earned Roosevelt’s admiration not enmity. In selecting a new army chief of staff a few months later, FDR jumped over 33 more senior generals to select Marshall. On April 23, 1939, he offered Marshall the job. Marshall, characteristically, told the president he could take it only if he could speak his mind: “Is that all right?” “Yes,” Roosevelt replied, to which Marshall retorted: “You said ‘yes’ pleasantly, but it may be unpleasant.”

Again like Washington, he took over a weak army. Sworn in on September 1, 1939, he had been awakened earlier and told that Germany had invaded Poland. He took the oath of office commanding a force of 174,000 men, in size just below the army of Bulgaria. By war’s end, more than 8 million would be under arms, supported by 129,000 bombers, 4,000 ships, 12 million rifles, and 2 atomic bombs. For this logistical achievement, as well as for his strategic sense, Winston Churchill hailed Marshall as the “organizer of victory.”

From Retired General to Civilian Peacemaker

On November 26, 1945, Marshall, recently retired, drove home to Dodona Manor in rural Virginia, the respite he and his second wife,