The Mystery of Gen. George C. Marshall

Where was the Army's chief of staff on the morning of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor?
-J.R. Nyquist

Gen. George Marshall appeared Dec. 7, 1945, before a joint congressional committee on the subject of the Japanese surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, which occurred exactly four years earlier. The legislators had many questions for Marshall, who had been the U.S. Army's chief of staff.

When asked about his "movements" on the evening of Dec. 6, 1941, Marshall replied, "I can only account for them by a sort of circumstantial evidence." The committee's general counsel, William Mitchell, then asked if Marshall had been to the White House. "No, sir," answered Marshall. "Not at all."

Mitchell then asked where Marshall was on the morning of Dec. 7, when the Japanese were about to attack. Marshall replied, "On that particular morning, I presumably had my breakfast at about 8, and following the routine that I had carried out on previous Sundays, I went riding at some time thereafter."

Marshall then corrected himself. In response to previous inquiries, he had said he went horseback riding at 8:30. But no, that wasn't right. According to Marshall, discussions "with orderlies and also evidence that I have seen of other individuals leads me purely by induction and not by definite memory to think that I must have ridden later."

Marshall continued, "Just what time I do not know; but between 8 o'clock and the time I went to the War Department, I ate my breakfast, I probably looked at the Sunday papers and went for a ride." Probably, he admitted, the horse ride took 50 minutes "because I rode at a pretty lively gait, at a trot and a canter and at a full run."

Marshall remembered the horse. "My recollection beyond that," he continued, "is that while I was taking a shower … word came to me that Col. Bratton had something important and wished to come out to Fort Myer. I sent word that I was coming to the War Department."

From the shower, yes, after trotting, after cantering, and a full gallop—yes, "purely by induction and not by definite memory," he took a shower. "My average time of taking a shower and dressing would be about 10 minutes, possibly less. As to what time I arrived at the War Department is a matter of conjecture; I have no recollection."

He remembers only so much, and nothing more.

Later in the morning, Bratton met with Marshall and showed him a decoded and translated Japanese diplomatic message intercepted by U.S. intelligence. The message suggested that Japan was about to attack the United States at around 1 p.m. Washington time (8 a.m. Hawaii time). According to the deciphered message, the Japanese embassy was ordered by Tokyo to destroy its code machines, a sure sign that war would begin.

The general, who had showered and dressed in 10 minutes, and could ride a horse at a full gallop, suddenly slowed down. He wasn't in a great hurry to pass Bratton's intelligence along to Gen. Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines or Gen. Walter Short in Hawaii. He did, of course, send warnings to the Philippines, San Francisco, and Panama. But for some reason, a telegram he sent to Hawaii didn't arrive until the Japanese attack was underway.

The Mystery Deepens

The mystery of Marshall's whereabouts on the night before the Japanese attack, and his failing memory regarding the morning of Dec. 7, had a curious footnote appended by none other than Sen. Joseph McCarthy (some years later). The footnote is from the biography of a communist diplomat named Maxim Litvinoff (also spelled Litvinov), who was appointed Ambassador to the United States in November 1941.

Litvinoff was no ordinary diplomat, since he had served as the Soviet foreign minister before the appointment of Vyacheslav Molotov. And Litvinoff's assignment to Washington was no ordinary diplomatic mission.

The context of Litvinoff's appointment was as follows: Germany had invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. German troops and tanks were advancing on Moscow. The Soviet armies defending Moscow were being systematically wiped out. So dire was the situation, the Soviet government was in the process of relocating from Moscow to Kuibyshev.

From thence, he was given his instructions and loaded on a plane. Of course, his departure was delayed on account of weather. The British and American press even said, at one point, that his plane was missing.

On Nov. 17, 1941, Litvinoff and his wife landed in Tehran, Iran, where he attended meetings and received reports not only about the Germans, but about the Japanese. On Nov. 23, Litvinoff flew to Baghdad. Then, inexplicably, his aircraft doubled back across Iran and landed in Calcutta, where he was received at Government House (British India) by Sir Shenton Thomas, who was told by Litvinoff of an imminent Japanese attack on the United States and Britain. (Litvinoff was assured that the Japanese would never reach Calcutta.)

On Nov. 30, the Litvinoffs arrived in Manila where they were guests of High Commissioner Francis B. Sayre. They dined at the "cool, white palace of the High Commissioner," together with Gen. and Mrs. MacArthur. Litvinoff allegedly warned MacArthur of an impending attack from Japan.

On Dec. 2, the Litvinoffs arrived in Guam, and then on Dec. 3 to Wake Island, finally arriving at Honolulu on Dec. 4, 1941. The sly Soviet oracle was the guest of honor at a well-attended reception. The Litvinoffs were then taken to the House of the Governor, where Short and Adm. Husband Kimmel welcomed the newly appointed Soviet ambassador to the United States.

As he did in Manila and in Calcutta, Litvinoff warned the two American commanders that a Japanese attack would come at any moment. Someone reportedly said to him, “They would be fools to attack us now.”

Litvinoff smiled and replied, “Yes, indeed, they would be fools. But they will attack.”

According to the Soviet ambassador’s biographer, “On the morning of Sunday, December 7, Litvinoff’s plane arrived at Bolling Field, Washington, D.C.” where he “was received by … General Marshall and Admiral King and many other officers and officials.” The biographer says Litvinoff was exhausted by the flight and was driven to the Soviet Embassy, where he slept for four hours. At that time, his secretary woke him with the news that Pearl Harbor was under attack.

It is disappointing, of course, that Marshall couldn’t remember meeting the Soviet ambassador’s plane on the morning of Dec. 7. It is, perhaps, also unbelievable that his otherwise famous memory would fail on that day, of all days. At the same time, Litvinoff knew exactly what his movements had been on those fateful days leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Of course, from the American perspective, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff might find it inconvenient, under the circumstances of a congressional investigation, to explain why he had met the Soviet ambassador’s plane little more than four hours before Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. Was Marshall then colluding with Moscow?

There is, as well, the question of giving false answers to a congressional inquiry. Is it conceivable that Marshall had forgotten the details of Dec. 7, 1941? And yet, that is exactly what he told Congress. The famous memory of this supposedly brilliant general wasn’t working on the morning Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Is it honest? Is it respectable to give such answers to Congress? Or was it a trick to avoid perjury?

The facts are thus, and there is more to say.

J.R. Nyquist has been a columnist for WorldNetDaily, SierraTimes, and Financial Sense Online. He is the author of the books “Origins of the Fourth World War” and “The Fool and His Enemy,” as well as co-author of “The New Tactics of Global War.”

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