Reflections on an American seer: Andrew W. Marshall and the mind of the strategist

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Introduction

Andrew Marshall, legendary former Director of Net Assessment (ONA) in the United States (US) Department of Defence, died on 26 March 2019 at the age of ninety-seven in Arlington, Virginia. His sixty-year career as a defence intellectual—including over four decades of service as head of the ONA—saw him help shape American strategy for an era of nuclear weapons, the Cold War and for the rapid changes of the early 21st century. He was the trusted Pentagon insider whose task was to study the contours of future warfare for successive administrations; yet, while many American defence specialists often cultivate public profiles as action-intellectuals in the vein of Herman Kahn, Marshall trod a different path. His career was forged on a cult of anonymity. Rarely in the history of any modern defence organisation has one man been so invisible and yet so intellectually influential for so long. Outside of specialist defence circles, Marshall remains a largely unknown figure or as some Western strategists are wont to remark, ‘the most influential man you have never heard of’.

From 1973 until 2015—from Nixon to Obama—Marshall made the ONA a bastion of intellectual activity in a vast Pentagon bureaucracy, where all too often innovation is the prey of bureaucratic fads, inter-service politics and election cycles. In the process, the ONA director became not only an architect of official strategy but a mentor to two generations of American defence analysts, ensuring that the US strategic studies community renewed itself by continuously fostering younger talent and new ideas. To many Western defence specialists Marshall is America’s Yoda, the grand master of a philosophy of competitive strategy that contributed decisively to the fall of the Soviet Union; he is the American sage of the 21st century’s Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and an unsentimental analyst of a rising China. The Marshall mystique extended well beyond the West. He was, as one Russian analyst put it, the ‘Gray Cardinal’ of the Pentagon, an éminence grise who—like Puzo’s
Tom Hagen in *The Godfather*—ran a semi-secret forty-year practice serving only one powerful client: the Secretary of Defence. In the Chinese military of the 1990s, Marshall was a key influence in changing the direction of strategy. In an interview in April 2012, Major General Chen Zhou, the main author of several Chinese post-Cold War defence white papers stated: ‘We [the People’s Liberation Army] studied RMA exhaustively. Our great hero was Andy Marshall in the Pentagon. We translated every word he wrote’.1

**Early years**

Andrew Walter Marshall was born in 1921 in Detroit of lower middle-class English parents. From his early childhood onwards, he exhibited a fascination with self-education and in his teens read the works of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Liddell Hart and Toynbee. In his early manhood, during the Second World War, Marshall worked as a machinist in the aircraft industry but after the war, he studied for a master’s degree in economics at the University of Chicago, where his teachers included Milton Friedman and Frank Knight. While at Chicago, he also worked part-time at the Institute for Nuclear Studies, where he had the good fortune to be selected as an assistant to the great physicist Enrico Fermi. On college graduation in January 1949, Marshall joined the new Research and Development (RAND) organisation, which was established by the US Air Force to draw the best American scientific and industrial minds to the new fields of missile science and atomic weaponry. It is important to note that Marshall did not join the new think tank as a strategist but as a statistician, since in 1949 the field of strategic studies was yet to be invented. Once immersed in the research atmosphere of RAND in Santa Monica, California, with its eclectic group of physicists, mathematicians, and social scientists, Marshall soon gravitated towards studying the problems of emerging Soviet-American nuclear rivalry.

As the missile age dawned and the Cold War began, Marshall was to use Dean Acheson’s famous phrase, ‘present at the Creation’.2 With its demand for skills in physics, mathematics, engineering and economics, the early nuclear age of the 1950s and 1960s was a period of intellectual revolution that led to the rapid sidelining of the professional military as the masters of strategy. Memorably described by Fred Kaplan as ‘the Wizards of Armageddon’, it was talented civilian experts who filled the policy vacuum that ensued and began the enormous intellectual challenge of mastering the atomic weapons revolution. Many of the best wizards were located at RAND and Marshall soon became part of a brilliant set that included Herman Kahn; the economist Charles Hitch; the political scientist Bernard Brodie;

and the mathematician, Albert Wohlstetter along with his wife, the talented historian, Roberta.³

For Marshall, the 1950s were a critical apprenticeship in the evolving field of nuclear age strategy. He served alongside such luminaries as Paul Nitze on the 1957 Gaither Committee to investigate American vulnerability to nuclear attack and became a consultant to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The future Pentagon strategist involved himself in a wide-range of original research ranging from nuclear deterrence theory and warfighting through the diagnostics of strategic warning and communications intelligence to Soviet organisational behaviour. Marshall also began what became one of his later trademarks in the Pentagon—intellectual support for colleagues and the mentoring of rising scholars and analysts. For example, he was a moving spirit in persuading Roberta Wohlstetter to write her classic study of American intelligence failure in 1941, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (1962)—a book that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks remains of enduring importance.⁴

In the 1960s, Marshall developed a strong interest in the analytical challenge of measuring the relativities of military power and in the problem of long-term strategic competition under conditions of nuclear stalemate. He was an early critic of the RAND concept of systems analysis based on the quantification and rationalisation of resources, which was adopted by the Pentagon when the Kennedy Administration took office in 1961. Systems analysis as a form of quantifiable management cost-effective decision-making was used by American defence planners to link strategy to capability choices. Marshall believed such an approach to developing America’s strategic options in the nuclear era was far too narrow and technocratic to be realistic.

In 1966, in a RAND paper, *Problems of Estimating Military Power*,⁵ Marshall argued that quantitative metrics were incapable of measuring an adversary’s actual fighting performance, nor did they illuminate the complex uncertainties arising from geography, logistics, military doctrine and, above all, human error. In contrast, he advocated the use of more qualitative methods of strategy derived from politics, social science, organisational studies and psychology. In his work on strategy at RAND, Marshall drew increasingly on inter-disciplinary research ranging from political history through to business studies and social anthropology. He also collaborated with

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leading scholars as varied as the economist James Schlesinger; the historian Richard Neustadt, and the political scientists William Kaufmann and Graham Allison.  

By the late 1960s, Marshall had risen to the position of Director of Strategic Studies at RAND, where he pursued the idea of a long-term strategy aimed at bolstering the West’s geopolitical position against the Soviet Union. Marshall believed that US-Soviet strategic competition, emanating from the unique combination of Cold War ideological differences and nuclear stalemate, needed to be carefully assessed and codified in a search for Western advantage. This conviction led him to develop the closely related, but nonetheless distinctive, approaches to strategy known today as net assessment and competitive strategic advantage. Since Marshall’s reputation as a world-class strategic thinker is based on the application of these two approaches, we need to examine them theoretically before going on to analyse their practical use inside the Pentagon.

**Net assessment and competitive strategic advantage**

For Marshall, net assessment came to represent an approach to strategic analysis that focused on the complex interaction between adversaries. In turn, net assessment formed the intellectual foundation for a competitive strategies approach to countering the Soviet Union. Marshall’s notion of net assessment, with its focus on dynamic interaction and intellectual breadth, remains very different from standard techniques of intelligence analysis and military threat assessment. He wanted to incorporate not just tangibles such as arsenals and force ratios but also a vast array of intangibles ranging from the impact of culture, resource constraints, geography and logistics to training regimes. Marshall’s approach to assessment employed a broad-based, comparative analysis of national security establishments in peace and war, with the aim of identifying ‘critical domains of competition’ that could be exploited for long-range strategic advantage.  

Under Marshall, net assessment became a form of eclectic and interdisciplinary analysis, drawing on fields such as economics, military history, political science and sociology. Three particular characteristics came to distinguish net assessment from the 1970s onwards: (a) comparative analysis; (b) a concentration on diagnosis; and (c) long-term trend identification. As a comparative analysis of ‘friend and foe’ capabilities, net assessment sought to identify strategic asymmetries between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact. The optimum output of a good net assessment became a strategic diagnosis in the form of a comprehensive

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picture of a competitive relationship between two adversaries. Finally, identifying long-term trends provided a basis for estimating the levels of continuity and change in an adversary’s force posture and weapons programs.\(^8\)

In many respects, net assessment is less a strategic methodology than a way of strategic thinking that requires high intellectual application across multiple academic disciplines. As a field it defies codification into common routines. Various attempts by military hierarchies in the United States and Europe to align net assessment with bureaucratic procedures have all been unsuccessful.\(^9\)

The practice of net assessment became the foundation for Marshall’s related philosophy of competitive strategies. In 1972, Marshall published a RAND paper, *Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis*\(^10\), which has been described by strategist, David J. Andre, as being ‘a seminal contribution to US strategic thinking in the post-World War II era’.\(^11\) The paper sought to outline a method of strategy that transcended electoral politics, budget cycles and service rivalries. It outlined a system of competitive strategy based on long-term interaction between national security establishments along with an advanced understanding of organisational dynamics. Marshall’s thinking was strongly influenced by cutting-edge business studies proposing that effective strategy between adversaries should be based on ‘competitor analysis’—and that countries like corporations, possess certain ‘core competencies’—which if correctly exploited lead to success.\(^12\) Seen in retrospect, *Long-Term Competition* with the Soviets is Marshall’s free market answer to the challenge of the Marxist-Leninist dialectic with its ‘correlation of forces’. While the idea of competitive strategy was not new—it is outlined in the ancient texts of both Sun Tzu and Thucydides—Marshall’s achievement was to codify a modern approach in Cold War conditions. He saw competitive strategy as both a method and a guide to long-term advantage based on identifying and aligning enduring US strengths against enduring Soviet weaknesses. The overall aim was to

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8 Ibid.
drive the engine of US–Soviet military competition into areas of cost-imposition that were unfavourable to Moscow.13

The Office of Net Assessments

In the early 1970s, much of Marshall’s thinking on net assessment and strategic competition became attractive to the Nixon Administration. Confronted by the twin challenge of withdrawing from Vietnam and the Soviet Union’s relentless drive to achieve nuclear parity, National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger decided to recruit Marshall from RAND into government service as head of a long-range net assessment group. At the end of 1971, following a directive from President Nixon approving the formation of Marshall’s group, the Office of Net Assessment was established and tasked with undertaking analysis of intelligence, military capabilities and the future strategic environment for the National Security Council (NSC). Then, in September 1973, the Nixon Administration decided that Marshall’s office was best situated not in Kissinger’s NSC but as part of the Pentagon, where it fell under the direct control of James Schlesinger, the Secretary of Defence.14

Marshall was fortunate during the early years of his tenure that his office had bipartisan political support from three able defence secretaries, James Schlesinger (1973-75); Donald Rumsfeld (1975-77); and Harold Brown (1977-81). Schlesinger, in particular, helped cement the foundation for ONA’s work. Not only were Marshall and Schlesinger both former RAND defence experts they were also personal friends, with a shared conviction that net assessment could provide far better long-term guidance to US strategy. Indeed, Schlesinger came to view Marshall as a prophetic figure, a man whom, he said, could ‘see things without the data’. It was Schlesinger who made the key decision that all ONA assessments would be unfiltered ‘best judgments’ that went directly from Marshall’s think tank to the Office of the Secretary of Defence. This meant that ONA reports avoided being staffed through the Pentagon’s bureaucracy, where useful ideas could be corrupted by any number of special interest groups. In effect, Schlesinger ensured that net assessments became strategic documents for the eyes of only the most senior officials. Schlesinger’s enlightened approach to managing the ONA was followed by his successors Rumsfeld and Brown.

Marshall’s intellectual approach to his new position was outlined in an August 1972 memorandum entitled, ‘Nature and Scope of Net Assessment’. In this document he


argued that the US could no longer rely on expenditure to retain strategic superiority over the Soviet Union. The dilemma the Americans faced with the growth of the Soviet nuclear arsenal in the 1970s was summed up by Defence Secretary, Harold Brown, when he remarked in January 1979: ‘Soviet spending...has shown no response to US restraint—when we build, they build, when we cut, they build’. Given this reality, Marshall became convinced that the Soviets had to be out thought by recourse to ‘inventive approaches to defense problem solution[s], and [by] carefully calculated risk taking’ that aimed to identify and to exploit US strategic advantages.15

Marshall was less interested in providing policy prescriptions than he was in providing a diagnosis of emerging strategic problems to arm the minds of senior decision-makers. As a long-range research organisation, ONA deliberately distanced itself from the hurly-burly of everyday bureaucratic processes and internal politics inside the US Department of Defence. It was never tasked with making critical strategic decisions but rather with incubating, evaluating, and promoting a range of future strategic ideas, which the Pentagon bureaucracy was ill-suited to pursue. As Marshall put it, ‘the single most productive resource that can be brought to bear in making net assessments is sustained intellectual effort’. In such an analytical endeavour, the important and the long-term assumed precedence over the urgent and the short-term. From 1973 onwards, four long-term areas of Cold War confrontation became ONA priorities: the US-Soviet strategic nuclear balance; the rival NATO-Warsaw Pact alliances in Europe; the maritime balance of global power; and the estimation of comparative defence spending between the US and the USSR.16

To ensure high quality research in all these areas, Marshall concentrated on forging a wide-ranging inter-disciplinary program. While he drew where possible on the resources of the CIA, the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the armed services, he placed much greater emphasis on attracting the best and brightest minds from business, industry and academia to work for the ONA.

Over the years, Marshall developed what can only be described as a cult following among the cadre of defence analysts he recruited from leading universities, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Stanford, to work in his office. They came to see themselves as an exclusive intellectual elite known as ‘St Andrew’s Prep’ in deference to their mentor. Several members of ‘St Andrew’s Prep’ such as Eliot Cohen, Stephen

Peter Rosen and Aaron Friedberg, went on to become senior officials in the Clinton and two Bush administrations.\textsuperscript{17}

**The Reagan era and the collapse of the Soviet Union**

Part of Marshall’s determination in pursuing competitive strategies during the Cold War was his long-held conviction that the Soviet command economy could not endure a protracted arms race without facing domestic disruption.

The heyday of competitive strategies came in the 1980s under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Unlike most of his predecessors, Reagan believed that the Soviet Union was doomed to end on the rubbish heap of history, and he was determined to force that country to pay an increasing price for its rivalry with the West. In particular, the president’s belief in the growing vulnerability of Soviet political economy became a major factor in his decision to compete with the Russians through arms technology. Reagan’s overall strategy was to build up the US military in key areas while forcing Moscow to spend ever-increasing amounts of resources not only to maintain military parity with the United States but also to support its surrogates abroad from Afghanistan to Angola.\textsuperscript{18}

Under Reagan, the B-1 bomber program; the Advanced Technology Bomber (the B-2 stealth bomber); new land-based MX Peacekeeper intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs); and the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) or ‘Star Wars’ scheme of ballistic missile defence were all initiated. Pershing II intermediate range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles were deployed into Europe to support NATO and arms and money were provided for anti-communist forces globally. While it remains unclear how much the SDI owed directly or indirectly to Marshall, the scheme was a variant of his competitive strategy approach in that it forced the Soviet military into an area of high-end electronics where it was clearly deficient. As Daniel Gouré, a former senior Pentagon official, noted in 2012, ‘by seeking to devalue the ballistic missile, Reagan struck at the heart of Moscow’s sole competitive advantage vis-à-vis the West’.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1987, Defence Secretary, Caspar Weinberger announced in his Department’s Annual Report: ‘I have decided to make competitive strategies a major theme of the Department of Defense during the remainder of this Administration’. Weinberger and his successor, Frank Carlucci, fostered a Strategic Concepts Development Centre

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(SCDC) at the National Defence University to closely examine the dynamics of long-term military competition. A competitive strategies philosophy was also instrumental in shaping the US Navy’s new Maritime Strategy, which aimed at enclosing the Soviet fleet in its home waters. As Gouré observes, ‘while not the singular reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union, the competitive strategies approach, particularly as applied by the Reagan administration, did much to set the stage for subsequent events and for the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact’.20

There can be little doubt that the superpower arms competition of the 1980s was one of the main reasons for the disintegration of the Soviet regime. In 1992, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, the Chief of the Soviet General Staff recalled, ‘the Soviet Union could not continue the confrontation with the United States and NATO after 1985. The economic resources for such a policy had been practically exhausted’.21

Marshall was by no means the only American strategist to perceive the Kremlin’s growing economic weakness—nor did he foresee the speed of Soviet collapse in 1991. Yet, given his framework for competitive strategy, his scepticism about Soviet economic strength, and his dogged pursuit of an accurate estimate of the Soviet defence burden, Marshall made major contributions to US strategy in the Reagan and George H. Bush years. As Robert Gates has written, Marshall’s work in these areas ‘led to a fundamental rethinking of our long-term competitive position in the Cold War’.22

**A new interwar period**

Following the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and American military success in the Gulf War of 1990-91—all of which suggested the arrival of a new strategic era of unchallenged American superiority—many saw the future as an era of triumphalism and ‘the end of history’. In contrast, Marshall perceived only the arrival of a ‘new interwar period’. Over the course of the 1990s, two areas began to emerge as long-term research concerns for the post-Cold War ONA. The first was the revolution in conventional weapons systems stemming from advanced electronics, precision munitions and terminally guided long-range systems. The second was the replacement of Europe by Asia as America’s future arena of long-term strategic consideration. In particular, Marshall became concerned at the rapid rise of China and its potential to become a peer competitor of the United States.23

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20 Ibid., 91.
21 Barrass, ‘U. S. Competitive Strategy during the Cold War’, 84.
23 Krepinevich and Watts, The Last Warrior, chapters 8–9.
The ONA had carefully tracked writings on what Soviet strategists called a ‘military technical revolution’ (MTR) arising from new conventional weapons systems during the 1980s. Russian military theorists postulated that, over time, electronics and precision munitions would combine to create autonomous ‘reconnaissance-and-strike complexes’ (battle networks created by the integration of command, communications, and firepower). Taking his cue from Soviet thinking, Marshall commissioned a body of research to analyse the processes of military innovation in terms of technology, doctrine and organisation and how these might be translated into strategy. For example, he commissioned two leading American military historians, Williamson Murray and Allan Millett to produce historical case studies on military effectiveness in the period from 1914 to 1945—when carrier warfare, air power, submarines and armoured mobility were all developed. Marshall was interested in exploring how a technological monopoly could evaporate quickly in the face of rivals, as was the case with the British lead in carrier aviation in 1918 and American atomic weapons in the late 1940s. The Murray-Millett study was published in three edited volumes between 1988 and 1991 under the title *Military Effectiveness* and they remain today seminal texts in any understanding of military innovation.24

The ONA’s work on military effectiveness assumed much greater policy importance following the end of the Cold War when swift American success in the 1991 Gulf conflict demonstrated the raw power of the precision revolution. For Marshall, the liberation of Kuwait provided strong evidence of major changes in warfare arising from the use of stealth aircraft, long-range munitions, advanced sensors, and the use of satellite technology. He came to believe that long-range strike systems would eventually blur traditional distinctions between land, air and sea in favour of multidimensional operations. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, he told his staff, ‘the most important thing we [the ONA] can focus on in the next several years is the investigation of, and experimentation with, novel concepts of operation and new organisations to exploit the technologies available now and likely to be available in the next 20 years’.25 To this end, in 1992, ONA produced an analysis of the phenomenon of the military revolution which, almost a decade later, was published under the title of *The Military Technical Revolution: A Preliminary Assessment* by the Centre for Budgetary and Strategic Assessment in Washington in 2002.26 The significance of this work was that it set the terms for the debate on what Marshall christened the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA) and which came to dominate much of Western defence thinking throughout the 1990s.

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25 Ibid., 220.

An RMA-style military became of keen interest to Republican candidate, George W. Bush, in his quest for the White House. In early 2001, following Bush’s presidential victory, Donald Rumsfeld returned as Secretary for Defence for a second time and began to pursue a ‘transformation’ of the US armed forces based on information age technologies and organisational change. As part of this policy, Marshall was asked by Rumsfeld to conduct a review of US defence aimed at creating ‘an advantage-based defence strategy’ that would prolong American superiority in key competencies such as undersea warfare, aerospace science, robotics and combat training.\(^{27}\) When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, its air power and digitised ground units conquered the country in less than three weeks with only a third of the force levels deployed during the 1991 Gulf War. It was a striking demonstration of decisive RMA-style warfare.

Yet, a swift victory was soon eclipsed by the unexpected development of long irregular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. While much of the US defence establishment became consumed by protracted irregular conflict in the Islamic world after 2003, Marshall, a Thucydidean realist by instinct and education, saw a US-China strategic competition as the greatest threat to American primacy. Marshall was unconvinced by the popular wisdom of Beijing’s ‘peaceful rise’ or by claims of ‘responsible stakeholder’ status and believed that the single biggest challenge facing American security was the growing linkage between the precision revolution and the changing balance of military power in Asia. In 2011, one of Marshall’s ONA protégés, Aaron Friedberg, published, \textit{A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia}, a pessimistic study which attacked ‘a wilful, blinkered optimism that Sino-US rivalry was highly unlikely, in part because it was too dangerous to contemplate’.\(^{28}\)

Given America’s distraction with radical Islam and insurgency warfare, Marshall feared that China would be unrestrained in acquiring the technological means to begin shifting the strategic balance in the Western Pacific progressively in its favour. The ONA director never faltered in urging a concentration of American strategic effort in Asia in order ‘to plan for the types of military challenges a malevolent China may pose over the long-term and [to] incorporate these into service and joint war games and exercise programs’. China’s acquisition of long-range missiles, cyber, space and undersea warfare capabilities could only place limitations on America’s ability to project naval power to secure its Asia-Pacific alliance system stretching from Japan to Australia. For Marshall, weapons systems such as the Feng 21-D anti-ship ballistic missile provided evidence that China was rapidly acquiring the

\(^{27}\) Donald Rumsfeld, \textit{Known and Unknown: A Memoir} (New York: Sentinel 2011), 293.

capacity to pursue ‘area-denial and anti-access’ (A2AD) strategies off its littoral. The US Navy’s forward presence, symbolised by its powerful aircraft carrier groups, would become vulnerable leaving Taiwan, Japan and South Korea exposed to potential Chinese coercion.

From the early 2000s, ONA undertook important research aimed at fostering better understanding of China’s strategic culture and its view of war. Marshall was particularly impressed by the French scholar, François Jullien’s work on Chinese military thought with its emphasis on achieving positional and psychological advantage (xing and shih) over an adversary—concepts which resonated with his own philosophy of competitive strategies. Concepts such as the US Navy’s air-sea battle, joint operational access and, more recently, the joint concept for access and maneuver in the global commons all bear the imprint of ONA influence. However, despite Marshall’s strong focus on Sino-American strategic relations, it remains unclear to what extent he influenced the Obama Administration’s 2011 announcement of a ‘pivot’, or rebalancing, of US defence resources towards the Asia-Pacific.

At a conference dinner in the mid-1990s, some of Marshall’s ‘St Andrew’s Prep’ protégés presented him with a framed print of Jean-Léon Gérôme’s 1873 painting of François Leclerc du Tremblay (Père Joseph), the Capuchin monk who served at the right hand of Cardinal Richelieu and who has come down to us as the original éminence grise. The implication is clear: just as du Tremblay played a key role in France’s emergence as the great power of Europe at the end of the Thirty Years War, so too was Marshall instrumental in shaping America’s global supremacy by helping to defeat the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Marshall was a quiet seer, a courtly and self-effacing individual comfortable with anonymity in the pursuit of improved knowledge. His private motto, ‘There is no end to the good a person can do if he does not care who gets the credit,’ demonstrates a dedication to impersonal truth rather than personal ambition. In a real sense, Marshall is reminiscent not of the Capuchin, du Tremblay, but of another Frenchman, the Dominican priest and philosopher, Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges. The latter’s description of the harmonious soul in pursuit of knowledge in his 1921 book, The Intellectual Life, can be applied to Marshall:

Do you want to do intellectual work? Begin by creating within you a zone of silence, a habit of recollection, a will to renunciation and detachment which puts you entirely at the disposal of the work; acquire that state of soul unburdened

by desire and self-will which is the state of grace of the intellectual worker. Without that you will do nothing, at least nothing worthwhile.30

Sertillanges goes on to argue that, while the most mediocre mind may hit on an idea, like a rough diamond or a pearl, what is really difficult is what he calls ‘the cutting of the idea, and, above all, its setting into a jewel of truth which will be the real creation’.31 Marshall not only hit upon the ideas of net assessment and competitive strategy, he also cut them into jewels of knowledge to serve America’s national interest during the Cold War. He achieved this ‘cutting of ideas’ not by seeking to build an empire inside the Pentagon—the ONA has seldom numbered more than twenty personnel—but by relying on an intellect which was attuned to longer-term trends. It is this capacity for original thought and its objective presentation to the policy-world that makes Marshall such an influential American strategist.

**The Marshall legacy**

What then of Andrew Marshall’s legacy? Any judgment can only be an interim one given that so much about his work remains secret. An important 2015 intellectual biography, *The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy*, by two of his protégés, Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts attests to Marshall’s significant role as a Pentagon seer.32 Moreover, the continuing importance and sensitivity of Marshall’s work can be gauged by the simple fact that, of twenty-five net assessments produced by the ONA under his directorship, only two are declassified today. This secrecy notwithstanding, it seems clear that Marshall is one of the most prominent Western strategists of the past half century. He helped the West win the Cold War and set important parameters for our understanding of strategy in the 21st century. During his long stewardship of the ONA, he approached the crafting of strategy as a creative process in which preferable policies must be measured against interaction with adversaries and conditioned by resources. His interlocking strategic frameworks of net assessment and competitive advantage continue to remain relevant as we enter what Paul Bracken has called a ‘second nuclear age’ in Asia, marked by the rise of China and renewed great power rivalry.33 Indeed, in 2012, the leading American scholar Thomas G. Mahnken, edited

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31 Ibid., xxvi.
a major study entitled, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century*, focused on Asia in general, and China in particular.  

Marshall’s extraordinary career from the physics laboratory in Chicago where he worked with Enrico Fermi through his membership of RAND’s glittering coterie of nuclear strategy pioneers to his long and influential directorship of the Pentagon’s ONA is a reminder of the importance of fostering intellect in strategic affairs. Thinking about strategy requires significant creativity as well as curiosity and a tolerance for uncertainty. These are virtues that are seldom found in defence bureaucracies, which tend to thrive on predictability and routine. When one combines bureaucratic orthodoxy with the impact of contemporary social media outlets and a relentless electronic news cycle, the environment for good Western defence policy-making in the future is hardly encouraging. In the years ahead, a Westminster-style governmental system, such as Australia’s, would do well to examine how Marshall’s ONA functioned and to consider the value of creating a diagnostic strategic-level think tank as vital adjuncts to its defence organisation.

From the Spanish Habsburgs through to the Germans in two world wars to America in Vietnam and Iraq, history is littered with countries that could win battles but not wars because they lacked proper organisation for high-level strategy formulation. Marshall’s long ONA tenure was distinguished by his laser-like concentration on wars not battles; by an unwavering focus on the strategic future not the present; and by an eternal vigilance that eschewed complacency. He remains an American original and the last survivor of the gifted Cold War strategists from the RAND Corporation, who rose to prominence in the 1950s. In 1986, when historian, Peter Paret, edited a now famous collection of essays entitled *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Andrew Marshall’s name did not appear in any of the chapters on Cold War strategy. In the future, it is almost certain that any further edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* will have to remedy that omission—and not just about the Cold War—but in its new chapters on the post-Cold War era and beyond.