



Opinion: Heed The Marshall Maxim

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“I’d rather have decent answers to the right question than great answers to irrelevant questions.”

This pithy precept appears at the top of page 1 of *The Last Warrior*, an intellectual history of Andrew Marshall, the furtive, 42-year director of the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment (ONA), who died in March at the age of 97. So often was the maxim repeated in appreciations of Marshall that it has me wondering about the “right questions” we should be trying to answer today.

Those who do not recognize the name can rest assured that even Marshall’s colleagues would refer to him as “the most influential man you’ve never heard of.” His resistance to celebrity notwithstanding, I have known of Andy Marshall for a very long time, and not because we knew one another.

His name has figured as a leitmotif in the development and practice of my own thinking about strategy. From seeing Graham Allison’s effusive acknowledgement of Marshall in the pathbreaking 1971 book *Essence of Decision* to chumming with a clique of Marshall acolytes at the Center for Naval Analyses during my tenure there in the immediate post-Cold War years, I came early to admire the gravitas of Andy Marshall. Even my current practice in business strategy echoes Marshall, who in 1992 famously invited a group of business strategists from IBM, AT&T, Sun Microsystems and Xerox to lead an offsite on innovation before a reluctant group of admirals and generals accustomed to themselves being at the front of every room.



Until recently, amplifying mere admiration with actual knowledge of Marshall's oeuvre has been a privilege accorded few outside the brotherhood of ONA alumni dubbed "St. Andrew's Prep." Marshall's self-effacing temperament, combined with the secret classification and exclusive distribution of nearly everything he wrote in government service, had lent an aura of mystery to the chief priest's actual views and analyses.

While ONA's assessments remain locked away, Marshall's retirement coincided with publication of several magazine profiles, academic assessments and *The Last Warrior* (the latter by proteges Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts), all of which give credit to Marshall's early identification of three insights that decisively shaped the Pentagon's outlook: Long-term economic weakness would undo the Soviet Union; the advent of advanced information technology married to precision guidance would revolutionize warfare; and China would rise to compete with the U.S. for global leadership.

Taking Marshall at his word, one presumes these early-warning insights were derived from analyses he commissioned after carefully determining the right questions to ask about the strategic challenges of the late Cold War, post-Cold War and early 21st century, respectively. According to Krepinevich and Watts, what Marshall called "strategic management" required developing insights about "one or two of the most pressing problems or attractive opportunities in a given competition, and [doing] so early enough for the defense secretary to make decisions about them that would influence their outcome."

How better to honor this man and his legacy, therefore, than to take up what I will call the Marshall Maxim and propose three questions whose answers may help illuminate choices about the strategic management of the nation, its defense establishment and the industry which serves it:

- How will America's role in the world change when the tectonics of national power—wealth, technology and demographics—are no longer tilted in our favor? We will need a new grand strategy by which to create power.
- How do we deter, defend against and defeat adversaries in a world where kinetic power is depreciating? As information progressively trumps lethality as an instrument of war, we will need to organize and equip our military forces differently.
- What is the business model of the next great defense company? The Aerospace Industries Association's recent report, "Vision 2050," affirms that "established A&D players are finding their existing operating and investing paradigms may need to change."

These may not be the best "right questions," and I offer them with the abject modesty befitting their inspiration. But now as much as at any time over Marshall's career, we who share his unbounded curiosity about strategic management should be laboring to discover the right questions for which decent answers are needed.

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