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Thomas R. Marshall: Progressive Era Politics, a Presidential Hoax, and the 1920 Election

Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to my parents, for mentoring me my whole life, and to Dr. David Parker, for agreeing to review and sponsor this paper.

**Thomas R. Marshall:
Progressive Era Politics, a Presidential Hoax, and the 1920 Election**

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Abstract

In 1919, Vice President Thomas Marshall was speaking in Atlanta when he was told the president had died in Washington. Marshall was understandably shocked and felt the burden of the presidency suddenly on his shoulders. Happily for him, the story he was told was a hoax from an unknown perpetrator. This paper explores the life of Thomas Marshall, vice president of the United States for eight years, from his Indiana origins until the end of his time in office. Along the way, Marshall and his beliefs of the Progressive movement are highlighted, as are the national politics of his day. Marshall could have easily been the Democratic candidate in the 1920 election, but he chose not to run because of the incident in Atlanta. This paper proposes that he would have been more electable than the eventual nominee, James M. Cox, and could have won the election. A Marshall victory in 1920 would have extended the Progressive Era into the 1920s, which instead were a time of Harding and Coolidge's *laissez-faire* presidencies. America could have been easily affected by a Marshall presidency, yet this hoax in Atlanta stopped it from happening.

Keywords: Thomas R. Marshall, Woodrow Wilson, Atlanta, Progressive Era

The Atlanta crowd was breathless: the nation's beloved president of six years was dead in Washington. His replacement, an Indianan named Thomas Marshall, spoke on stage about the sad news. It was a critical juncture in American history—even in world history—as Congress debated the Treaty of Versailles and whether America would join the League of Nations. The burden of representing Woodrow Wilson's dream fell to Marshall. What would the new president do?

Thomas Marshall did not become president since Woodrow Wilson was not, in fact, dead. However improbable as it may seem on this cold November day in 1919,

there were a few moments when the Atlanta crowd thought they had witnessed history. Even though the report of Wilson's death was fake, the effect it had on Marshall caused him to turn away from the White House. The idea of Marshall as president is a unique “what if?” and could have easily changed the course of the 1920s.

Thomas Riley Marshall was born in North Manchester, Indiana, on March 14, 1854.¹ His family came from Virginia, and his parents were Dr. Daniel and Martha Patterson Marshall. Later during his career, people would ask if he was related to the famous Marshall of Virginia: Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Marshall. All rumors

1. David J. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World: The Life and Times of Thomas Riley Marshall* (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2007), 4.

were laid to rest in Marshall's memoirs: "So far as I know I am the only man of my name who does not trace his origin directly or collaterally to the great chief justice."² Dr. Daniel Marshall was a Democrat, and his son followed in his footsteps.

Thomas Marshall attended Wabash College, and his "years as a student... were a determining factor throughout his life."³ While at Wabash College, he began showing his political aspirations by starting a Democratic Club.⁴ It was also at Wabash that he had his first encounter with the judicial system, but it was not a positive one. After the student newspaper at Wabash published a libelous article about a visiting speaker, the paper's staff, which included Marshall, were sued. The case was dismissed, but the reason remains unclear.⁵ This did not deter Marshall, and he resolved to be completely honest in all his public actions. He could boast, after a long political career, that he was "never again... sued for either slander or libel." Marshall became a lawyer after graduation from Wabash College.

In the late 1870s, he was engaged to Catherine "Kate" Hooper, a Columbia City,

Indiana resident and the daughter of Marshall's boss. She passed away in September 1878, and "Tom Marshall's alcoholism came to the surface."⁶ For the next fifteen years, he drifted; he remained a lawyer but found the work too tedious. His early cases seemed to him to be just "fist fights," the phrase Marshall used in his memoirs to describe "assault-and-battery cases," but once the railroad came, he found his workload changed to cases of "railroad companies... mutilating and killing our citizens."⁷ In 1893 he met Lois Kimsey, and they were soon engaged. They married in 1895, "and her first task was to cure him of his alcohol addiction." With her support, he was able to begin to focus more on entering politics.

Marshall's Democratic Party had undergone many changes since its formation in the time of Andrew Jackson. In the Era of Old Hickory, it was the party of "hard money, antibanking, anticorporation and negative government doctrines" and followed in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson.⁸ Because of their antagonism to Lincoln's Republican Party, after the Civil War, Democrats were often denounced as the party of treason and

2. Thomas R. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall: A Hoosier Salad* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925), 15.

3. Charles M. Thomas, *Thomas Riley Marshall: Hoosier Statesman*, Men of America Series (Oxford, Mississippi: The Mississippi Valley Press, 1939), 14.

4. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 88.

5. Thomas, *Thomas Riley Marshall*, 16.

6. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 26.

7. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 106-107.

8. Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66.

slavery.⁹ Tammany Hall, a New York political organization, caused the Democrat's image as the party of reform to fall by the wayside, and it would not be resurrected until the time Marshall began to enter politics, with the "scrupulously honest" Grover Cleveland and William Jennings Bryan.¹⁰ Under leadership from Bryan, a new faction of the party began to emerge with the support of Midwestern and Southern farmers. Called the Populists, they were reformers and supporters of currency based on both gold and silver. Gradually, some joined a movement called the Progressives, and Marshall found himself in this new camp. He never entirely went as far as Bryan, but was still an ally.¹¹ In 1906, Marshall was approached about running for Congress, but he instead indicated that he would prefer to be Indiana's governor. In 1908, he won the gubernatorial election, partly because of support from political boss Thomas Taggart.¹² The political bosses controlled the inner workings of the political parties in states and cities, though they were not always necessarily elected officials.

As Governor, Marshall proposed a new constitution for the State of Indiana, which was last replaced in 1851. The new constitution enshrined many of his progressive beliefs. Opponents argued it dealt too much with many long-settled issues, like the banning of slavery.¹³ Due to complicated legal problems, the legislature passed the constitution, but the document never reached a referendum. "Tom Marshall's Constitution" was killed by the Indiana Supreme Court, which Marshall complained about in his final message to the legislature.¹⁴ While some newspapers, a year after the constitution was defeated, claimed that "The Tom Marshall constitution... was a big joke," some of its principles (including the legislature's ability to override a governor's veto) are now commonly found in other states.¹⁵ (When he wrote his memoirs, he was still upset, describing the incident in a section titled "Judicial Autocracy.")¹⁶ The Marshall Constitution caused its namesake to gain a national reputation in his party. In 1912, he was one of several individuals handpicked by William Jennings Bryan to challenge the temporary chairman of the

9. Richard White, *The Republic for Which it Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*, The Oxford History of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24.

10. Troy Senik, *A Man of Iron: The Turbulent Life and Improbable Presidency of Grover Cleveland* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2022), 7.

11. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 49.

12. Thomas, *Thomas Riley Marshall*, 44-45.

13. "Constitution to Free Slaves," *The Daily Republican (Rushville, IN)*, April 24, 1911.

14. "Governor Takes Fling at Court," *The Indianapolis Star*, January 10, 1913.

15. "The Finish of the Tom Constitution," *Fort Wayne Daily News*, December 2, 1913; Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 116.

16. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 211.

1912 Democratic National Convention, Alton B. Parker, for the role of permanent chairman, but Marshall declined the offer.¹⁷ The fact Bryan would consider Marshall an ally and a party leader shows how Marshall's reputation as a Progressive was acknowledged nationwide by his party.

It was standard practice for state parties to propose a candidate from their state as a favorite son at national conventions. The 1912 Republican National Convention saw incumbent William Howard Taft battle with Theodore Roosevelt. Still, three Progressive favorite son candidates, Senators Robert La Follette Sr. and Albert Cummins, and Charles Evans Hughes of the Supreme Court, also received votes.¹⁸ Taft's ultimate victory at the convention caused the party to split in two, with a new Bull Moose Party forming around Theodore Roosevelt. This occurred just days before the Democratic National Convention on June 25, 1912, in Baltimore. There were several frontrunners for the presidency, including New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson and Speaker of the House Champ Clark. The primaries indicated Clark would receive the most votes at the convention but

not enough to secure the necessary two-thirds majority needed for nomination.¹⁹ Marshall was supported as a favorite son candidate by Indiana delegates, and political boss Thomas Taggart "thought there was a chance that Marshall could emerge as a compromise candidate."²⁰ The idea was not improbable: in 1880, amid somewhat similar circumstances, the unknown James A. Garfield had emerged as the Republican candidate.²¹ While the convention did not result in Marshall's nomination for president, Taggart used the Marshall votes as a bargaining chip to secure Wilson's spot on the ticket.²²

Following this, Marshall quickly secured a spot as Wilson's running mate. Though the two had never met, Wilson told the press Marshall was a "valued personal friend."²³ Meanwhile, Clark went down in history as a "victim of the two-thirds rule."²⁴

Also voted on at the Democratic National Convention was the national platform, which included criticism of the high cost of living, a denunciation of monopolies, commendations for the nation for creating an income tax and allowing the

17. William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Philadelphia: The United Publishers of America, 1925), 164-165.

18. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 712.

19. A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2013), 232.

20. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 134.

21. Joseph Bucklin Bishop, *Presidential Nominations and Elections: A History of American Conventions, National Campaigns, Inaugurations and Campaign Caricature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 86-87.

22. Berg, *Wilson*, 233.

23. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 139.

24. Bishop, *Presidential Nominations and Elections*, 96.

popular election of senators, and promotion of presidential primaries. Notably, it also said that the party “favor[ed] a single presidential term, and to that end urge[d] the adoption of an amendment to the Constitution.”²⁵ This was an addition supported by leaders of the Progressive Movement, and William Jennings Bryan had advocated for a similar amendment for several years.²⁶ Other Progressive ideals, like the conservation of natural resources, the creation of a Department of Labor, and the promotion of food safety laws, were also supported. During his time in office, Theodore Roosevelt heavily promoted consumer safety, labor protections, and land conservation, showing how the Progressive movement’s tenets could cross party lines. The party platform concluded with a pledge that the “platform is one of the principles which we believe are essential to our national welfare.”²⁷

Because of the Republican Party’s split between Taft and Roosevelt, the Wilson-Marshall ticket easily won the election. Wilson and Marshall received 435 electoral votes, compared to Roosevelt’s 88 and Taft’s 8.²⁸ However, as historian H. W. Brands has noted, “how much of Wilson’s popular vote

reflected simple Democratic loyalty, as opposed to endorsement of his small-government progressivism over [Roosevelt’s] big-government version and Taft’s comfort with the status quo, was impossible to determine.”²⁹ The election, while a Democratic victory, did not necessarily imply that Wilson and Marshall had the strong nationwide support that was needed to win again in the future. When Inauguration Day came, Wilson “summon[ed] all honest men, all patriotic, all forward-looking men, to [his] side.”³⁰

Presidential historians are divided on Woodrow Wilson’s time in office. A. Scott Berg, in his 2013 biography of Wilson, takes great care to compare the twenty-eighth president to Jesus Christ, particularly in the book’s chapter titles. John Milton Cooper Jr., in his 2009 biography, takes the much more nuanced view that “Wilson was not a president for all seasons... In the end, much about Wilson remains troubling... Wilson, along with Lincoln and Jefferson, would come to be one of the best remembered and

25. *Party Platforms and Conventions, together with Votes and Proceedings of the Republican, Democratic and Progressive National Conventions of 1912* (New York: The Evening Post, 1912), 23.

26. Bryan and Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan*, 173.

27. *Party Platforms and Conventions*, 31.

28. Bishop, 225.

29. H. W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 69.

30. Woodrow Wilson, “Inaugural Address,” in *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States from George Washington 1789 to John F. Kennedy 1961* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), 202.

most argued over presidents.”³¹ Perhaps it is Patricia O’Toole who sums it up best: “he was the most controversial of the [presidents] because his triumphs as well as his defeats were so large and lasting.”³²

Conversely, Thomas Marshall's role as vice president is much less debated, partly because the office is less significant. Historians are not often on Marshall’s side. Cooper said he did not “make much of a mark in office” primarily because he “endured neglect from the White House.”³³ More positively, Joel K. Goldstein called him our “funniest Vice President.”³⁴ The vice president’s role since the time of John Adams had been to preside over the Senate, perform minor ceremonial duties, and little else. Because of this, there was little chance for Marshall to leave his mark, especially as Wilson leaned on advisors closer to him. Reflecting on his time in office, Marshall was critical. “The standing joke of the country,” Marshall wrote with his trademark wit, “is that the only business of the vice president is to ring the White House bell every morning

and ask what is the state of health of the president.”³⁵ He found this was not the reality of a vice president’s responsibilities. In his role as presiding officer of the Senate, his name did find itself on two important pieces of legislation: the Eighteenth Amendment (which started Prohibition) and the Nineteenth Amendment (women’s suffrage), which is notable given the fact that Marshall was a recovering alcoholic and opposed to women voting.³⁶ He also gained a small claim to fame during a Senate debate. After a long speech by Senator Bristow extolling what the country needed, Marshall turned to the man next to him and said, “What this country needs is a really good five-cent cigar.”³⁷ This one remark has gone down in history as Marshall’s greatest legacy. Still, because of comments like this, Colonel Edward House, Wilson’s closest advisor, noted Marshall began to be viewed as a “jester” by contemporaries.³⁸

Before entering World War I, it seemed like America truly needed only Marshall’s cigar. In 1916, Wilson and

31. John Milton Cooper Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 10-11; Cooper, 599.

32. Patricia O’Toole, *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), XV.

33. John Milton Cooper Jr, “A Shadowed Office, the Vice Presidency and Its Occupants, 1900-1920,” in *At The President’s Side: The Vice Presidency in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Timothy Walch (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 16.

34. Joel K. Goldstein, “Vice-Presidential Behavior in a Disability Crisis: The Case of Thomas R. Marshall,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 33, no. 2 (2014): 37.

35. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 368.

36. Thomas, *Thomas Riley Marshall*, 143; Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 262.

37. “Yes, Verily,” *St. Joseph (MO) Gazette*, April 5, 1914.

38. Thomas, *Thomas Riley Marshall*, 153.

Marshall were both chosen by their party to serve another term. They defeated Charles Evans Hughes in November's elections, but political pundits pointed out that the results showed "not that Wilson won but that Hughes almost did."³⁹ Once America entered the war, Woodrow Wilson's administration shifted its focus towards Europe. Wilson himself preferred domestic issues, telling a friend shortly after his election that "it would be an irony of fate if his administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs."⁴⁰ While military historians question whether America's entry into the war affected the outcome, it did bring the war to a swifter conclusion.⁴¹ Wilson's Fourteen Points laid out America's, or at least the president's, vision of a world in the wake of "the moral climax of... the final war for human liberty."⁴² Though America was only in the war for a short time, it was enormously expensive, and it was estimated that the money spent was "nearly large enough to pay the entire cost of our Government from 1791" until World War I.⁴³ Woodrow Wilson guided the nation during this massive expansion of the Federal government, which

was followed by criticism for violations of civil liberties. After the armistice, Wilson traveled overseas to negotiate the Treaty of Versailles, leaving the nation without its Commander in Chief. Wilson asked Marshall to fill the void, and he led cabinet meetings in Wilson's absence for the next several months.⁴⁴ This was unusual for the time, as the vice president rarely attended cabinet meetings, much less led them. Asked what he thought after the first meeting, Marshall said he "had a very good time... quite a number of stories were told."⁴⁵ He also represented Wilson in official functions, including meeting diplomats and attending Theodore Roosevelt's funeral.⁴⁶

The treaty Wilson returned with polarized the nation, mainly because of its inclusion of a League of Nations. Republicans in Congress, led by Theodore Roosevelt's close friend and advisor Henry Cabot Lodge, began campaigning against this

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39. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 359.
40. Robert H. Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson & World War I, 1917-1921* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 231.
41. John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 373.
42. Woodrow Wilson, "The Fourteen Points," in *Documents of American History*, ed. Henry Steele Commager, Vol. 2, *Documents of American History Since 1865* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1958), 317-319.
43. *The Official Record of the United States' Part in the Great War* (n.p., 1925), 147.
44. Joel K Goldstein, *The Modern American Vice Presidency: The Transformation of a Political Institution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 136.
45. "Marshall Acts as 'Referee' in Cabinet Meeting," *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1918.
46. Edmund Morris, *Colonel Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2011), 557.

predecessor of the United Nations.⁴⁷ They were concerned about the idea of the world government the League of Nations would create and if this would erode the sovereignty of the United States.⁴⁸ In response, Wilson, with his Progressive beliefs in the importance of the people, traveled by train across the country, making speeches in support of his League of Nations. Supporters of the League were encouraged by the number of people who came to hear Wilson speak, but it was exhausting for Wilson. After speaking in Pueblo, Colorado, in September 1919, Wilson collapsed from exhaustion.⁴⁹ The trip was cut short, and Wilson was rushed back to Washington where he had a stroke that paralyzed him on his left side.⁵⁰ Marshall was told of the situation at the same time as the rest of the country, and it was made clear to Marshall that Wilson might never recover.⁵¹ With Wilson incapacitated, Marshall had the chance to assume the powers of the presidency; instead, Wilson's wife, Edith, took over, which she claimed was at the urging of the president's doctors.⁵² Marshall

said he would only assume office if Mrs. Wilson, Wilson's closest advisor, and Congress agreed but made no attempt to solicit statements from them.⁵³ Why Marshall was not more assertive has been the focus of scholarly debate, with the best examination of the situation coming from Joel K. Goldstein in a 2014 paper in *Politics and Life Sciences*: "The circumstances were not promising for vice-presidential action. It is hard to see what Marshall could or should have done."⁵⁴ Marshall biographer David Bennett asserts that, had Marshall been acting president, a compromise would have been found in the debates over the League of Nations.⁵⁵ The Senate never agreed to join the League of Nations, and it would take Democratic president Franklin Roosevelt to revive its ideals.

Amid these debates, Marshall went on a speaking tour. In November, he planned to visit Georgia and North Florida.⁵⁶ The public and press had little idea what was happening at the White House while

47. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 541.

48. Laurence Jurdem, *The Rough Rider and the President: Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and the Friendship that Changed American History* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2023), 323.

49. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 529.

50. Cooper, 533.

51. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 285.

52. Goldstein, "Vice-Presidential Behavior in a Disability Crisis," 42.

53. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 540.

54. Goldstein, "Vice-Presidential Behavior in a Disability Crisis," 45.

55. Bennett, *He Almost Changed the World*, 289.

56. "Vice President Plans to Deliver Lecture in Atlanta Nov. 23.," *Atlanta Journal*, November 16, 1919.

Marshall was traveling. For instance, the front page of the November 20, 1919, *Atlanta Georgian* proclaimed, “WILSON SILENT ON TREATY, President to Await Public’s Verdict.”⁵⁷ In fact, just a day before, Wilson had tried to draft a statement “but managed to dictate to Edith only a few disjointed remarks.”⁵⁸ Marshall’s speech for Atlanta was scheduled for November 23, 1919, at the Atlanta Auditorium. He would speak to the Loyal Order of Moose; a group of which Marshall was a proud member. On Thursday, November 20, he spoke in Savannah while the next day saw him in Jacksonville; on November 22, he was in Columbus; and lastly, he ended his trip in Atlanta with a crowd featuring Mayor James Key and Governor Hugh Dorsey.⁵⁹

The Atlanta Auditorium, where Marshall would speak, was built in 1909 at the corner of Courtland and Gilmer Streets. It was used both as a meeting space and an armory, and when it was built, it was “the

largest building in the southern states and one of the largest of its kind in America,” or so newspapers claimed.⁶⁰ The building could hold 7,500 people, and it featured a large pipe organ at one end.⁶¹ Marshall arrived in Atlanta at 11 o’clock and was greeted by Governor Dorsey, Mayor Key, and a variety of other notable Atlantans.⁶² The crowd included Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Clark Howell of the *Atlanta Constitution* and lawyer S. Price Gilbert; both are the namesakes of buildings at the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, respectively.⁶³ While in Atlanta, Marshall stayed at the now-demolished Piedmont Hotel on Peachtree Street.⁶⁴

That night around 8:30, Marshall was introduced to a crowd of several thousand by Governor Dorsey. During his speech, Marshall commented on the League of Nations and promised that “an international league to preserve the peace of the world was bound to come.”⁶⁵ His speech also discussed

57. J. Bart Campbell, “Wilson Silent on Treaty, President to Await Public’s Verdict,” *Atlanta Georgian*, November 20, 1919.

58. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 545.

59. “Vice President To Talk for Moose Here on Sunday,” *Atlanta Georgian*, November 20, 1919.

60. “Only Thirty Days Before Great Southern Music Festival Opens,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1909.

61. *Interior of the Auditorium, Atlanta, Ga.*, 1912, postcard. Witt Bros., Publishers, 1912.

62. “Thos. R. Marshall Will Speak Here Sunday Evening,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 23, 1919.

63. “Thos. R. Marshall Will Speak Here Sunday Evening.”

64. “Vice President Arrives Today,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 23, 1919.

65. “Origin of Wilson Death Rumor, Stopping Speech of Marshall, Is Mystery,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 24, 1919.

“the Anglo-Saxon love of liberty,” and Marshall began to speak about life, asking:

What is life? I tell you a man isn't necessarily alive because he walks around the streets of Atlanta, breathing its air, drinking its water. If he thinks of Atlanta merely as a place where he can get on, that man is dead! If in Atlanta there is a man who could have joined the Red Cross for 1920 and did not join, that man is dead! If in Atlanta there is a man who did not buy Liberty bonds, that man is dead, and I am not coming back to attend his funeral! There are men walking among us who are dead, and there are men who have passed beyond who are not dead. George Washington is not dead; he is a bigger factor in the life of the republic now than when he prayed for his ragged continentals at Valley Forge. Abraham Lincoln, that gaunt Kentuckian, is not dead. He is-⁶⁶

While Marshall was speaking, the Atlanta Auditorium received a mysterious telephone call. The night engineer, G. T. Christian, answered the phone. “Is this the Auditorium? I want to speak to Vice President Marshall,” asked the voice.⁶⁷ Christian replied that Marshall was speaking and could not come to the phone. “Tell him

it's the Associated Press and that President Wilson's dead and he'll come to the phone.”⁶⁸ At the nearby lobby, Christian found a policeman. The two went into the Auditorium to a passageway behind the stage and got the attention of Charles J. Haden, a lawyer and historian.⁶⁹ Haden was understandably confused, later telling the *Atlanta Constitution* that his “first impression is that there was a fire.”⁷⁰ As the Vice President spoke about Lincoln, Haden “tiptoed from the rear of the stage,” tapped Marshall on the arm, and whispered the news to him before addressing the audience. There are differing reports as to what was said. According to the *Atlanta Journal*, Haden told the audience: “We have just had bad news. President Wilson is dead!”⁷¹ The *Constitution* quoted him saying: “News has just been received from Washington that President Wilson is dead.”⁷²

Regardless of how the news was delivered, it came as a shock to everyone. The *Constitution*, in the headlines of the next day's edition, made sure to note that there were “many women crying at [the] report of death” while also adding that “Mrs. Marshall... sobbed aloud when she heard the

66. “Origin of Wilson Death Rumor, Stopping Speech of Marshall, Is Mystery.”

67. “Origin of Wilson Death Rumor, Stopping Speech of Marshall, Is Mystery.”

68. “Origin of Wilson Death Rumor, Stopping Speech of Marshall, Is Mystery.”

69. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 24, 1919.

70. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall.”

71. “Origin of Wilson Death Rumor, Stopping Speech of Marshall, Is Mystery.”

72. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall.”

story.”⁷³ Marshall regained his composure and told the crowd, “If this sad news is true, I can not take up the burdens of our great chieftain unless every patriot in the country will help me and pray for me!”⁷⁴ An organist, Charles J. Sheldon Jr., was able to find the controls of the Auditorium’s great organ and began to play “Nearer, My God, to Thee” while Reverend W. T. Gaulden, visiting from Quitman, GA, gave a benediction for the deceased president. Marshall and his wife left the building, found a telephone, and called Washington to verify the news. The White House, to Marshall’s relief, confirmed that Wilson was not dead. Marshall would tell the Atlanta papers the hoax was “brutal,” as during the few minutes he thought he was president, he felt the nation’s weight on his shoulders.⁷⁵

The next day, newspapers would speculate about who was speaking to G. T. Christian on the phone. The *Atlanta Journal* posed the probable theory that someone had called wanting to talk to Marshall, and saying Wilson was dead was the best bet to get him on the phone, but there were also concerns it was a Communist plot.⁷⁶ A reward of \$100 was offered to anyone who could find the

perpetrator.⁷⁷ Almost as soon as the Atlanta crowd heard the news, the North Avenue Presbyterian Church was phoned, and St. Phillip’s Cathedral was notified.⁷⁸ Because of this, news of Wilson’s death spread faster than the clarification that it was a hoax. The news spread to nearby Marietta before the reports could be corrected.⁷⁹ Word of the shocking incident spread nationwide, reaching San Antonio, Texas and Charlotte, North Carolina, where Marshall planned to speak the day afterward.⁸⁰

In those few brief minutes, Marshall’s attitude toward the presidency changed. Though he had supported efforts in 1912 to run for the nation’s highest office, he had been ambivalent towards assuming power when Wilson was sick in 1919. The incident in Atlanta solidified his view. In December, newspapers reported Marshall saying that “for fifteen minutes at Atlanta I thought I was the president of the United States. That fifteen minutes taught me that no man ought to seek the office, and that no man ought to take a nomination for it except at the

73. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall.”

74. Origin of Wilson Death Rumor, Stopping Speech of Marshall, Is Mystery.”

75. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall.”

76. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall.”

77. “False Report of Death of the President Halts Address by Marshall.”

78. ““Wilson’s Death” Breaks Up Meeting.” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 24, 1919.

79. “A fake phone message...” *Marietta Journal*, November 28, 1919.

80. “Death Hoax Played on Vice President,” *San Antonio Evening News*, November 24, 1919; “Vice President Marshall in Charlotte,” *Charlotte News and Evening Chronicle*, November 24, 1919.

imperative will of his party associates.”⁸¹ In the same interview, he announced he was “not a candidate for any office” in 1920.⁸²

Marshall had a real chance of securing his party’s nomination at the Democratic National Convention. He was aligned with Wilson, who was popular with Democrats, and had supported the League of Nations. Yet because of his Atlanta experience, he chose not to seek a higher office. Proof of Marshall’s support comes from Wall Street gamblers: early during the 1920 Convention, they gave Marshall better odds than James M. Cox, who ultimately gained the nomination.⁸³ The convention even had a group of Indiana Democrats present that vowed to support Marshall despite the fact he “said he isn’t a candidate and wouldn’t let us open headquarters for him.”⁸⁴ Marshall was even at the Convention but promised he was there “not as a candidate, but as a peacemaker.”⁸⁵ Instead, Governor James M. Cox was nominated for president with New York politician Franklin D. Roosevelt as his running mate.⁸⁶

It is said that when Calvin Coolidge received the Republican nomination for vice president, Marshall sent a simple telegram: “Please accept my sincerest sympathy.”⁸⁷ Cox and Roosevelt ultimately lost to Warren G. Harding and Coolidge, partly because Cox refused to abandon the dream of a League of Nations.⁸⁸ Interestingly, John Milton Cooper Jr. has noted that Marshall and Harding had one prominent similarity: each man “got ahead in the cutthroat, faction-ridden politics of the Midwest... by encouraging people to underestimate them.”⁸⁹ Marshall, who had shown interest in compromising on the League, might have fared better in the election than Cox. In an article for the *Boston Post* from about a year later, Marshall said he was “no more convinced than... before the election that there was any danger to the American people in joining the league.” Just a month later, however, he called it a “school boy’s dream,” and the comment gained

81. “Marshall Doesn’t Want Presidency,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, December 26, 1919.

82. “Marshall Doesn’t Want Presidency.”

83. David Pietrusza, *1920: The Year of the Six Presidents* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 250.

84. “Bourbon Clans Gather in City En Route West,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, June 24, 1920.

85. “Marshall at San Francisco as Peacemaker,” *The Brainerd Daily Dispatch*, June 25, 1920.

86. Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 136.

87. Amity Shlaes, *Coolidge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 202.

88. Pietrusza, *1920: The Year of the Six Presidents*, 401.

89. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 539.

national attention.⁹⁰ In his memoirs he was also critical, saying “a thoughtful man will pause before he says of a certainty that the kings and emperors have not been succeeded by autocrats.”⁹¹

After 1921, Thomas R. Marshall never held another political office. The decision makes sense: after reaching the vice presidency, and deciding to never be president, other political offices must have seemed unfulfilling. Because of his status as a former vice president, he remained a political pundit, and through his newspaper articles from this time it is possible to gain insight into his opinions of early 1920s politics. Despite his retreat from the political arena, Marshall’s name was occasionally floated as a candidate for higher office. In November 1921, Senator J. Hamilton Lewis publicly proclaimed he expected Marshall to be the presidential nominee in 1924 as a compromise candidate between William Gibbs McAdoo and James M. Cox.⁹² In 1923, the *Spokane Chronicle* held a mock election during which readers could pick from a variety of candidates for president and vice president, including Calvin Coolidge,

Herbert Hoover, William Jennings Bryan, William Randolph Hearst, Theodore Roosevelt Jr., Henry Ford, Eugene Debs, and a multitude other prominent members of congress.⁹³ Among the Democrat candidates, Thomas Marshall was the leading pick at 54 votes, compared to Republican Herbert Hoover at 94.⁹⁴ While this poll is unlike the rigors of a modern political opinion poll, it still shows Marshall’s relevance after leaving office. Additionally, after frontrunner McAdoo was discredited by the Teapot Dome Scandal in 1924, there was national speculation that Marshall would be running for president.⁹⁵

One of the great repudiations of the Wilson Administration early in Harding’s presidency came in November 1921, when Eugene Debs’ prison sentence was commuted. The nation’s most prominent socialist, he had been imprisoned in 1918 for criticizing America’s entry into World War I. Wilson’s own Attorney General recommended a pardon in 1920, but Wilson refused.⁹⁶ There are only fleeting glimpses of what Marshall thought about the situation, though what could be the most unique insight

90. Thomas R. Marshall, “What Should We Do With Our ‘Troubles’ Abroad?,” *Boston Post*, April 3, 1921; “League was Boy’s Dream, Says Marshall,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 24, 1921.

91. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 367.

92. “Marshall Will Be Nominee of Democrats in 1924 for President, Says Lewis,” *Boston Globe*, November 2, 1921.

93. “Anyone Eligible to Vote in 1924 Can Join in Chronicle ‘Election,’” *Spokane Chronicle*, October 30, 1923.

94. “Hoover Choice for Vice President,” *Spokane Chronicle*, November 2, 1923.

95. John B. Day, “Marshall Backers in Colorado Busy,” *Evening Star*, February 17, 1924.

96. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 540.

is also secondhand. According to the *Gastonia Gazette* of March 15, 1921, Dr. Lucius N. Glenn was on a train to Minnesota when he sat next to Marshall. According to Dr. Glenn's account, "'If I were president,' said Marshall, 'I'd open the doors and let [Debs] out quick. If that were done, he'd soon be all but forgotten. Of course, now, if you could electrocute him, but —'"⁹⁷ The story sounds a bit exaggerated, so it is hard to know if it can be trusted. If true, it shows that a Marshall presidency might have broken with some of his predecessor's policies.

Marshall also showed support for one of the great accomplishments of Harding's presidency, the Washington Naval Conference of 1921. Marshall was not alone among his fellow Democratic progressives in supporting the effort, as William Jennings Bryan wrote at one point during the conference that it "mark[ed] another week's journey toward world peace... If such action is taken, it will practically abolish war."⁹⁸ For the *San Francisco Examiner*, Marshall wrote a series of articles from late October to December 1921 about the conference. The *Examiner* was also able to secure articles from G. B. Shaw, Will Rogers, H. G. Wells,

Wilson's Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, journalist Lincoln Steffens, and other notables of the day.⁹⁹

In his first article for the *Examiner*, Marshall proposed a treaty between the United States and England "guaranteeing France against German aggression," as he believed "a real cloud lowers over the coming conference between France and Germany."¹⁰⁰ With post-World War I sentiments still raw, Marshall believed there to be a real imminent threat of a second war in Europe. The idea of a similar treaty had already been proposed, called the Treaty of Guarantee (which Georges Clemenceau agreed to in exchange for giving up the Rhineland), but the treaty died in the Senate at the same time as the League of Nations.¹⁰¹ The Locarno Treaties of 1925 ensured the European protection of France that Marshall desired but did not include the United States.¹⁰² If Marshall had been able to arrange US involvement, it likely would have brought America into World War II before Pearl Harbor. Marshall's writings from the time of the naval conference show a lack of isolationism that would come to define the 1920s.

97. "Up and Down Main Street: By the Metal Meanderer," *Gastonia Gazette*, March 15, 1921.

98. William Jennings Bryan, "Bryan Sees World Peace Step Nearer," *Des Moines Register*, November 27, 1921.

99. "'The Examiner' Staff of Special Writers on the Armament Conference," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 6, 1921.

100. Thomas R. Marshall, "Pact to Aid France Held Move to Peace," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 30, 1921.

101. Robert McCrum, "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," *The Historical Journal* 21, no. 3 (1978): 636.

102. W. R. Bisschop, "The Locarno Pact. October 15-December 1, 1925," *Transactions of the Grotius Society* 11 (1925): 111.

The scandals of Harding's presidency, without doubt, would have been avoided by Thomas R. Marshall. Always devoted to his wife, it is impossible to imagine a scandal like that of Harding's affair with Nan Britton. The great political scandal of Harding's administration, the Teapot Dome Scandal, is also difficult to picture coming from a man of Marshall's integrity. The scandal saw oil-rich land that had been set aside for the US Navy (most notably land around the Teapot Dome in Wyoming) being leased to a private company for drilling, not with bidding but with bribery. Even before the bribery was made public, many Progressives and Conservationists were hostile to the use of natural resources. Naturally, Marshall decried the dishonest nature of the scandal after it was revealed.¹⁰³

As to the political forces behind the Teapot Dome, it is harder to determine where Marshall stood. The land was set aside by Woodrow Wilson in 1915 as a naval oil reserve. His Secretary of the Interior, Franklin Lane, supported leasing the land, while Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels opposed the idea.¹⁰⁴ Marshall was not involved in these discussions since he was not part of Wilson's cabinet, and he would not comment about the Teapot Dome until later. In his memoirs, there is one major passage about conservation when he says,

“[n]obody knows how prodigally we dissipated the resources of nature... there would have been an abundant supply for all future time.”¹⁰⁵ However, this comment is included not as a criticism of the destruction of natural beauty but rather as a critique of exorbitant lumber prices. There is also a single reference to the Teapot Dome in Marshall's memoirs when he says that if his father had saved more money, he “could not only have bought Teapot Dome, but the teapot also.”¹⁰⁶ Some of the more revealing comments of Marshall come from March 1915, when he spoke at a convention of the California Inland Waterways Association. As Marshall phrased it, “I believe the time is near at hand when we are going to slow down, or we are going to go mad. We cannot keep up the pace forever.”¹⁰⁷ Based on these comments it would seem Marshall would support the Navy's plan in 1915, but whether this would still hold true after 1921 is uncertain. Regardless, even though the leasing of the Teapot Dome is what instigated the scandal, it was not the leasing itself but rather the way it was handled that caused uproar. Because of the sterling reputation of Marshall, it is hard to see how the leasing of the oil reserves would have imploded into the largest scandal in presidential history until Watergate.

It was during Woodrow Wilson's presidency that the Federal Government's

103. Thomas R. Marshall, “Cloud's Silver Linings In Washington Disclosures,” *Birmingham Post-Herald*, May 4, 1924.

104. Burl Noggle, *Teapot Dome: Oil and Politics in the 1920's*, (1962, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 17.

105. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 56.

106. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 27.

107. “Vice President Favors Reclamation Project,” *Oakland Enquirer*, March 24, 1915.

offices became segregated, and Wilson made only a few appointments of African Americans while in office.¹⁰⁸ The era also saw the rise of a second Ku Klux Klan, after the original organization was squashed by President Grant in the 1860s. Warren G. Harding did condemn the KKK during his presidency, but for years faced accusations he was actually a member with his Attorney General.¹⁰⁹ Marshall would write about his abhorrence of the KKK, saying that the group was “largely composed of men who claim to be American citizens but are too cowardly to let anybody know what they individually believe.”¹¹⁰ Around the time of the 1924 Democratic National Convention, Marshall denounced prejudice on racial and religious grounds as “utterly bainful [sic], utterly mischievous, and utterly poisonous.”¹¹¹ While not necessarily a criticism of white supremacists, Marshall's comments about what he termed “class legislation” are revealing:¹¹²

The new idea of democracy inevitably tends to legislation by classes and once the classes have control of government, then some one class will take charge of affairs, and

that will be the ending of democracy. The tyranny of a class is just as inimical to the rights of the people as the tyranny of a single man sitting as the representative of an unlimited monarchy.¹¹³

While Harding was unwilling to support anti-lynching measures, Marshall would have been more receptive based on his comments on race relations.¹¹⁴ It is also easier to see how Marshall would have done more to put a stop to the KKK using federal authority, as he was not as bound by Harding's same sense of small government ideals.

Harding's beliefs about the role of government are best shown in his—and later Calvin Coolidge's—dedication to *laissez-faire* economic principles. As biographer Amity Shlaes phrased it, “Coolidge kept government out of the way of commerce.”¹¹⁵ The Progressive movement Marshall represented, on the other hand, wanted the Federal Government to monitor the actions of big business to avoid the squashing of the average American. In 1924, Republican

108. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 205; 252.

109. David Chalmers, “The Ku Klux Klan In Politics In The 1920's,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1965): 240.

110. Marshall, *Recollections of Thomas R. Marshall*, 59.

111. “Un-American,” *Macon Telegraph*, June 26, 1924.

112. “New Danger to Nation's Ideals,” *Journal and Courier* (Lafayette, Indiana), June 6, 1923.

113. “New Danger to Nation's Ideals,” *Journal and Courier* (Lafayette, Indiana), June 6, 1923.

114. Eugene P. Trani and David L. Wilson, *The Presidency of Warren G. Harding* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 103.

115. Shlaes, *Coolidge*, 6.

Robert La Follette Sr. created his own Progressive Party and choose as his running mate democrat Burton K. Wheeler. It is in this party's platform that the Progressive's economic beliefs in the 1920s are best laid out.

Like many platforms since, it included support of tax reduction, which aligns with Marshall's 1921 statement that "taxation carried too far will result in the overthrow of government."¹¹⁶ Most importantly, the Progressives of the 1920s supported the nationalization of railroads "as the only final solution to the transportation problem."¹¹⁷ One key piece of the platform condemned the Teapot Dome and supported national support for water-related projects; in particular, the Muscle Shoals Project in Alabama. The project was a half-completed dam on the Tennessee River that had been stopped by Republicans after Harding took office.¹¹⁸ Republicans hoped it could be leased to private industry, in particular Henry Ford, while Progressives wanted the power generated to be sold directly to the consumer by the United States Government. Progressive dreams for the project at Muscle Shoals later morphed into the Tennessee Valley Authority of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Note that it had been Marshall,

years before in 1915, who had supported national efforts at harnessing the potential of rivers.

In the Roaring 1920s, an era of free spirits of the kind seen in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Marshall criticized those who have "the idea they have a right to do anything which will lead to success in their business affairs."¹¹⁹ His view is perhaps best summarized in the sub-heading *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, used when Marshall's article on the subject was first published: "Marshall Thinks General American Idea of Each Person Having An Individual Yardstick Leads Away from Moderation."¹²⁰ It seems the reason America never had a president like Marshall in the 1920s is best summarized here. Marshall was a man of honesty, integrity, and above all moderation. It was this moderation that led to him being proposed as a candidate perennially, as he was an ideal compromise candidate. But, in an era of excess, corruption, and flamboyance, Marshall may never have stood a chance at being elected. While the experience in Atlanta caused Marshall to not seek the presidency, it is also easily possible he never would have been elected. When he passed away on June 1, 1925, he was mourned nationwide. He has

116. "'Taxation Carried Too Far Wil Overthrow Government' --- Marshall," *Boston Post*, July 31, 1921.

117. Robert La Follette Sr., "La Follette's Platform of 1924," in *National Party Platforms: Volume I 1840-1956*, ed. Donald Bruce Johnson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 253.

118. Thomas Hager, *Electric City: The Lost History of Ford and Edison's American Utopia* (New York: Abrams Press, 2021), 61.

119. Thomas R. Marshall, "Right of Private Judgement Carries U.S. to Excesses," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), June 8, 1924.

120. Thomas R. Marshall, "Right of Private Judgement Carries U.S. to Excesses," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), June 8, 1924.

largely been forgotten in the years since, with most attention going towards his witty comments and his action (or inaction) after Wilson's debilitating stroke.

With a Progressive like Thomas R. Marshall at the helm, America could have been more active in securing a peaceful Europe, building internal improvements on a national scale, and regulating the businesses that collapsed the stock market in 1929. Instead, America retreated into itself under Warren Harding and would set itself apart

from world affairs until Franklin Roosevelt's time in the White House. Without a mysterious phone call in Atlanta, Thomas R. Marshall stood a chance at becoming the twenty-ninth president. It is easy to see how the Progressive movement did not have to go into hibernation after Woodrow Wilson, and Marshall could have played a key role in securing a very different version of the 1920s.

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