



The Marshall Plan Speech: Rhetoric and Diplomacy

Advisor: Philip Brenner, Professor, School of International Service, American University
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Framing Question

What rhetorical and diplomatic challenges did Secretary of State George Marshall face as he delivered his 1947 Marshall Plan speech?

Understanding

In his “Marshall Plan Speech” of June 5, 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall sought to describe the plight of post-War Europe, convince Congress and the American people that it was in the nation’s interest to relieve that plight, assure Europeans that America was not trying to dominate them, and calm the fears of the Soviets while warning them not to interfere with the initiative.

Text

[Marshall Plan Speech, June 5, 1947, Harvard University](#) (transcript from recording)



Background

The Marshall Plan, officially known as the European Recovery Program, is generally considered one of, if not the, most successful American foreign policy initiative since World War II. Nonetheless, historians still debate its goals. Was it a mission to relieve suffering, a plan to replicate American-style capitalism in Europe, a stimulus to boost the American economy, a brake to prevent Europe from backsliding into fascism, a strategy to frustrate Soviet expansion, or all of those things? Whatever it was, it was not on America’s diplomatic agenda when World War II ended in 1945.

The War left Europe devastated. People throughout the continent were poor; starvation was widespread. Countries did not have the money to rebuild roads, bridges, factories, and homes. Banks and other financial institutions were in ruins. European nations simply lacked the capacity to rebuild their economies on their own.

By 1947 it had become clear to policy makers in Washington and overseas that something needed to be done to address the plight of Europe. America took its first step in that direction when President Truman persuaded Congress to allocate funds to aid the government of Greece as it fought a civil war against a home-grown Communist resistance. The principle upon which that aid was based came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, a policy under

which America pledged to support free peoples who were resisting subjugation by Communists or totalitarian forces.

In the spring of 1947 foreign ministers from Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union met in Moscow to work out solutions to Europe's economic woes. Secretary of State George Marshall, who had been the Army Chief of Staff during the War, represented the United States. At the conference Marshall became convinced that the Soviets were not interested in solving economic problems but rather were prepared to wait for the war-weakened nations of Europe to collapse and fall under its domination. Shortly after his return to Washington, he delivered a national radio address describing the problems in Europe and calling for immediate action to remedy them. He ordered his policy advisors to develop a plan for such action, and they soon put together a set of recommendations, which became the basis of the Marshall Plan.

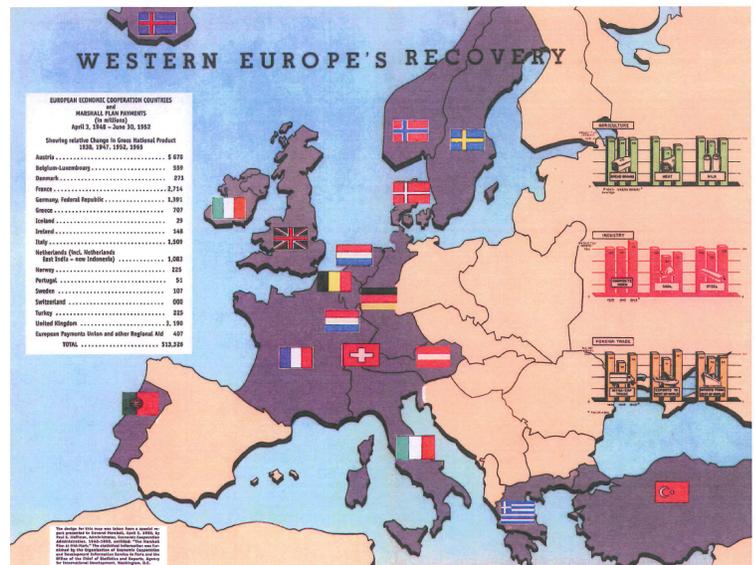
Secretary Marshall and President Truman knew that it would not be easy to convince the American people and Congress to come to the aid of Europe, especially to help such a fierce former enemy as Germany. The United States had a long tradition of avoiding entangling relations with other countries. Even though World War II had, to say the least, deeply enmeshed the nation in foreign affairs in Europe and Asia and even though America emerged from the War as the only power capable of world leadership, many Americans still desired to avoid deep involvements abroad. And those Americans had strong allies in Congress, where Republicans held a majority. While the Republicans were split between isolationists and internationalists, even the latter were unlikely to support an aid program estimated to cost about \$4 billion per year at a time when the entire federal budget was only \$34.5 billion. The Truman administration embarked upon a massive publicity campaign to win both popular and Congressional support for American aid to Europe. Marshall was well-positioned to lead this effort as a revered wartime leader who was not considered a partisan of either political party. His brief speech at the Harvard commencement activities on June 5, 1947, described in simple blunt terms the problems of Europe and a possible solution to them.

While Marshall and his advisors crafted the speech primarily for the American public and for Congress, they had two other audiences in mind. The Plan required the cooperation of the people of Europe. In the speech Marshall sought to demonstrate that he and President Truman understood their plight and stood ready to help. However, he had to assure them that America did not intend to impose a solution but rather would assist in implementing remedies of their own design. Then there was the Soviet Union. The Plan was open to the Soviets, but they refused to participate, denouncing it instead as an American scheme to take over Europe. In his speech Marshall had to reassure the Soviets that the Plan did not threaten them, but he also had to assert that it would go ahead despite their opposition.

The administration's campaign of persuasion worked. The Economic Cooperation Act of 1948 was signed on April 3 of that year, and the Marshall Plan was underway. Between 1948 and 1951 it cost \$13 billion. To put that amount in perspective, in 2015 dollars it would be roughly \$131 billion or, over a four-year period, an annual average expenditure of almost \$33 billion. For further perspective, consider that, in 2016, the federal government plans to spend \$33.7 billion in foreign aid for the entire world. During the years of the Marshall Plan, in today's dollars, the total federal budget ranged from \$316 billion to \$449 billion. The current federal budget, at about \$4,000 billion (\$4 trillion), is roughly ten times larger than it was in 1951. This means that the percentage of the budget devoted to the Marshall Plan each year, around 9%, was far greater than the percentage allocated to all foreign aid today, less than 1%.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?



Marshall Plan dollars went to reconstruct Europe's productive capacity, reestablish its financial systems, and restore its faith in industrial capitalism, with a special emphasis on American-style capitalism. They funded projects in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and western Germany. Each country used Marshall Plan support in a different way. Tensions and disagreements often arose between the giver of the aid and its recipients, but by 1950 the stage was set for an economic boom in Western Europe. For his leadership of the plan that bore his name, George Marshall received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.

This lesson focuses on Marshall's Harvard speech, which roughly follows the classic five-part structure of argumentation: introduction, narrative or statement of fact, argument, rebuttal, and conclusion. We explore the introduction and conclusion in brief notes and closely analyze the narrative, argument, and rebuttal, while considering how the speech addressed the concerns of its multiple audiences.

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



Text Analysis

Introduction

Paragraph 1

[1] Mr. President, Dr. Conant, [president of Harvard] members of the board of overseers, ladies and gentlemen: I'm profoundly grateful and touched by the great distinction and honor and great [compliment accorded](#) me by the authorities of Harvard this morning. [2] I'm overwhelmed, as a matter of fact, and I'm rather fearful of my inability to maintain such a high rating as you've been generous enough to accord to me. [3] In these historic and lovely surroundings, this perfect day, and this very wonderful assembly, it is a tremendously impressive thing to an individual in my position.

Paragraph 2

[4] But to speak more seriously, I need not tell you that the world situation is very serious. [5] That must be apparent to all intelligent people. [6] I think one difficulty is that the problem is one of such enormous complexity that the very mass of facts presented to the public by press and radio make it exceedingly difficult for the man in the street to reach a clear [appraisement](#) of the situation. [7] Furthermore, the people of this country are distant from the troubled areas of the earth and it is hard for them to comprehend the plight and consequent reactions of the long-suffering peoples and the effect of those reactions on their governments in connection with our efforts to promote peace in the world.

Narrative or Statement of Facts

Note: In the **narrative** a speaker states the facts of his or her case. The speaker tells the audience what they need to know to make sense of the topic.

Paragraph 3

[8] In considering the requirements for the rehabilitation [rebuilding] of Europe, the physical loss of life, the visible destruction of cities, factories, mines, and railroads was correctly estimated, but it has become obvious during recent months that this visible destruction was probably less serious than the dislocation of the entire [fabric](#) of European economy. [9] For the past ten years

Note

In an **introduction** the speaker tries to persuade the audience to like him or her so that they will pay attention to what is being said and agree with it. In addition, the speaker tries to interest the audience in the topic of the speech. The speaker may do this by pointing out how important the topic is or by stating the purpose of the speech. Marshall does all of these things in his first two paragraphs.

He clearly identifies at least one of his audiences, the American public, including the people assembled before him and those who will hear the speech on radio or read about it in newspapers.

In paragraph 1 he tries to win over his listeners by thanking them for the honor of speaking at Harvard and by displaying humility. He is "grateful," "overwhelmed," and "fearful" of his abilities to measure up to their expectations. In paragraph 2 he continues to woo the audience by flattering them. That the world situation is serious is apparent to "all intelligent people." His audience is made up of such people, so he "need not tell" them that the world situation is serious, although, of course, he does. His emphasis on seriousness also signals that his topic is important, and his listeners should pay attention.

He goes on to identify a problem: the public cannot understand the complexity of the world situation because it is overwhelmed by the "mass of facts" presented in the media and because Americans are far removed from those "troubled areas," the nations of Europe, which are making the world situation serious. Articulating this problem, he identifies the purpose of, at least, the next part of his speech: he is going to explain the world situation. Thus he prepares the audience for the next section of his address, the **narrative**.

conditions have been abnormal. [10] The feverish preparation for war and the more feverish maintenance [continuation] of the war effort engulfed all aspects of [took over completely] national economies. [11] Machinery has fallen into disrepair [stopped working] or is entirely obsolete. [12] Under the arbitrary and destructive Nazi rule, virtually every possible enterprise [activity] was geared into the German war machine. [13] Long-standing commercial ties, private institutions, banks, insurance companies, and shipping companies disappeared through loss of capital, absorption through nationalization, or by simple destruction. In many countries, confidence in the local currency has been severely shaken. [14] The breakdown of the business structure of Europe during the war was complete. [15] Recovery has been seriously retarded [held back] by the fact that two years after the close of hostilities [end of the war] a peace settlement with Germany and Austria has not been agreed upon. [16] But even given a more prompt solution of these difficult problems, the rehabilitation of the economic structure of Europe quite evidently [clearly] will require a much longer time and greater effort than has been foreseen.

**Activity: Stating the Facts,
Making the Case, Part 1**

Explore how Marshall develops the thesis of paragraph 3.



1. How does Marshall define the problem of Europe in 1947?

2. What, in Marshall's view, caused this problem?

3. In what sense might it be said that Marshall, in calling for the economic rehabilitation of Europe, is arguing for the final defeat of the Nazis?

Note: In paragraph 4 Marshall further addresses the lack-of-understanding problem he identified in paragraph 2 by providing additional facts about the conditions in Europe. This paragraph derives its effectiveness from the way in which he orders his presentation of these facts.

Paragraph 4

[17] There is a phase of this matter which is both interesting and serious. [18] The farmer has always produced the foodstuffs to exchange with the city dweller for the other necessities of life. [19] This division of labor is the basis of modern civilization. [20] At the present time it is threatened with breakdown. [21] The town and city industries are not producing adequate goods to exchange with the food-producing farmer. [22] Raw materials and fuel are in short supply. [23] Machinery, as I have said, is lacking or worn out. [24] The farmer or the peasant cannot find the goods for sale which he desires to purchase. [25] So the sale of his farm produce for money which he cannot use seems to him an unprofitable transaction. [26] He, therefore, has withdrawn many fields from crop cultivation and is using them for grazing. [27] He feeds more grain to stock and finds for himself and his family an ample supply of food, however short he may be on clothing and the other ordinary gadgets of civilization. [28] Meanwhile, people in the cities are short of food and fuel, and in some places approaching the starvation levels. [29] So the governments are forced to use their foreign money and credits to procure [buy] these necessities abroad. [30] This process exhausts funds which are urgently needed for reconstruction. [31] Thus a very serious situation is rapidly developing which bodes no good for the world. [32] The modern system of the division of labor upon which the exchange of products is based is in danger of breaking down.

**Activity: Stating the Facts,
Making the Case, Part 2**

Examine how Marshall deploys evidence in paragraph 4.



4. The whole of Marshall's speech is, of course, aimed at his Harvard audience and the American people. Why might the narrative portion of his address also find eager listeners in Europe?

Note: Sentences 31 and 32 are pivotal in the speech. In 31 Marshall closes out the narrative. He has dealt with the lack-of-understanding problem from paragraph 2: "Thus (I hope you now understand) a very serious situation is rapidly developing..." Sentence 32 not only summarizes that "very serious situation" but also states a problem. He will devote the next part of speech to outlining his solution to that problem. Thus he moves on to the **argument**.

Argument

Note: The **argument** is the heart of any piece of persuasive writing. In it the speaker explains why the audience should support a proposition or take an action.

Paragraph 5

[33] The truth of the matter is that Europe's requirements for the next three or four years of foreign food and other essential products – principally from America – are so much greater than her present ability to pay that she must have substantial additional help or face economic, social, and political deterioration of a very grave character.

Paragraph 6

[34] The remedy lies in breaking the vicious circle and restoring the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole. The manufacturer and the farmer throughout wide areas must be able and willing to exchange their products for currencies the continuing value of which is not open to question.

Paragraph 7

[36] Aside from the demoralizing effect on the world at large and the possibilities of disturbances arising as a result of the desperation of the people concerned, the consequences to the economy of the United States should be apparent to all. [37] It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace.

5. What is Marshall arguing for in paragraph 5?

6. In paragraph 6 he mentions a "remedy." To what problem is he referring?

7. Thus far Marshall has focused on rebuilding the productive capacity of Europe — roads, factories, etc. — how, in paragraph 6, does he redefine the goal of American aid?

8. What arguments does he make to support his plan in paragraph 7?

9. At what audiences does Marshall aim this portion of his speech?

Note: Marshall knows that people at home and abroad will oppose his plan. To be persuasive, he must anticipate objections and address them, and he does that in the next section of his speech, the **rebuttal**.

Rebuttal

Note: In a **rebuttal** the speaker acknowledges opposing views or criticisms and argues against them. A speaker who fails to do so would offer a weak, incomplete, and unconvincing case.

Paragraph 8

[38] Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos. [39] Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist. [40] Such assistance, I am convinced, must not be on a piecemeal basis as various crises develop. [41] Any assistance that this Government may render in the future should provide a cure rather than a mere palliative. [42] Any government that is willing to assist in the task of recovery will find full cooperation, I am sure, on the part of the United States Government. [43] Any government which maneuvers to block the recovery of other countries cannot expect help from us.

Paragraph 9

[44] Furthermore, governments, political parties or groups which seek to perpetuate human misery in order to profit therefrom politically or otherwise will encounter the opposition of the United States.

Paragraph 10

[45] It is already evident that, before the United States Government can proceed much further in its efforts to alleviate the situation and help start the European world on its way to recovery, there must be some agreement among the countries of Europe as to the requirements of the situation and the part those countries themselves will take in order to give proper effect to whatever action might be undertaken by this Government. [46] It would be neither fitting nor efficacious for our Government to undertake to draw up unilaterally a program designed to place Europe on its feet economically. [47] This is the business of the Europeans. [48] The initiative I think, must come from Europe. The role of this country should consist of friendly aid in the drafting of a European program and of later support of such a program so far as it may be practical for us to do so. The program should be a joint one, agreed to by a number, if not all, European nations.

Paragraph 11

[49] An essential part of any successful action on the part of the United States is an understanding on the part of the people of America of the character of the problem and the remedies to be applied. [50] Political passion and prejudice should have no part. [51] With foresight, and a willingness on the part of our people to face up to the vast responsibility which history has clearly placed upon our country, the difficulties I have outlined can and will be overcome.

10. Why would Marshall say that his policy is aimed “not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos”?

11. What does Marshall mean when he says that American assistance must be a “cure rather than a mere palliative”?

12. Marshall issues warnings in paragraphs 8 and 9. Cite the language of his warnings.

13. Who is the audience for this warning?

14. How does Marshall avoid the charge that the United States is trying to impose its will upon Europe?

15. In his rebuttal Marshall does not state the criticisms he refutes, rather he implies them. Just as he anticipated criticism from foreign countries in paragraphs 8, 9, and 10, in paragraph 11 he anticipates criticism from his own country. What critics do you think he is addressing?

16. Cite the language Marshall uses to address American critics.

17. What does Marshall call upon the American people to do?

18. What does Marshall mean when he says that history has placed a “vast responsibility” upon America?

Note: At this point Marshall is prepared to move to the final section of his speech, the **conclusion**.

Conclusion

Paragraph 12

[52] I am sorry that on each occasion I have said something publicly in regard to our international situation, I've been forced by the necessities of the case to enter into rather technical discussions. [53] But to my mind, it is of vast importance that our people reach some general understanding of what the complications really are, rather than react from a passion or a prejudice or an emotion of the moment. [54] As I said more formally a moment ago, we are remote from the scene of these troubles. [55] It is virtually impossible at this distance merely by reading, or listening, or even seeing photographs or motion pictures, to grasp at all the real significance of the situation. [56] And yet the whole world of the future hangs on a proper judgment. [57] It hangs, I think, to a large extent on the realization of the American people, of just what are the various dominant factors. [58] What are the reactions of the people? [59] What are the justifications of those reactions? [60] What are the sufferings? [61] What is needed? [62] What can best be done? [63] What must be done? [64] Thank you very much.

Note

The **conclusion** of a speech is important because it presents the final words an audience hears, which often linger and shape the impression of an entire speech. Traditionally, speakers use conclusions to do four things:

1. leave the audience with a favorable opinion,
2. emphasize key points,
3. stimulate an appropriate emotional response,
4. summarize the argument.

In his conclusion Marshall does not have to worry about leaving a favorable opinion: he was one of the most highly regarded national leaders in 1947. (From the applause we hear in the recording of the speech, it is clear that the audience liked him and what he said.) He does, however, emphasize important points: that Americans must understand the complex situation in Europe, that the future depends upon rebuilding of Europe, and that Americans must make decisions about Europe based on reason and calm judgment.

Moreover, through the use of rhetorical questions, questions raised without the expectation of an answer, he summarizes his entire speech:

- What are the **reactions of the people** [of Europe]? (Desperation)
- What are the **justifications of those reactions**? (Economic collapse)
- What are the **sufferings** [of the Europeans]? (Poverty and starvation)
- What is **needed**? (Restoration of the European economy and confidence in the future)
- What can **best be done**? (American aid)
- What **must be done**? (Americans must agree to supply aid)

This is a particularly effective concluding strategy because, as Marshall says twice in the speech, he wants Americans to think about and understand the conditions in Europe so that they can make decisions based on reason. His questions at the end provoke thought rather than emotion. This comports with his overall avoidance of any sort of emotional appeal in the speech.

Glossary

compliment: expression of honor
accorded: given
appraisal: judgment
fabric: underlying framework
feverish: intensely active
engulfed: overwhelmed
obsolete: old-fashioned
arbitrary: unrestrained by law
nationalization: takeover by government
bodes: predicts
deterioration: fall into ruin
demoralizing: discouraging
piecemeal: partial
palliative: easing of symptoms
maneuvers: moves
alleviate: relieve
efficacious: effective
unilaterally: on its own
initiative: first step
foresight: prudence

Text

- George C. Marshall, "The Marshall Plan Speech," June 5, 1947. Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts.
<http://marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/marshall-plan-speech/>

Images

- "George C. Marshall, U.S. Secretary of State, January 21, 1947 to January 20, 1949," photograph, U.S. Department of State.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_C._Marshall,_U.S._Secretary_of_State.jpg
- "Marshall Plan Payments in Millions to European Economic Cooperation Countries, from April 3, 1948 to June 30, 1952," color chart, The George C. Marshall Foundation. <http://marshallfoundation.org/library/documents/marshall-plan-payments-millions-european-economic-cooperation-countries/>