

# REMEMBERING ANDY MARSHALL



*ESSAYS BY HIS FRIENDS*

Tutorials from a Sphinx  
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I cannot claim to have been as close to Andrew W. Marshall as many, perhaps most, other contributors. Nevertheless Andy was an important force in my life, not least for teaching me how to think, or at least how to think a little better. It is my great good fortune to have come into his orbit as a young man, and to have been allowed to travel in some of his circles for most of my life.

I first heard of Andy Marshall in the very early 1980s, when I was a graduate student in my 20s up at Harvard, working hard at everything except the dissertation I was supposed to be doing. The word was, a Sphinx-like genius down in Washington was running a little shop in the Pentagon that was doing mysterious but important research bearing on the conduct of, and perhaps even the outlook for, the Cold War. Then as now I had no security clearances, so I could not learn much about Marshall's operation. (This, recall, was the pre-internet age, when information was not available to all at the snap of one's fingers or the click of one's mouse.) But I did glean some sense of what the Office of Net Assessment was about by reading through some of the open source papers and studies ONA had sponsored through the RAND Corporation available in the library—and I very much liked what I saw, especially those papers I was able to understand.

I came into the outermost fringes of Andy Marshall's orbit in the mid-1980s, through the legendary Charles Wolf of RAND. Like Andy, Charlie Wolf was one of the very early RANDistas. (Later my path would also cross with another of Andy and Charlie's friends from early RAND days, the remarkable Fred Ikle: what an extraordinarily exciting place RAND must have been in the 1950s! But that is a different story...)

What qualified me for consideration as a prospect was my homework on the social and economic performance of the USSR and the Soviet Bloc states. (This was not my thesis topic, needless to say.) Around 1986 Wolf invited me to contribute a chapter to a volume he and Harry Rowen, another ur-RAND colleague, were preparing on the future of the Soviet Union. Not so long after that I came into Andy's presence.

It would be an exaggeration to say I met him then, exactly—I was incidental to the gathering, and I had the good sense mainly to keep my mouth shut.

What I had heard about Andy from others at the outer reaches of his realm seemed completely accurate: the guy was a Sphinx. The then-sixty-something Marshall, hairless and bespectacled,

was defined by an intense and unsmiling gaze. I could not tell what was on his mind. But I was pretty sure he was dissatisfied by what he was hearing. Mainly he stared and listened. He nodded; frowned; asked maybe two quick questions—and then we were dismissed. To say he seemed forbidding would have been an understatement.

Not so long thereafter I would get to see the Sphinx talk. I credit this to my intellectual friendship with two informal teachers, Murray Feshbach and Igor Birman.

Murray, of course, was the leading Western student of Soviet demography—the first outsider to spot the rise in infant mortality in the USSR's, as well as the more general worsening of adult health during the Soviet Union's "era of stagnation". Igor is not as well-known today as Murray—he remains a prophet without honor in his adopted homeland—but I was convinced then as I am now that no one inside or outside the Warsaw Pact better understood Soviet economic realities.

To learn from Murray and Igor was to know that the conventional wisdom about the USSR in both Washington and the academy was badly wrong. Far from being a system that was "muddling through" with mediocre but passable social achievements and an inefficient but steadily growing economy—supposedly the second largest in the world!—the USSR was a society in deep crisis, and one supporting a faltering war footing economy. Very possibly alone among Washington's officialdom, Andy understood the greater significance of Murray and Igor's work—and he was incontestably alone as a sponsor and promoter of their findings within the US government.

In retrospect I think Andy's trust in them somehow rubbed off a bit onto me, which is why one day in the late 1980s he dropped the veil and shared with me an unvarnished Marshall assessment. The Soviet economy was vastly poorer and more militarized than the consensus intelligence community estimate suggested. Most of the CIA's research on the USSR was second rate, or worse. He hoped he could find more scholars and researchers to produce better work on the Soviet situation. But for the time being the best he could hope for was that US decision-makers would just ignore the nonsense they were getting from the CIA.

This was an eye-opening—indeed electrifying—tutorial. And by a curious twist of fate, its lessons were inadvertently reinforced by a chance chat with Robert Gates, then CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence, concerning the Agency's estimates of Soviet performance. Gates reached out to me after I published an essay faulting the CIA's work. Courteous and worldly, Gates confided to me that of course he knew my criticisms were correct—but as I would surely understand for half a dozen administrative reasons he would share with me in confidence, the Agency could not officially amend its Soviet economic estimates. The contrast between the Marshall approach to the problem and the Gates approach to the problem could hardly have been clearer—and it would make a deep and lasting impression on my thinking about public policy and international security research.

Around 1990 I finally got my first chance to sit so to speak at the grownup table with Andy. I earned this opportunity by dint of an AEI conference I chaired on the comparative performance of the US and Soviet economies as viewed by CIA economists, “reform” Soviet economists, and independent Western economists. (Igor Birman was the architect of this effort, but it took the two of us to pull it off.) The three day gathering was, I think it fair to say, absolutely devastating for the CIA’s take on the Soviet economy: elegant and sophisticated as its modeling of Soviet economic performance may have seemed, the results nevertheless could not pass the laugh-out-loud test, especially for the Soviet economists present. The scale of that intellectual failure can begin to be appreciated when one remembers that, at the time of our conference, the US intelligence community’s effort to describe the performance of the Soviet economy was probably the largest and most expensive social science project ever undertaken.

In particularly memorable exchange, a leading Soviet economist dumbfounded the chief of the CIA unit tasked with this work by sincerely asking if the Agency had been exaggerating the size of the Soviet economy all these years just to bolster America’s military budget—after all, the CIA economists were better trained than their Soviet counterparts and their errors were so enormous and elementary? Andy Marshall and Charlie Wolf both participated in the conference, Charlie weighing in often and wisely. I don’t think Andy said a single word during those sessions, but as I recall he was smiling from ear to ear for almost three days straight.

Some months after the conference Andy agreed for us to have lunch together. I had a hundred questions for him, and he was in a mood to take them seriously and answer them without his famous reserve. It was for me a one-on-one lesson in Andy’s worldview, his conception of long-term strategy, and his approach to net assessment and researching strategic questions. It was a great deal to take in; I admit I didn’t absorb it all.

One of Andy’s many points about his work was that the sort of things he and I might talk about—the USSR; China; economic and social performance; global demographics and the rest—occupied only about a quarter of his time and attention. Three quarters of his time, he said, was devoted to science, technology and the development of defense platforms. At that moment I realized I would never really be able to understand more than a very small fraction—say, about a fourth—of what Andy really did. Such homework as I would do for Andy or with Andy would always be compartmentalized—contributing to a greater understanding that drew on sources I was not privy to, and likely would not be capable of digesting even if I had full access to them.

The hard science/social science balance of Andy’s self-described agenda has been a cautionary to me ever since—underscoring the limits of the contributions that my sort of homework can make to a more comprehensive overall assessment of strategic competition in the global arena. It also highlighted just how difficult it would be for any think tank or non-governmental research entity to produce work comparable to ONA’s, much less replicate ONA’s function. Some years after that lunch with Andy, my own institute toyed with the notion of organizing an internal strategic assessment unit—in effect a net assessment effort. It was clear to me that such an

initiative would be vastly more difficult than its proponents imagined—not least because so many who consider themselves to be “strategic types” are so un-versed in math, science and engineering. (Not surprisingly, our own in-house homage to ONA failed to launch.)

Over the decades since that for me unforgettable lunch with Andy I have been privileged to see Andy recurrently—through workshops, Summer Studies, and various homework projects of my own, also more informally as well. I hasten to add that I am not now nor have I ever been a “Jedi Knight”. But I know many of them. One of these, the redoubtable Enders Wimbush, was instrumental bringing me into closer and more regular contact with Andy and ONA. Enders is, among many other things, what you might call a collector—and I was very happily collected by him back in the early 1990s.

At the risk of repeating what others will doubtless attest: Andy Marshall was an inspirational force. It was exiting to be in his presence. You really wanted to do your very best work for him. His comments and questions always helped elicit excellence from his de facto tutees. (Yes the rumor is true: some of Andy’s remarks would be elliptical, occasionally even Delphic—but then you somehow managed to figure out what he was getting at...)

Andy brought out the best in his tutees through positive reinforcement. I never suffered criticism or reproach from Andy. I did once experience his gentle admonishment though. We were conversing about global demographics, and he asked me in a casual sort of way if I knew the size of the Kurdish minority in Turkey. I replied something to the effect that I myself did not have the answer offhand but had he checked the Statistical Yearbook for the Republic of Turkey. Andy didn’t say anything—but he gave me a sort of disappointed look. Yes—I had made a fool of myself. I promised Andy I would follow up on his question and get back to him.

I quickly learned the reason for his question: it turned out that Kurds were statistically invisible not just in Turkey, but throughout the Middle East—in Iraq, Syria, and Iran as well. So: Andy wanted me to see if I could come up with a way of approximating the demographic profile of the Kurdish minority in Turkey, and prospective shifts Kurdish/Turkish balance within the Republic of Turkey in the decades ahead! Thus began one of the more challenging, and fulfilling, research projects I would ever undertake: one that would bring me to Istanbul and Turkish Kurdistan (or whatever it is called these days), and eventually afforded me an unconventional though quite serviceable method of “counting” a disfavored population, despite a presiding government’s wish that it remain un-enumerated. Suffice it to say that Andy’s interests were wide-ranging—and that you would be well served assuming there was a good reason for every question that he asked.

Another facet of Marshall-world demands mention: this is the stunning array of talent that it consistently attracted, decade after decade. Even more striking than the caliber of the established figures of demonstrated accomplishment in ONA orbit was Andy’s gift for spotting promising young people. I don’t know exactly how he found such interesting, open minds, fresh thinkers and fearless sceptics—but this certainly added to the fun of running in his circles.

To be sure: this extraordinarily ambitious and far-reaching search for talent, including contrarian talent, turned up a crank or a charlatan from time to time. Over the years there were a few characters of questionable character as well. But such people were exceptions, and obvious ones. Andy himself was a man of sterling integrity, and the talent quotient of the Marshall contingents was a thing to marvel at—not least because these rosters were assembled despite all the quality-degrading tendencies of the US government’s standard operation procedures.

Though Andy formally retired in 2016, we kept in touch until the end—meaning he was still instructing me, on into my Sixties. Not so long ago this man in his late Nineties was offering me acute counsel on a headache of a research task I had taken on: project to measure, and make sense of, impending changes in Chinese family structure and their portent. (I think I finally untangled the knots that were hanging me up on that one: thanks for your help Andy, once again.) Earlier this year he was patiently helping me clarify my own thinking about ways to improve the quality of research on economic performance in North Korea, a famously difficult system for outsiders to analyze and understand. Not uncommonly he would suggest I take a look at some article or book I had not read, or heard of: sometimes the publication was written half a century ago, other times it had just come out. Even in his final years the knowledge and learning he would bring to bear on a problem was prodigious: and in my experience it typically offered an interesting new take.

In important ways I have lived a charmed life. I have been blessed with precious opportunity to make acquaintance and form friendships with some truly world class minds. Andy was one of these—but he was also rather more. He was a Great Man. He is impossible to replace. But it is incumbent upon those of us who knew him, and learned from him, to try to pass on his legacy as best we can.