

Thomas R. Marshall

Essay prepared by IHS staff

In the late summer of 1858, an Indiana country doctor, who had recently moved to the neighboring state of Illinois, took his four-year-old son to a debate in Freeport between United States Senate candidates Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. During the debate, the child recalled later in life, he sat on Lincoln's lap while Douglas was speaking, and on Douglas's lap while Lincoln talked. "One was tall, ungainly; the other, small and animated," the youngster remembered. "I think I have a recollection that I liked the tall man."

That young man became a successful attorney, Indiana governor and two-term vice president under Woodrow Wilson. Thomas R. Marshall reminisced about the Lincoln-Douglas debate experience in his 1925 autobiography *Recollections: A Hoosier Salad*, noting that it pleased him "to think that perhaps in a small way something of the love of Lincoln and of Douglas for the Union, the constitution and the rights of the common man flowed into my childish veins."

Born in North Manchester, Indiana, on March 14, 1854, Marshall was the only son of Daniel M. and Martha A. (Patterson) Marshall. Although his family lived in Illinois, Kansas and Missouri for a time due to his mother's ill health, Marshall resided in Pierceton, Indiana, from the age of six until entering Wabash College. Looking back on those days, Marshall knew, at least, what profession he wouldn't be following: "I had a country shoemaker, who tried to teach me how to drive pegs, tell me that I was wholly unfitted for that business and that so far as he could see I would have to rely upon my tongue and not my hands for a livelihood."

Graduating from Wabash College in June 1873, Marshall studied law under the tutelage of Judge Walter Olds, who later became an Indiana Supreme Court justice. On April 26, 1875, at the age of 21, Marshall was appointed as an attorney in Whitley County. Two years later he formed a law partnership with William F. McNagny--a partnership that lasted until Marshall became governor in 1909.

As a young attorney, Marshall and his partner eked out a living with help from a few cantankerous citizens. "We felt that it had been a rather dull and stupid Saturday unless we had a half dozen assault-and-battery cases to try before the local justice of the peace," Marshall said. Later, as assault cases slackened and prospects were bleak, "the railroads began to cut off arms and legs and opened up a new source of revenue," he joked.

A staunch Democrat, Marshall had a long history of party involvement, including forming a Democratic Club while at Wabash College. Marshall's first foray into the political arena, however, did not bode well for the future. In 1880 he served as the Democratic candidate for prosecuting attorney in the 33rd Judicial District, which included

Kosciusko and Whitley counties. Marshall lost; it would be 28 years before he tried again for elective office.

After his defeat, Marshall continued to practice law in Columbia City and, in 1895 at the age of 41, he married Lois Kimsey. He reentered the political wars during the 1908 gubernatorial campaign as a compromise candidate in a battle between Democrats loyal to party boss Thomas Taggart and an anti-Taggart contingent. Conducting a low-key campaign, paid for by Marshall from a \$3,750 loan he secured from his bank, he defeated Republican challenger James E. Watson by approximately 15,000 votes.

Often describing himself as a "Progressive with the brakes on," Marshall did institute some reforms during his four years in office. He helped create a state board of accounts to audit the financial records of state and local officials and pushed through child labor, weekly wage and voter registration laws. He failed, however, in his attempt to revamp the state's constitution.

As he had been during the fight between Indiana Democrats for governor, Marshall was in the right place at the right time at the Democratic National Convention in 1912. New Jersey Gov. Woodrow Wilson had captured the party's presidential nomination after 46 ballots. Wilson's two opponents--Champ Clark and Oscar Underwood--refused offers to run for vice president, and Wilson agreed to Marshall's selection as his running mate. The Democrats themselves took advantage of a split in the GOP, defeating incumbent President William Howard Taft and "Bull Moose" candidate Theodore Roosevelt.

Four years later, the Wilson/Marshall ticket narrowly defeated Republican challenger Charles Evans Hughes, who had Hoosier Charles Warren Fairbanks--Theodore Roosevelt's vice president--as his running mate. When Wilson suffered a stroke in 1919 during his campaign on behalf of the Treaty of Versailles and was incapacitated, Marshall refused to take power, at one time remarking to his wife, Lois: "I could throw this country into civil war, but I won't."

At the end of his term in 1921, Marshall returned to private life and a steady stream of lecture appearances, delighting audiences across the country with his wit. Some of the numerous bon mots he contributed include:

On the office of vice president: "Once there were two brothers. One ran away to sea; the other was elected vice president. And nothing was ever heard of either of them again."

On the 19th state: "It [Indiana] has perhaps no towering mountain peaks, but it has surely furnished as many first-rate second-class men in every department of life as any state in the Union."

On the "generation gap": "The only difference between their generation and my generation is that they have different ways of making fools of themselves."

On political platforms: "A political platform ought to be written by three persons--a political economist, a philologist and an honest man."

On his plans after leaving office: "I don't want to work. I don't propose to work. I wouldn't mind being Vice President again."

Despite Marshall's many accomplishments, he remains best known today for a chance remark he made while presiding over the U.S. Senate in 1917. During a long speech by Senator Joe Bristow of Kansas on the needs of the country, Marshall turned to a clerk and said: "What this country needs is a really good five-cent cigar."

Marshall died of a heart attack on June 1, 1925, at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. The *Indianapolis News* reported that the former vice president "was sitting up in bed reading the Bible when the fatal attack took him."