

Marshall, the Environment and Civil Rights

Louis Marshall remained a political conservative throughout his life. He remained loyal to the Republican Party through his final years, in the 1920s, even as he privately chided key GOP figures for projecting indifferent attitudes toward major social issues. A loquacious man of strong opinions, sometimes his political judgment on American issues was off target. An uncanny example is his enthusiastic exclamation to his youngest son, George, after Herbert Hoover's election in 1928: "I am sure that Hoover, with all his broad experience, his ability to think scientifically and in an orderly manner, his appreciation of the problems which call for solution, will be equal to any emergency that may arise."

While no more of a prophet on domestic politics than anyone else, Marshall's legacy on American affairs was richly diverse and in some respects unique. There is much on Marshall's record that would inspire subsequent generations of American Jews committed either to the community's liberal Democratic mainstream or to its increasingly influential neoconservative minority.

Marshall's legal expertise and ardent belief in Constitutional liberties propelled him during the last decade of his life to an intriguingly unique, and curiously overlooked, circumstance in the ethnic history of the United States. Spokesmen from the country's most vulnerable and persecuted minorities routinely referred to the American Jewish organizational leader as their own champion. "No man has done more for the Negro," the NAACP said about Marshall. Similarly, Native American commentators hailed Marshall's advocacy for their community, exuding that this work "had the quality of a trumpet challenge to the imagination and conscience."

A special place on Marshall's career resume must be reserved for his blue ribbon contribution to environmental protection through the use of the law, grassroots advocacy and higher-education initiatives. Essentially, Marshall and his son Robert (a legendary figure in American environmental history) refashioned key initiatives that provided organizational definition to American Jewish life and transplanted these modified models in the environmental sphere, as though they were establishing an American Jewish Committee for wildlife and forest protection. Legal and social

protections afforded to ethnic groups in the country had to be extended to the environment, Louis and Robert Marshall insisted; the environment was to be seen as a legitimate “minority” interest of its own. In this sense, Marshall can be seen as an icon by green movements positioned to the left of establishment politics in the 21st century.

Marshall introduced the “forever wild” clause in the 1894 New York state constitution. Important in the protection of the Catskills and the Adirondacks, this clause set a precedent for environmental protection in New York State and the country. A yet more significant contribution was Marshall’s crucial role in the founding of the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse University in 1911. Cornell University had experimented unsuccessfully with environmental education in the first years of the 20th century, but Syracuse University’s Forestry College first class of 160 students constituted a ground-breaking endeavor in environment studies in North America. Marshall served for years as the president of the Forestry College’s board of trustees and energetically spoke about the indispensability of environmental protection and education to state legislators in Albany, to Syracuse University administrators, and to teachers and students.

Marshall’s labors for environmental protection were recognized a year after his death when New York Governor Franklin Roosevelt arranged for the establishment of the Louis Marshall Memorial Building at the Forestry College. Yet, his contributions in this field never have been fully appreciated, probably because they were so far ahead of their time. As in the example of this exhortation, Marshall’s comments on environmental matters have special resonance in the 21st century:

There is no subject which demands more serious attention on the part of American statesmen. If our forest lands are to be denuded in the future as they have been in the past, there will not only be a lumber famine, but there will be a change in climate of a most serious nature, a diminution of our sources of water supply, and at certain seasons of the year destructive freshets. In time our country would suffer all of the evils which are now felt in those European and Asiatic countries in which the forests have disappeared.