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This book of the just-retired newsman's reminiscences of Washington at the dawn of America's involvement in World War II is no mere historical curiosity shop. It's very instructive about the way Washington *still* works. For instance, Brinkley tells us that in September 1941, while FDR was still wavering about where to put the military's new headquarters building, an Army general told the contractor to get started. By the time Roosevelt found out about this a month later, the foundations for the Pentagon had already been put in place.

Washington Goes to War Details

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From Reader Review *Washington Goes to War* for online ebook

Violeta says

"... i am a journalist, not a historian, and while this book is an effort to describe a moment in the past, it is less of history than of personal reminiscence and reflection...."

Paul Haspel says

Washington, D.C., grows at a moderate rate in time of peace, but grows very quickly in time of war. It happened during the American Civil War, when the “sleepy Southern town” of antebellum days became a well-fortified, confident, and forward-looking Union capital; and it happened quite recently, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when an entirely new homeland security apparatus had to be formed, virtually from scratch. Perhaps most famously, it happened during the Second World War. The profound changes brought to Washington by the city’s, and the nation’s, participation in the Allied war effort are well chronicled by David Brinkley in his 1988 book *Washington Goes to War*.

Brinkley, a distinguished journalist best known for decades of achievement at NBC News, on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *This Week With David Brinkley*, provides a fast-moving and pleasing portrait of this time of change in the history of the Nation’s Capital. Among other things, Brinkley captures the way in which President Franklin D. Roosevelt exercised his “almost magical talent for persuading and manipulating the American people” through “his ability to state his thoughts in simple homely phrases,” as when, in the time before Pearl Harbor, he explained “Lend-Lease,” a military program designed for aiding embattled Great Britain, to a skeptical and largely isolationist U.S. public by saying, “Suppose my neighbor’s home catches on fire, and I have a length of garden hose four or five hundred feet away....I want my hose back after the fire is over. All right. If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it” (pp. 50-51). Roosevelt’s defense of what Brinkley describes as frankly a “fraudulent” program that abandoned all pretense of United States neutrality in World War II worked, in spite of U.S. Senator Robert Taft’s acid rejoinder that “Lending arms is like lending chewing gum. You don’t want it back” (p. 51).

Once the United States was officially in the war, much changed in Washington. The thousands of people who came to Washington to assist in, or profit from, the war effort caused an acute housing shortage – a problem that was sufficiently well-known that Hollywood released two wartime comedies, George Stevens’s *The More the Merrier* (1943) and Sidney Lanfield’s *Standing Room Only* (1944), both set in D.C. and taking as their subject the District’s housing shortage. Portions of *Washington Goes to War* take the reader back to the time when government workers “slept in shifts” in shared housing -- when temporary housing proliferated in trailer parks throughout the area, and equally temporary office buildings popped up on the National Mall itself.

The day Pearl Harbor was bombed, the Republican minority leader of the House of Representatives met with President Roosevelt and declared, “In the hour of danger there is no partisanship”; but as Brinkley points out, “unity meant different things to different people”, as when a Democratic boss from the Bronx stated his belief that “the Republicans should suspend operations for the duration and leave the Democrats in charge” (p. 200). In many of the political controversies of the time, Aristotle would no doubt have seen justification for his well-known claim that *ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον* (“Man is by nature a political animal”).

War or no war, Washington's social scene continued to sparkle, albeit with some alterations: "Before the war, the Latin American embassies had been of little interest to Washington socialites, but with so many European countries occupied by the Germans and their embassies suffering, the South and Central American embassies assumed with a new seriousness the task of keeping social Washington amused at night" (p. 151).

The social segregation that had existed in Washington, D.C., since the post-Civil War era continued, but was challenged during World War II by brave African Americans who pointed out, correctly, that it was absurd for the U.S.A. to expect African-American soldiers to fight for American democracy abroad, but to put up with undemocratic, racist social practices at home. In April of 1943, for example, black students asked politely to be served at Thompson's Restaurant at 11th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, while picketers marched outside in support. The picketers' efforts received some reinforcement when "six black soldiers (unconnected with the demonstrators) joined the students at tables inside and refused to leave even when M.P.'s arrived and warned them that the incident might 'embarrass' the army. Finally, the restaurant management gave in, and for several days – as local reporters watched – blacks were served without incident" (pp. 250-51). While the restaurant was re-segregated once reporters were no longer watching, the incident demonstrated the determination of D.C.'s African-American community to fight for their rights, and looked ahead to the more lasting successes of the Civil Rights Era.

As a Washington native who grew up in the D.C. area, I found that *Washington Goes to War* helped me to look at the life of the city in new ways. For example, when driving through upper Northwest Washington in my younger years, I was often struck by the attractive campus of the Office of Naval Intelligence, near Ward Circle at Massachusetts and Nebraska Avenues, and wondered: how did the United States Navy acquire such a prime piece of real estate? Simple, as it turns out: the Navy took a look at the campus of a women's college called Mount Vernon Seminary, and "decided it wanted the school and its Georgian brick buildings, classrooms, dormitories, its land, its chapel, everything; and while the girls were home for the Christmas holidays, the navy just took it. It offered \$800,000 for property easily worth \$5 million and finally agreed to pay \$1.1 million" (p. 117). Such is the way things change in a society at war, and *Washington Goes to War* captures those changes well. With helpful photographs (no footnotes or index, but a useful list of sources at the end), it is a good work of popular history.

David Brown says

David Brinkley is my hero. He was a daily voice in our home at the six o'clock news hour, and I remember my brother and I once repeated their closing lines when we went to bed: "Good night, Chet." "Good night, David." He was an important figure in America. (The folks in Wayne, West Virginia even named a bridge for him.) Brinkley was the man in the know, and later I thoroughly enjoyed watching him preside over ABC News' *This Week with David Brinkley*. Who better to relate to us the goings on in our nation's capitol during World War II?

I found the book easily readable and quite captivating. His cozy portrayals of colorful Washington characters provide the reader with an interesting peek behind the curtain at the inner workings of the Washington machine. From the party planners to bureaucrats to press lords, Brinkley described many facets of life in the District. His anecdotes sometimes put the pompous into perspective and revealed a human side to a government culture that often appears cold and lacking personality to the rest of the country.

The premise of the book is that the war transformed the capitol from a sleepy southern town -- where

Congress only met five months a year and avoided the steamy D.C. summers before the invention of air-conditioning – to a bustling bureaucracy that was quickly bulging at the seams. Ugly temporary buildings appeared on the Mall, and “government girls” streamed into town and had a time finding suitable lodging. The Pentagon military complex was meant for wartime, but in peacetime it only continued to grow. When Washington turned to pay-as-you-go tax collection, it found that it could afford more, and the sleepy little town would never be the same.

Brinkley's poignant portrayal of the last days of the war, including the death of Franklin Roosevelt, shows a journalist who was more than a stiff news reader. Here was a reporter with humanity and empathy, someone who respected the offices and institutions that he covered for decades, and did so with heart. For me this book was as much about Brinkley as it was about Washington. Maybe that's because after a lifetime of service reporting on the government as a distinguished member of the press, my hero showed once again that he was a voice America could trust.

Born in 1920, the same year as my father, David Brinkley's book evokes for me reflections on men and women his colleague Tom Brokaw termed the *Greatest Generation*. All my days I will be grateful for their great contributions. Washington Goes to War counts among them.

+Chaz says

Funny at times, Brinkley really tells you the way it was in Washington DC during WWII. Detailed and well written, it's a must read for anyone that has the slightest interest in history or Politics

Don says

Reading goodreads reviewer and close personal friend Nolan Crabb's review of this masterpiece caused me to immediately add it to my "to read" list and I'm very glad I did. Brinkley's chronicle of an incredibly dysfunctional World War II Washington, D.C. is extremely troubling, extremely readable, and, as Nolan points out, in a strange way comforting.

All of the rhetoric about how broken Washington is, how dysfunctional government has become etc. is, and should be, of great concern. This book serves as a reminder that things may not have been so much better in the "good old days." Brinkley provides numerous examples of governmental inefficiency and waste. He shows us a Washington where partying was the norm even at a time when our world was in crisis. His account is quite readable and left me scratching my head and wondering how we managed to get anything done during those pivotal years in US history. Of course, it can be argued -- correctly, I think -- that the current administration is leading us down a very dangerous path and that this was not true under FDR. I agree, but that's not what this book addresses. It shows that Washington, DC was no more functional 76 years ago than it is today (a sad comment indeed) and yet we are here to tell about it.

Dave says

More a memoir than a history book, journalist Brinkley conveys a feeling through anecdotes and newspaper clippings just what it was like as Washington DC grew from a sleepy southern city to a true international capital during WWII. There are definitely some interesting and amusing stories here.

Gaabriel Becket says

This is a fantastic book. David Brinkley wrote about the changes that took place in Washington, DC as a result of WWII, how it went from basically a sleepy little burg where visitors walked into the president's office and bounced on his chair, to the sprawling bureaucratic machine we all know today. He writes about it directly and vividly because he was there and saw it, what the people were like as people (Alice Roosevelt, eeew!), what the town was like, snapshots of things that make it come alive - fearing shortages after Pearl Harbor, people stocked up on sugar and pineapples, so much so that one car's trunk was so overfull it was dragging on the ground; or the festering cesspool of backbiting gossip that was the hotel the Japanese, German and Italian diplomats were kept in, along with their wives AND mistresses! I tell everyone to read it, not enough people do. A great book and fun to read.

Jill Mackin says

I'm a former Washingtonian and I found this book to be fantastic!

Nolan says

One of the most frequently repeated themes of the last election cycle has been that Washington is broken, that the Congress is dysfunctional, and on it goes. The purveyors of that message sought to convince us that this is a relatively new development. If you believe them, you want to ring your hands and scream with frustration. But history is always the best teacher, and in this case, it teaches well. The truth is that the Congress has probably always been dysfunctional to one degree or another, and that the DC city government has struggled with competence issues at least since the years prior to World War II. This is an up-close look at DC by a young reporter who went there to cover the war and stories surrounding it.

You will find a strange kind of comfort in this book, because with it will come the realization that no matter how broken things seem now, they've always been like that. The image some of us may have of an efficient Roosevelt administration helping to roll up the nation's sleeves and win a war is a wonderful one to carry with you if you're ok with harboring a complete myth. The reality is that Washington was a city of chaos and disorganization. It is a town whose one hand has no idea what the other is up to. One federal employee, for example, was hired on the spot to do a job only to get a letter forwarded to him from a New York office that said he was not qualified for the job. Somehow his own signature had been affixed to the letter.

You'll be stunned and appalled by the stories of the inadequate housing during the war years. People were housed in buildings that remained standing well into the mid '60s, despite their extremely temporary nature. The now-famous Pentagon was authorized for construction by generals a full month before Roosevelt found

out the authorization had been given. That's because he diddled and dawdled indecisively trying to figure out where to build the military space.

I found myself fuming with absolute rage at the descriptions of the constant partying that apparently was a hallmark of World War II-era Washington. I suspect that kind of stuff happens there still only to far greater degrees. You'll read about one whore house whose hours were from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Its owner reasoned that her women could provide expensive quickies to sexually frustrated Congressmen and others during the work day and be closed at night when the laughably tiny vice squad would do most of its raids.

You'll read stories of air raid sirens that didn't work, agency personnel who stole typewriters from other agencies at night so the vast influx of female typists who had converged on the city from everywhere would have something to type on. It felt to me like the administration used shortages as an excuse to get the average American to sacrifice increasingly only to shamelessly waste or misappropriate those things that came in as a result of the sacrifices.

Brinkley points out that this is a journalistic endeavor, not a history. Whatever it is, it is highly readable, and much of it will leave you stunned by how relevant the information is to today's Washington. The anecdotes range from the truly funny to the racially tragic and all points in between. You'll read about the three-member commission that was the DC government during the war, and about the fact that Congress deliberately ignored and neglected the city until it was forced to do something so the Congress wouldn't look bad. In short, this is a fascinating look at how a broken city still manages to work often enough to get things done sort of, and it's worthy of your time. The profanity levels here are low to moderate, and despite the focus being on Washington, there are no sexual descriptions here.

Paul Szydlowski says

David Brinkley describes how air conditioning, payroll withholding and WWII gave us big government.

Riley says

At times this book went a little off topic, veering from Washington D.C. into a more general history of World War II. But I enjoyed it, and I was impressed with David Brinkley's writing style and some of his turns of phrase.

A few that I underscored:

"Some three hundred miles south of Washington, in the small port city of Wilmington, North Carolina, a young part-time reporter [presumably Brinkley himself] for the Morning Star poked idly around the Cape Fear River docks. At the foot of Walnut Street, waiting for a ship's winch to lift them aboard, were stacks of wooden bins filled with scrap metal – brake drums, bedsprings, knives and forks bearing the monograms of bankrupt hotels and restaurants, coat hooks, the insides of Big Ben alarms clocks, Chevrolet engine blocks, the long poles grocers used to reach the corn flakes on the top shelves. What was all this junk and where was it going?

“‘Scrap metal going to Japan,’ they told him. ‘So they can melt it down and shoot it back at us.’

“Was it possible a young man conceived on these bedsprings might someday fight the Japanese and be shot with a weapon made from his own parents’ melted-down bedsprings? Nobody on the Walnut Street docks could answer that.”

Or:

“In July of 1914, the British and German ambassadors to Washington lived in houses facing each other across Connecticut Avenue, the bathroom window of one looking over through the trees into the bathroom window of the other. In the mornings, as the two of them shaved, each looked out across the avenue at the other and smiled and bowed – old colleagues beginning the day with ivory-handled straight razors and badger shaving brushes in porcelain mugs. A month later, their countries were at war. The bowing and smiling stopped. Each refused to look out the window while he shaved.”

Or, on class-conscious socialite Washington:

“Why such frenzy to fill a dinner table with people who might be famous or hold great power but who might also be insufferably dull? Archduke Otto of Austria, the pretender to the nonexistent Austro-Hungarian throne of the Hapsburgs, continued to be sought after even when he was found to be a bore who ate like a timber wolf and then sat lumpishly and groggily in the living room refusing to leave until pushed. Why did the hostesses pursue this?”

Karen says

The descriptions by author David Brinkley of how Washington, DC, was before Pearl Harbor and after December 7, 1941, revealed much I didn't know and/or hadn't considered in my various readings about the history of the war. Washington had to change its ways of doing things almost overnight. New, cheap housing had to be built to house the thousands of needed clerical and professional people who arrived within days of the declaration of war. How people lived, how deals were made, how President Roosevelt behaved (who knew he rarely made decisions on his own?), and how the social life of the city evolved makes this book an enjoyable read and provides much understanding of what started in WWII that has lasted to the present day. Agencies that did not exist prior to Pearl Harbor are still active today albeit sometimes under different names. The way the president was able to work around Congress to get what he wanted sounds very familiar with events over the past 30 years, and how nations worked together or around each other provides insight into how international deals are made. Mr. Brinkley, of Huntley-Brinkley News on NBC, wrote a wonderful book about life in war-time USA. Highly recommended. I appreciate Sarah Shaber's suggestion (of the Louise Pearlie mystery series) that I read *Washington Goes to War*.

Sheila says

If you love the city of Washington DC, are preparing to visit, or recently visited, this is a fun read. Brinkley writes about the incredible period during Roosevelt's 3rd term when the number of buildings and the city's population exploded. The cast of real-life characters are more exciting than some of the best fiction you'll

ever encounter. Brinkley's style is candid and honest. A great read for your flight into our nation's grand Capitol! Then, you'll want to visit Embassy row, the Pentagon, and the old hotels.

Pat DiGeorge says

Newscaster and journalist David Brinkley tells the story of the transformation of the capital city during World War II.

Mr. Brinkley writes nothing about his personal military involvement in the war. I finally found in a philly.com article explaining that in 1940, he volunteered for the Army. A year later he was misdiagnosed with a kidney ailment and honorably discharged. He then worked in Atlanta and Nashville for UPI (United Press International) before moving to Washington, D.C. as a reporter for the NBC radio network.

His book is copiously researched and begins with a history of the creation of the city itself. What interested me the most was how it changed from a sleepy town to the chaotic center of the free world. In 1941 my mother, Hedy Allen, arrived in Washington to be one of the vast number of "government girls" who came to work as stenographers, typists, and file clerks for the myriad of new government agencies that were popping up every week.

I laughed so many times during the book at Brinkley's sense of humor. "Six months into the war, there were so many new agencies, all known by their initials that nobody could keep them straight." OPC, OWI, WPB, OPA, WMC, BEW, NWLB, ODT, WSA, OCD, OEM ... and I will add those from the OSS since that's where my mother worked ... COI, SI, X-2, SO, OG, R&A, MO. The secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, was also director of the Office of Petroleum Coordination. At a news conference when asked about an OPC ruling, he answered, "I can't speak for the OPC." That is, until an aide whispered in his ear, "You are the director of the OPC." Ickes was confused by all the initials too.

So, all these initials needed government employees, and most of them were women. In the beginning civil service exams were required (my mother took one) but they were dropped. Took too much time. The government advertised in newspapers all over the country for anyone who had a high school diploma and could type. \$1440 a year.

The women (if they didn't already have a job, and thank goodness my mother did) went to a mass receiving station above a dime store where they were interviewed. There were never enough workers to feed the agencies.

And there were never enough typewriters. By mid-1942 the government said it was 600,000 typewriters short. The companies that had been making typewriters had been diverted to war production. The OWI (Office of War Information) began a "Send your typewriter to war" campaign. Maureen O'Hara posed behind a table piled with typewriters. Each had a tag that read, "For Uncle Sam."

Problem was, not that many people were willing to hand over their typewriters. Plus, the ones that came in with their standard 12 inch carriages often weren't the right size. These new agencies were using new forms up to 18 inches wide.

The next crisis was paper. When the war started, the government owned \$650,000 worth of printing and reproducing equipment. In less than a year it had \$50 million worth. There wasn't enough paper to keep all

these machines going, and there wasn't enough space to store the records they created. After spending two weeks in the National Archives going through just *some* of the papers of one WWII office (X-2 Stockholm) I believe it!

Six months after Pearl Harbor more than half the young women hired as typists and stenographers had quit and gone home. They had been hired but were never given anything useful to do.

"It was simply the way the government worked, in both war and peace, although in wartime it was worse. The single fact most clearly differentiating government employers from private employers was, always, that government agencies did not have to earn their money. Congress simply handed it over every year and almost always more than the year before, so it was there to be spent and it was unthinkable not to spend it. Nobody in government ever benefited in any way from saving money. Whatever was not spent had to be handed back to the Treasury and if an agency had money left over at the end of one year, how could it ask Congress for more money the next year?"

Perhaps not much has changed in the past seventy years!

For anyone with a connection to Washington D.C. and/or World War II, I highly recommend Brinkley's book.

Marla says

A very entertaining history.
