PIONEERS ON PARADE

MILES FRANKLIN AND DYMPHNA CUSACK

A NOVEL

David Brinkley

WASHINGTON GOES TO WAR

ANDRE DEUTSCH

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To Alan, Joel, John and Alexis

Washington in wartime is a combination of Moscow (for overcrowding), Paris (for its trees), Wichita (for its way of thinking), Nome (in the gold-rush days) and Hell (for its livability).

—Malcolm Cowley, "Washington Is Like Hell,"
The New Republic, June 1942

Home of the brave, land of the free
I don't want to be mistreated by no bourgeoisie,
Lord, it's a bourgeois town!

Tell all the colored folks to listen to me,
Don't try to buy no home in Washington, D.C.
'Cause it's a bourgeois town!

—Song by Leadbelly,
black folk singer of the 1940s

Washington the Capital is a symbol of democracy and America. Washington the city is a symbol of almost everything that sincere and thoughtful men know is wrong with democracy and America. Washington the Capital is the hope of world freedom; Washington the city is overcrowded, badly housed, expensive, crime-ridden, intolerant, with inadequate transportation, schools, and health facilities. It staggers under a dilapidated and hopeless governmental organization, and its problems are rapidly getting worse.

—Alden Stevens, "Washington: Blight on Democracy,"
Harper's, December 1941

If the war lasts much longer, Washington is going to bust right out of its pants.

—*Life* magazine, January 1943

Chapter Headpieces

I Pennsylvania Avenue, looking up toward the Capitol *(National Archives)*

II Women picketing the White House, November 5, 1941; British sailor looks on at right *(Acme)*

III Women office workers in Washington *(National Archives)*

IV A few hours after the Pearl Harbor bombing, an armed patrol guards the War Department *(Acme)*

V Actress Maureen O'Hara with a load of typewriters donated to the government for war work *(Library of Congress)*

VI Andrei Gromyko and Orson Welles meet at a Soviet embassy reception, 1944 *(Library of Congress)*

VII FDR press conference, December 23, 1941; Winston Churchill is at his right *(Acme)*

VIII Senator Theodore Bilbo *(AP)*

IX OPA poster *(National Archives)*

X Spectators at Roosevelt's funeral procession, April 14, 1945 *(National Archives)*

Preface

I am a journalist, not a historian, and while this book is an effort to describe a moment in the past, it is less a work of history than of personal reminiscence and reflection. Essentially, it is an account of my own observations and experiences in wartime Washington, supplemented by material drawn from interviews and other sources. I have tried to create out of it all a portrait of the pain and struggle of a city and a government suddenly called upon to fight, and to lead other nations in fighting, the greatest war in history, but pathetically and sometimes hilariously unprepared to do so.

This is bound to be somewhere close to the last reporting from that period based on firsthand sources. One after another, with unsettling rapidity, those in positions of power and responsibility during World War II are passing from the scene. Several who agreed to recall and describe their experiences in the war years died before I could get to them.

I have not dealt here in any detail with the grand strategy of the war in Europe and the Pacific. Instead, I have tried to report mainly on what I saw and heard and learned in Washington during years now fading into a misty past, the wartime experience of a country two-thirds of whose people are now too young to remember any of it. The result is a sort of *Our Town* at war, the story of a city astonished and often confused to find itself at the center of a worldwide conflict without ever hearing a shot fired. A strange city, set up in the first place to be the center of government and, like government itself at that time, a city moving slowly and doing little.

As the forties began, Washington was mainly a middle-class town grown up around a middle-class government. A Hudson Valley patrician sat in the White House, yes, but he and his appointed assistants presided over a population of government employees of modest incomes and modest ambitions. A town where Raleigh Haberdasher on F Street ran

advertisements suggesting that a man in an office job really should own more than one suit. (When the new and radical idea of zippers on men's trousers began to appear, Woodward and Lothrop posted signs in its men's department saying that for $3.50 it would remove the zippers and replace them with buttons.) A town where people routinely bought Chevrolets not new but used.

It was a town and a government entirely unprepared to take on the global responsibilities suddenly thrust upon it. The executive branch, despite its expansion during the New Deal, remained relatively small, its employees more concerned with egg prices and post office construction than with the war clouds gathering in Europe and Asia. And Congress, all its members sent in from other places, was even worse. No one in the Senate even laughed when one of its members, Kenneth Wherry, Republican of Nebraska, rose to declare that after the war China deserved American help so that "Shanghai can be raised up and up until it's just like Kansas City."

A government of drones and paper shufflers simply could not do the job. And so Franklin Roosevelt found that he had, in effect, to recruit an entirely new and temporary government to be piled on top of the old one, the new government to get the tanks and airplanes built, the uniforms made, the men and women assembled and trained and shipped abroad, and the battles fought and won. The war transformed not just the government. It transformed Washington itself. A languid Southern town with a pace so slow that much of it simply closed down for the summer grew almost overnight into a crowded, harried, almost frantic metropolis struggling desperately to assume the mantle of global power, moving haltingly and haphazardly and only partially successfully to change itself into the capital of the free world.

Nothing like it had ever been seen before. Nothing like it is likely to be seen again.

This book is a journalist's attempt to describe it.

David Brinkley
Washington, D.C.
November 1987

Acknowledgments

Washington's agencies and offices produced the weapons and the uniformed men and women to fight and win World War II. They also produced monumental accumulations of paper, much of which has remained stored and largely untouched since the war ended. Nearly eight years ago, Charles Curtis began researching and organizing this material, looking for records of what happened out of the public eye in Washington during the war years. For a part of this time Clifford Sloan also joined in the paper search. The two of them have since gone on to pursue legal careers and may now see this work as less important than what they have done since, but to me it was invaluable. This book could not have been written without them.

Others helped with the interviews and research on a subject so large, so sweeping as to make their assistance indispensable. Mark Powden unraveled the complexities of a number of events in the bureaucracy of wartime Washington. Jonathan Alter conducted with great skill a number of the interviews. Further, I am grateful to Peter Fitzsimmons, Lisa Conniff, Charles Bloche, David Goldberg and James Ralph for their assistance in various stages of the work.

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Further, I offer my thanks to the splendidly helpful staffs at the National Archives, the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington's Columbia Historical Society, the Washingtoniana Room in the Martin Luther King Library of the D.C. Public Library and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, N.Y.

And foremost, to my son, Alan Brinkley, professor of history. He directed the research, often calling on the aid of his students at Harvard.

And, far more than that, he helped organize and plan these chapters and saved me from numerous errors. If any remain, they are mine, not his. To Alan, my deepest thanks.

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Prologue

In 1783, the British defeated and the American Revolution ended, the new Congress was already irritated at being forced to move its deliberations from one city to another for the previous six years to escape the British army. Now, settled in Philadelphia, it was infuriated again because it was threatened by its own army, a rowdy mob of its newly disbanded soldiers gathered in the street noisily demanding to be paid. Congress responded with a resolution:

> The authority of the United States having been this day grossly insulted by the disorderly and menacing appearance of a body of armed soldiers about the place within which Congress were assembled, and the peace of this city being endangered by the mutinous disposition of the said troops . . .

It asked the Philadelphia authorities to call out their own militia to remove the soldiers from the street. The troops were, according to James Madison's notes, "muttering offensive words and wantonly pointing their muskets to the windows of the hall of Congress. . . . It was observed that spirituous drink from the tippling houses adjoining began to be liberally served out to the soldiers and might lead to hasty excesses."

Philadelphia responded that it did not believe Congress being disturbed in its labors was sufficient provocation for calling out its militia.

Congress was so enraged it left Philadelphia and held its next session in Princeton, New Jersey. There, Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts offered a resolution to build a permanent place for a federal government on the banks of the Delaware or Potomac river "if a suitable site can be found."

Everyone agreed that Congress needed a meetingplace under its own control and insulated from local political pressures and from such threats as drunken soldiers, but there was no agreement on where this

place should be. There were numerous offers over the next several years. New York State suggested the town of Kingston. Other offers came from Newport, Rhode Island; Annapolis, Maryland; Trenton, New Jersey; Williamsburg, Virginia; and Philadelphia. But Congress rejected them all, out of sectional jealousies, hope for commercial advantage, and for such reasons as South Carolina's dislike of Philadelphia because it had too many Quakers who opposed slavery.

Then two states, Maryland and Virginia, offered both land and money. They would provide between them one hundred square miles of land, on both sides of the Potomac River, and would give $192,000 for new government buildings. An attractive offer, but still not good enough to end the rivalries among the states until Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury under the new Constitution, saw a chance to make a deal. He wanted the new federal government to assume responsibility for the debts the individual state governments had run up during the Revolution. He saw that those to whom the debts were owed were mostly wealthy and influential men; if the new central government owed them money, they would be more likely to work for its survival and stability. The Southern states opposed this idea, because most of those who were owed money were Northerners. And the money to pay the debt would have to be raised by increasing the government's only real source of revenue, the tariff on imports, which the Southerners also opposed because they, more than the North, were a rural, agrarian people dependent on imported manufactured goods. Hamilton got his way only by agreeing to support a new capital city in the South, on the Potomac River. On July 15, 1790, Congress voted to remain in Philadelphia for ten years and then move to a new "Federal City" to be constructed somewhere along the Potomac. And so Washington, D.C., was born as it was to live—with a political deal.

Even before it was built, the capital was named for George Washington. Congress gave him the privilege of choosing a site for the federal city, anywhere between the point where the Anacostia River flows into the Potomac and a creek seventy-five miles upstream flowing in through the village of Williamsport, Maryland. Williamsport, expecting to become the great, glittering capital of a new and growing nation, hastily rebuilt its one central street to make it one hundred feet wide, to accommodate the ceremonial processions of kings and princes who would surely be visiting the new American capital. Two hundred years later,

Williamsport still sits there, a remote and tiny village with one enormously wide street.

Within the limits specified by Congress, George Washington located the new capital city as close to his own home, Mount Vernon, as he could. He placed it at the junction of the Potomac and the Anacostia.

As he announced his choice, he warned against greedy land speculators and agreed to pay sixty-seven dollars an acre to buy land from David Burnes for the future White House and from Daniel Carroll for the United States Capitol. He made the same offer to others on both sides of the river: for land in the existing towns of Alexandria, Virginia, and Georgetown, Maryland, and for tobacco farms, swamp, and wasteland—all to make up the one hundred square miles Congress said it needed for protection and privacy. So, on sixty-seven-dollar land—sneeringly described in the New York press as "a tangle of woods and swamps"—rose the capital of the first great republic since Rome.