

► *America goes into high gear on war production and Washington becomes*

AMERICA'S BIGGEST BOOM TOWN

By DONALD WILHELM

AMERICA's feverish preparations for war have set off booms in the industrial centers, have left no town untouched in some degree. But the place where it all starts is Boom Town No. 1 — Washington, D. C. Washington never before was such a spectacle, not in the previous World War, not even in the frenetic days when Gen. Hugh (Ironpants) Johnson whooped it up for the NRA Blue Eagle.

Hotel clerks smile superciliously when you ask for a room. Or if you're an old and valued customer, they will phone all over town for you and finally get you a bed in some place which, if you weren't so grateful by that time to find anything at all, you'd call a flophouse. Many a businessman flies back to New York for the night, flies down again next morning. Restaurants are packed and their prices inch relentlessly upward. The Union Station, one of the most spacious and most beautiful in the world, doesn't look so ridiculously oversized any more, with 75,000 passengers a day moving across its great

concourse. In the slow-moving traffic jam of the streets, you have plenty of time to note the diversity of license plates; 15,000 tourists a day drive in to see the show, or look for jobs, or honeymoon — and this doesn't count Virginians or Marylanders. The airport is the busiest in the United States — which means in the world — save La Guardia Field, New York. It handles 65,000 passengers a month in 182 scheduled daily flights, and many of these are flights of four to six sections, which is aviation lingo for extra planes. It is sheer good fortune that the handsome new airport across the Potomac was completed just in time to serve the rush.

These things the visitor notices, amid Washington's special brand of steamy heat. But the city's workers, stirred though they are with a patriotism that is strikingly apparent, see less pleasant facts. The government employes are crowded and uncomfortable both in their offices and in their living quarters, working long hours with no over-

time pay, worried over the impact of rising rents and the rising cost of living, on their average \$1500 salaries.

There are 240,000 men and women on one or another public pay roll in Washington now and they are increasing at the rate of 5000 a month. That includes some 20,000 officers of the Army and Navy on duty here. You don't notice the officers. It was suggested that they ought to be in uniform, to stir the public to a realization of the emergency. But Some One promptly squelched the suggestion.

The horde of government employees go to work in all kinds of places. The government has taken over 200-odd mansions, hotels and apartment houses to use as offices. It is a bit startling to find the official with whom you have business sitting amid the shiny tiles of what last week, or yesterday, was obviously a bathroom. Sometimes the fixtures have been decently boxed in to serve as chairs or tables; sometimes not. Girls newly come from Iowa farms are pecking typewriters in rooms the like of which they never saw before — mirrored ballrooms with slightly naughty frescoes. The boss presides in a silk-walled boudoir, if he's lucky. Down in the old Nineteenth Street Auditorium, the typists sit in the boxes

and balconies. The filing cabinets are backed up against the organ pipes. Washingtonians took the evictions meekly until the government served notice on the 346 occupants of the new and rather snooty Dupont Circle Apartments to clear out. About 100, protected by leases, refused to move and are sticking it out, though the carpets have been stripped from the lobby, and the clack of adding machines insistently leaks through the walls of their beleaguered strongholds.

The War Department, with 24,000 personnel that will be 30,000 by the time you read this, is packed into 17 different buildings at enormous cost in lost motion and delay. There is a breath-taking scheme to remedy that by erecting the biggest building in the world — 4,000,000 feet of floor space, four times the area of the Department of Commerce Building that covers three city blocks and was christened "Hoover's Folly" when it was built. It is to stand at the Virginia end of the Memorial Bridge across the Potomac. It will cost a mere \$35,000,000, so Congress probably will do it. The Army and Navy have been sharing the big Munitions Building, a thing which looks like a cotton warehouse and was built as a "temporary" structure during the first World War.

The Army now says sweetly the Navy can have the whole barn; the Army will graciously move out.

II

For all their discomfort and apprehensions, the government folk blench at the idea of living anywhere else than Washington. The Home Owners Loan Corporation is moving its 1200 people to New York, and you should hear the anguished screams! Recently the Bureau of the Budget questioned every department closely as to the possibility of moving all or part of its personnel out of Washington. What actual transfers will come of that is anyone's guess, but it has had two immediate effects. For one, bureau chiefs are bestirring themselves with comic alacrity to see if, after all, they can't find more desk space right where they are. The Department of Justice, to pick an example, found 20,000 square feet — room for 200 new employees — by such expedients as shoving Thurman Arnold's law library out into a corridor. For another, it was brought out that 17 per cent of all the government's 23,000,000 square feet, 528 acres of floor space is being used for files, and 8 per cent for dead storage — a total of 25 per cent.

Washington is Paper Town. Everything is recorded in duplicate, triplicate — one agency makes ten copies of everything. And not a scrap of paper can be destroyed without authorization of that famous tail-end committee of Congress on the Disposition of Executive Papers. No statistician has yet computed how many times around the earth the accumulated carbon copies of long-forgotten letters would reach if laid end to end, but it *is* of record that tightly packed in the government's standard four-drawer filing cabinets, they now cover 114 acres. That is desk space for 50,000 workers, giving each a generous 10 x 10 feet. A law signed a year ago permits the use of microfilm for keeping records. A few of the more alert offices adopted the method. The Civil Service Commission filmed 2,500,000 records last year. The Baltimore office of the Social Security Board films 250,000 records a day. Savings in file space are as high as 98 per cent. Cost of the filming is about equal to the cost of filing cabinets saved; the saving of office space is clear gain.

Decentralizing sounds like a bright idea until you begin to look into it. The Social Security Board moved its Old Age and Survivors' unit, some 500 of its 4500 employees, to Baltimore, and isn't happy

about its experience. The Bureau of Internal Revenue has decentralized and doesn't like it, either. After all, every branch has numerous and continual relationships with other governmental agencies, and it is awkward and inefficient to maintain these contacts from a distance. Moreover, economies are problematical. It develops that it would cost a million dollars to remove the I.C.C. to Chicago. For a million dollars, you can still put a lot of office space under roof in Washington, and not upset thousands of families who own homes, have friends, children in school, and community responsibilities.

Housing is as scarce as office space. Washington has, in a decade, more than doubled in population. It had 700,000 residents in 1940, and had spilled another 300,000 across District lines into its suburbs. It is a long walk now between "For Rent" signs, and the latest figures of the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate rents have risen to the highest level of any American city. "It is always a shock to the newcomer to find that a one-room kitchenette and bath apartment costs as much to rent as a whole house in the state from which he came," the Civil Service Commission drily remarked in an official paper.

Still, the job-seekers swarm in. When file clerks are wanted, police have to be called to create orderly queues in the streets outside the Civil Service Commission. Some of these hopefuls help fill the great government automobile camp for 1000 cars in East Potomac Park; but no one stays there more than two weeks. Private auto camps up and down U. S. No. 1 are packed as far as Baltimore, 50 miles away; and others extend 50 miles to the south as well. A good many workers commute from Baltimore. Some are living in houseboats on the Potomac. They all somehow find a place to sleep, eventually. There are still a few ads in the *Post* in a curious code which the room-seeker quickly learns to decipher, "1st fl lrg comf frnt rm, tw beds, nx ba, unl phn, for yg wom, sgl men; \$25 dbl, \$19 sgl." Those in "walk dist, pvt ba, 5 wind" naturally cost more.

The government is about to build dormitories for women, as it did during the last war, and probably will have to build for men, too, though it is easier for men to find a place to live. It is, by the way, a prevalent fallacy that there are more girls than men on government pay rolls; actually, the men greatly outnumber the girls. It is likewise nonsense to perpetuate the

myth that the girls never meet the men. One of the current phenomena is the startling rise in the marriage rate in Washington since Uncle Sam began bringing boys and girls together from every state in the union.

III

Of all the cities hit by the defense boom, Washington was perhaps the least ready to cope with the problems entailed. The telephone company is struggling fairly successfully with its impossible task. Washington instead of Stockholm now has more phones per capita than any other city in the world. There are 1,800,000 local calls a day — 400,000 more than a year ago. There are 44,000 long distance calls a day, incoming and outgoing, an increase of 57 per cent over last year, and Washington is the greatest user in the world of the overseas phone. Telegrams in and out of Washington have more than doubled in number, and the outgoing wordage of dispatches from what is now the news capital of the world was never before so enormous. Newsmen, magazine writers, authors and camera men have boosted the membership of the National Press Club to 2477, an all-time high. Columbia has trebled the

staff of its radio station; the five other stations have done about the same.

The streetcar and bus system is doing the best it can to handle 4,200,000 passengers a week, which is 1,000,000 more than last year. Other services aren't rising to the emergency so well. Educators do not like even to imagine what the school situation will be this fall. Hospitals are overcrowded and are ejecting chronic sufferers to make beds available for other patients. Many physicians and dentists announce that they cannot serve newcomers; their established practice is already too large.

The capital has been shocked by a series of crimes, including attacks on women. Inevitably the boom has attracted thousands of floaters to the city, and the great growth in population has spread the police department very thin. The department has been politics-ridden, unprogressive, slovenly, thoroughly accustomed to doing "favors" for Congressmen and Senators whose friends or appointees got caught in jams. In the home town of the FBI, few Washington cops had ever attended its school for policemen.

Seat of the national government, America's show-place, spared the corruption and misrule of a local political ring, Washington should

in theory have a model municipal administration. It hasn't. Its citizens have no vote, even on local affairs. It is run by Congress, operating through three commissioners. One of these must be an Army engineer; the others are Presidential appointees—just now, two former newspapermen. Assignment to the District Affairs committee is eagerly avoided by Congressmen. The job takes a lot of time and hard work, and gets you no credit with the folks back home in Pea Hollow. The Indiana Congressman who re-

cently sounded off loudest about the defects of the District police simultaneously announced he was resigning from the committee. He could no longer, he said, neglect the affairs of his own constituency to do District chores.

In the shadow of the Capitol dome, Washington civic affairs are a demonstration of what "taxation without representation" and government *of* instead of *by* the people means at a time when half the world is fighting that very thing.

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THE HERD

SLOWLY in herd the cows are brown and still,
Drinking the deep earth and the water sprout.
One step above the grass, beside the hill,
They face their single way and stand about.

Tamer than earth and pasture land and sun,
They mildly stare, converge, then let me pass
Through marshaled ranks drawn up in fear along
The low, forgotten battlefields of grass.

MARSHALL SCHACHT