



From my perspective

The future of Federal City- Washington, DC[☆]

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1. Introduction

Washington, DC, the federal city, is a planner's ideal playground. As a one-industry town (government), forces at play and their potential interactions are relatively clear and therefore are a good place to begin exploring future choices for it and larger, more complex communities. Primary emphasis will be on forces and factors shaping the future of the federal government, the economic base of the community, and the associated implications for change.

Changes in the Washington, DC, situation over the next 60 years conveniently break into three clusters.

- Structural, functional, and organizational changes in government
- Changes in society in general, directly or indirectly affecting government
- Other regional changes

The future will reflect the interplay of those forces acting in the short and the long terms with varying vigor and in different directions. Some forces, such as telecommunications and computers, are likely to be centrifugal. They will push activities away from the District and even from the region. Other forces are centripetal in drawing activities closer to, if not into, the nation's capital. For example, an increasing role for international bodies implies new agencies and new growth in old agencies. Some forces may push strongly in one direction now and in a quite different direction later. The attention to national defense and national security over the next 60 years may fall into that category.

Many forces likely to be significant over the long pull may not mature for a long time.

Other forces may depend upon the maturation of the long-term trends leading to a particular event, such as the addition of a new state to the union. Forces shaping Washington are spread over the entire conceptual map of the short and long terms, likely and unlikely, basic and derivative, weak and strong trends.

2. The long-term future

2050 is as far in the future as 1930 is in the past. Consider the changes in US society, economy, polity, and industry over the past

60 years. There is no reason to believe that equivalent or more drastic changes will not occur in the next two generations. Therefore, let us look at some that are, though not necessarily likely, plausible changes that could dramatically alter the status of the nation's capital.

3. New states

What will be the 60th state of the union? If one had asked in 1930 what would be the 49th or 50th state of the union, a reasonable answer would have been "none." Jumping to the future, several radical changes could expand the union. First is the situation with regard to Canada, a somewhat unstable polity. Should Canada break up into individual provinces or clusters of provinces, the economic reality of trying to go it alone would suggest that union with the States on a one-at-a-time basis would be in their economic and political interest. In terms of the American future, considering the likely continuing permeability of the US-Mexican border, the nation may reach a point where it will seek to establish a more conventional ethnic balance. The most likely candidate to court in this search would be Canada.

With the rise of the Pacific Rim, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines could each become prominent actors in their region. Australia and New Zealand are small in population yet relatively large in area, and will be looking for new economic, industrial, and business opportunities as well as political and economic stability. They share the English language and some heritage with the United States so that economic, political, and military pressures over the next six decades may drive to some form of Pacific Rim union.

Our relationship with the Philippines is open to speculation. However, should administrative and political chaos develop in the Philippines, the United States might be invited in to restore order.

One can extrapolate the concept of the English-speaking union backward across the Atlantic to affiliate with the United Kingdom as four or five new states, or perhaps enjoying commonwealth status, like Puerto Rico.

At any of several stages of expanded union a radical expansion in the role of the federal city could occur. More likely, the federal city would be reduced to provincial capital status with a new United States of North America capital or a new English-speaking union capital, perhaps in Kansas City or Seattle.

The end of the cold war and the resulting US/CIS bilateral nuclear arms and space weapons reduction agreements will lead to other forms of arms reduction. Over the next 65 years the gas will go out of

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the national security balloon, thereby having a radical effect on the military support structure now centralized in the federal city. A radical turnabout in arms may be slow in coming but precipitous in arrival.

4. International organizations

A long-term movement on the international scale going beyond treaties and agreements is towards international organizations which have a solid operational base. Relief is the clearest and shortest term of their operational activities. Direct intervention in the internal affairs of nations via the World Bank is one of many acceptable forms of intervention into sovereign states. Bilateral foreign and military assistance programs tie individual nations to each other. All in all, we are moving toward what Wendell Wilkie called "One World." Over the next 60 years, there will be an unfolding of international organizations, many of which will enjoy a degree of power beyond sovereignty, unfamiliar to us. Of those that are directed at research and development or the control of trade, the question will arise as to where they will be housed. While Nairobi has become an administrative center of international environmental concerns, it is more likely that the globe's industrial, financial, technological, and resource management centers will be in one or more of the advanced industrialized nations. The success in housing the World Bank in the United States suggests that this model may be followed, further expanding the economic base of Washington, DC.

5. A new constitution

The overwhelming force of scholarly, public, political, and practical opinion is that a new national constitution is unthinkable. Nevertheless, a steady flow of scholarly analysis over the last five decades makes increasingly strong arguments for radical reform in the Constitution. Assuming for the moment that the core civil rights and civil liberties concerns can be dealt with, the primary thrust of most thinking on a new constitution is to accomplish one positive and one negative goal. The positive goal is to reorganize government in a way that more usefully reflects the structure and function of the economy, society, and the population. The negative goal is to wipe out tens of thousands of governmental units which, in the minds of many, have become dead weight on effective and smooth operation of our society. The county system, and to some extent the systems of state government and thousands of tax districts and special authorities, are likely to go by the board in any new constitution.

Under a new constitution, to what extent would Washington, DC, remain the nation's political and administrative power center? How would it compete with seven, eight, or nine provincial capitals? Several of the proposals for a new constitution would create a fourth, fifth, or sixth branch of government. That would have architectural and design effects on the city. Furthermore, in the restructuring of government, any new constitution would so alter the present departmental and independent agency structure as to create a new network of authority, responsibilities, and relationships. Put in its briefest form, on the negative side, the physical plan of the District of Columbia would be instantly obsolete. On the positive side, there would be the pressure to redesign and rebuild the physical plant to reflect the new structure of government.

6. Statehood for the District of Columbia

One could argue endlessly the "when" or the "ever" of statehood for the District of Columbia. Assuming for the moment that such a change occurs, it is likely to be driven by a growing national feeling of fairness and equity—a principle of one person, one vote.

More to the point with regard to planning for the nation's capital is the form that statehood could take. The one obvious variation would be the present District becoming a state.

Perhaps a more attractive alternative would be separation of the business and residential areas of the present District from the government and monument area, maintaining the nonresidential government area as a federal compound. Change might occur in another direction to expand the boundaries of the new state to embrace the immediate suburbs in northern Virginia and Prince Georges and Montgomery counties in Maryland.

One of the more likely drivers for some form of statehood is the high black population in the District of Columbia that otherwise will remain disenfranchised. As black power throughout the rest of the United States increases, statehood could become a bargaining chip for black votes.

7. The next decades

Let us move back to the shorter range, to the forces now in operation which will shape the federal city over the next several decades.

8. The centralization-decentralization dilemma

Several forces are now at play working toward both centralization and decentralization of federal government and individual agency responsibilities. The so-called new federalism with the planned shift of operating and financial responsibility to the state and local government levels is one force. On the other hand, the extent to which there will be a reaction is unclear, should the new roles exceed the capabilities and political limitations of the state system. Recall that the rapid expansion in federal authority, and in the assumption of what previously had been state and local government prerogatives, occurred during the Roosevelt administration in the Great Depression. It happened because the budgets, the competence, and authority of the states were not up to the task.

We must remain agnostics on the long-term success of the new federalism. While there will be a reassignment and sorting of many traditional federal, state, and local government functions, we must keep in mind a more important long-term trend. As American society becomes more integrated and complex, there has been a strong trend toward central government responsibility for managing that complexity. Because there is little likelihood that society will become less complex in the projectable future, the need for centralized responsibility is unavoidable.

Within the federal government, the move toward smaller government may run into absolute limitations on the flexibility of the system. Some shrinkage in the work force may occur through such schemes as government divestiture of specific functions, for example, the sale of Bonneville and TVA, and the privatization of many support functions such as libraries and word processing.

Decentralization, in terms of the movement of various agency headquarters to other parts of the country, does have a logic and appeal in many cases. The Bureau of Reclamation, which serves the 17 western states, might better serve its constituencies were it moved to the West. On the other hand, in terms of the long-term future of the Bureau of Reclamation, coalescence with a civilianized Corps of Engineers would create a nationwide constituency and perhaps leave Washington, DC, as the preferred site. The back-office move of the CIA to rural West Virginia is an interesting current illustration of the potential for geographic spread of the central government.

Other organizations might find different locations more attractive on the basis of amenities. There seems no reason, for example, why the Census Bureau or the Treasury must be located in Washington, DC, or its metropolitan area.

Decentralization runs into serious obstacles. Change itself is a major impediment to innovation in that it is disruptive and stressful. Furthermore, there is an implicit and often psychologically unavoidable feeling of second-class status associated with being away from headquarters. A third and more substantial element of decentralization is the localized nature of many functions which span the nation, such as tax collection

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