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The War Managers: Thirtieth Anniversary Edition

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Douglas Kinnard

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events. The building comes to life through the experiences of the strong cast of personalities who planned, built, upgraded, repaired, and worked within it throughout the first sixty years of its history. Vogel’s story takes shape in early 1941, with Franklin Roosevelt’s War Department and its concerns about the ability of the United States to plan for and wage what it saw as a coming global war. At that time, the War Department had twenty-four thousand employees, scattered throughout Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Maryland, in twenty-three separate buildings, including apartments, shacks, and even a Leary’s Garage at 24th and M streets. After Germany invaded Russia in June 1941, the requirement for more space was urgent, and the Army turned to Brigadier General Brehon B. Somervell, its Quartermaster Corps’s Chief of Construction Division, to solve the problem.

Vogel fills with color and detail his story of the fast-paced construction of the largest office building in the world. By March 1942, over ten thousand men were working on the site. They dredged 680,000 tons of sand and gravel from the Potomac and pounded in 41,492 concrete piles and columns that would support a building with 17.5 miles of corridors and five floors, plus a mezzanine and basement.

Vogel does not end his story with the completion of the building in February 1943. He describes numerous later events as diverse as General Eisenhower’s getting lost in the building, the Navy brass refusing to move in, and stories of secretaries of defense James Forrestal and Robert McNamara. His book includes chapters on the Vietnam antiwar protests at the Pentagon on 21 October 1967 and on the over-billion-dollar “remaking” of the Pentagon during major improvements and upgrades during the 1990s. The two concluding and most moving chapters relate the tragic loss of 184 lives and the destruction and repair of the west side of the Pentagon from the horrific impact of the hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 on 11 September 2001. Despite the damage the building held, in part due to the strength of the spiral steel reinforcing bar used in the concrete columns during its original construction. Perhaps this and the related remarkable story of the rebuilding of the Pentagon in less than a year are fitting testimonies to the quality of the people and builders of yesterday and today. Vogel has stated that “it took me longer to write the book than it took them to build the Pentagon.” No doubt true, but Vogel’s book and its story of a Washington landmark and a globally recognized icon of American power were worth the wait.

WILLIAM CALHOUN
Naval War College


This unique and classic book was based on a sixty-item questionnaire administered to 173 U.S. Army officers who served as commanding generals in the Vietnam War. The author, Douglas Kinnard, a West Point graduate and Princeton PhD, served two tours in Vietnam, including one as a brigadier general, and was known to many if not all of his respondents. The postal survey
was fielded in September 1974, when the author, having retired from active duty, was on the faculty of the University of Vermont. Kinnard’s guarantees of anonymity and his rapport with his peers elicited a response rate of nearly 70 percent. Many of those surveyed also added written commentaries. Questions dealt with a range of issues, including strategy, tactics, personnel management, the role of the media, rules of engagement, and recommended changes “if we had to do it over.” The findings are disturbing, not only for people who lived through the Vietnam era but for those of us who are witnesses to history repeating itself in Iraq. Nearly 70 percent of the generals who responded stated that they were uncertain of the Vietnam War’s objectives. Many conceded that they had overestimated the capability of South Vietnamese forces and had underestimated the extent of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam’s corruption and ineptitude. Over 50 percent of respondents thought that U.S. forces should not have engaged in combat in Vietnam. These views were recorded some seven months before the fall of Saigon.

Among the richest data in the book are the marginal notations by the respondents. It was widely acknowledged that the system for measurement of progress, based on body counts and kill ratios, fell victim to the natural optimistic bias of military men. The system was denounced by one respondent as “a fake—totally worthless.” Another general replied, “The immensity of the false reporting is a blot on the honor of the Army.”

Kinnard devotes a good deal of attention to the fact that despite such perceptions, dissent had been uncommon among the generals. This is not surprising, given the risks such dissent would have posed to their careers. Writing in 1976, in the immediate postwar and Watergate years, Kinnard was cautiously optimistic that the officer corps could henceforth stand up and be counted. Unfortunately, thirty years later, dissent still remains hazardous to one’s career.

Without wishing to strain comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam, one cannot read Kinnard’s book without developing a sad sense of history repeating itself. He reminds us that “in the Vietnam War there was too much tricky optimism from LBJ on down.” Misplaced faith in the integrity and capacity of the local forces has a familiar ring. So too do cover-ups of egregious human rights abuses and insensitivity to indigenous culture.

One hopes that among the generals who have served or who will serve in Iraq, there is one who might be tempted to follow in Kinnard’s footsteps and seek the candid views of his or her peers about the conflict. The same lessons remain to be learned.

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For three decades, Admiral James L. Holloway III has been one of the great supporters and promoters of the work of the U.S. Navy’s historians, through his role as president and then chairman