



## The Pentagon: A History

*Steve Vogel*

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The creation of the Pentagon in seventeen whirlwind months during World War II is one of the great construction feats in American history, involving a tremendous mobilization of manpower, resources, and minds. In astonishingly short order, Brigadier General Brehon B. Somervell conceived and built an institution that ranks with the White House, the Vatican, and a handful of other structures as symbols recognized around the world. Now veteran military reporter Steve Vogel reveals for the first time the remarkable story of the Pentagon's construction, from its dramatic birth to its rebuilding after the September 11 attack.

At the center of the story is the tempestuous but courtly Somervell—"dynamite in a Tiffany box," as he was once described. In July 1941, the Army construction chief sprang the idea of building a single, huge headquarters that could house the entire War Department, then scattered in seventeen buildings around Washington. Somervell ordered drawings produced in one weekend and, despite a firestorm of opposition, broke ground two months later, vowing that the building would be finished in little more than a year. Thousands of workers descended on the site, a raffish Virginia neighborhood known as Hell's Bottom, while an army of draftsmen churned out designs barely one step ahead of their execution. Seven months later the first Pentagon employees skirted seas of mud to move into the building and went to work even as construction roared around them. The colossal Army headquarters helped recast Washington from a sleepy southern town into the bustling center of a reluctant empire.

Vivid portraits are drawn of other key figures in the drama, among them Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president who fancied himself an architect; Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, both desperate for a home for the War Department as the country prepared for battle; Colonel Leslie R. Groves, the ruthless force of nature who oversaw the Pentagon's construction (as well as the Manhattan Project to create an atomic bomb); and John McShain, the charming and dapper builder who used his relationship with FDR to help land himself the contract for the biggest office building in the world.

The Pentagon's post-World War II history is told through its critical moments, including the troubled birth of the Department of Defense during the Cold War, the tense days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the tumultuous 1967 protest against the Vietnam War. The pivotal attack on September 11 is related with chilling new detail, as is the race to rebuild the damaged Pentagon, a restoration that echoed the spirit of its creation.

This study of a single enigmatic building tells a broader story of modern American history, from the eve of World War II to the new wars of the twenty-first century. Steve Vogel has crafted a dazzling work of military social history that merits comparison with the best works of David Halberstam or David McCullough. Like its namesake, *The Pentagon* is a true landmark.

## The Pentagon: A History Details

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## From Reader Review The Pentagon: A History for online ebook

### Paul says

I bought this book in August 2008 as part of my ongoing effort to learn more about the American "military-industrial complex". It turns out that there are not many books on the Pentagon; this was one of the few devoted to it. Admittedly it appeared to be mainly about the actual *building* rather than the institution itself, but I hoped that a "bricks and mortar" account might nonetheless provide a useful sidelight on the institution, and, having now read it, I feel it has done so.

Steve Vogel's history of the building is built around three events: its original construction (about 300 pages); the attempted storming of the Pentagon by antiwar protesters in October 1967 (50 pages); and the terrorist strike on 11 September 2001 (80 pages). The remaining 70 pages link up these events with highlights from the intervening years. From a purely structural and, as it were, architectural standpoint, the book is devoted to its bookends of construction and post-9/11 rebuilding, and the rest of the book is a sketch to connect those events, with the drama of the 1967 protest causing this episode to occupy more space than its purely architectural significance would justify.

One thing I was hoping to learn from the book was more about a piece of information I had picked up in James Carroll's excellent *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power*, that Franklin Roosevelt, when presented with the original proposal for the Pentagon, had ordered its makers to cut it to half its size, and they had instead gone ahead and built it to full size anyway. To me this seemed like a significant indication of how military power was usurping the prerogatives of civilian power in the U.S., and I wanted to know exactly how it had played out.

Mr. Vogel's book delivers those goods in spades. He details every twist and turn in the tortuous story of how the Pentagon was commissioned, designed, and built, including the many-sided tug-of-war over where exactly the building would be put and how big it would be. The issues of power and control in any complex project with many strong-willed participants—and the building of the Pentagon was certainly this—become murky. I was reminded of an image that came to my mind from my experience making a TV series: decision-making is less an orderly chain of command than a pack of dogs pulling on a carcass. In this case the carcass was the world's largest office building and what would become the ganglion of history's largest and most globe-gripping military force. The participants, from the president on down, were indeed strong-willed, as well as powerful, quirky (in some cases mentally ill), and all too human.

Why is the Pentagon a five-sided building? Why was it built in Virginia instead of in D.C.? Why was it such a departure from the neoclassical architecture of the capital up that point? These and many other questions are answered by the book, and some of the answers were, to me, surprising. The symbolically powerful pentagonal shape, for example, arose from an initial hasty sketch of the proposed building, formed so that it could occupy as efficiently as possible the irregularly five-sided property it was originally intended to occupy. When the site was changed, things were moving too fast to make any major changes to the design other than massaging its irregular pentagonal shape into a regular pentagon—and voila, the Pentagon was born.

Many other things too happened by seeming serendipity. While no aspect of the would-be Pentagon was without controversy and even vehement opposition by influential Americans, the wheels for its construction were thickly greased by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The Japanese were thus able to achieve what no American could: to focus the mind of the Sleeping Giant and get Americans behind the

Pentagon project.

And what a project. As one who has worked in corporate project management, I really appreciated this aspect of Mr. Vogel's book. He delivers a sense of the feel of a large project: the chaos, the urgency, the fear, the interpersonal politics, and yes, the achievements. Whatever your attitude to the institution of the Pentagon—and mine is quite negative—as a feat of engineering and project management at the biggest scale, the construction of the actual building was amazing, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading about it.

Steve Vogel's writing is clear and fluent; he makes the complex project easily understandable and portrays its people vividly and sympathetically. An ex-serviceman himself and a longtime correspondent for *The Washington Post*, Mr. Vogel does not indulge in flag-waving or overt patriotism in this potentially highly charged topic. He does convey a strong sense of the heroism of people during the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and the trauma suffered by the families of the slain. And he even records the misgivings some of those survivors had upon listening to George W. Bush use the occasion of the dedication of the memorial to those slain to hint at his intention to invade Iraq.

I'm still looking for a really good book about the Pentagon as an institution, for I believe that the increasing militarism of American society necessarily implies a drain of the country's sovereign power from the White House and the Capitol to the Pentagon—a structure never envisaged by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, before World War II the standing army of the United States was relatively small; afterwards, it ballooned to match its outsized headquarters at Hell's Bottom, Virginia, and has never really looked back. Roosevelt's cherished hope that the Pentagon would become a national archive after the war was probably a nonstarter, and the paranoia of the Cold War provided a perfect accelerant for the political cancer of militarism, against which mere presidents, as Dwight Eisenhower warned in 1961, are powerless.

But if there is such an institutional history of the Pentagon out there, or if one comes along, Steve Vogel's book provides an excellent background document. Form and function are always closely linked, and after reading *The Pentagon* I feel I know it as a physical *place*—one in which real people have worked and died. Their problems as workers in the world's largest office building have been *my* problems as an office worker: getting lost in the building, commuting, dealing with the crappy indoor climate, the ego clashes of self-important bosses. They're just trying to do their job. Speaking as a citizen of planet Earth, I feel it's unfortunate what that job now is. But Steve Vogel has told the story of their building very well.

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### **Chris says**

They don't build them like this any more. An absolutely fascinating book about the people who built the Pentagon. Just an amazing feat of design and construction in a short time. Often they were building before there were plans in place. Vogel tells a great story as he weaves in FDR and the military engineers, the politicians, and the civilian construction crews. I would not have wanted to have been the contractor or the officer in charge of construction. It was a neverending chorus of changes and complaints from everybody on the building. It's a wonder it was built with all the naysayers and the people with good ideas constantly meddling—and they did it without computers too. Vogel goes into the attack on 9/11 and the reconstruction of the Pentagon as well. It's an emotional telling of this tragedy. I grew up in DC and learned much about this iconic building that I used to drive by on a daily basis to work.

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## **Tony Taylor says**

Never thought this book could be so interesting, but when my wife read it first and told me that I would like it, I took her word for it. I was stationed at the Pentagon (OPNAV 4th deck, E-ring) for 13 years up through 1988, so I feel that I knew the old Puzzle Palace fairly well, but it was not until I read this fascinating book that I realized that there was so much interesting history associated with its original construction as well as with the modernization and rebuild (after 9/11). You don't have to have ever been in the service or even been in the Pentagon to find this book truly interesting and well worth putting on your "to read" list. It was published in 2007 shortly after the modernization and rebuild program was well under way, but its history is just as good a read today as it was six years ago.

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## **Michael says**

This book follows the history of the Pentagon from the early decision to consolidate the old War Department into a single location to the reconstruction effort after the September 11 attack.

What makes the book so good is that it's not just a dry recitation of facts but instead is just short vignettes of various events.

Some of the best stories come from the construction of the Pentagon, however the building has a surprisingly colorful history.

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## **Spencer Bounds says**

Thanks again to @steve\_vogel for a book that was as excellent the second time around as it was the first time, ten years ago. It's also nice to know that 14-year-old me made at least one good choice in 2008. This work was then, and remains, easily one of the best books I've ever had the pleasure of reading.

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## **Anne Ward says**

This is a book about a building--how it was built, the action it has seen, and its place within the U.S. military. The book defies every opportunity to become a yawn and gives a intriguing account of the people and politics that went into building the Pentagon. If you live in the DC area this is a must read.

Five Stars: Historical, relevant, and well written.

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## **Sannie says**

Steve Vogel's history of the Pentagon reads easy and is completely fascinating. *The Pentagon: A History*

reads like a novel, the characters are the architects, the politicians, and the workers. I normally don't read books like this, but I picked it up admittedly after Vogel made an appearance on The Daily Show. I wasn't sure I would like it, but I enjoyed it thoroughly; Vogel's writing is clear and the Pentagon's story is fascinating. Anyone who has an interest in American military history should pick this up.

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### **Ian Cann says**

A very interesting well written of the Pentagon and its construction - The book makes the characters involved all very relatable. Rather than just a rolling history from them until the time of writing, the book then leaps on in time to major developments in the building's history - The 'Battle of The Pentagon' with anti-Vietnam war protesters in 1967, and then in the book's most moving sections, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent rebuilding process.

Interesting and thoughtful reading all round.

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### **Diane says**

Very comprehensive and detailed history of the Pentagon, from its building during World War II until its renovation after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Filled with interesting antecedents, particularly from the building's early years. At 500 pages, however, I found it a bit too long. I felt as if the material merited a shorter treatment.

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### **Pamela says**

Looking at the blasé-blue cover and the concise, to-the-point title/sub-title, one might think *THE PENTAGON: A HISTORY* would be a boring, better-used-as-a-doorstop, SNOOOZE sort of tome. Oh, but NO! It's engagingly readable, thoroughly enlightening and fascinating. Anything but a snoozer. I mean, WOW, what an ENORMOUS, ICONIC building!! Recognized the world over. And built in less than two years - DURING wartime no less, when budgets were tight, labor was scarce, tensions were high, and out-of-the-box architecture was decades in the future.

Rich were the details, many the cameo stories/bios, extensive the research, and fabulous the photographs: dusted off and retrieved from archives. All wrapped together with pleasantly readable text that left me happy to have read this hefty tome to conclusion.

Granted, I read a great many nonfiction books (just about equal to that of fiction) and therefore one might think I have a bit more tolerance for longer, heavier, slower reads. Or that I simply find most all nonfiction tomes fascinating. Not true. On both accounts. No matter how fascinating the subject matter, or how much desire I have to learn about a particular topic, if it's not accessibly readable in non-drivel language, I simply can't do it.

So yes, this was a beefy tome every bit worth reading that I can highly recommend without hesitation, to American History fans, Architectural Enthusiasts, and readers with interests in military and/or politics, and/or labor and design intensive building projects.

FOUR \*\*\*\* Snooze the Cover - ENTHRALLING the SUBJECT Matter - Engagingly Readable the Text  
\*\*\*\* STARS

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### **Robert says**

This is a page turner, an exciting story. With all the evidence around of government screw-ups, it's restorative to read of not one but two spectacular successes, no, three: the building of the Pentagon in 1941-42, the reconstruction in the late 1990s, and the rebuilding after the attack of 9/11, which the reconstruction assured relatively minimal devastation. The people come to life as the author tells their remarkable stories.

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### **Frank Theising says**

A surprisingly entertaining book. I expected this to be rather dull but instead found myself so caught up in the story that I blew through the 500 pages in no time. The story of the Pentagon's construction really was fascinating. While the book provides all the requisite details behind the building's size, shape, and location, it's the big personalities involved (FDR, Somervell, McShain, Groves, etc) with their ambitions and political maneuverings, that took what could have been a boring book and made it a memorable and engaging story. The engineering, material, and logistical obstacles involved with this project were incredible and it is a testament to the drive and tenacity of those involved that it was built in so short a time. At its peak, over 15,000 people were employed in its construction. The second half of the book, covering Vietnam protests to the 9/11 attacks and reconstruction, was equally informative and enjoyable. Knowing all the history behind the building has certainly increased my appreciation for the opportunity I've had to work there. Highly recommended for those interested in WWII history. What follows are some of my notes on the book:

#### Project Timeline:

July 17 1941 - Brig Gen Somervell launches project  
July 24 1941 - FDR approves  
Aug 14 1941 - Senate approves  
Aug 29 1941 - FDR moves site  
Sep 11 1941 - Ground Broken  
Apr 30 1942 - First employee moves in  
July 25 1942 - Decision to add 5th floor  
Nov 14 1942 - High command moves in  
Feb 15 1943 - Building Complete

Washington was consumed by war anxiety. Hitler had launched his surprise attack on the USSR and Gen Marshall was racing to prepare for a potential conflict and an unprecedented mobilization with the War Department scattered across various buildings and shacks in DC, MA, and VA. A new War Department building had just been constructed in Foggy Bottom but it only held 4,000; The War Department then numbered 24,000 workers. Marshall imagined a new complex of temporary buildings, but his construction chief Brig Gen Somervell had a loftier vision to house the entire War Department in a single building. On a Friday afternoon, he asked his architects for the general layout and basic design by 9am Monday. A square building of the size Somervell imagined was too unwieldy. Guided by the shape of the Arlington Farm plot of land on which they looked to build, they went with a pentagon shaped design (xxv).

Secretary of War Stimson had served in this position 3 decades before under Taft in the years leading up to WWI. Then he had endless time to prepare but no money. Now, he had appropriated fantastic sums but had no time (4). He needed a man to speed up the construction program and turned to LTC Somervell who had impressed many while leading the New Deal's NYC Work Progress Administration where he built LaGuardia airport (7). Jumping two ranks to Brig General, Somervell used his new power to purge the Construction Division of incompetents and those who couldn't keep up with his record breaking construction program (23-24). He did keep some, like Colonel Leslie Groves, the chief of operations on whom he would rely heavily.

The plot of land in Arlington Farm, across the river from the Lincoln Memorial was a misshapen pentagon which made for an awkward design, but they needed to maximize the space in order to build Somervell's proposed 4 million sq ft building. In the span of a week, Somervell had proposed a building of unprecedented scale, produced preliminary designs, won the support of Stimson, Marshall, and President Roosevelt, and sold the \$35M project to key Congressional leaders! (45) What Somervell had not done was consult with the myriad government agencies that would normally approve such projects. The Secretary of the Interior and the Commission of Fine Arts in particular vehemently opposed the proposed location of the new building, claiming it was a rape of Washington and stain upon L'Enfant's design of the city (89). Somervell, having won the funding from Congress was determined to build it there but FDR intervened to move the site south to the location of a proposed quartermaster depot. To stay in compliance with the law, a small portion of the building would extend onto the Arlington Farm site (99). In moving the building's location to what was known as "Hell's Bottom", the view of Arlington would remain intact but they would displace the poor African-American community in Queen's City.

In ordinary times, it would have taken a year and a half to design the building...they only had 34 days before they broke ground (124). Over a 100 draftsmen worked non-stop to produce the plans. To save time, the engineers would construct the building in 5 sections (A-E), starting with wedge A and then moving clockwise to the next section. Construction would be ongoing in all five sections but each section would be one stage ahead in hopes the draftsmen could focus on Section A and deal with subsequent sections later. Still the architects, engineers, and draftsmen could not stay ahead of the building contractors which put the timeline at risk. The demand for structural engineers was high and wages soared to attract the needed talent. The timeline was audacious from the outset but the mobilization and build up around the country meant the demand for expertise and resources far exceeded the available supply (154).

During construction, the Army reorganized and the Corps of Engineers took over construction from the quartermaster corps. This put Somervell officially outside the chain of command, but for all practical purposes Somervell continued to run the project (161). When the Japanese attacked in Dec 1941, the funding spigot opened up and the decision was made immediately to expand the size of the Pentagon (169). Construction sped ahead at a remarkable pace, with the builders often proceeding without the designs from the draftsmen in order to stay on schedule. Somervell was determined to get War Dep workers into the building on schedule. As the workers moved in, they had to do their work while construction (and all the accompanying dust and noise) was happening all around them. Despite the additions, Army departments were clamoring for office space. So on Jul 13, 1942, Somervell proposed adding a 5th floor (232). He called this the "fourth floor – intermediate" instead of 5th floor to hide his expansions from reporters and the public. As the price tag continued to rise, Somervell moved funds from other Army construction projects so as to avoid going back to Congress for more money. In doing so, he built bigger and paid more than Congress had ever authorized. They and the press were simply informed of a *fait accompli* (267). This generated investigations into the project (Senator Truman and Congressman Engel were at different times thorns in Somervell's side).

The building, itself a monumental undertaking, would be incomplete without power, roads, telephones, etc. The demand for telephones in the War Dept was insatiable...like providing a system from scratch for a city the size of Trenton, NJ (275). The Pentagon switchboard alone required 300 operators and took up 32K feet of floor space (276). All of this fell into place right around the time of Operation Torch, the invasion of Northern Africa. For a brief period, the War Dept offered up space for the Navy to move into the building, with great benefits for unity of effort and wartime collaboration, but the plan fell apart when the Navy did not get the amount of space they wanted (279-288). The project was completed in 17 months, with all work complete by Feb 15, 1943 (296). Even with all the additions, the building never did hold the entire War Dept under one roof. It provided only half the 7 million sq ft the War Dept needed in 1945 (332).

What to do with the Pentagon when the war ended? Roosevelt had proposed the Pentagon be used as archive for records. The onset of the Cold War settled the question for everybody...the building would remain the home of the War Department.

The second half of the book covers the Post WWII history of the building. The violent protests over Vietnam, the challenges of maintenance and upkeep, and the Sept 11 attack and reconstruction. All the way up to Vietnam just about anybody could freely enter the building and walk around. The Weather Underground movement exploited the non-existent security to plant a bomb in one of the 4th floor bathrooms (the night cleaning crew happened to finish minutes early, escaping the explosion by the grace of God) (390-392).

After 50 years of neglect, the building was showing its age. The building was full of hazardous asbestos and the internal plumbing and wiring were in desperate need of repair. Portions of the basement would flood after a good rain. Flooding in the basement approached high voltage electrical vault in the basement almost forced them to kill power to the building on the cusp of US forces moving into Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War (399). It would have been cheaper to just build a new building than to fix this one, but by now the Pentagon was designated as a U.S. cultural landmark. The scheduled renovation of the building was going to cost \$1B. The renovation was to be conducted in stages, following the same A-E wedge pattern used during construction (403-404). After the Oklahoma City, World Trade Center, and Embassy bombings of the 1990s, the renovation would include installation of blast resistant windows (at \$10K a pop), steel reinforced concrete, and Kevlar-type ballistic cloth between steel beams to catch shrapnel (417).

By some twist of fate, when the 9/11 attack happened the airplane slammed into Wedge A, the only one that had been renovated. This significantly reduced the extent of the damage to the building and minimized the loss of life. The book contains graphic descriptions of the attack and the heroic efforts to get survivors out. The Phoenix Project was the name given to the effort to rebuild the destroyed wedge. With the spike in patriotism that followed the attack, the Phoenix Project operated with the speed and enthusiasm that would have made the original builders proud. One year from the date of the attack, offices were opened back up for occupancy. The American Society of Civil Engineers filed a report on how the building performed during the attack. They noted the building had an unusual measure of strength thanks to a forgotten oddity. Because FDR envisioned the Pentagon becoming a federal records archive, he insisted that Somervell build the floors strong enough to hold heavy file cabinets. They were designed to hold 150 pounds per square foot, twice the norm (499). The extra steel and concrete, coupled with the close spacing of the columns gave the building extra strength that served it well and prevent numerous deaths.

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## **Ari says**

A very detailed history of the Pentagon. The building, not the Defense Department. In some ways, it's a paradigmatic defense procurement program. Huge, hugely over budget, pushing the technical envelope, and subject to endless political meddling.

One of the things you learn is that Roosevelt thought of himself as an amateur architect, and kept meddling with the plans. At one point he proposed a solid square building, 1000 feet on a side, with fluorescent lights and air conditioning for the interior spaces. This was abandoned when Henry Stimson refused to work in "a banana warehouse."

You learn a lot, along the way, about the key people in the military establishment around the start of WW II. Leslie Groves, later the boss of the Manhattan project, exerted a great deal of personal supervision. And he was a bit of a jerk. But he did get the building built, despite enormous obstacles.

The sections about the Pentagon on and after 9/11 are very moving, and very well written. A very well done blend of human and technical narrative.

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## **Mark Mortensen says**

"The Pentagon: A History" captured my complete attention by simply answering all of my questions regarding: who, what, when, where and why. The Pentagon is merely a unique free standing structure some regard as the 8th wonder of the world, however it is the culture within from day one to present that is as historical as the building itself.

The top American military echelon is filled with highly talented individuals seeking advancement, recognition and responsibility in an atmosphere full of egos and politics. In December of 1940 Brehon B. Somervell parlayed his engineering background along with his "can do" fierce charismatic leadership skills to swiftly become chief of the Army Construction Division. Somervell thought on grand scales and his vision was to have top military personnel under one roof. He was the right man at the right time and with WWII looming a building to be known as the Pentagon swiftly became his signature project.

The Pentagon to be located in Virginia across the Potomac River next to Arlington National Cemetery and Gen. Robert E. Lee's historic Arlington residence drew opposition from historical and architectural committees as it would forever change the Washington, D.C landscape. Budget conscious Republican and Democrat representatives tried to slow the process for the largest office building in the world to house roughly 40,000 employees within 6.24 million square feet. Senator Arthur Vandenberg aptly stated: "Unless the war is to be permanent, why must we have permanent accommodations for war facilities of such size? Still the project moved ahead at a rapid pace, while Somerville was on his own fast track rising from Lt. colonel to Lt. general in a little more than one year.

Upon completion of the building author Steve Vogel tells of the history from within. James V. Forrestal the first secretary of defense would move into the building in 1947.

In time the Navy and later the Marine Corps with their own pride and tradition would join military personnel

under one roof. The 9/11/2001 plane crash into the Pentagon adds to more current history. The Pentagon is a unique focal part of American history.

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### **Tish Jenkins says**

Steve Vogel is a brilliant storyteller. How else can the history of The Pentagon become a riveting page turner that kept me up past 2:00 a.m. on weeknights?

He brings to life the larger than life characters, the politics, and sheer enormity of the task to build the world's largest office building in the heated run up to WWII with humor, interesting trivia (ground was broken to build it on September 11, 1941 a 60 years exactly before it was attacked), and solid reporting.

This reads more like a biography, chronicling the life of the Pentagon.

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