



The State We're In: Washington

Your guide to state, tribal & local government

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“With great power
comes great responsibility.”

Spiderman

Foreword

MMy father recently died. Understandably, I often find myself thinking about him and his life’s remarkable journey. It is a familiar story. His grandparents were immigrants. When he began school in rural South Dakota in 1921, he spoke no English, only German. The Great Depression catapulted him out of school in the ninth grade in an attempt to help save the family’s hardscrabble farm. A few years later, survival came in the form of federal public works projects. Still later, he answered his country’s call to duty in World War II. Afterwards, he began driving truck (which he did for 37 years), and moved to the emerging suburbs to raise his four children.

Although I do not recall a single instance of his leading a family discussion about current events, I do remember that he read two newspapers every day from front to back. He was a bit stoic in the sense we sometimes think of those of German background, but he occasionally expressed a healthy skepticism of large institutions. I also recall that no matter what the circumstance, he never missed voting – for anything, be it a school measure or the presidency.

In other words, my father worked hard, played by the rules, and sacrificed to make a better life for his children.

What does all this have to do with the outstanding book that follows? Everything. This book is about the civic community that is shared by all of us and binds us together. It is about the most important and basic information required to “be in the game.” It is about the rights and responsibilities inherent in the “greatest experiment” ever undertaken. It is about the tremendous intergenerational responsibility that has characterized our living, breathing, dynamic way of governing ourselves. Finally, it is about as well written as is possible.

That’s no surprise. The author, Jill Severn, is the best writer I have ever had the privilege to know personally. This is her voice. It is well worth listening to. I think so much of it, that were it mine, I would dedicate it to my dad.

Denny Heck

REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE 10TH DISTRICT TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



There are many ways for you to be involved in your government.

Introduction

This book is about how we govern ourselves. It addresses three very basic questions:

- **What is a government?**
- **Why do we need one?**
- **Why should I care about it?**

By the time you've finished this book, you should be able to answer these questions easily. You will also know enough about state, tribal and local government to be an active citizen – someone who helps keep our democracy alive and healthy.

The most important point to learn about government is that, in a democracy, government belongs to all of us. If we don't like what the government is doing, it's up to us to change it. And if we do like something government is doing, it's up to us to make sure it continues.



Having a democracy is a little bit like having a pet dog. It's a lot of fun, but it's also a big responsibility. It's a living, breathing creature that needs to be nourished, cared for, loved, and disciplined. It can be annoying, expensive and messy. But it's a cherished part of the family, and so, though we often take it for granted, we must never neglect it.

The difference is, of course, that government is bigger, more important, and far more challenging to keep on a leash. That's why learning about government is so important. If we don't keep our government under control, it can end up controlling us.

If we let that happen, we would betray the work, the wisdom, and the sacrifices of the people who came before us. They created the government that we have today so that our generation – and the generations that will follow us – could live in freedom. Now it's our turn to follow in their footsteps.

How Washington got its name

In March 1853, the U. S. Congress passed an act that established the Washington Territory. (Before then, this area had been part of the Oregon Territory, and was often called "North Oregon.") Congress rejected the suggestion that this new territory be called "Columbia." They thought it would be confused with our national capital, Washington, the District of Columbia. Apparently, at that time people had not yet adopted the habit of calling the national capital "Washington, D. C." or simply "Washington." So they named the new territory "Washington" to honor our nation's first president – and left us with exactly the problem they wanted to avoid!