Freedom Rising is a fresh, intensely human account of how the Civil War transformed the nation's capital from the debating forum for a loose union of states into the seat of a forceful central government.

Before 1861, Washington was a dusty, muddy city of 60,000, joked about by urban sophisticates from New York and Boston. But at the onset of war, thousands of soldiers, job seekers, nurses, good-time girls, gamblers, newly freed slaves—all kinds of Americans—poured in. For days, Washington was cut off from the North, and no one was sure whether it would become the capital of the Union or the Confederacy.

Ernest Furgurson—author of the widely acclaimed Chancellorsville 1863, Ashes of Glory, and Not War but Murder—tells the story through the men and women who brought the city to rambunctious life. He re-creates historic figures such as William Seward, who fancied himself Abraham Lincoln's prime minister; poet Walt Whitman, who nursed the wounded; and detective Allan Pinkerton, who tracked down Southern sympathizers; and he introduces intriguing others, such as Mayor James Berret, arrested for disloyalty; architect Thomas Walter, striving to finish the Capitol dome in the middle of war; and accused Confederate spy Antonia Ford, romancing her captor, Union Major Joseph Willard, operator of the capital's premier hotel. Here is Mary Lincoln, mourning the death of her son Willie, seeking solace from fakers who conducted séances in the White House. And here is the president—in all his compassion, determination, and complexity—inspiring the nation, wrangling with generals, pardoning deserters, and barely escaping death on the ramparts of Fort Stevens as Jubal Early's Southern army invades the outskirts of Washington and fights the Union Army within five miles of the White House. For four years, the
city was awash in drama and sometimes comedy, until the assassination of Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth became the tragedy of the century.

By the time the grand two-day victory parade of 150,000 troops surged along Pennsylvania Avenue, the men and women who had arrived in such great numbers at the start of the war had made Washington a capital to be reckoned with throughout the world. Freedom Rising is an invaluable aid to understanding the making of America.

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My Personal Review:
Ernest Furgurson uses the statue atop the Capitol as a metaphor for the survival of the U.S. and the liberation of African-Americans. Even throughout the turmoil of the war, construction of the Capital continued, albeit haltingly, its progress symbolizing the triumph of the Union. This book is a must read for anyone who lives or works in the capital.

Riddled with southern sympathizers and spies, the capital nevertheless became a truly federal city. Slave markets stood on the south side of Independence Ave, now a two-mile-long chain of government departments, and even on Lafayette Square. D St. and 21st, the present location of the State Department, was a huge stables; on Boxing Day, 1861, a fire broke out that killed thousands of horses and sent thousands more running through the city. For days afterwards, the city stank of burned horse meat. Present day conservatives would say that they still haven't cleaned out all the horse---- from the area. Federal Triangle was the red light district, catering to all tastes; digs have found piles of bottles of expensive French champagne where the bawdy houses one stood. Constitution Avenue was a canal -- Tiber Creek -- and all of the mall west from the Washington monument was the Potomac. Within months of the outbreak of war, Washington saw a string of firsts -- the first use of trains for strategic mobility, the first use of aerial reconnaissance, the first machine gun, the first suspension of habeas corpus, the first nursing corps, the first aircraft carrier (a balloon moored to a boat in the Potomac that allowed the feds to observe the Confederate withdrawal from Occoquan and the Pohick Creek area where I now live). Furgurson writes of Lincoln, Stanton, Seward, Chase, Winfield Scott, Grant, and McLellan; of Confederate spies such as Antonia Ford; of dozens of soldiers and nurses, poets such as Whitman, and others who created the rich fabric of a capital at war, surrounded by hostiles. Washington, Furgurson writes, went from a town divided and fearful in 1861 to a "place of focused and confident power" in 1865. He does a superb job of reporting this huge political and physical transformation.
Some other notes. George Washington's grand-nephew fought on behalf of the Confederacy, and was killed in September 1861. Some vengeful Northerners wanted to confiscate Mt. Vernon but a collection of women persuaded the military authorities to let them retain it as a national historic landmark. If the hallmark of sharp political speech is that it remains as relevant today as when it was uttered, these words of Lincoln to a crowd celebrating his re-election bear directly on the calls of some to postpone the Iraqi elections of January 30, 2005. "We cannot have free government without elections, and if the rebellion could force us to forgo or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us."

"Freedom Rising" was enlightening as well in how deeply runs the Democratic Party's visceral distrust of the federal government, whether as a player on the national stage or more currently in the international arena. The Democratic platform in 1864 "shrugged at slavery" and all but assured Lincoln's reelection. Gideon Wells described the platform as "unpatriotic, almost treasonable to the Union. The issue is made up. It is whether a war shall be made against Lincoln to get peace with Jeff Davis. Those who met at Chicago prefer hostility to Lincoln rather than to Davis." Democratic Party leaders still struggle with the dilemma of supporting a Republican leader in time of war.

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