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Checks and balances, lobbyists, Mall activists and scandals are all essential buzzwords in the Washingtonian lexicon.

Washington, DC, Today

Washington has come a long way in the last 15 years. The not-so-distant days of crime-ridden streets and a dysfunctional local government have receded. Today, the economy is booming, with billions of dollars of investments pouring in. In fact, Washington was one of the few metropolitan areas in the USA to survive the recession relatively unscathed. Economics aside, the District is forging a new identity with a range of cutting-edge sustainable initiatives, a celebrated new restaurant scene and ambitious building projects.

Best on Film

All the President's Men (1976) Dramatic portrayal of two journalists who uncover the USA's biggest political scandal: Watergate.

Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939) Frank Capra classic of idealist do-gooder (played by Jimmy Stewart) taking on the established power brokers of Washington.

Slam (1998) True-to-life portrait of a young man (and budding poet) growing up in a blight-stricken area of DC.

Best in Print

Katharine Graham's Washington (edited by Katharine Graham; 2002) Illuminating essays about the Washington experience, by presidential insiders, novelists, journalists, socialites and humorists.

Lost in the City (Edward P Jones; 1992) Critically acclaimed collection of short stories set in African American DC during the tumultuous 1960s and '70s.

A Long Distance Life (Marita Golden; 1989) Epic tale of Southern sharecroppers who seek a new life in DC, set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement and other historic events.

Boom Days

Between 2007 and 2012, the District's economy grew some 14%, compared with 3% across the rest of the country. Even during the darkest days of the recession, unemployment never surpassed 7%. The growth of the federal workforce (and the size of the government) has played a major role in fueling the local economy. It has also helped shield the District from the downturn experienced in the rest of the country.

It's not just the public sector that's doing well. Washington's tech sector is also growing (faster even than California's), and tourism continues to be a huge draw (contributing some \$5 billion to the local economy). In fact, the District dynamo shows no sign of letting up: the Bureau of Labor Statistics ranked DC number one (out of 100 surveyed metro areas) for job growth through to 2020. This helps explain why the Washington area remains the wealthiest and best educated in the country.

New Projects

As the economy expands, Washington has seen a spate of new building projects and dramatic renovations. The Martin Luther King Jr Memorial, more than two decades in the making, finally opened in 2011, paying tribute to one of the world's great peacemaking visionaries. Nearby, the much-heralded National Museum of African American History and Culture held its groundbreaking in 2012 (with President Obama and the First Lady present). This Smithsonian museum, scheduled to open on the Mall in 2015, will showcase the tragedies and triumphs of African Americans in a 20,000-piece collection spanning 400 years of history.

Far from being a figment of the past, African American culture remains stronger than ever in Washington. The reopening of the Howard Theatre – a legendary