Praise for Still Surprised

“Warren’s humanity, joie de vivre, and intellect sparkle throughout this must-read memoir. Each chapter in his fascinating life drives him inexorably toward becoming the father of leadership, showing us how he has such a beloved and admired friend, mentor, and role model for so many leaders.”

— BILL GEORGE, professor, Harvard Business School; former chairman and CEO, Medtronic

“Engrossing, enthralling, and enlightening, this is a brilliant book full of remarkable people and events and packed with profound self-revelation. Every episode of Warren’s stellar career is itself a leadership lesson that will appeal to leaders and leadership studies.”

— ROWAN MOSS KANTER, professor, Harvard Business School; author, Confidence and SuperGrit

“This must-read book compiles a lifetime of lessons from the master. The poignant memoir on leadership will satisfy the appetites of both serious students and casual observers. It’s so rich that you’ll keep coming back for new insights, and it will never disappoint.”

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“The guru of leadership studies, Warren Bennis, has written a delightful memoir that appeals to both mind and soul.”

— David Gergen, professor and director of the Center for Public Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School
STILL SURPRISED
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A Memoir of a Life in Leadership

Warren Bennis
with Patricia Ward Biederman
For Grace,
and for Kate, John, and Will
and their children,
my loving links to the future
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In the strictest sense, I began writing this memoir in my 85th year. But its roots reach back to my college days at Antioch in the late 1940s. In my sophomore year, I wrote an autobiographical story about an unnerving encounter in Germany after the war. Published in the school’s literary magazine, the piece had the campus buzzing. I was stunned—and transformed—by the discovery that I could write my way into the consciousness of others. Most surprising was that this was true even when the subject was so personal. At that moment I understood that something magical happens when you tell a good story. Listeners, or readers, somehow experience that story as their own.

That first unexpected success at Antioch made me both a storyteller and a collector of stories. From then on, I scrutinized everything I heard, read, and experienced for resonant tales. Once you know that deftly shaped stories compel an audience as nothing else does, you can’t stop telling them, if only to see the look of delight on the faces of those hearing them. I have been seeking that bond between storyteller and audience ever since, as a teacher, writer, and speaker. I think the power of narrative struck me with such force
because I discovered it relatively late in life. Unlike most American children, who hear stories before they can pull themselves up in their cribs or manage strained peas, I don’t remember anyone ever sitting on my bed when I was little, telling me a story. I don’t mean to claim that I was traumatized by *Rumpelstiltskin* deprivation. But the fact is that my parents did not read to me on a regular basis, nor did my older brothers. As a result, my love of stories developed later, as I was bewitched in turn by radio, comic books, movies, and pulp fiction. The stories told in these rather new media mesmerized me. Even better, they allowed me to escape for a time from the uneventful existence of a working-class boy born in the Bronx in 1925—a child inauspiciously named Warren Gamaliel after the late President Harding.

As that undergraduate publication first showed me, stories are a powerful tool for engaging others. All of us present ourselves to the world through the stories we invent about ourselves, consciously or not. In fact, I had proof of that well before college. In 1938 I was an eighth-grader at a public school in Westwood, New Jersey, where I often felt like the only Jewish child in a town whose angry German Bund gave me nightmares. There, it was my great good fortune to have a wonderful teacher, a Miss Shirer. She was one of those extraordinary people who reflexively assuage the anxieties of their young charges as they educate them. She was also a local celebrity. Her brother was CBS Radio’s man in Berlin, William Shirer, who risked his life describing in nightly newscasts Hitler’s attempt at world domination.

One day Miss Shirer gave us an unsettling assignment. She asked us to tell our classmates about our favorite hobby. What was I going to do? I had no hobbies, let alone a favorite one. Unlike most of my male peers, I wasn’t good at sports or even building model airplanes. In my panic, I had an inspiration. My classmates reported on their
love and mastery of chess, philately, and other popular enthusiasms of young adolescents of my generation. When it was my turn to present, I reached into the shoe box I had brought to class and pulled out the accoutrements of the only activity I felt I had truly mastered—shining my family’s shoes. As my classmates looked on—either stupefied or awed, it wasn’t clear which—I revealed the rituals and best practices of my unusual art. In memory, I was brilliant on such fine points as when oxblood polish is preferable to maroon and when a cloth produces a better sheen than a brush. I first wrote about this singular performance in the book *An Invented Life*, and rightfully so. The Warren Bennis who emerged in that New Jersey classroom was essentially a work of my imagination. Out of such unusual elements as neat’s-foot oil, I had devised a story that I could star in. I’ve been doing much the same thing ever since.

When I was first approached about writing a memoir, I had serious reservations. In an odd way, I felt I wasn’t ready yet, that I was too far from the end of my story to write it effectively. Once I got over that, I became utterly engaged in the project. Wherever I went, I carried a notebook for capturing memories that popped to mind at the oddest moments and jotting down notes about scenes or topics I wanted to include. I began going to the Viceroy Hotel in Santa Monica at least once a week, often two or three times, to tell stories to my long-time collaborator Patricia Ward Biederman. While the vigilant staff kept us in cappuccinos, we began to document my life, starting with my experiences as a 19-year-old infantry officer in the Battle of the Bulge.

Someone asked me recently why this book doesn’t begin with a detailed account of my childhood. Frankly, my childhood, like most, wasn’t all that riveting, and readers have better things to do with their time than paying it too much attention. Yes, I was once
a mortified adolescent schlepping his accordion on the bus from his weekly lesson in Hackensack back home to Westwood. But I’ve already written about that unhappy time, and it lacks the scope and drama of what came later. Moreover, as I’ve grown older, I’ve lost patience with glacier-size memoirs and biographies that start with the histories of both sets of grandparents and proceed in minding-numbing detail from preschool to the present. A few giants warrant such cradle-to-the-grave treatment—very few. I think the rest of us tell our stories most compellingly when we limit ourselves to the high points—not telling all, but telling a well-chosen some. Alfred Hitchcock said that “drama is life with all the boring parts cut out.” I think that’s what a good memoir is as well. So in this book I chose to recount those experiences that were formative, meaningful, funny, and moving, but to eliminate the boring parts. Instead of duly reporting what I was doing year after year, I tried to capture the excitement of more than eight tumultuous decades as one fortunate man experienced them. In the end, no memoir, however encyclopedic, truly captures a person’s life. As novelist John Barth (a colleague at the University at Buffalo) so brilliantly observed, “Your story is your story, not your life.” I would rather readers finish this book wanting to know more about me than feeling that they know too much.

A major challenge in writing a memoir is striking the right tone. Snarky, confessional memoirs seem to have considerable voyeuristic appeal, but I tend to read memoirs in hopes of accessing the interior monologues of interesting people. I think the writer of a memoir has an implicit contract with readers. They generously signal their readiness to listen to the writer’s story by reading the book. And the writer tries to deliver an honest, evocative version of his or her life story (or an important part of it). The best memoirists are good companions, entertaining you as long as their books
are in your hand. I must confess that I have enjoyed the occasional mean-spirited memoir, such as Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, but this is not one of them. Mine has been a largely charmed life, and my grievances are few to none. I have also tried to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis that wreck so many memoirs. Too often the authors exude either an annoying false modesty or an almost comic grandiosity. In the latter category, no one managed to be more absurdly self-aggrandizing than Theodore Roosevelt, when he famously declared, “The bravest man I ever knew was the black sergeant who followed me up San Juan Hill.”

One of the things writing a memoir requires you to do is to think about your past and what it means, to see how your life was shaped by the times and the people you shared those years with. As Francis Bacon observed, “Truth is the daughter of time.” When I began looking back from the vantage point of my ninth decade, I began to see the shape of my life, the arc of it, as screenwriters say. That arc begins with my orphaning myself from my family. As Freud noted, many children fantasize that they are adopted. They imagine themselves the offspring of different parents, switched at birth, found in a cabbage patch, left in a handbag in a railway station—anything that allows them to distance themselves from their actual families. I realize I was one of those would-be foundlings, who dreamed from an early age of a life different from the hard, ordinary existence of my parents and brothers. It was only by leaving the world I was born into that I was able to invent a life that suited me better.

World War II started me on that journey, as it did millions of other men and women of my generation. In 1943 I went into the Army, less frightened at the prospect of going to war than eager to see where life would take me. The war gave me a great gift. It offered me the opportunity, at the age of 19, to lead others. The
late John Gardner, who was Lyndon Johnson’s secretary of health, education, and welfare and the founder of Common Cause, had a similar experience, when he was a Marine officer fighting in the Pacific. We so often think of leadership as something innate, something a few rare and gifted individuals are born with. But leadership is so often a function, not of one’s personality or psychological makeup, but of the role one finds oneself in. Gardner was a genuine war hero, but he explained his leadership to me in the most modest terms. He said, “Some qualities were there waiting for life to pull those things out of me.” Nothing about my life before the war indicated that I had any capacity for leadership. But in my lieutenant’s uniform, leading men whose lives depended on me, I was able to fill that role. That great student of leadership, William Shakespeare, shows how role shapes the development of King Henry V. Not yet a king, young Prince Hal can afford to be a rake and wastrel, like his teacher and fellow carouser, Falstaff. Before Hal puts on the crown and the rest of the regal costume, he shows no evidence of the qualities required of a leader. But when thrust into the role of king, he finds the inner resources necessary to fulfill that most demanding role. The crucial first step in that transformation is Hal’s heartrending, but essential, renunciation of Falstaff. Henry starts to become a great leader, not on the battlefield at Agincourt, but the moment he tells Falstaff, “I know thee not, old man,” and begins to act like a king. Leadership is a performance art, and most of us become leaders only when we are cast in that role.

As I noted earlier, this is a book by and about an unusually lucky man. I survived the war and, because of a new veterans’ benefit, was able to go to college. The college I chose—Antioch—was a free-thinking institution that championed both learning and social justice. At Antioch, I met the great Doug McGregor, who made sure I got into MIT. There I studied with giants, including
Nobel Prize–winning economist Paul Samuelson, who chose to forgive my less than extraordinary math skills. The post-war years were a Golden Age for the social sciences (my degree was in economics and social science), and I found myself in the midst of the action in one of the great cities of the world. Doug, many others, and I did work on group dynamics that people now say helped usher in today’s more collegial, learning organizations, including Google. The Cambridge years were ones of intense collaboration that showed me how much gifted people working together can accomplish.

When I became president of the University of Cincinnati in 1971, I had a chance to put into practice all I had learned about leadership. In Cincinnati a team of us worked a kind of miracle, saving the fiscally endangered university by bringing it into the state university system. In doing so, I discovered that administration wasn’t really my calling after all. I wanted to think, write, and teach for a living. For the last 30 years (some of the happiest of my life), I have been at the University of Southern California, living on the beach in nearby Santa Monica. In the following pages, you’ll discover how I got from there to here. It is a tale full of remarkable, sometimes eccentric people, places, and the occasional animal. They include the Cambridge psychoanalyst who called me Walter; a rhesus macaque on a urinal in Calcutta; Stewart Brand, Ram Dass, and other neighbors in a houseboat community in Sausalito; Vice President Al Gore, as he helped his staff cope with intra–White House tensions; and the beautiful physician who is my wife.

As I wrote this book, I often heard the music that played during each period of my life. Even more than photographs, popular music helped me recall the emotional realities of the time. *I’ll Be Seeing You* triggered a flood of memories—how young and handsome we were in our uniforms, the sweetness and urgency of each
flirtation in an I’m-shipping-out-in-the-morning world, the ache of separation. Until I wrote this book, I didn’t appreciate how utterly World II changed the world and shaped my generation. Mobilization for the war ended the Great Depression and set the stage for post-war prosperity. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where I did my graduate work, soared in prestige as a result of such key war-effort projects as improving radar and teaching people how to use it. Today no one thinks about the very real possibility that the Allies might have lost the war. But the defeat of the Axis powers was far from certain as late as the winter of 1945. Can we even imagine the global catastrophe that would have followed an Axis victory? But the Allies didn’t lose, and most American soldiers came home from the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific full of hope and optimism. In a sense, I was an American Everyman who fought for his country and whose life was transformed after the war by a U.S. government that realized it had to invest in its future, now that it was certain it had one. Mine was one of millions of careers launched by new veterans’ benefits instituted in 1944. Those benefits created the American middle class.

The impact of the war was more than economic. It changed how my generation understood the world. War is always ugly, but the genocides perpetrated by the Axis powers in both Europe and Asia undermined time-honored notions of human decency. How could lovers of Mozart gas millions of innocent children? How could millions of Jews, Gypsies, and gays be murdered in mechanized death factories in ostensibly civilized Europe in the 20th century? These questions haunted and inspired the post-war social scientists of my generation. Group dynamics and the other fields we pioneered reflected our need, in light of the Holocaust and other wartime horrors, to discover what made ordinary people capable of such evil, if only to prevent it from happening again. Our crucial findings
were that we crave the approval of those around us and that groups powerfully affect their members, for good or ill. When American soldiers and our allies entered the concentration camps, they saw the horrific result of anti-Semitism and other forms of racism. It didn’t happen overnight, but eventually we became more tolerant, more committed to fairness. The casual racism of the first half of the century was no longer viewed as innocuous, and in time the result was the civil-rights movement and a heightened awareness of the dangers of tribalism.

Clearly, one of the benefactors of the post–World War II reality is U.S. president Barack Obama. Mine was a segregated Army, in which African American soldiers were barred from fighting alongside whites, and white soldiers said any ugly thing they wanted to about their black brothers in arms. Now the grandson of a white veteran of World War II is the first African American president of the United States. When President Obama went to Oslo in 2009 to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, he was in an uncomfortable position—accepting the peace prize at the same time that he was commander-in-chief of a country engaged in two wars. I don’t know how much of his speech he wrote himself, but I thought it reflected an important truth about the human condition. The president said that we have to “[reconcile] these two seemingly irreconcilable truths—that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.” And then he said something that resonates for anyone who has grappled with the reality that human beings are neither angels nor demons, but are capable of doing terrible things. He cited President Kennedy, who had said decades earlier, “Let us focus on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.” The recognition that we need to constantly monitor and perfect our human institutions,
including our systems of justice, is surely one of the enduring lessons of World War II.

Gerald and Sara Murphy, the real-life couple who served as models for Dick and Nicole Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *Tender Is the Night*, liked to say, “Living well is the best revenge.” I would emend that to say living is the best revenge. Every once in a while, I get an e-mail from Frank Benham, an octogenarian like myself whom I last saw when I was 18. We were bunk-mates at Camp (now Fort) Hood, near Waco, Texas, when we were in basic training. In December 2004, Frank wrote to remind me that it was the 60th anniversary of the start of the Battle of the Bulge. Sixty years earlier, he was in Rheims, France, part of the last line of defense should the Germans try to retake Paris. “It was a very nervous Xmas, I can tell ya that,” he recalled. “Had a lot of cooks, bakers, company clerks, truck drivers trying to play infantry men on the line. I was more worried these trigger-happy guys would shoot me than I was afraid of the Germans.” Frank tells me that as far as he can determine, we are the only two left from that group of eager boys at Camp Hood who set out to make the world safe for democracy. To my astonishment, we did. And if Frank and I are now as rare and endangered as condors, we will deal with that. We have seen worse.
STILL SURPRISED
In December 1944 I was the rawest second lieutenant in the U.S. Army, a 19-year-old shavetail trying to keep my platoon (and myself) alive as we pursued the retreating enemy into Germany. But 18 months earlier, I had been just another confused, nebbishy teenager, recently graduated from Los Angeles’s Dorsey High School. Unmoored, unsure of who I was, let alone who I wanted to be, I didn’t have interests so much as a handful of obsessions. The healthiest, by far, was my quest to build a comprehensive collection of the great pop music of my time. At least once a week, I would liberate 35 cents from the till in my father’s struggling malt shop at the corner of Slauson Avenue and Rimpau Boulevard. Even in Los Angeles, it was the rare and privileged youngster who had a car of his own, and I was not one of them. I would catch the bus for the half-hour ride into Hollywood, where a half dozen first-rate record stores beckoned me.

Thirty-five cents would buy one of the oversized 12-inch discs, normally reserved for classical music, required to capture such extended-play masterpieces as Benny Goodman’s “Sing Sing Sing.” An aficionado, I could name every musician in the big bands of
Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, Harry James, and Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey. But I also knew who jammed with such lesser-known greats as Bunny Berigan. I did not make my weekly purchase lightly. I had a curator’s confidence that I would know what I wanted when I heard it. So before I invested my father’s hard-earned money, I would sequester myself in one of the shop’s listening booths, don the oversized earphones, and lose myself in the latest Charlie Christian guitar solo or Lionel Hampton on vibes or Chick Webb on drums. Some weeks I allowed myself to be transported by the great women artists of the era—Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Jo Stafford. Music mattered to me as few other things did, and I followed the richly varied scene the way most of my classmates followed sports teams. I even subscribed to several music magazines, including *Metronome* and a British periodical with the word *Sounds* in the title. Looking back, I see that pop music was my therapy, as it has been for so many young people who yearn for something they can’t yet articulate, something grander than their lonely, mundane lives. The listening booth was my sacred space. When the sounds of Duke Ellington or Stan Kenton flooded my consciousness, they drove out anything that was dull or painful or perplexing.

Like so many other millions, my father lost his last real job as a shipping clerk in 1932. From then on, he supported my mother, older twin brothers, and me working as a process server, loading illegal booze for the New Jersey mob, and, finally, opening a soda shop that also sold magazines and comic books. My dad worked tirelessly, but he had no more talent for business than I had for football. Hoping a change in geography would change his luck, he moved us from New Jersey to Southern California, where a family friend owned a wildly successful drugstore in Beverly Hills. In Los Angeles, my father opened a malt shop that also served sandwiches. It wasn’t much of a financial success, but it bettered my life as a
teenage transplant from the East Coast. High school classmates began to stop by the malt shop after school to play the pinball machine and get extra scoops of ice cream when I was working the counter.

The U.S. economy had finally begun to expand after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. By 1944 the protracted desperation of the Depression had given way to a busy, purposeful America largely defined by the war being fought in Europe and the Pacific. Although it didn’t feel like a formative experience at the time, I was one of the millions of Americans lucky enough to experience the inspired leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt firsthand. Like most Jewish, working-class families, my relatives were more or less born Democrats. But it was soon clear that FDR was no ordinary Democrat, no ordinary politician, no ordinary leader. Despite Roosevelt’s aristocratic background, most Americans quickly came to believe that he was the one man they could put their trust in, the one who could solve the nation’s dire economic problems and, later, see the nation through a terrible global war. In his occasional fireside chats, FDR spoke to each of us directly via the big radio in our living rooms. It was only recently, when I read Jonathan Alter’s marvelous book *The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, that I understood how Roosevelt achieved the unprecedented sense of intimacy he inspired in those he led. FDR used his imagination to project himself into our living rooms. In preparing for each fireside chat, the president recalled, “I tried to picture a mason at work on a new building, a girl behind a counter, a farmer in his field.” According to Alter, Frances Perkins—FDR’s secretary of labor and the first woman of Cabinet rank—said that he “saw them gathered in the little parlor, listening with their neighbors. He was conscious of their faces and hands, their clothes and homes.”
Technology, in the form of radio, allowed FDR to enter Americans’ homes. As Alter reports, the number of radios in the country had grown from several thousand in 1921 to 18 million by 1932. Astonishingly, 60 million people heard the first fireside chat on Sunday night, March 12, 1933. Morally neutral, radio was the servant of Hitler as well as FDR. The Nazis distributed free radios in every German town, radios pretuned to both a propaganda station and one that broadcast music acceptable to the Reich. Radios also helped the regime maintain social control. Any German heard listening to “degenerate music” on the radio, especially the color-blind jazz I loved, risked being turned over to the Gestapo.

It was FDR’s empathic imagination, not technology, that allowed him to create the remarkable impression that his fireside chats were meant for your ears only. As one observer said of the president’s audience, “They were ready to believe FDR could see in the dark.” The power of the bond that FDR forged with ordinary Americans is captured in one of my favorite stories about him. As the grief-stricken masses waited on Constitution Avenue for Roosevelt’s funeral cortège to pass by, a well-dressed, middle-aged mourner fell to his knees, sobbing. When he finally regained his composure, a nearby stranger turned to the grieving man and asked, “Did you know the president?” “No,” he replied, “but he knew me.”

At our president’s urging, we wartime Americans clipped ration coupons; ate Spam; recycled metal, rubber, and paper for the war effort; and bought the victory bonds urged on us by patriotic celebrities whose pitches were screened at movie theaters between the serials and feature films. Like other boys my age, I put maps of Europe and the Pacific up on my bedroom wall so I could track the Allies’ progress as reported on the radio, in the newspapers,
and in the Movietone newsreels that were an eagerly anticipated fixture of Saturday matinees. Although both coasts were patrolled for enemy ships and submarines, and the skies were constantly scanned for enemy aircraft, the war often seemed far away. Then, one afternoon, a two-and-a-half-ton Army truck pulled up in front of the fruit and vegetable store next to my father’s malt shop. Jeff, the store’s Japanese American owner, ran in, emptied his cash drawer, and stuffed the money in his pocket. Then he pulled down the metal screen that protected his business at night, and hung a closed sign on the door. Still wearing his apron, he climbed into the back of the truck, where a dozen other Japanese men and a few women were already standing. The truck pulled off, and we never saw Jeff again. No matter how distant the front, the war could reach into the neighborhood at any time. Even if your own family hadn’t been touched, everyone had a friend with a father or older brothers in harm’s way. And you couldn’t help but shiver every time a new gold star appeared in a neighborhood window, proof that another mother had lost a child in uniform.

As my 18th birthday neared, I decided to enlist in the Army Specialized Training Program. Everyone knew you had to do well on an aptitude test to qualify, so the program had a certain cachet. I scored the requisite 130 or better and was accepted. The program began with basic training, then four years in college acquiring skills the military needed. I didn’t think much about what would inevitably happen when I completed the program—that I would be sent to fight the brutal war that continued to rage on two fronts. I was eager to see what college was like. In high school I had been a good but not exceptional student. And my subscription to a British music journal notwithstanding, I wasn’t terribly intellectual. The first serious novel I remember reading during the 1940s was a much praised first book by a writer named Saul Bellow, titled
Dangling Man. While I waited to go into the Army, I took a job at the Lockheed plant in Inglewood. Lockheed and its subsidiary Vega cranked out almost 20,000 military planes between 1942 and 1945. In Inglewood, I worked as a riveter, assembling fuselages for P-38 Lightning fighter planes, the scourge of Japanese pilots. On the Lockheed assembly line, young men were outnumbered a hundred to one by Rosie the Riveters, who had no idea their jobs would disappear the moment the war ended and their boyfriends and husbands came home.

By December 1944, I was somewhere in southern Germany, a teenage replacement officer in the U.S. Army’s 63rd Infantry Division. My superiors said they thought I was the youngest officer in the European Theater of Operations. I arrived in theater as American forces were in the final throes of the Battle of the Bulge, that murderous last-ditch effort by the German military, whose thousand-year Reich had less than six months to live. Back home in Southern California, I might have felt half-formed and insecure. But in Germany, I was about to become a leader of men, ready or not.

If you saw Band of Brothers or Saving Private Ryan, you have an idea of what World War II looked like. The war in Europe may have been just, but it was no glorious struggle against the forces of evil. It was a series of vicious encounters that were as grotesquely ugly as any painting by Hieronymus Bosch. War presents you with images normally seen only in nightmares and horror movies, and the worst of them remain in your memory as long as you have memory. I never got used to the broken, eviscerated bodies of boy soldiers or the acrid stench of burning human hair. By the end of 1944, Germany’s war machine had devoured most of its men. The dead German soldiers we came across were often no more than 14 or 15 and looked like the children they were. Often, the only