

# House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power

James Carroll

Reviewed by Dr Tom Frame

After the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre were destroyed in 2001, the Pentagon resumed its status as the largest building in the United States and like no other edifice on earth. When I visited the US Department of Defense's head office in mid-June this year, I was given a personal tour of the vast structure and was amazed to see the number of fast food restaurants and bakeries, gift and apparel shops, hairdressers and beauty salons that it hosted. When I preached and celebrated Holy Communion in the chapel built in the section of the building destroyed by the impact of Flight 77, I was deeply moved by both the attack's brutality and the resulting loss of life. On the outer wall of the chapel one of the concrete blocks bears the simple inscription: '11 September 2001'. An evocative memorial to those killed is presently being erected.

The terrorists chose the Pentagon as a target because it symbolises American military power. Since the building was opened in 1943, it has occupied a central place in the political culture of the United States and shaped the nation's capacity to deploy armed force. In this major study, novelist and historian James Carroll argues that the culture engendered within the building by its occupants—what he calls 'the Pentagon effect'—is principally responsible for the United States squandering the considerable international sympathy and goodwill that was generated by the '9/11' terrorist attacks, and that the Bush Administration failed to grasp the opportunity presented to it for a new era of global cooperation and stability.

This happened, according to Carroll, because the Pentagon is like a 'metaphysical creature' that stands apart from the rest of Washington with its own way of seeing the world and conducting its business. In what is a widely-researched book based on well reasoned argument, Carroll contends that since the building was finished it has operated beyond the control of any responsible element in either government or society. He alleges that it is the biggest, loosest cannon in American history, and that no institution has changed the country more than the Pentagon. It has remained unaccountable to the American republic and retained its near limitless funding by systematically talking-up and exaggerating threats to the security of the United States.

Built as a temporary structure to bring the various elements of the United States armed forces together during World War II, Carroll argues that the 'collapse of restraint' on the military that might have been accepted during wartime, persisted into the post-war years when the Defense Department achieved what Dwight Eisenhower called 'a disastrous rise of misplaced power'. This led initially to the unprecedented incendiary bombings of Germany and Japan in 1945 and more recently to the 'shock and awe' strategy employed in Iraq. He charts the rise of America's nuclear arsenal—including the decision

to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki in which President Harry Truman, according to General Leslie Groves, 'did not so much say 'yes' as not say 'no'—and the Pentagon's desire to demonstrate the full extent of American power.

The continuing lack of accountability, Carroll writes, is a function of successive Presidents being preoccupied with the Pentagon's agenda and their unwillingness to be seen politically as either weak or soft in military affairs. The notable exceptions are Harry Truman who refused to allow the deployment of nuclear weapons during the Korean War which prevented any further escalation of the Cold War; John F. Kennedy who brought his own resolution to the Cuban missile crisis despite urgings from the Pentagon that he was engaged in 'appeasement'; and Ronald Reagan who responded positively to Mikhail Gorbachev's calls for peace and the withdrawal of intermediate-range nuclear weapons from Europe. In Carroll's mind, simply to blame the 'neo-conservative' element in the Bush Administration for the security difficulties in which the United States presently finds itself ignores the long-term influence of the Pentagon.

James Carroll cannot be compared with either Michael Moore or Noam Chomsky. He does not want to discredit the Bush Administration or advance a Leftist ideological agenda. He is a former Catholic priest and clearly a deeply moral man who retains a great love for his country. His father was a Pentagon official for more than twenty years and he obviously much prefers peaceful solutions to global problems over military ones. *House of War* is measured and thoughtful. Carroll is concerned about the ethical conduct of foreign policy and statecraft as well as the universal demands of justice and compassion.

*House of War* is an unsettling book. It suggests that when individuals congregate in certain places to consider specific subjects in particular ways, they can think and act in ways they would never contemplate or even imagine were they to meet with other people in different circumstances. The text is well end-noted and the bibliography a useful guide to further reading. The photographic section gives a human face to the narrative and illustrates some of the points Carroll tries to make.

I could easily imagine that it would be possible to get physically lost in the Pentagon although the building's long-term occupants tell me the truth is otherwise. Maybe so. But I can readily see how and why those who work there could become morally disoriented or lose sight of democracy in a building where it is much harder to look out than to gaze within. ♦

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