

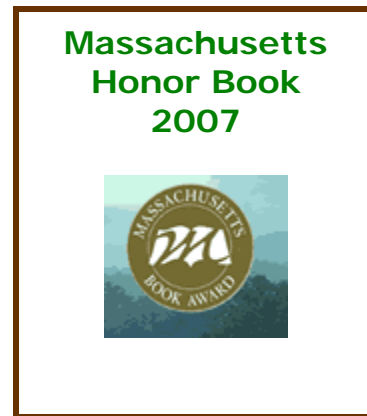
# *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power*

by James Carroll

Houghton Mifflin

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### SUMMARY

James Carroll tells a broadly expansive, some say epic, history of the Pentagon and its role in world politics and international relations, anchoring the story with details and observations from his personal experience growing up as the son of a Pentagon official. The Pentagon, as “the engine room of a militarized economy,” represents a lead part in an ensemble cast of characters that, along with the author himself and his father Joseph Carroll, who was the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, includes U.S. presidents from Truman to Bush (2nd), the atomic bomb, Strategic Air Command, and myriad defense department and military luminaries from James Forrestal to Curtis LeMay to Donald Rumsfeld.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A recurring *leit motif* is Carroll’s noting of “correspondences,” the coinciding of dates and events. For example, Carroll draws significance from the link between the groundbreaking for the Pentagon and his own birth (same week), and from the link between the date of that groundbreaking and the attack on the building sixty years later (11 September). How is this literary device effective, or, distracting?
2. Was the Pentagon built with “the bricks and mortar of paranoia,” or was the Cold War based on a real threat?
3. Was a diplomatic solution actually possible, as Carroll argues, or was dropping the atomic bomb on Japan necessary to end the war?
4. How did dropping the atomic bomb on Japan affect the course of relations with the Soviet Union, or did it?
5. What are the implications of Carroll’s assertion that, more than being simply an agency, the Pentagon became an entity with “the capacity to act in ways that transcended the wills and purposes of the people who claimed responsibility for the Defense Department at any given time,” as he writes on page 234?

6. By contrast, reviewer Max Boot suggests that Carroll is mistaken about how much power the Pentagon actually has in the major decisions about war. Has the power has rested more with the various presidential administrations, as Boot asserts, or with the Pentagon, as Carroll argues?
7. Would things have turned out differently, as reviewer George Scialabba has suggested, if any of the key players in the building up of the Pentagon were women?
8. Consider the questions Carroll says the book attempts to answer:
  - a. Has the Pentagon been “a bulwark against the tides of chaos and conflict,” or has it been “the tidal engine?”
  - b. Is the production of weapons a strategy that secures or one that threatens?
  - c. Does the paradox of deterrence already involve defeat?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION** (*from the author's website*)

Born in Chicago in 1943, James Carroll grew up in Washington, where his father served as the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Carroll wrote about his father, his work, and their relationship in the memoir, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*, which received the 1996 National Book Award in nonfiction and other awards. Carroll attended Georgetown University before entering the seminary to train for the Catholic priesthood, to which he was ordained in 1969. Carroll served as Catholic Chaplain at Boston University from 1969 to 1974 and then left the priesthood to become a writer. He published his first novel, *Madonna Red*, in 1976, followed by bestsellers *Mortal Friends* (1978), *Family Trade* (1982), *Prince of Peace* (1984), *The City Below* (1994), and *Secret Father* (2003). Carroll's essays and articles have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Daedalus*, and his op-ed page column has run weekly in the *Boston Globe* since 1992. Carroll's book *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*, published in 2001, was a *New York Times* bestseller and received many prestigious awards. Carroll's other nonfiction includes *Toward A New Catholic Church: The Promise of Reform* (2002) and *Crusade: Chronicles of an Unjust War* (2004). James Carroll lives in Boston with his wife, the novelist Alexandra Marshall. They have two grown children.

### **HELPFUL LINKS**

Author's website at [www.jamescarroll.net/House.html](http://www.jamescarroll.net/House.html)

Online Pentagon Tours at <http://pentagon.afis.osd.mil/>

The official Department of Defense website at [www.pentagon.gov](http://www.pentagon.gov)

Society for History in the Federal Government at [www.shfg.org](http://www.shfg.org)

## ADDITIONAL READING

John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005.

Lyle Goldstein, *Preventive Attack and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Comparative Historical Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.

I.F. Stone, *The Best of I.F. Stone*, Karl Weber, ed. New York: Public Affairs, 2006.



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