Book review by Dr Jeffrey Bradford, Director of Research, U K Defence Forum

House of War by James Carroll

A very personal history of the Pentagon and its role in shaping American foreign and domestic policy. James Carroll writes from an unashamed personal perspective. The son of a former FBI officer promoted to General in the US Air Force at the time of the McCarthism scares, James grew up going to the Pentagon on a Saturday with his father. Later he protested the Vietnam war outside the Pentagon as a priest and now applies his intimate experiences to his role as a journalist making sense of the cultural construct which the Pentagon has grown into and its impact on thinking in the United States.

At the heart of his dialogue is the identification of key people and the ways in which they influence policy and successive generations of Pentagon leaders. One new fact to this reviewer was how Vice-President Dick Cheney's first role was as an assistant to Donald Rumsfeld - just one illustration of the intertwining relationships which span generations. A further theme is the role of nuclear power and policy at the heart of Pentagon thinking. Whilst it might seem anachronistic today, the amounts being spent on ballistic missile defence have a lineage of thinking spanning back several decades. Additionally the development of atomic and nuclear policy is charted from the perspective of the Pentagon's role in skewing the American economy and R&D base to serving the organisations needs - and thus having a major impact on the role of the Presidency. The third theme is that of dates and the way in which major events occur on similar dates on different years is a recurring theme.

This book is not an objective academic story, but more a passionate personal view of an institution spanning decades, its people, impact on society, the authors family and the international community. (672 pages, published by Houghton Mifflin ISBN: 0618187804).