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The Pentagon, a History: The Untold Story of the Wartime Race to Build the Pentagon and to Restore It Sixty Years Later

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Hollywood’s James Dean. Fed by post-war consumerism and entertainment focused so exclusively on adolescents, adult influence rapidly declined. West quips that by 1960, “American culture was no longer being driven by the adult behind the wheel; it was being taken for a ride by the kids in the back seat.”

Indeed, West offers a point of view echoed by other thinkers of “second thoughts” that the entire antiwar movement of the 1960s was driven less by concern about American foreign aggression than by mere self-interest in avoiding military service. Evidence the 1970 campus violence that forced this reviewer to carry an Army Reserve Officer Training Corps uniform in a paper bag. One year later, the draft lottery quelled most opposition from college-aged adolescents who, like children, no longer “had to do” what they did not like. The consequences of national immaturity became clear when a “Huey” helicopter lifted off from a besieged Saigon rooftop in 1975. By then, however, Americans had been distracted by Jaws and dancing to “You Sexy Thing.” In 1977, Jimmy Carter made good on his campaign promise to grant draft-dodgers amnesty, revealing that adult responsibility was dead in the White House as well.

Remaining ignorant as they aimed to understand “the other,” Americans lost their sense of themselves. It therefore follows as no surprise, according to West, that when faced with terrorism on a global scale, America declared war on a tactic instead of the people and culture who used it. West believes that our biggest handicap is “a perilous lack of cultural confidence . . . our renunciation of cultural paternity [which is] a natural consequence of believing in our own illegitimacy.”

A snapshot of popular news headlines suggests West is correct. Frightened of and ignorant about Islam, Americans—63 percent of whom, National Geographic says, cannot find Iraq on a world map—are like kids with no one to advise them. So they blissfully amuse themselves with self-absorbing distractions, such as Hollywood drama, reality television, and who gets voted off the island. Meanwhile, modern-day religious fascists plot their destruction.

This book is intense, no-nonsense, challenging, and clearly written with passion reflecting parentlike frustration. Readers—most of whom, like the author herself, are products of post-World War II parents—may become uneasy, as I did, when West’s rapier finger pushes a personal button. However, this book is a must, since eventually violent extremism will force America to shake off decades of immature behavior and grow up. As West aptly concludes, “A civilization that forever dodges maturity will never live to a ripe old age.”

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Vogel, Stephen. The Pentagon, a History: The Untold Story of the Wartime Race to Build the Pentagon, and to Restore It Sixty Years Later. New York: Random House, 2007. 626pp. $32.95

This title accurately describes Stephen Vogel’s book, but it does not do his engrossing story justice. Vogel, a veteran military reporter for the Washington Post, has written the biography of a building, complete with its conception, formative years, aging, and even crisis
events. The building comes to life through the experiences of the strong cast of personalities who planned, built, upgraded, repaired, and worked within it throughout the first sixty years of its history. Vogel’s story takes shape in early 1941, with Franklin Roosevelt’s War Department and its concerns about the ability of the United States to plan for and wage what it saw as a coming global war. At that time, the War Department had twenty-four thousand employees, scattered throughout Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Maryland, in twenty-three separate buildings, including apartments, shacks, and even a Leary’s Garage at 24th and M streets. After Germany invaded Russia in June 1941, the requirement for more space was urgent, and the Army turned to Brigadier General Brehon B. Somervell, its Quartermaster Corps’s Chief of Construction Division, to solve the problem.

Vogel fills with color and detail his story of the fast-paced construction of the largest office building in the world. By March 1942, over ten thousand men were working on the site. They dredged 680,000 tons of sand and gravel from the Potomac and pounded in 41,492 concrete piles and columns that would support a building with 17.5 miles of corridors and five floors, plus a mezzanine and basement.

Vogel does not end his story with the completion of the building in February 1943. He describes numerous later events as diverse as General Eisenhower’s getting lost in the building, the Navy brass refusing to move in, and stories of secretaries of defense James Forrestal and Robert McNamara. His book includes chapters on the Vietnam antiwar protests at the Pentagon on 21 October 1967 and on the over-billion-dollar “remaking” of the Pentagon during major improvements and upgrades during the 1990s. The two concluding and most moving chapters relate the tragic loss of 184 lives and the destruction and repair of the west side of the Pentagon from the horrific impact of the hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 on 11 September 2001. Despite the damage the building held, in part due to the strength of the spiral steel reinforcing bar used in the concrete columns during its original construction. Perhaps this and the related remarkable story of the rebuilding of the Pentagon in less than a year are fitting testimonies to the quality of the people and builders of yesterday and today. Vogel has stated that “it took me longer to write the book than it took them to build the Pentagon.” No doubt true, but Vogel’s book and its story of a Washington landmark and a globally recognized icon of American power were worth the wait.

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This unique and classic book was based on a sixty-item questionnaire administered to 173 U.S. Army officers who served as commanding generals in the Vietnam War. The author, Douglas Kinnard, a West Point graduate and Princeton PhD, served two tours in Vietnam, including one as a brigadier general, and was known to many if not all of his respondents. The postal survey...