



# The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State (Haymarket Series)

*Dale Carter*

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According to British historian Carter, as much as the 1930s were shaped by the rise of imperialist powers, the postwar era has been characterized by the quest for the domination of space, and the rocket is the symbol and metaphor for postwar American social history. Borrowing his terminology from Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, Carter says this shift from the Nazi "Oven State" to the American "Rocket State" was signaled by "the appearance of men for whom rocketry has become ideology and idolatry." Despite this intriguing premise, the first third of the book is mired in intellectually self-indulgent literary criticism (of Pynchon, Mailer, et al.) and cultural critique (of film, television, advertising), at times insightful, yet, in large part, remote, jargonistic and tangential. The section in which John Kennedy and the Mercury astronauts are portrayed as Hollywood-type "leading men," i.e., actors chosen to play the role of hero for an admiring audience, is more focused and accessible. Here the analysis is at its sharpest, for example, in the idea that JFK's championing of the space program was actually propaganda and opportunism, or that the astronauts were both components and commodities of NASA. Carter concludes with the unconvincing argument that, since the '70s, NASA's supposed shift away from technological promises into overtly defense-related ends precipitated the Rocket State's demise. He fails to explain why defense is a fundamental change rather than the inevitable evolution of the space program.

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