



Dr. James Gerard Roche

December 16, 1939–August 4, 2026

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The officers, trustees, staff, and fellows of the Andrew W. Marshall Foundation lost a good friend and colleague earlier this month. Jim Roche, who passed away on August 4 at the age of 86, was involved with the AWM Foundation as a proposal reviewer, essayist, and all-round contributor to the Foundation's mission. As the Office of Net Assessment's first Deputy Director, Dr. Roche worked directly and closely with Andy Marshall at ONA from 1975–1979 when he became the Democratic Staff Director of the Senate Armed Services Committee under the leadership of Senators Henry M. Jackson and Sam Nunn. His wise counsel and ever buoyant humor will be much missed.

James Gerard Roche was born in Brooklyn, New York to Gerard Roche, a machinist, and the former Elizabeth Counihan, a homemaker. He grew up in New York City and Chicago and attended the Illinois Institute of Technology on an ROTC scholarship, graduating in 1960 with a humanities degree. Even at a still-tender age Jim never accepted the dogma of a strict division between technology and the humanities, seeing all realms of knowledge as useful and usefully relatable. As Jim told AWM Foundation oral history interviewers in September 2025:

I've ... tried to get people to recognize that systems engineering is such that it's really the combination of liberal arts and mathematics. We ... should all go techie with liberal arts. I don't know how we think about the big picture, including trying to predict thirty years from now, without studying some of the [arts], because ... cultures tend to last for a long, long time.

After graduation Jim was commissioned an Ensign in the U.S. Navy, retiring after 23 years as a Captain. During those 23 years Jim alternated service at sea in a combat arms service with furthering his increasingly eclectic education on land. As a surface warfare officer he led search-and-rescue operations in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam War before attending the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey where he earned an Operations Research master's degree in 1966. Jim then went back to sea, returning the next time to earn a Doctor of Business Administration degree from the Harvard Business School in 1972.

Back at sea again during 1973–74, Jim served as Commander of the USS Buchanan (DDG-14), a guided-missile destroyer commissioned in 1962 and retired from service in 1991. The ship under Captain Roche's command merited the Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy in 1974 for the USN's most improved combat unit in the Pacific.

Back again on land for good, as it turned out, Jim worked on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff (S/P) under the directorship of Winston Lord, and then on the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Next came the experience for which he was all but made to order: serving as Andy Marshall's first deputy director in the Office of Net Assessment. Here is how Jim described his introduction to ONA and to Andy Marshall:

In the course of being in Washington, I got to ... go down and interview with Andy ... , and it turns out that within 15 minutes we were wired, because he was talking a lot about things in the military that were comparable to the world of business policy and business strategy decisions. We went back and forth on that, and it was just like he had ordered a custom-made car. It, we, fitted perfectly.

Jim averred that working for Andy, 18 years his senior, broadened him and lifted him to new strata of understanding:

When you went to work for Andy, the first thing you got was a group of books to read—The Territorial Imperative, and all the cultural anthropology stuff. One of the best things ... was [that] Andy had me read the writings by Marshal Ogarkov, who was the chairman of the Russians' [General] Staff. Ogarkov, a very bright man.

Jim attested that Marshall's on-the-job curriculum was a sturdy shield against the laziness of mirror-imaging other people in other cultures, with their own histories and experiences. The Russians were not stupid, and when after 1992 it came time to perform a prophylactic strategic pivot, neither were the Chinese.

That first meeting more than half a century ago commenced a lifelong relationship between two men who knew how to think "outside the box" before that phrase even existed. Both were synergistic thinkers, ambitiously curious but prudently humble about the inevitability of uncertainty and change. So long after retiring from the Navy in 1983, after serving as Democratic Staff Director of the SASC, and after a distinguished career at the Northrop Corporation from 1984 to early 2001, rarely did much time pass when Andy and Jim were not in touch with one another.

So it remained when President George W. Bush nominated Jim to serve as the 20th Secretary of the U.S. Air Force, which he did all of President Bush's first term. As Jim recalled:

While I was Secretary, I kept a close relationship with Andy, just because he was the closest thing to my father I had [A] very broad man: He understood opera, he understood theater, he understood sports very, very well. Very, very wide open to new ideas.

Andy also had an unbelievable love for the United States. One time we were at a dinner with our wives, and I told him I'd just bought a new recording. I said, "If the ladies don't mind, we'll watch a little bit of it." We did, and he cried ... through almost all of it. It reminded him of his youth in Detroit, building things that he was not qualified to drive or work, but other people were, and he contributed to that.

As Air Force Secretary during the tumultuous and challenging period between the June 1, 2001 and January 20, 2005, Jim oversaw the early post-9/11 period of combat operations in Afghanistan and then, after March 2003, in Iraq. After leaving office Jim joined the board of directors of the Orbital Sciences Corporation and later served as a consultant to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the U.S. Air Force. His close intellectual and personal relationship with Andy Marshall never lapsed through all that time, not even after Andy retired from his government service on January 2, 2015 at the age of 93.

Dr. James Gerard Roche's career in the U.S. Navy, in the Legislative and Executive Branches of the U.S. Government, and in the private sector spanned more than sixty years. The recipient of Honorary Doctorates and other awards aplenty, Jim cared not for his own honor but for the security of his country and the wellbeing of the institutions within it that he served. Here is how he summed up his hopes last year:

I just want to be known for making wherever I worked far better than when I found it. I've had six careers ... Making some place better than when I found it is something I would like people to think of, and I believe I did that. I believe that's the way it went.

It is hard to disagree.

Dr. Roche married the former Diane L. Mikula in May 1960; they lived, many observed, as a single heartbeat until Diane's death this past January. Jim is survived by his daughter Heather Roche of Annapolis, MD. The officers, trustees, staff, and fellows of the Andrew W. Marshall Foundation extend their heartfelt condolences to Heather and to all of Jim's extended family and friends. May they all be blessed by their memories of an American life well spent, and may they find fair seas and following winds to guide them forward.