

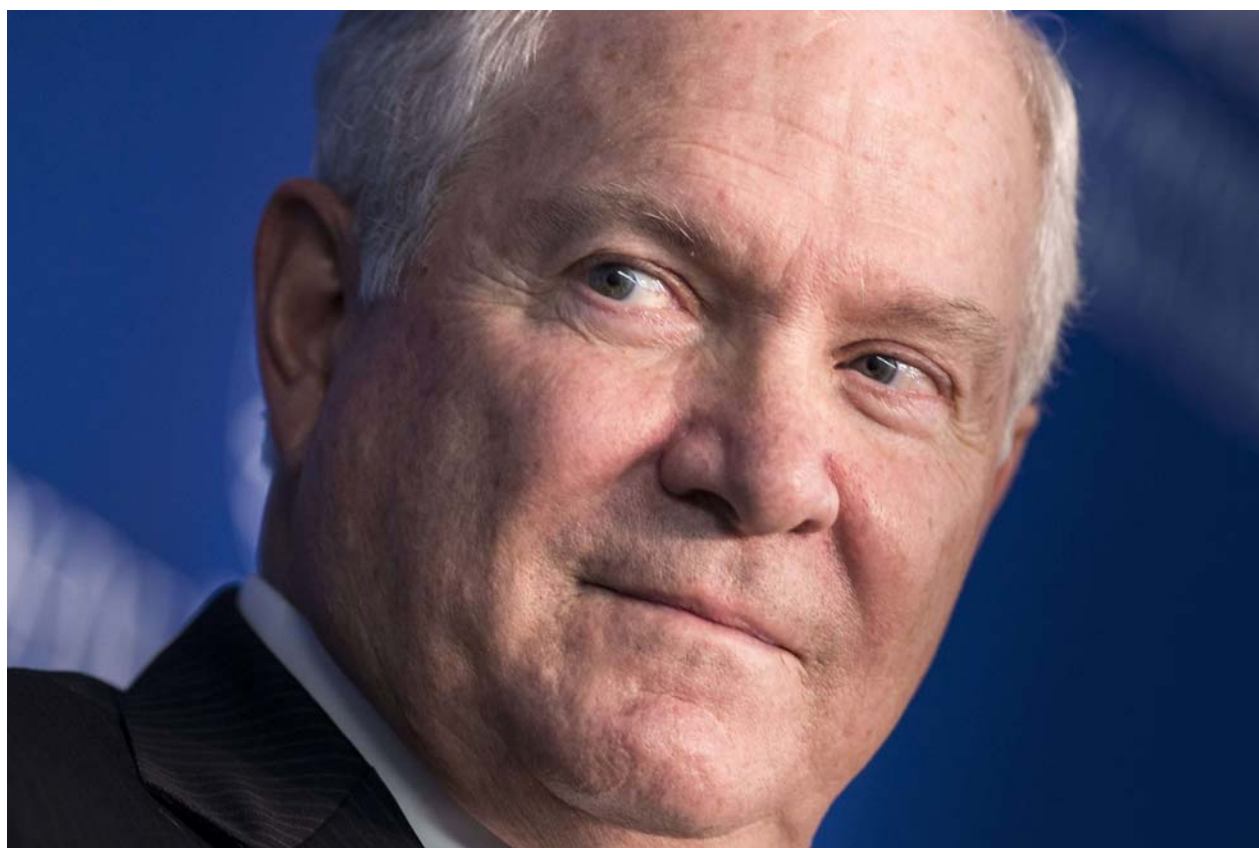
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# 'Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War,' by Robert Gates



Brendan Smialowski, AFP/Getty Images

*Former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, author of "Duty."*

**Glenn C. Altschuler**

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## **Duty**

### **Memoirs of a Secretary at War**

**By Robert M. Gates**

**(Knopf; 618 pages; \$35)**

The greatest challenge faced by a secretary of defense, according to Robert Gates, is the crushing impact "of dealing daily with multiple problems, pivoting on a dime every few minutes from one issue to another ... and then making decisions, always with too little time and too much ambiguous information." As he deals with "difficult allies and difficult foes" around the world, moreover, the secretary also has his "hands full with both in Washington, D.C.," as he copes with bureaucratic infighting and inertia, conflicts within the executive branch, and the partisan abyss in Congress. In the early 21st century, Gates points out, "crises don't come and go - they all seem to come and stay."

Gates knows what he is talking about. A former officer in the United States Air Force, Gates has a Ph.D. in Russian and Soviet history, served as a member of the National Security Council staff in four administrations, as director of the Central Intelligence Agency under President George H.W. Bush, and as president of Texas A&M University. His tenure as secretary of defense, under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, from 2006-2011, was longer than that of all but four of his predecessors.

In "Duty," Gates takes readers inside "the situation rooms" where, as secretary of defense, he planned the troop surges for Iraq and Afghanistan, responded to new realities in Russia and China, debated the repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, and prepared the Pentagon's budget. Informative, reflective, provocative and at times emotional, his book is essential reading for anyone interested in United States foreign policy.

Although his candor is mostly welcome, Gates' decision to publish "Duty" before the end of Obama's term as president and his acidic assessments of members of his administration cast doubt



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on his claims that he is a team player. All the more so because he is a Republican. To be sure, Gates indicates that he had very few disagreements with George W. Bush because he entered the Cabinet when the key national security decisions had already been made and Vice President Cheney was "an outlier on the team."

That said, Gates' tone changes when he turns to his Obama years. He blasts Vice President Biden as driven by political considerations and "wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades." After conceding that the "national interest had trumped politics" when Obama authorized a surge in Afghanistan and giving him high marks for approving the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, Gates castigates the president for lacking respect for the military, micro-managing defense policy and betraying his skepticism about the sustainability of the military strategy in Afghanistan. Is he implying, one wonders, that certainty is better than doubt in formulating, executing and evaluating foreign policy?

Far more significant than these barbs, which, alas, have monopolized coverage of the book in the national media, is Gates' penetrating and at times compelling critique of American foreign policy. In recent years, he points out, private contractors have assumed a larger and larger role in overseas military operations, with little or no plan, structure, coordination or oversight. Involved in some ugly incidents, moreover, some security personnel have compromised relations with host governments. Gates recommends that "everyone carrying a gun on our behalf" be placed under the jurisdiction of the military commander.

Although he offers no solutions, Gates also shines a light on the damaging impact of bureaucratic infighting. It frustrated attempts to address the care of wounded warriors at Walter Reed Hospital, thwart cyberattacks and eliminate obsolete weapons. Most important, Gates raises the issue of the preoccupation of the military services with planning, equipping and training for future major, conventional wars with other nation-states "while assigning lesser priority to current conflicts and other forms of conflict, such as irregular or asymmetric war." Gates believes that this approach ignores 21st century realities. His effort "to balance our capabilities," however, "led to a rebellion." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the secretaries of the Air Force and Navy and the chief of staff of the Army refused to agree to his proposal that investments be made to address non-traditional challenges, if they required "assuming some measure of additional, but acceptable risk in the traditional sphere." This issue, which "rarely engages the general public," has very real consequences for our national security - and remains unresolved.

"Duty," of course, does not offer the last word on national security issues. Gates may be overly sanguine, for example, about the impact of the surges in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan. He may

be wrong about the size of the Pentagon budget. And, now and again, pride, prickliness and petulance may cloud his judgment.

***Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War, by Robert M. Gates***

It is clear, however, that Robert Gates, who may well know more about military affairs than any other American, has done his duty to his country. That comes through in both his government service and a book that provides a framework to help us make informed choices about war and peace.

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