

# BOOK REVIEW

## Setting the Record Straight: An In-depth Review of *Duty* by Robert Gates

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Even before former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates's book *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*<sup>1</sup> hit the shelves, pundits were publishing reviews of the book. Most were unflattering, but few, if any, were fair representations of the entire memoir. Of course, Washington-area politics always revels in nit-picking facts, and most reviews of *Duty* are no exception. (To be fair, the reviews were all mostly op-eds with word limits, which make it pretty hard to report fairly on a 600-page book.)

Despite what many reviews imply, *Duty* is not a “tell all” book. It is clearly a fact-rich, highly personal, almost daily reflection of what Gates experienced and thought. Gates relates his story from the perspective of a man experienced in D.C. culture, having served the nation in multiple administrations. That he came from the Intelligence Community culture undoubtedly colored the way he assumed his role as Secretary of Defense. In any case, it is clear that he acutely recognized the different responsibilities of Director of Central Intelligence and Secretary of Defense. Along the way, he offers his opinion fairly, giving both substantial criticism and also substantial praise where due. He does this both in his treatment of circumstances and his treatment of individuals, including President Obama: he mixes criticism with praise, making cherry-picking his memoir very easy – and Gates has criticized Republicans who have cherry-picked his criticisms of President Obama.

Mostly, however, this book is a catharsis. Gates drew a lot of heat for publishing his memoir while President Obama was still in office. However, the reader senses that Gates felt personally compelled to write it – almost as if it were his way of working through a sort of PTSD following his time of service.

The national security crowd will search in vain for some of the issues it might feel were most important during the Gates's tenure as Secretary of Defense. He inherited a novel and expansive view of conflict proclaimed by President Bush's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Under President Obama, there was a further expansion of the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), when “imminent harm” was liberally interpreted to justify an unprecedented expansion of drone strikes. Drones themselves became a subject of national security concern, both for the unintended consequences of an erroneous strike and for their deployment on an

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1. ROBERT M. GATES, *DUTY: MEMOIRS OF A SECRETARY AT WAR* (2014).

expanded battlefield as they were increasingly used across national borders. Drone warfare also revised debates over the way the LOAC approaches the capture/kill dichotomy. Frustratingly to many observers, the courts and Congress often seemed to avoid these issues of executive decision-making. But so does Gates in his memoir. Except for his views on congressional responsibility, none of these national security issues preeminently occupied him. His view of his responsibility was more intensely personal than abstract and analytic.

Bob Gates was asked to serve as the Secretary of Defense during President Bush's last two years in office. Gates makes it clear that he was very content in his then-current role as the President of Texas A&M, but he considered it his civic duty to accept the President's request. As the two-year term drew to a close, there were rumors that he would be asked to stay on in the new administration. Gates makes it abundantly clear throughout the memoir that he did not enjoy being Secretary of Defense, but that he knew he would stay if asked by President Obama because he felt he owed it to the troops.

It is clear from the text that Gates feels he was the one who most stood up for the troops. Gates especially felt a great responsibility signing orders for troops to deploy into combat zones. Moreover, on his first trip to Afghanistan, he realized that we were now fighting the very people he met as Deputy Director of Analysis at the CIA on his last trip. That realization made him wary of committing military forces in new places, and it was the reason that he objected to committing military force in Libya. He had little patience with those (basically the White House staff) who talked about military force as if it were a video game. He had to explain that even a no-fly zone starts with an act of war (attacking air defenses).

Gates also found that there was a wide gap between how Washington and those in the field perceived the war's progress. Throughout the memoir, Gates heavily criticizes the National Security Staff (NSS), which he considered greatly bloated, with its own agenda, including micro-management of the war effort. He directed the removal of a direct line to the NSS from Bagram Air Base and ordered all commanders to refer to him any direct contact by the NSS. He even states that he pointedly reminded the National Security Adviser and Vice President Biden that they are not in the military chain of command. Gates was deeply disappointed that the bipartisanship in national security matters that he had previously experienced was nowhere to be found in the Obama Administration. Gates felt that President Obama's White House was the most centralized and controlling since the days of President Nixon.

Despite two wars, Gates says that he spent most of his time on budget matters. He oversaw the production of six defense budgets, not one of which was passed in time to avoid a congressional continuing resolution. As a result, the Department had no new authorities to start any new programs for periods of time that lasted anywhere from a few months to a year. He obtained budget agreements from both OMB and the President, only to see the agreements broken for political reasons. He obtained assurance that the Don't Ask, Don't

Tell policy would not be scrapped until the service chiefs had time to prepare, only to see that agreement broken as well, for the same reasons.

His dissatisfaction was not solely due to the political nuances of his job, however. He was also frustrated by the bureaucracy of the Pentagon. He complains that the five-sided building is very good at planning for conflict, but not so good at managing it. Spending on current needs took a backseat to planning for the future. In the end, for example, he had to insist on the purchase of new vehicles better equipped to absorb IED explosions. In another instance, Gates wanted to reduce wait times for medevac in Afghanistan to a one hour. The bureaucracy resisted, citing favorable survival statistics, but Gates eventually prevailed, adding ten additional helicopters and three forward surgical hospitals to the war effort.

Though Gates had been an Air Force officer in his youth, he does not spare his former service branch. Without his explicitly saying so, it is clear that Gates was concerned the Air Force had a fighter pilot mentality. It had let nuclear issues fall in priority, often relegating those assigned to the nuclear mission to second-class citizenship. It was even more startling that the Air Force did the same to drone operators, after insisting that they be fully qualified pilots. (The Army uses warrant officers and non-commissioned officers to fly drones, and the CIA uses civilians).

Some of his sharpest criticism is reserved for congressional indolence and partisanship. He makes no secret of the fact that he was disgusted with the Senate, which was criticizing the Iraqi Council of Representatives for not passing key legislation when it was guilty of the same thing. He singles out Congresswoman Pelosi for “shameless and relentlessly partisan” comments on Iraq. He says it is impossible to have a sensible discussion with Democrats in the presence of TV cameras. He criticizes the Senate for making political points when military officers are up for confirmation (or otherwise testifying) and putting good people through a wringer. When subsequently asked in an interview if his observations of Congress might have been overly harsh, Gates replied that he thought about it a lot, but at the end of the day that is what he believes.

Much has been made of his statement that Vice President Biden has been wrong on virtually all foreign policy issues. In fact, he admits that this assertion is exaggerated and also concedes that it is impossible not to like Joe Biden – he is smart, funny, and sociable. However, Gates is very defensive of the military, and he heavily criticizes Biden and his staff for what Gates perceived to be persistent attempts to undermine the war strategy and to convince the President that he can’t trust senior military.

With one exception, Gates does not compare Presidents Bush and Obama. Bush, he says, might disagree with the military, but he never questioned their motives or distrusted them. Obama, on the other hand, was always respectful of the military, but he was deeply suspicious of their actions and recommendations. Gates felt that President Obama thought that time spent with generals and

admirals was a duty. However, Gates adds that he became Secretary of Defense in the last two years of the Bush Administration, when all the decisions had really been made. As he stayed on into another administration, it was under an inexperienced president who faced multiple crises. He also notes that in the first months and years of Obama's administration, re-election was high on the agenda, so domestic political considerations were major factors.

Nevertheless, Gates says he agreed with every one of Obama's decisions on Afghanistan – some of which were made against the advice of his staff. He describes Obama as a deliberative and decisive decision maker. He admires Obama's resolution in the raid that killed bin Laden. In the end, he says that he liked and respected both Presidents.

Gates also has praise for Secretary Clinton. He describes her as smart, ideological, focused, and a great representative of the United States abroad. Yet, he also relates a remarkable conversation to which he was privy when Secretary Clinton was supporting the Afghan surge and explained to the President that her opposition to the earlier surge in Iraq during the primaries was purely political, because she was facing him in Iowa.

Gates also documents his own foibles. Early on he told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that NATO military advisers were still trained for fighting in the Fulda Gap and were not well suited for counter-insurgency operations. He says that all hell broke loose in the alliance when that was reported. He concedes he lacks diplomatic skills. He once told the French Minister of Defense that Russia was an oligarchy controlled by security services and that Putin still called all the shots. The conversation leaked.

One article published in anticipation of this memoir was titled "The Pentagon's Grumpy Old Man." Gates would probably confirm that description, but not for the reasons it implied. He states quite clearly that as time wore on, he grew increasingly dissatisfied. Toward the end, he says he was angry all the time due to two wars, bureaucratic inertia, and the complexity of the Pentagon. Although he doesn't dwell overmuch on other tensions in the world, he does relate the events of trips to Russia and to China, where he and his foreign counterparts traded subtle barbs. Even during the two wars, other responsibilities did not go away.

Gates also gives a brief glimpse into his personality when he notes that his fondness for barbecue resulted in its constant presence on his airplane. He relates another humorous situation at a restaurant in Baku, where many meats were being served on a long board. Before he could eat, there was a fire alarm from which he almost had to be dragged away by his security guards.

*Duty* is very readable and remarkable insight into the everyday life of a Secretary of Defense. However, as noted earlier, it is also primarily a catharsis with little to no commentary on national security or international law. Its most consistent focus is on the troops. Gates relates his angst at signing deployment orders and writing condolence notes at night. He also says, several times, how much he enjoyed having a meal with enlisted troops when in Afghanistan. He

describes how increasingly hard those troop visits became as he constantly wondered which of those he met he might next see at Walter Reed National Military Hospital – or for burial at Arlington Cemetery.

This is an honest memoir. Gates may be right or wrong in his opinions, but they are honest opinions. He criticizes and praises. He has something nice to say about everyone he criticizes (except, perhaps, Congress). It is also a deeply personal memoir, a fact perhaps best evidenced by his last paragraph:

*“I am eligible to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. I have asked to be buried in Section 60, where so many of the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan have been laid to rest. The greatest honor possible would be to rest among my heroes for all eternity.”*