

DUTY: MEMOIRS OF A SECRETARY AT WAR¹REVIEWED BY CAPTAIN SEAN P. MAHARD^{®*}

I consider myself personally responsible for each and every one of you as though you were my own sons and daughters. And when I send you in harm's way, as I will, I will do everything in my power to see that you have what you need to accomplish your mission—and come home safely.²

I. Introduction

On June 30, 2011, President Barack Obama presented then-Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates with the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the highest award a president can bestow upon a civilian.³ It was a recognition of Gates's career in public service, which spanned eight presidents and countless conflicts.⁴ *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War (Duty)* primarily recounts Gates's service as Secretary of Defense across President George W. Bush's and President Barack Obama's administrations. The book made quite a splash in political circles when it hit the shelves, and pundits quickly highlighted the juicy, behind-the-scenes political details Gates revealed.⁵ Gates's memoir, however, is

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

² *Id.* at 467 (quoting Gates's remarks to military-academy cadets).

³ Molly O'Toole, *Obama Awards Defense Chief Gates Medal of Freedom*, REUTERS (June 30, 2011, 3:06 PM), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/30/us-gates-farewell-idUSTRE75T4LC20110630> (describing Gates's farewell ceremony).

⁴ *See id.* ("Obama teased Gates—who has served eight presidents—saying he 'loves' the Washington spotlight, but also highlighted his achievements as secretary.").

⁵ *See, e.g.,* Max Boot, *Why Is Robert Gates Angry? The former Defense Secretary: Indignant, effective, and often wrong*, NEW REPUBLIC (Feb. 25, 2014), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116500/duty-memoirs-secretary-war-reviewed-max-boot> ("With no desire for future government employment, [Gates] is letting his inner Hulk out for a roar."); Greg Jaffe, *Book review: 'Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War'*

much more than a political tale. He epitomizes the best qualities of a values-based leader—selfless-service, integrity, duty—and his book illustrates how these values arguably made him the best Secretary of Defense since World War II.⁶

This review focuses on the qualities that make Gates such a competent leader, which underscores why his book is such a worthwhile read. From his deep commitment to the men and women who served to his willingness to admit mistakes, *Duty* stands as a treatise on effective leadership. The top spot at defense imposes a heavy burden on any secretary, but Gates managed it with a deft hand, never losing sight of what mattered most—the troops. He also rose above the day-to-day minutia that consumes so many in the Pentagon, choosing to focus on the future sustainability of the Defense Department’s budget, technology, and personnel management. *Duty* teaches readers what it takes to manage an organization as complex as the Defense Department while keeping the people—Soldiers and Civilians—who work there the top priority.

II. Five Years, Two Presidents: A Historical Tenure at Defense

Duty covers Gates’s time at defense from 2006 to 2011, spanning two presidential administrations. It starts with his selection by George W. Bush to succeed Donald Rumsfeld as the Defense Secretary. On Sunday, November 5, 2006, President Bush met secretly with Gates at his ranch in Crawford, Texas—Bush wanted to avoid the attention a meeting at the

by Robert M. Gates, WASH. POST (Jan. 7, 2014), http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-duty-memoirs-of-a-secretary-at-war-by-robert-m-gates/2014/01/07/0d8acad0-634d-11e3-a373-0f9f2d1c2b61_story.html (discussing Gates’s criticisms of Vice President Joe Biden); Fred Kaplan, *Robert Gates’ Primal Scream: The furious, brilliant, bridge-burning memoir of the most effective cabinet secretary of our time*, SLATE (Jan. 14, 2014, 1:47 PM), http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2014/01/robert_gates_duty_the_defense_secretary_s_criticisms_of_obama_and_bush.html (“Gates seems to have written this book in part to dissuade any politician from asking him to join an administration ever again.”); Thomas E. Ricks, *In Command: ‘Duty,’ a Memoir by Robert M. Gates*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 13, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/books/review/duty-a-memoir-by-robert-m-gates.html> (“The former defense secretary is naming names.”).

⁶ See Jaffe, *supra* note 5 (noting that Gates is “widely considered the best defense secretary of the post-World War II era”).

White House would bring.⁷ Gates loved his job as president of Texas A&M University, and he was reluctant to leave but graciously accepted President Bush's offer to head defense.⁸ He understood how difficult the position would be; the United States was fighting two wars on two fronts in 2006.⁹ But his country needed him, and Gates answered that call.¹⁰

Gates came to the Pentagon no stranger to D.C. He began his career as an analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1966 after earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in history.¹¹ Gates worked his way up to the National Security Council staff and then to Deputy Director of the CIA from 1986 until 1989.¹² After the election of President George H.W. Bush, Gates served as Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor from 1989 until 1991.¹³ Eventually he became Director of the CIA in 1991 and was the only Director to date who started as an entry-level employee.¹⁴ After an impressive public-service career, Gates had the résumé and experience necessary to lead the Defense Department.

Under President Bush's administration, Gates's first priority was Iraq.¹⁵ In fact, the day after Gates was sworn in as Secretary, he flew to Iraq to meet with the U.S. commanders there.¹⁶ He faced many obstacles in prosecuting Operation Iraqi Freedom—from politicians in D.C. to the bureaucracy at the Pentagon to a lack of quality care for the troops at home.¹⁷ He worked tirelessly to overcome each challenge. And, of

⁷ GATES, *supra* note 1, at 5-9 (recounting his private meeting with President Bush at Crawford, Texas).

⁸ *Id.* at 4, 7-8 (noting that Gates told the White House he would not accept the job as Secretary of Defense, but changing course when President Bush himself asked him to take the position).

⁹ *Id.* at 4, 6-8 (“We have kids dying in two wars. If the president thinks I can help, I have no choice but to say yes. It’s my duty.”).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 8 (“The president then said he knew how much I loved Texas A&M, but that the country needed me more.”).

¹¹ Robert M. Gates '65, *Chancellor*, WILLIAM & MARY UNIV., <http://www.wm.edu/about/administration/chancellor/> (last visited April 9, 2015) (Gates's biography).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ GATES, *supra* note 1, at 25 (“My highest priority as secretary was to turn the situation around in Iraq.”).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 40-41.

¹⁷ *See id.* at 49-57, 109-19, 135-42 (discussing the “Washington Battlespace” difficulty in changing the Pentagon's culture, and wounded-warrior issues).

course, Iraq was not the only concern. The Bush administration would have to deal with Russia, Syria, and Iran.¹⁸ Yet, Gates's ability to maneuver between issues and to prioritize responses exemplifies what leaders must do to manage large organizations effectively.

Gates faced a difficult decision at the end of President Bush's term in 2008. Gates, by his own admission, was spent: "I had too many rocks in my rucksack: foreign wars, war with Congress, war with my own department, one crisis after another."¹⁹ Despite his wariness, Gates accepted President-Elect Obama's offer to stay on as Secretary, an unprecedented historical move.²⁰ Gates, a Republican, initially worried about the decision to remain—President Obama was twenty years Gates's junior and most of the Obama appointees had been in college or high school when Gates was Director of the CIA for President George H.W. Bush.²¹ Maybe in recognition of this fact, Gates picked up a new nickname from the incoming team: Yoda.²²

With myriad challenges and as a relative outsider in a new administration, Gates could not afford to waste any time. He had to address one of President Obama's top concerns: the responsible withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.²³ Gates managed the drawdown while also tackling another top presidential priority, Afghanistan. The President's cabinet was divided on how to proceed with the "good war," and *Duty* exposes how Gates navigated the intense, internal debate among administration officials.²⁴

Gates's tenure with President Obama was not limited to war. He encountered stubborn allies, China,²⁵ natural disasters, the Haitian

¹⁸ See *id.* at 153-93 (chronicling the issues with Russia, Syria, and Iran during the Bush administration).

¹⁹ See *id.* at 258 (admitting that Gates did not enjoy his job at defense).

²⁰ *Id.* at 268-76 (describing Gates's initial meeting with President-Elect Obama and his eventual acceptance to stay on as Secretary of Defense).

²¹ See *id.* at 287-88 (acknowledging that Gates was not familiar with most of the personalities in the new administration and felt like an "outsider").

²² See *id.* at 288 ("Because of the difference in our ages and careers, we had very different frames of reference."). Yoda is the Jedi master from the *Star Wars* series. *Id.*

²³ See *id.* at 323-24 (noting that Iraq was the topic of the first National Security Council meeting under President Obama).

²⁴ See *id.* at 335-86 (chronicling the countless meetings and discussions that took place in Obama's administration regarding Afghanistan and the appropriate U.S. strategy there).

²⁵ See *id.* at 413-20 ("Improving the military-to-military relationship with Beijing was a high priority.").

Earthquake,²⁶ and internet debacles, such as WikiLeaks,²⁷ to name only a few. He also oversaw the elimination of Don't Ask, Don't Tell—an historical milestone in the Defense Department²⁸—and “spent more time on the defense budget in 2010 than on any other subject.”²⁹

Throughout two presidential administrations, Gates juggled the nation's security challenges with skill and patience. The issues he faced in both administrations came in addition to “the crushing effect of dealing daily with multiple problems, pivoting on a dime every few minutes from one issue to another, having to quickly absorb reporting from many sources on each problem, and then making decisions, always with too little time and too much ambiguous information.”³⁰ Gates managed the highest ranking general officers and admirals in the United States military, which included the occasional, unenviable task of firing some.³¹ He had to maintain relationships with foreign militaries, including China, whose global influence and power has increased significantly in the past twenty years.³² Add these commitments to high-level mandatory meetings—at NATO, for example³³—and one quickly appreciates the monumental challenges faced by the Secretary of Defense.

Ultimately, *Duty* traverses two presidential administrations and five years in the Department of Defense with exceptional ease. Gates's writing style flows chronologically, describing countless meetings with politicians, military officials, presidents, and Soldiers. His memoir provides a rare look at the inner workings of the largest agency in the

²⁶ See *id.* at 420-24 (describing the U.S. military's response to the Haitian earthquake in 2010).

²⁷ See *id.* at 425-27 (recounting Julian Assange's online organization, WikiLeaks).

²⁸ See *id.* at 445 (Don't Ask, Don't Tell “was abolished in the American armed forces on September 22, 2011. The transition went as smoothly as anyone could have hoped. We had turned a page in history, and there was barely a ripple.”).

²⁹ See *id.* at 445, 453 (noting that Gates prepared six defense budgets, but Congress did not enact one prior to the start of the new fiscal year).

³⁰ *Id.* at 412-13.

³¹ See, e.g., Ann Mulrine, *Robert Gates' Last Day at Pentagon: Three Reasons He'll be Missed*, Christian Science Monitor (June 30, 2011), <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2011/0630/Robert-Gates-last-day-at-Pentagon-three-reasons-he-ll-be-missed/Accountability> (discussing Gates's efforts to hold senior officers accountable).

³² See GATES, *supra* note 1, at 413-16 (discussing Gates's efforts to build a stronger China–United States relationship).

³³ See *id.* at 193-96 (referring to Gates frequent travel as Secretary of Defense).

United States government. With a no-nonsense perspective, Gates describes the good, the bad, and the ugly.

III. The Soldiers' Secretary³⁴

“I just want to thank you and tell you how much I love you.”³⁵ Shortly before Gates uttered those words to 275 Soldiers southwest of Jalalabad, Afghanistan, in 2010, he had met with a platoon that had lost six Soldiers the previous week.³⁶ By his own admission, he “was barely holding it together.”³⁷ With emotion and passion, Gates admitted, in that same speech, that the Soldiers' commitment to their mission kept him committed to his work in Washington.³⁸ Gates cared deeply for the troops, and *Duty* illustrates that military leaders can be more effective when they have a true appreciation for what Soldiers endure on the front lines.

Duty portrays a Secretary of Defense with a Soldier-focused mentality, committed to cutting bureaucracy, improving efficiency, and safe-guarding the military's most valuable asset—the Soldier. For example, Gates spearheaded the effort to surge counter-Improvised Explosive Device capabilities to Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁹ When addressing conflict strategies in either combat zone, Gates always focused on a decision's impact on front-line troops.⁴⁰ A zero tolerance for what he termed “bureaucratic [BS],” Gates did not disguise his contempt for government-created obstacles to health care or Family support for Soldiers.⁴¹ Gates's best days were spent thanking military men and women for their service—from Navy SEALs surviving “hell

³⁴ *Id.* at 103.

³⁵ *Id.* at 499 (quoting a speech Gates gave to Soldiers at Forward Operating Base Connolly in Afghanistan).

³⁶ *Id.* at 498-99.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *See id.* (“I feel the sacrifice and hardship and losses more than you'll ever imagine. You doing what you do is what keeps me doing what I do.”).

³⁹ *See id.* at 445-48 (telling the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization: “Money is no object. Tell me what you need.”) (quotation marks omitted).

⁴⁰ *See id.* at 362, 366 (lamenting that if he could not “take care of the troops,” he could not remain as Secretary).

⁴¹ *See id.* at 494 (recounting the only email he sent to a Soldier while Secretary that addressed an issue the Soldier was having with Tricare (the military insurance program) covering his wife while he was deployed).

week” to Marines graduating from basic training.⁴² Gates’s commitment to servicemembers and their Families can be found in almost every part of *Duty*, highlighting his loyalty to the servicemen and women he led.

Gates recognized, as the best leaders do, that he was personally responsible for those he led. He did not sympathize with Soldiers; he empathized with them: “I feel your hardship and your sacrifice and your burden, and that of your families, more than you can possibly know.”⁴³ In one telling passage, Gates recounts his first visit to Dover, Delaware—the first stopping place for fallen Soldiers returning to U.S. soil—to visit four Americans killed overseas.⁴⁴ He had arranged to be alone with the four fallen that evening and described how a wave of emotion overwhelmed him as he knelt beside each casket.⁴⁵ These moments reveal Gates’s deep respect for Soldiers and his recognition that each Soldier has value—an enduring lesson for any military leader.

Gates’s self-awareness proved one of his most notable strengths. Throughout the book, he minces no words when he admits mistakes. He took blame for a prolonged battle over Afghanistan command and control in the Pentagon,⁴⁶ including a struggle with the Marine Corps’ desire to retain sole operational control of its forces in Helmand Province.⁴⁷ Always willing to poke fun at himself, Gates’s self-deprecating manner charms readers: he remembers attending a meeting with a number of high-ranking generals but notes that none of the enlisted Soldiers tasked with serving food seemed to notice “the short, white-haired guy in a blue blazer with no stars.”⁴⁸ Although he may have occasionally gone unnoticed, Soldiers are forever indebted to a man who cared so deeply for their well-being.

⁴² See *id.* at 466 (noting that personally thanking the troops was “one of the greatest honors” of being Secretary).

⁴³ See *id.* at 561-62 (addressing the troops in Afghanistan for the final time: “My admiration and affection for you is limitless, and each of you will be in my thoughts and prayers every day for the rest of my life.”).

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 308.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ See *id.* at 478 (“By late spring, every American in uniform in Afghanistan was under McChrystal’s command. It had taken far too long to get there, and that was my fault.”).

⁴⁷ See *id.* at 340 (commenting that allowing the Marines to maintain operational control of their forces in Helmand with a Marine General in Central Command was his “biggest mistake in overseeing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan”).

⁴⁸ See *id.* at 353-54 (recounting a meeting with then-General McChrystal at Chievres Air Force Base, Belgium).

Gates bore a heavy burden in leading defense, and his periods of self-reflection were important reminders of the costs of war. In one passage of *Duty*, he refers to Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals*, which describes Edwin Stanton—Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War—as begging “God help me to do my duty” when making decisions that would affect Soldiers' lives.⁴⁹ As a solemn prayer for the strength to do his job, Gates kept those words on his desk.⁵⁰ In another chapter of *Duty*, Gates describes the funeral service for Specialist Frederick Green, who Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan murdered in the 2009 attack at Fort Hood, Texas.⁵¹ He attended Green's service at the request of his father and “could see . . . other cemeteries in numberless small towns across America, where families and friends had buried local sons who had risked everything and lost everything.”⁵² Gates understood the consequences that decisions in D.C. would have on young Americans and their families across the country.

IV. A Future Focus for the Pentagon

Gates worked hard to reform the Pentagon's budget, doctrine, and outdated technology. He understood that budget reform was critical in an era of fiscal restraint and worked hard to cut excess from each budget he oversaw.⁵³ He recognized the need to focus the Pentagon's efforts on current conflicts involving the use of counterinsurgency doctrine, rather than preparing for possible future conflicts involving conventional strategies.⁵⁴ Finally, Gates knew that technology was the key to reshaping the force for success in the future.⁵⁵ Despite pushback from Congress and the Pentagon, he never lost focus on building a department that could succeed in the future.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 258.

⁵⁰ *See id.* (“I wrote out that passage and kept it in my desk.”).

⁵¹ *Id.* at 385-86.

⁵² *Id.* at 386.

⁵³ *See id.* at 546-52 (reforming the military budget to make it more efficient and focused on military capabilities).

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 142-46 (expressing frustration with the Pentagon's primary focus on future wars with other nation-states).

⁵⁵ *See id.* at 303 (noting that the old paradigms for conventional and unconventional war were no longer adequate). In regard to reshaping the force, Gates wanted “to sustain and modernize . . . strategic and conventional capabilities [as well as] train and equip for other contingencies.” *Id.*

Gates recognized the importance of rewarding the best, forward-thinking leaders, which would require reforming the military's personnel-management system. In his own right, he managed the senior officers of defense very well, and when he departed the department in 2011, he felt proud to leave "the president with the strongest possible team of military leaders to face the daunting challenges ahead."⁵⁶ He knew that the military would need to retain leaders who rejected the status quo. In a speech at the United States Military Academy, he encouraged the cadets to "reject service parochialism, convention, and careerism and instead 'to be principled, creative, and reform-minded.'"⁵⁷ This was—and remains—exceptional advice for young leaders. He went even further and praised earlier officers "who had the 'vision and insight to see that the world and technology changed'" and understood how to use that change to the nation's advantage.⁵⁸ Often, he continued, these officers faced "fierce institutional resistance" and overcame the obstacles at significant professional risk.⁵⁹ Gates understood the importance of encouraging creative, independent thinkers in the military.

V. Conclusion

Duty provides leadership lessons that apply at any level in the military, from private to general officer. The book stands as a testament to Gates's humble service, describing how "a kid from Kansas, whose grandfather as a child went west in a covered wagon . . . became the secretary of defense of the most powerful nation in history."⁶⁰ He gave up a relatively safe position as president of a prestigious institution, Texas A&M University. But he left the Aggies to tackle two wars and an assortment of national-security challenges, continuing his service longer than he anticipated because "there is a debt to the Founders that must be paid."⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 538.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 467.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 466-67.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 466.

⁶⁰ *See id.* at 269 (discussing an email he had sent to his family the day after the country elected President Obama).

⁶¹ *See id.* (telling his family in an email that a big decision would come soon on whether to remain with President Obama's administration as Secretary of Defense).

“There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people.”⁶² This principle, expressed in then-President George H.W. Bush’s inaugural address on Friday, January 20, 1989, captures Gates’s service as Secretary of Defense.⁶³ His selfless-service to the United States and his commitment to the troops saved the lives of countless men and women in uniform. He led defense with one purpose: serve the men and women of the armed services, not vice versa. In doing so, he teaches us that his love and commitment for the troops made him a stronger and more effective leader in Washington. This is a must read for America’s military.

⁶² *Inaugural Address of George Bush*, THE AVALON PROJECT, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/bush.asp (last visited April 13, 2015).

⁶³ *Id.*