

Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War Study Guide

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Summary

In his memoir called *Duty*, former United States Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates provides a candid look at his time serving under two Presidents who were presiding over two wars. Reflecting on his experiences at the Pentagon from 2006 until 2011, Gates provides an inside look at the decision-making process in both the Bush and Obama White Houses and the often-frustrating job of dealing with Congress, government bureaucracy, and conflicting political interests.

Robert Gates thought he had finished with government service after serving six Presidents in a wide range of roles, but when President George W. Bush asked him to consider becoming Secretary of Defense, his sense of duty took him back to Washington in late 2006. It was a tough time to take on the job as the United States was embroiled in wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and the public was growing weary of both. As he dealt with the complexities of military strategy on two very different fronts, Gates also found himself at war with the Pentagon itself, where deep-seated policies and habits left little sense of urgency or passion even though young men and women were dying overseas. From day one, he battled to expedite the procurement of equipment, supplies and support services for the troops as well as improving support for those who were struggling to recover from devastating injuries, but he was sustained by his growing respect and love for all those who served in uniform.

When the Bush Presidency ended and the Obama administration began, Gates found himself struggling to learn a new set of rules imposed by a White House staff bent on micromanaging every issue and with seemingly little understanding about military strategy and culture. In addition to finding a way to successfully wind down two wars, Gates was faced with a host of other issues including the hunt for Osama bin Laden, revolutions in the Arab world, European missile defense issues, tensions between Iran and Israel, and much more.

In this memoir, Gates attempts to provide a candid, detailed account of a pivotal time in United States history while weaving in his own deeply personal story.



Chapter 1: Summoned to Duty

Summary

Duty is a remarkably candid memoir by Robert M. Gates, U.S. Secretary of Defense from 2006 until 2011. Gates pulls few punches as he describes serving under two very different presidents and presiding over two unpopular wars while juggling Washington bureaucracy, battles with Congress and his determination to provide his troops with everything they needed to succeed and thrive.

The book opens with Gates, then president of Texas A&M University, receiving a call in October, 2006 to inquire about his interest in replacing Donald Rumsfeld as President George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense. Gates knew Bush's father, former President George H. W. Bush (Bush 41), but not Bush 43, as he is called when there is a need to differentiate the two. Gates had been head of the Central Intelligence Agency and held other high-level posts, but he had turned down other recent offers to return to government service. He had intentions of retiring from his university position in a few years. However, he felt a sense of duty. He traveled to the President's Texas home to interview. He told the President there were five issues on his mind including the following: a necessary troop surge with a duration linked to certain conditions; his opinion that Afghanistan was being neglected, particularly the provinces, districts, and tribes; both the Army and Marine Corps needed to grow; the National Guard and Reserves should be deployed as an operational force; and his belief that the Pentagon was buying too many weapons more suited to the Cold War than the 21st century. He was offered the job and had a very smooth Congressional confirmation process. However, during his hearing, he became overwhelmed by the enormity of the task he was facing -- a resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, an unpredictable nuclear power in North Korea, Iran's nuclear aspirations, a dire need for military equipment, the pursuit of weapons programs the country could not afford, recruitment and retention challenges, problems of families who faced multiple deployments and more. After an easy confirmation, Gates decided to retain all the Defense Department's current personnel. He left Texas for Washington and was sworn in.

Analysis

The author might easily have titled his book War rather than Duty because he makes it clear from the first few pages that he was at war for his entire tenure at the Department of Defense. In addition to the obvious military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, he usually felt that he was also at war on a number of other fronts as well. His opponents included a Congress that was often more concerned with the personal interests of its members than the good of the country, a White House staff that tried to wrest control of every decision and issue, sometimes the two presidents under whom he served, and the very organization he was brought in to lead -- a Pentagon that was mired in bureaucracy and old ideas.



From the beginning, Gates makes it clear that his sense of duty was the only thing that led him to accept the job as Secretary of Defense. Although both he and his wife had mapped out a future that did not include further government service, he seems to have given up that future without a second thought because his sense of duty was so strong. Throughout the book, he will continue to praise the troops serving in the United States military and it appears to be his duty to them that was his primary driving force.

It is clear from the book's first chapter that Gates did not write this book with the intention of making friends in Washington. It is obviously the work of a man who has no intention of returning to government work, as he writes without impunity about various entities and individuals. In the first chapter, for example, he expresses his dismay that members of Congress were less concerned with the two wars in which Americans were dying than in getting money for the military bases, shipyards, and other defense-related industries that provided jobs in their individual districts.

Gates also gives the reader an early sense of his support and even affection for the troops who will serve under him. He tells the story of meeting a woman who had two sons in Iraq and who tearfully asked him to bring them home alive. This theme will recur throughout the book as the secretary both embraces and struggles with his role.

Vocabulary

squander, avert, consternation, turbulent, vigorous, consolation, ethical, precise, clandestine, protocol, disabuse, sectarian, deploy, circumspect, ponderous, impending, ornate, diametrically, litany, interregnum, retinue



Chapter 2: Iraq, Iraq, and Iraq

Summary

Gates begins this chapter by saying that his highest priority as Secretary of Defense was to turn around the situation in Iraq. Previously he had been among the senior officials in the administration of President George H.W. Bush (hereafter Bush 41) who planned the Gulf War in 1991 and later realized a serious mistake had been made in not forcing Saddam out of office as part of the surrender. Just prior to his Defense appointment, Gates was part of a bipartisan Iraq Study Group that visited Iraq and found the situation very depressing. Impressions included the need to get the Iraqis services and jobs, the necessity of winning the Battle of Baghdad, the serious political challenges within the Iraqi government and a litany of economic, social, cultural and political weaknesses in the country. Gates left the group after his appointment and was surprised when its final report did not recommend a troop surge even though several members had been in favor of that. Gates goes on to describe in detail the discussions that led up to Bush 43's decision in January 2007 to implement a surge – sending large numbers of additional troops and support personnel to Iraq, noting that the decision was a rare one in which a President risked his reputation, public esteem, credibility, political ruin and the judgment of history on one decision. Despite the intense criticism that followed, Gates never saw the President have second thoughts.

Also in this chapter, Gates discusses his frustrations with Congress, in this case over the surge. General David Petraeus had been placed in charge of the Iraq military effort and the two worked closely together, but part of the problem was that the Baghdad “clock” and the Washington “clock” moved at very different speeds, making it necessary to buy time in Washington while speeding things up in Iraq. Much of the Congressional debate was led by four Senators with Presidential ambitions, including Barack Obama, who wondered when it would be time to say “enough” and John McCain, who was generally supportive of the President's policies. Bush vetoed a bill calling for troop withdrawal to begin by October 1, 2007, and to be completed 180 days later. Gates met privately with Bush prior to going to Iraq. He left their meeting believing that Bush and he were in agreement on the need to start a withdrawal in October. His challenge was to get Petraeus to agree to that.

During this time, Gates also made what he says was the most difficult decision of his tenure as Secretary – extending Army deployments from 12 to 15 months. While he knew it would be difficult for both troops and their families, experience has shown it was even worse than expected and probably aggravated post-traumatic stress and contributed to a growing number of suicides.

Gates details several months of juggling various factions leading up to the decision to draw down troops to earlier levels by the summer of 2008, giving the surge more time to succeed. During this time, Gates developed a reputation for saying little publicly about his opinions on the matter, believing this increased his leverage in the decision process.



The chapter ends with a description of a chaotic meeting of the Senate Appropriations Committee that ended in a need for the room to be forcibly cleared.

Analysis

Since he had served in government for many years under several Presidents, Gates is able to provide some historical perspective that is valuable to understanding the decision to go into Iraq even though it occurred before his time as Secretary of Defense. He participated in the bipartisan Iraq Study Group without knowing that he would soon be tapped to run the Defense Department and he writes candidly about the strengths, weaknesses and points of view of the group's various members. In this section he also describes the group's trip to Iraq, describing what he saw and experienced at the time, which can be compared with later trips he took as Secretary of Defense, noting changes as the war progressed. Although Gates resigned from the group before its work was completed, as a result of his nomination, he continued to follow its work and expresses disappointment that the final report did not recommend a surge, as most in the group had wanted earlier, and like many decisions in Washington, he chalks this up to politics.

In another moment of candor, Gates describes his first meeting with the President (then Bush 43) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While he does not openly disrespect the chiefs, he establishes a vast difference in their attitude toward the war in Iraq and his own, noting that they seemed detached from the current wars in which the U.S. was engaged, with no discussion of the need to win those wars. Instead, they were entirely focused on future contingencies and how to best prepare for conflicts the country might face in the future. Gates returns to this theme several times throughout the book, expressing his surprise at how little thought many in Washington seemed to give to what it would take to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan rather than simply getting our troops out of those countries as the American people wearied of war.

Another important issue Gates touches on in this chapter is the difference between what he calls the "clocks" in Baghdad and Washington. As members of Congress and the people they represented became increasingly tired of the war in Iraq, what he calls the Washington clock moved at a much faster rate, with growing impatience to put an end to the conflict and bring the troops home with little regard for what would constitute a successful outcome. However, the Baghdad clock, or the timetable needed by the military to carry out a plan and bring the conflict to a successful conclusion, ran at a slower pace and could not be sped up by pressure from Washington. Part of his frustration was the pressure Gates felt to reconcile these two very different clocks. Gates also expresses frustration at the fact that members of Congress made loud demands for the Iraqis to set deadlines for achieving certain benchmarks while they blatantly ignored their own responsibilities to pass budgets and deal with other critical issues. Impatience with incompetence in Washington continues as a theme throughout the book.



Woven into his discussions about Iraq and the decisions being made about that issue, Gates also provides interesting glimpses into life in Washington. One such example is his detailed description of the Oval Office and the rooms that surround it.

Vocabulary

tenure, daunting, forestall, coalition, sanction, repress, adherence, megalomaniac, draconian, acquiesce, innumerable, deflect, apportion, prerequisite, insurgent, exodus, catastrophic, benchmark, augmentation, unanimity, relegate, rhetoric, contingency, commensurate, precarious



Chapter 3: Mending Fences, Finding Allies

Summary

Chapter 3 discusses Gates' efforts to build relationships in Washington after assuming his duties as Secretary of Defense. He was frustrated with the number of meetings that filled his days; but, he was unsuccessful in changing the Pentagon's approach to how briefings were conducted. One of his earliest challenges was mending rifts between the Pentagon and other entities, including members of Congress, reporters, and other agencies, as well as within the Defense Department itself. He began internally, letting his staff know how he intended to conduct business and what his priorities were, and ensuring that he listened to others and was willing to let a good argument change his mind. He worked to develop good working relationships with the most important members of Congress, observing that while most were thoughtful and insightful in private, their personalities changed when TV cameras turned on. He was particularly anxious to have a good relationship with the State Department and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and was happy to concede that she should be the principal spokesperson in relevant matters.

Gates goes on to discuss President Bush's team, giving the opinion that senior administration officials felt they let the country down by allowing the 9/11 attacks to occur on their watch, but adding that those who criticize the actions they took, such as detention centers and interrogation techniques, did not experience the fear or urgency to protect the country that they felt. He writes of respect for Bush 43, saying he was more intellectually curious than his public image and a man of character, conviction and action. He describes a cordial relationship with Vice-President Dick Cheney and a very warm, supportive one with Secretary of State Rice, whom he describes as touch-minded with a razor-sharp tongue. Gates also developed a close working relationship with Mike Mullen, who became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff a few months after Gates became Secretary.

Gates discusses his desire to forge a personal relationship with the troops. He demonstrated support for them by increasing the size of the Army and Marine Corps, directing that the National Guard would deploy as units rather than individuals, writing personal notes to the families of each serviceman and woman killed and wounded in combat, and routinely visiting the wounded even in the most difficult circumstances. The chapter's final section discusses the deplorable conditions that were discovered at Walter Reed Army Medical Center as revealed in a story in the Washington Post. Gates says that he was aggressive in approaching the situation, including asking for the resignations of high level people, resulting in public praise for his decisive action.



Analysis

While Gates maintains that he enjoyed generally good relationships with most members of Congress throughout his tenure at the Defense Department, he pulls no punches when it comes to his disdain for the hypocrisy he saw in many of them and in their collective inability to get things accomplished. Following up on his description in Chapter 2 of a hearing gone terribly awry, he again describes the difference between their private personalities and public images. Like others, Gates places a great deal of blame on the media -- not the individuals who make it up, but the fact that a 24-hour news cycle means dramatically increased coverage of all aspects of government. He deplores the fact that men and women who are reasonable and thoughtful in private become enraged bullies when given an opportunity to play for the cameras and by extension their constituents at home, leading to a situation in which less and less meaningful work gets accomplished. This is particularly cause for concern when the matters at hand include the safety and well-being of military troops.

In this chapter, Gates also gives the reader a sense of his no-nonsense approach to running the Pentagon. He is dismayed -- and will continue to be so throughout his tenure -- at the bureaucracy and foot-dragging he found in the Defense Department, but he describes his early efforts to establish a culture of openness and professionalism. It is also significant that in his initial meetings with Pentagon staff, he urges them to look for every opportunity to interact with and show appreciation for soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen, whom he views as individuals rather than faceless numbers who are risking their lives for their country. His affection and support for the troops continue to be the touchstone that guides his actions as secretary. As the book progresses, Gates continues to confess that as much as he admired the troops and enjoyed spending time interacting with them, the emotional strain became nearly impossible to bear and was a major factor in his eventual resignation.

Gates provides other insights into specific individuals such as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, whom he says was more likely to contact him about issues of interest in his home state than matters of true national interest and once urged him to invest Defense funds in research on irritable bowel syndrome.

Vocabulary

extinguish, veneer, abject, inherent, constituency, candor, consensus, reconcile, effusive, condescend, arduous, ideologue, imminent, paucity, cull, rebut, expound, cede, nadir, lucid, adamant, exorbitant, innovation, designate, cohesion, rescind, unconscionable, reiterate, remedial



Chapter 4: Waging War on the Pentagon

Summary

Gates says that when he became the Secretary of Defense, he was dismayed to find that despite the fact that the country was fighting two wars and losing both, there was little sense of urgency, concern or passion in the Pentagon. He attributes this to the fact that everyone thought both conflicts would be over quickly. He says that the Department of Defense is structured to plan and prepare for war but not to fight one. The process for procuring the items most necessary to help commanders and soldiers in the field typically takes years. As an example, he cites his successful effort to get thousands of mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) purchased, built and delivered, saying they have saved the lives and limbs of countless soldiers who otherwise would have been the victims of IEDs. Another example involves his effort to improve intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in Iraq and Afghanistan, primarily through the use of unmanned drone aircraft. This was problematic because Air Force officials resisted, partly because piloting an unmanned aircraft from the ground was not appealing to its pilots but in time Gates approved a \$2.6 billion initiative to dramatically increase the number of drones in the two war regions and he began speaking publicly about the need to change the culture in the services with regard to supporting the two wars as well as preparing for future conflicts.

Gates also expresses dismay at the lack of support for soldiers who had been severely wounded, particularly those with traumatic brain injuries and multiple amputations. As with many other issues within the Pentagon, he blames the military and civilian bureaucracy and the lack of a sense of urgency or willingness to change the way things have been done in the past. Despite several efforts he details in the book, Gates did not succeed in cracking this resistance in most cases. He considers this to be one of his biggest failings.

Analysis

Stepping away from the battlefield, Gates takes this chapter to discuss some of the many frustrations he faced as he came to understand how the Pentagon itself operated, which was not in a manner that suited his own personality. As a man who hated lengthy meetings, he found himself embroiled in them. Even more important was the enormous amount of red tape associated with accomplishing what meant most to him -- taking the necessary steps to protect and take care of the troops in the field.

Gates uses the example of the MRAP to describe the what he felt was the Pentagon's biggest and most perplexing failing -- the lack of a sense of urgency and commitment to the troops and the wars they were fighting. The fact that the wars had gone on longer than most anticipated was not an excuse in his book and he was astonished and angry to learn that technology existed that could save the lives and limbs of soldiers in the



field, but the nameless, faceless bureaucracy that pervaded the Pentagon simply did not have the passion or initiative to pursue their procurement. He paints this bureaucracy as being stuck in old, established ways and unwilling to consider new ways of responding to needs. He goes so far as to say that perhaps Pentagon staffers felt threatened by new ideas or concepts and were fearful that anything new put their existing programs and procurements in danger.

Despite detailing a number of changes he succeeded in making, including improvements at Walter Reed and in treating severely wounded warriors, Gates ends the chapter with a resigned sense of frustration that he was unable to do more to make significant changes in the way the Pentagon runs and in the mindsets of those who run it.

Vocabulary

erroneous, ponderous, labyrinth, agility, gargantuan, procurement, lethargy, aberration, equity, laminated, ingenious, conventional, fusion, aerial, loiter, intercept, panoply, impediment, loath, venerable, juncture, Spartan, integral, ensue, dissolution, dissent, mortify, remedial, preponderance, berth, egregious, differentiate, purview, prosaic

Chapter 5: Beyond Iraq: A Complicated World

Summary

Gates begins the book's fifth chapter by saying that the United States faced problems in a number of places other than Iraq and Afghanistan. He says that during the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, the U.S. developed a penchant for telling others how to behave both at home and abroad, so some governments and people welcomed 9/11 because it humbled an arrogant nation. Gates goes on to describe his attempts, often in concert with Secretary of State Rice, to work with the Russians on U.S. efforts to develop missile defense capabilities in Poland and the Czech Republic, resulting in a number of often-futile trips to Russia. He likens the effort to work with the Russians on missile defense to Sisyphus trying to roll a rock uphill. The relationship between the U.S. and Russia further heated up during tension and military posturing between Russia and the neighboring independent country of Georgia.

Another issue arose in 2007 when Israel discovered and reported to the U.S. that North Korea had secretly built a nuclear reactor in Syria. Debate ensued, with Vice-President Cheney advocating a quick strike but Gates and others pushing for diplomacy first. In the end, Israel destroyed the reactor with no public fanfare and although Gates did not agree with the approach, he now thinks the way the debate was handled by the U.S. administration was a model of national security decision making.

Gates discusses U. S. tensions with Iran at length, noting that economic sanctions and military posturing by President Bush left many with the impression that he planned to attack Iran. Some in the administration, including Cheney, openly supported using military force but Gates was determined that the country should not get into a third war. The Iran issue plagued the administration and Gates throughout the end of Bush's term as Israel, fearful that Iran was developing a nuclear program that would be targeted against it, expected strong support from the U.S. but many in the administration wanted to avoid even a hint that such support would include military action against Iran. Fallout over these issues eventually resulted in David Petraeus being made commander of Central Command for the Mideast wars and caused more tension between Cheney and Gates.

Gates concludes this chapter with a quick review of his travels to scores of countries over a two-year period, including a deeply moving trip to the American cemetery in Normandy to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of D-Day.



Analysis

In discussing various issues taking place aside from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Gates takes the opportunity to provide readers with some history lessons on the world's hotspots and the events that contributed to current situations. For example, he goes into detail about the post-Cold War relationship between the United States and Russia, a subject of particular interest to Gates in light of his former role as director of the CIA.

This chapter also provides insights into a number of world leaders, at least as seen through the author's experiences, as well as his working relationship with then-Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice.

Again in this chapter, Gates steps away from his primary narrative to provide insights into the smaller aspects of life at the highest levels of government. For example, in discussing the frequent travel required by his job, he provides a detailed description of the plane he used for most overseas trips, including the physical aspects of the aircraft and the meals he ordered for himself and those flying with him, who had to share his unhealthy preferences such as cheeseburgers and ribs. In another section, he describes the elaborate setting for a sumptuous banquet in Saudi Arabia -- details that provide human interest and break up long sections about policy.

Vocabulary

quiescent, colossus, penchant, align, arrogance, calamity, subsequent, rendition, animosity, acrimony, engender, deliberation, disconcerting, emblazon, abrogate, demur, diatribe, precipitous, periphery, litany, ratchet, utilitarian, impetuous, colloquial, incursion, primitive, unilateral, tepid, divulge, pretext, placate, subordinate, incriminating, elicit, nefarious, existential, miffed



Chapter 6: Good War, Bad War

Summary

Gates begins Chapter 6 by stating that Iraq was known as the “bad war” because we had chosen it. Afghanistan was called the “good war” because it was one of necessity. Soon after the Afghan war began in late 2001, the Taliban was ousted from power. However, it was soon revitalized on the fringes. The Taliban began killing Americans and others. Many of the difficulties there resulted from problems with neighboring Pakistan, including that country’s habit of providing safe havens for the Taliban and allowing them to infiltrate from their side of the border. Despite meetings at which Gates asked for very specific actions, Pakistan, where the real power is held by the military, did little. The complex, unworkable chain of command among the U.S. and its allies also caused confusion and frustration. Many times even military commanders on the ground did not agree on how well the war was proceeding. Gates concluded that the Europeans wanted to focus on nation-building while he preferred a more focused counterinsurgency. At the end of 2007, Gates proposed that the alliance prepare a three-to-five year strategic plan integrating both military operations and civilian development programs, including milestones and goals to measure progress, and the plan received broad support. In 2008, it was widely felt that more troops were needed in Afghanistan. However, there were questions about whether Bush could commit them because his term was ending and Gates assumed he would be leaving as well. Gates also writes of taking efforts to minimize civilian casualties and erring on the side of generosity in making “consolation payments” to the families of victims. As the Bush administration wound down, several reports on what to do in Afghanistan were generated and privately passed on to the new administration.

Meanwhile, economic pressures at home were causing many to seek quicker troop draw downs in Iraq and Congress tightened up on funds for that unpopular war. In addition, many controversies over the competence and behavior of private security contractors working in Iraq brought pressure to bring them under the jurisdiction of the military judicial system or the Justice Department. In September, Bush announced that all of the surge would be withdrawn from Iraq by midsummer 2008 and Gates hinted publicly that the pace of drawdowns could continue at the same rate in the second half of the year, but he felt strongly that some level of U.S. troops should continue in Iraq for the long term to avoid losing what had been achieved. Pressure was also coming from presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to pull out troops. At the end of 2008, a long-negotiated Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) were signed, requiring U.S. combat troops to withdraw from Iraq by June 30, 2009 and for all U.S. forces to be removed by December 31, 2011. Gates was satisfied because he felt the U.S. would have extra time to stabilize the country and work with its military, but says the new president would face a deteriorating war in Afghanistan.



Analysis

In this chapter, Gates describes not only the inherent differences between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also begins to discuss the extreme difficulty of getting out of wars of this nature. In most of history, a war ended when one side defeated the other militarily, with World War I and World War II as examples, but the current conflicts were quite different. In fact, there was no unilateral agreement on what "victory" would look like. Gates points out that prior to getting involved in Afghanistan, U.S. officials had little real understanding of the problems that country faced. Essentially everything was broken so it was inevitable that the U.S. and its NATO allies would have to undertake a complex mission of reconstruction on a variety of fronts. In addition, Gates points out that while he continually nagged the Europeans to do more than they were doing, NATO in fact had already become more involved than initially intended when the mission went far beyond the armed peacekeeping effort that had been expected.

Gates also notes that efforts in Afghanistan were hampered by confusion in the military command structure and confusion on how the war was actually progressing. A myriad of high-ranking generals were in charge of various pieces of the effort with no real unity of command, while intelligence analysts presented divergent views regarding how things were actually going on the ground.

While much of this chapter involves detailed discussions of military strategy, Gates also weaves in some human interest pieces, noting that visiting the troops became more heart-wrenching for him. He insisted on meeting and eating meals with the troops when he visited them overseas, but as he looked into their eyes, he increasingly wondered which ones he would soon be visiting in the hospital or at Arlington National Cemetery. He also notes that as the wars continued, he learned that while soldiers carried their weapons at all times, they were ordered to remove the ammunition before meeting with him, which he both resented and understood.

Vocabulary

oust, auspiciously, resilience, reconstitute, unhindered, caveat, fortified, largess, sovereign, explicitly, divergence, infiltration, clout, insurgent, analytical, multinational, stalemate, disparate, comprehensive, brunt, liaison, rhetoric, anecdotally, chagrin, feckless, acceleration, illicit, renege

Chapter 7: One Damn Thing After Another

Summary

In Chapter 7, Gates discusses a number of issues that plagued him as Secretary of Defense. The first involved problems with the Air Force, including an incident in which actual nuclear weapons rather than mock training rounds were loaded and delivered to a base in Louisiana, followed by a labeling error that caused four ICBM warheads to be delivered to Taiwan. As concerns mounted, Gates fired several high level people. Other Air Force-related issues included the effort to select the contractor to build a new tanker aircraft. Bidding irregularities and other complex problems eventually prompted Gates to delay the process until after the next administration took over in 2009, never dreaming that it would come back to him when he stayed on as secretary. Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where uniformed Americans who die overseas are initially flown, became the scene of controversy when it was revealed that the remains were not being handled with the proper dignity and that some were being sent to a crematorium that handled both pets and humans. Gates also dealt with the problem of whether or not to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, which remains an issue today, piracy in the Strait of Malacca and a Medal of Honor nominee whose recommendation was withdrawn after the action for which he was nominated was disputed.

Analysis

Gates uses this chapter to make the point that while his most public responsibility was to oversee the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as secretary he was faced with a barrage of other issues that required high-level attention. As a former member of the Air Force, he expresses his dismay at a number of unforgivable mistakes that occurred within that service, some of which could have been absolutely catastrophic.

Particularly given his love and respect for the troops, Gates was especially distraught over the revelation that the remains of fallen warriors were not being treated properly upon their arrival at Dover Air Force Base. These issues were not only public relations nightmares, but also were destructive to the relationship and level of trust between the members of the armed forces and their families and the leaders at the Pentagon, including Gates himself.

One other note of interest concerns visits Gates made to several Air Force bases after he had taken steps to fix a number of problems within that service, including replacing some key personnel. He notes that at each site, the questions he received were about current and future priorities for the service, not about the officers who had been replaced or reassigned. He makes the point that the eyes of the men and women in



uniform were clearly on their mission, while officials in Washington were more concerned about the personalities and politics involved.

Vocabulary

myriad, medevac, stringent, incredulous, adherence, misconstrued, covert, mandate, lax, stewardship, erosion, symptomatic, repercussions, allegation, cache, forthright, configuration, except, optimal, prudent, unobtrusive, adjudication



Chapter 8: Transition

Summary

In Chapter 8, the focus is on the events that took place surrounding the 2008 Presidential election. In early 2008, there was speculation that Gates might be asked by the newly-elected President to stay on as Secretary of Defense, but he downplayed it and spoke as if he had no intention of accepting such an invitation if it came. Privately, however, he held such respect and affection for the troops serving in the armed forces that he knew if he were asked, his sense of duty would make him agree. After the conventions ended, there were sensitivities regarding briefings and information requested by candidates Obama and McCain, particularly since both were sitting U.S. Senators and Gates did not enjoy the need to navigate political minefields. In early October, a month before the election, Gates was approached by an Obama aide about whether he would be interested in staying and Gates provided him with a series of questions for Obama. A few days after the election, Obama and Gates met secretly, discussed Gates' questions and other issues, and Gates agreed to stay for about a year. Soon the Obama transition team arrived at the Pentagon, making for some awkward situations, but overall the process went smoothly. On December 1, 2008, a press conference was held at which Gates, along with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others were introduced, after which Gates continued working with current and future players on transition matters and jockeyed between serving his current boss, Bush, and his future boss, Obama. In mid-December the new national security team met for the first time and Gates tried to say little to avoid the possibility of shooting down ideas as "we've tried that and it does not work" and he was impressed with Obama's statement that the administration was in the war in Afghanistan to win. There were bittersweet moments as Bush's tenure came to an end. Gates volunteered to be the designated cabinet officer to stay away from Obama's inauguration in case of a catastrophe.

Analysis

This chapter provides interesting insights into the sensitive nature of transitioning from one administration to the other, particularly when the two sides have expressed public disdain for each other. As much as Gates claims to have made an effort to keep the new administration from asking him to stay on, he also admits that from the beginning he knew he would not turn down such an offer if it were made. He reveals for the first time that he received a feeler about joining the Obama ticket as its Vice Presidential candidate, which he laughs off given his open dislike for politics.

Perhaps, the most intriguing and telling insight comes from Gates' discussion of his early meetings with the Obama team as they mapped out the transition while Bush was still president. Forced to walk a tightrope between loyalty to the President he currently served and the one he would soon serve, Gates was in the uncomfortable position of



listening to the Obama team disparage Bush and his team -- of which Gates was still a part -- and all of the policies they had put into place. But, as a longtime government official, having served under six (soon to be seven) Presidents, Gates also realized that in just a few years, another brash group of incomers would be saying the same things about the Obama team as the circle comes back around again.

Vocabulary

anguish, exaggerate, indifference, conviction, quell, inconceivable, adamant, coherence, unequivocal, delusional, appalled, inadvertently, non-concurrence, contingency, rhetoric, reflective, elicit, unprecedented, presumptuous, impertinent, clandestine, cavernous, convey, aura, caveat, criterion, devoid, pejorative



Chapter 9: New Term, New Agenda, Old Secretary

Summary

In Chapter 9, Gates describes his early experiences in the Obama administration, where he felt like an outsider at first since he did not share the longstanding relationships many of the other high-level officials had. He was also older than most, including Obama, and found generational differences. He describes Vice President Joe Biden as down to earth, a man of integrity and impossible not to like, but Gates says he has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue for the past 40 years. He speaks highly of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom he calls idealistic but pragmatic, smart, tough-minded, indefatigable, and funny. Other important figures were CIA Director Leon Panetta, director of national intelligence Dennis Blair, and the White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, who had a reputation for wanting everything done immediately. Gates describes his relationship with Obama as strong, but always a business relationship with few opportunities to socialize. He found the president pragmatic on matters of national security, but thought he lacked Bush's passion. This bothered Gates, particularly his seeming lack of passion for Afghanistan, noting that he spoke more of exit paths and ending the war than about success or accomplishing the mission.

Gates discusses his agenda during the first months of the Obama administration, which included modernizing the military's strategic and conventional capabilities while also training and equipping for other contingencies since the ways of waging war were changing. He also focused on taking care of wounded combatants by decreasing the time it took for medevac units to reach fallen soldiers in Afghanistan, and after much research, he began allowing the media to cover the arrival of fallen servicemen and women at Dover Air Force Base, but only with the permission of their family members.

Gates goes on to discuss in minute detail his 2010 budget proposals and the reasons behind each of his recommendations, along with the criticism he received for specific decisions. He talks about the difficulties of being a holdover from the previous administration when Bush and his policies were ridiculed in meetings and discusses the intricate negotiations regarding a timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq. Gates was angered when two American women journalists crossed into North Korea and were arrested for spying and later when three American hikers crossed into Iran from Iraq and were arrested, feeling that any thinking person should know better than to skirt so close to those hostile nations and that getting them out took an enormous amount of time and effort. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy regarding gays in the military. Gates was conflicted about Obama's plans to end the policy and allow gays to serve openly, primarily because he thought a sudden change in policy was ill-timed while the country was engaged in two wars, and he says the issue would continue to be debated throughout 2009.



Analysis

With the Bush administration now in the past, Gates focuses the beginning parts of this chapter on getting to know his new bosses and colleagues. In addition to frank observations about various administration officials, he notes the generational differences between himself and the much-younger Obama staffers, many of whom had to learn to turn off their cell phones during high level meetings to avoid the potential of broadcasting everything that was being said to foreign intelligence eavesdroppers.

In discussing President Obama, Gates talks at length about what he perceived as a surprising lack of passion, noting that while Bush 43 had not been sentimental like his father, his eyes would well up when presenting someone with the Medal of Honor. However, this did not happen with Obama. Gates characterizes Obama as the ultimate pragmatist who sometimes expressed anger about matters that were important to him, but rarely the kind of passion and commitment Gates wanted to see from a President in the middle of wartime. Still, Gates says that the President had no lack of support for the troops themselves, but simply for their mission, perhaps because these were wars he inherited rather than started.

Gates also spends time writing about the relationship between cabinet secretaries and the White House staff, noting that junior staffers, heady with being part of a new administration, would often call a cabinet secretary to say that "the White House" wanted something. Having seen this phenomenon in previous administrations, Gates instructed his staff that he expected to be contacted only by very senior White House staff members.

Gates briefly touches on two incidents that generated enormous press coverage at the time they occurred -- the arrest of two female journalists who wandered into North Korea and three hikers who wandered into Iran. In the midst of enormous upheaval in those parts of the world, he laments the time and effort that had to be expended to free these people, whom he clearly feels acted irresponsibly in getting too close to those borders for any reason whatsoever.

Vocabulary

formative, apocalyptic, recur, gravitate, idealistic, indefatigable, hierarchical, disdain, lament, insubordination, bombast, deference, inept, crass, contentious, prevail, dilatory, beset, convene, depredation, encroachment, acolyte, chagrin, paradigm, disparity, earmark, herculean



Chapter 10: Afghanistan: A House Divided

Summary

In Chapter 10, Gates says that even 20 years after the U.S. defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan, the American government had learned very little about how the country functions. Early in the Obama administration there was disagreement on the appropriate strategy for Afghanistan going forward, with the military pushing for significantly more troops there, and Gates says that Biden and others helped foster a sense of mistrust from the White House regarding military officials, which was worsened by senior White House officials' lack of experience with military affairs. In March 2009 Obama announced a new strategy that included 17,000 new troops to defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, prevent their return and provide security for Afghan elections, along with an increased civilian effort to help the Afghan government provide services and build an economy not dominated by drugs. Gates felt that a narrower definition of success would be acceptable and more reasonable to expect.

Gates describes the appointment of Gen. McChrystal to head the effort in Afghanistan after relieving Gen. McKiernan of his duties there. A seemingly simple review of personnel and programs in Afghanistan caused a major blowup with the White House as Obama, Biden and others were more concerned about political ramifications than doing what it took to achieve the president's stated goals or protect the troops. Gates was shocked and dismayed when McChrystal planned to ask for up to 40,000 additional troops, knowing the president would never approve. After a lengthy meeting with top military leaders, Gates told Obama they would need some additional "enablers" – medevac, helicopters, ordnance disposal personnel, etc. in addition to more trainers for Afghan forces, and it was agreed that progress should be evaluated regularly and the strategy changed if it was not working. At one point, Gates strongly considered resigning when the president and other White House officials refused to consider sending more enablers to protect and support the troops. The tension between the White House and senior military officials was exacerbated by a series of media reports based on apparent leaks from the military. At the same time, Gates says there were numerous leaks from the White House in the interest of shaping public opinion about what should happen in Afghanistan. Trust between military and White House personnel continued to disintegrate rapidly, prompting Gates to consider resigning earlier than planned, and he says the rift on Afghan policy would linger for the remainder of his tenure as secretary. The chapter ends with an account of Army Major Nidal Hasan's murder of his fellow soldiers at Ft. Hood, Texas.



Analysis

Gates spends considerable time in this chapter discussing his frustrations in working with the Obama White House with regard to the war in Afghanistan. It is not the president he criticizes so much as staff members and Vice President Biden, all of whom he accuses of leaking information to the press to serve their political goals as well as working behind the scenes to build mistrust between the president and his senior military leaders, including his top military commanders and even Gates himself. He describes everyone on the president's team, Biden in particular, being totally focused on the politics of sending more troops with no mention or concern for doing whatever it would take to achieve the goals the president had established or even to protect the troops who were already there. Gates found this especially surprising since the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress at that time.

Another source of Gates' frustration was his feeling that members of the White House staff, and even the President himself, had little understanding of military strategy and the unpredictability of war, noting to himself that "they all seem to think it's a science." For that reason it was difficult to make the President and his staff understand the need not only for more troops to accomplish the stated mission, but even for the support personnel needed to take care of existing troops.

Gates also writes about his concerns about how American forces treated the Afghan population. While being as careful as possible to avoid civilian casualties -- and to compensate for them in whatever way possible -- he says we often disrespected their culture and their religion. Projects were taken on without consulting the Afghans about what they wanted or needed, and U.S. and coalition military vehicles often barreled down roads with little regard for the pedestrians and animals that were traveling there. He says that he and Hillary Clinton repeatedly complained about these behaviors but got little response.

Finally, Gates points out another demonstration of the disintegrating trust and respect between the White House and the military. At the end of a particular strategy meeting, Vice President Biden said that the military "should consider the President's decision as an order" and Obama followed by saying, "I'm giving an order." To Gates and the other officers present, this constituted an insult and a complete lack of understanding of military conduct and culture, as, despite what we see in movies, no commander ever states something as an order. It is simply understood that a request or directive is to be carried out and to state it as an order is a supreme insult.

Vocabulary

munitions, tempestuous, expansive, coherent, ambivalent, parse, pare, impediment, disquieting, implicit, accede, blight, illustrative, innocuous, parlance, clairvoyant, transnational, proponent, differentiate, quandary, obtuse, symbiotic



Chapter 11: Difficult Foes, Difficult Friends

Summary

Gates begins Chapter 11 with a discussion of the tension between Iran and Israel and its impact on the United States. He had met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu some years earlier and found him arrogant and outlandishly ambitious. President Obama tried and failed to negotiate a strategy to quell Iran's nuclear ambitions and, concerned that Israel might launch a sudden military strike against Iran, Gates pressed the administration to formulate a response strategy and he embarked upon a trip in which he visited a number of key countries to discuss the Iran/Israel problem. He sums up the discussion by saying that while Israel has a constant struggle for its very survival, the country worsens its situation by its own actions.

After much controversy, a plan to install a new missile defense system in Poland was scrapped and replaced with a "phased adaptive" approach tailoring missile defense programs to the threats and circumstances unique to each region. The idea of putting missile defense systems in Europe caused tension with Russia, with whom the U.S. was trying to "reset" its relationship at the time. Gates talks about several trips to Asia during his tenure, often to further his goal of establishing and maintaining strong military-to-military relationships with countries such as China, Vietnam and Korea that were outside the vagaries of politics.

Gates was also involved in the effort to bring disaster relief to Haiti after that country's devastating earthquake in 2010. Although U.S. response, which included not only sending troops and supplies but also establishing an infrastructure and logistics supply chain in the midst of chaos, was swift, many Haitians were suspicious of the U.S. because of a long history of military intervention there. Gates ends the chapter by saying that although he intended to leave his post in the spring of 2010, the president asked him to stay and he agreed to do so until June 2011, also suggesting Leon Panetta as his eventual replacement.

Analysis

Gates uses this chapter to illustrate the point that despite the time and energy consumed by managing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his role as Secretary of Defense required that he also focus attention on a myriad of other matters around the world. His background as Director of the CIA provided him with a great deal of history regarding hotspots such as Israel, Iran, Russia, China and Korea, so Gates is able to give the reader some historical perspective to enrich his discussions of the current situation in these areas. Some of this detail bogs down the narrative in places, but Gates also interjects bits of human interest here and there. For example, he writes that



during a meeting, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy's personal cell phone rang and he paused to have a conversation with his wife, something Gates and his staff had never seen from a world leader.

Gates also writes about former successes during his CIA days with regard to forging cooperative relationships with China that lay outside the political arena. As Secretary of Defense, he says he strove to open a dialogue with the Chinese on sensitive subjects like nuclear strategy and contingency planning on North Korea by building on those previous successes.

Gates also discusses the military's role in delivering disaster relief to Haiti after the devastating earthquake that hit that country in early 2010. As he describes the chaos that was everywhere, he criticizes the White House for again trying to micromanage the situation with little understanding of the logistics required to establish a workable relief program there.

Vocabulary

preoccupied, gravitational, sanction, retaliatory, glib, incarnation, contentious, ingenious, pivot, protracted, acrimonious, unilaterally, rogue, obligatory, curry (verb), audacity, excruciating, purported, reciprocal, ratification, buttress, perfunctory, derail, cynicism, oligarchy, brazen, sequence, intrepid, anathema



Chapter 12: Meanwhile, Back in Washington

Summary

In Chapter 12, Gates writes about the controversy over the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy under which gay Americans could serve in the armed forces only if they kept their sexual orientation a secret. If they were outed, either by themselves or someone else, they were separated from the military. Only a couple of days before his State of the Union address, the president told Gates and Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that he would announce his plan to repeal the law, angering Gates because he felt more time was needed to prepare. Gates and Mullen began an extensive survey to determine what the effects of repeal might be on the troops, but to their dismay, the White House and Congress were quietly negotiating for a quick repeal. Disagreement over when and how to repeal the law caused considerable tension between Gates and the President. However, with swift planning and training, Don't Ask, Don't Tell was abolished with few problems.

Another effort that consumed a great deal of Gates' time and attention was the continued effort to keep the troops in the field supplied with what they needed. Casualties from IEDs were increasing and as the bombs became bigger and more powerful, those who survived often were left with increasingly serious injuries. Technologies and equipment existed that could make a difference, but the struggle involved cutting through the bureaucratic red tape to procure those things and get them into the field and Gates continued to be baffled by the difficulty of getting others to act with urgency to take care of the troops. He also worked with homeland security secretary Janet Napolitano on new policies to protect against cyber attacks through the National Security Agency, but the changes did not last long.

Gates goes on to talk about the difficulties of formulating a workable budget for the Defense Department in the face of bureaucracy and the inability of Congress to appropriate money in a timely way. Gates admits that he had no intention of cutting the defense budget, but instead undertook a massive efficiency program aimed at reducing or eliminating programs that were not working and reassigning those funds to other areas, with a particular eye to build a military with versatile capabilities. Knowing he was unlikely to get more money from Congress, Gates sought to find the funding he wanted from within the Pentagon by shifting priorities and he secured assurance from the White House that he would be allowed to keep and reinvest any money he saved. However, he was dismayed when the president asked him to make further cuts and he states that he felt that agreements with the Obama White House were good for only as long as they were politically convenient. He closes the chapter with descriptions of visits with various troops, which provided a sort of respite from the frustrations of Washington even though he felt a deep sense of responsibility for sending them into harm's way.



Analysis

With regard to the controversial Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy enacted during the Clinton administration, Gates is careful not to take a position opposing having gays serve in the military. Instead, he says he advocated from the beginning for two things -- that reversing the policy should come from an act of Congress rather than a presidential or court order, and that the troops at every level should have ample opportunity for input prior to making any changes to reduce impact on unit cohesion, discipline, morale, recruitment and retention. Gates gives credit to Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for summing up exactly what was wrong with the DADT policy to begin with -- it allowed gays to serve in the military, an institution that places the highest possible value on personal integrity, but only by compromising their integrity by lying about who they really are. He goes on to detail the circuitous path that eventually led to repeal of the policy and to laud the planning and preparation he says made the transition a smooth one.

Gates again points an accusatory finger at Congress with regard to the difficulties of managing the Defense Department's budget, saying that despite pressure from Capitol Hill to reduce waste and tighten management, Congress continually failed to enact a budget before the beginning of each fiscal year, forcing Defense and other departments to operate under constant financial uncertainty. His growing frustration over the inability of Congress to do what the Constitution required made him increasingly reluctant to maintain self-discipline when he had to testify before Congressional committees or even meet with individual members. Even his efforts to cut bureaucratic overhead and invest the savings in new military capabilities were thwarted by the refusal of Congress to act on budgetary matters and by the White House's reversal on promises made.

Vocabulary

inauspiciously, inevitably, stoically, innocuous, adamantly, preemptive, edict, retention, plebiscite, inexorably, mitigating, polarization, imperative, zeal, plummet, moratorium, dissuade, precipitous, grievous, tethered, bleat, havoc, precipice, obsolete, cathartic, fiat, myriad

Chapter 13: War, War . . . and Revolution

Summary

In Chapter 13, Gates writes about the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq on August 31, 2010. In speeches and interviews, both he and the president avoided saying we had won, but focused on the huge sacrifices made by both U.S. troops and the Iraqi people, and said history would show the long-term effects. Gates and Vice-President Biden then went to Iraq to preside over the inauguration of the new U.S. training and advisory mission there. Gates writes that relations between White House officials and the Defense Department were very strained over the topic of Afghanistan, with administration officials accusing the Pentagon of misleading the president and expanding the mission, although he admits that Defense personnel sometimes contributed to White House suspicions. Gates tried to work with the Pakistani leadership but it seemed impossible to make progress as they continued to provide sanctuary for the Taliban.

A new crisis surfaced when the magazine Rolling Stone published a major story about General McChrystal that made derogatory comments about Obama, Biden and others. Despite urging by Gates to reprimand the general but not fire him, Obama relieved him of his command and General Petraeus was named to replace him in Afghanistan. In addition, there were growing concerns about extreme corruption in the Afghan government and military, including accusations about President Karzai's half-brother. In the meantime, Gates became increasingly convinced that despite his own cautious optimism, Obama was skeptical about the prospects of success for the Afghan strategies he had approved. On visits with the troops in Afghanistan, Gates was becoming increasingly emotional about his role in placing them in harm's way.

Gates goes on to discuss the Arab revolution that began in Tunisia in December, 2010, and quickly moved to Egypt, fueled by social media. There was much discussion about what position the U.S. should take and Gates urged his Egyptian counterpart to ensure that the army would exercise restraint in dealing with the protesters, and an envoy from Obama urged Egyptian President Mubarak to begin transitioning power. As violence boiled over, Mubarak resigned and later the elected president Mohammed Morsi was forced out by the army, leaving Egypt's future very much up in the air. When anti-government protests began in Libya, Gates argued vehemently against U.S. military involvement there, maintaining that terms like "no-fly zone" were being used loosely by members of Congress and the administration who had no idea what a huge operation would be required if the U.S. became involved. Eventually, Obama decided to undertake a military operation there, leaving Gates relieved that his tenure as secretary would soon end per his end-date agreement with Obama.



Analysis

In this chapter, Gates further details the escalating tensions between the military and the powers-that-be in Washington, even referring to his job as his "deployment to the Washington combat zone." He discusses the difficulty of finding an end to the war in Afghanistan because there was really no definitive way to "win" the conflict so he tried to use terms like "success" and "accomplishing the mission" to help the troops feel that they were not putting their lives on the line for no discernible reason. Gates writes that although the President asked Mullen, Petraeus, and McChrystal to support his decision on the November, 2009, surge in Afghanistan, Biden and the White House staff continued to foster Obama's mistrust of the military. Gates was further frustrated by the difficult situation with Pakistan, as that country cooperated in some ways, such as providing supply lines, but also giving sanctuary for the Taliban and other extremists, which Gates says ensured that no matter what the outcome in Afghanistan was, Pakistan would come out on top. Although he defended Pakistan in front of Congress and the press to keep the situation from worsening, he was clear that the country was not a true ally.

Gates concludes the chapter by outlining some history behind the Arab revolution, which he says began with a single 26-year-old street vendor in a small Tunisian town setting himself on fire after being harassed and humiliated by a police officer. What would have, in earlier times, been a quickly-forgotten incident led to demonstrations that were publicized around the world through cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter. The news quickly led to an overthrow of the Tunisian government. When protests erupted in Egypt, the United States was in something of a precarious position because of its long-term relationship with President Hosni Mubarak. As he details the weeks and months of discussions over what role the United States should play in the evolving situation in both Egypt and Libya, Gates once again decries the fact that no one in the Obama White House truly understood military strategy or what was involved in what seemed to them simple operations or the difficulty of getting out of a situation once a decision is made to get involved.

Vocabulary

fraught, capitulation, meticulous, accelerate, sectarian, laud, daunting, albeit, chasm, tout, sanctuary, convoke, paucity, adamant, irony, distorted, irrecoverable, leniency, derogatory, mitigating, dicey, edict, alienate, expendable, repressive



Chapter 14: At War to the Last Day

Summary

In Chapter 14, Gates describes a trip to China to pave the way for a subsequent visit by the Chinese president to Washington. He sums up his thoughts on China by saying that its government continues to invest in new military capabilities and technologies, but rather than trying to match the U.S. ship for ship, etc., the Chinese are investing selectively in capabilities that target our vulnerabilities, not our strengths. Their cyber-attack capabilities are advanced and continuing to improve, so the U.S. needs to manage the relationship carefully and keep a robust air and naval presence in the Pacific to reassure our friends and allies. After a brief mention of several other trips abroad, Gates describes the discussions regarding succession as he and others were leaving their posts. In the end, Gates was replaced by Leon Panetta and Petraeus took over the CIA while Army General Marty Dempsey was nominated as the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Gates goes on to describe the events leading up to the killing of Osama bin Laden, saying that many in the top circles feared that the CIA did not have enough evidence that bin Laden was in the Pakistani compound that was under surveillance. There was also disagreement about what type of attack would be best and Gates worried that a raid, whether or not successful, would humiliate and anger the Pakistani military, causing them to cut off supply lines and other help necessary for the war in Afghanistan. In the end, he supported the raid by special forces and describes the well-known facts about the successful operation while decrying the multitude of leaks he says came from the White House and CIA afterward, revealing tactics that could hinder our war efforts and endanger personnel.

Gates expresses frustration at further forced budget cuts as he prepared to leave his post, as well as foot-dragging in both Iraq and Washington regarding whether U.S. troops should or would be present in Iraq for an ongoing period. His final weeks were also plagued by struggles over when and how to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, with Gates believing strongly that we would lose all our gains by pulling out too quickly. He closes the chapter by noting that his first fight as Secretary of Defense was over Iraq and his last over Afghanistan, the two wars that framed his tenure.

Analysis

While Gates spends much of this chapter providing lengthy descriptions of meetings with various world leaders, most interesting to the average reader are his insights into the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan. Even though there was a \$25 million reward offered and infinite amounts of high tech surveillance technology available, Gates says that in the end, bin Laden was located through old-fashioned detective work and painstaking analysis by CIA experts, despite the fact that many



people would try to claim credit for it. Although Gates and Biden rarely agreed on much, they were the two primary skeptics when discussions began on whether or not to strike the compound that had been identified, but their reasons were different. While Biden was concerned about the political consequences of failure, Gates was worried that no matter how the raid turned out, it might anger the Pakistani government to the extent that they would cut off the supply lines that were critical to getting fuel and cargo into Afghanistan.

Gates describes three possibilities for a strike -- a special operations raid, bomb and a limited, small-scale drone strike. There were advantages and disadvantages to each and Gates initially supported the drone option and although he later changed his mind and favored a raid by special forces, the president had already made that decision by the time Gates informed him of his change of heart. Although the raid was successful, Gates is highly critical of the multitude of leaks that came out within hours and he blames the White House and the CIA, claiming they wanted to brag and claim credit even though the facts were often misstated. Gates also discusses the controversy over releasing photos of bin Laden's dead body, revealing the concern that people could Photoshop the pictures in disrespectful ways, thus enraging Muslims and putting our troops and other Americans at risk.

Vocabulary

explicitly, restrained, bilateral, provocation, escalate, interlocutor, discretion, condescending, diatribe, perfunctory,chutzpah, portentous, cordiality, propensity, dormant, notorious, circumstantial, abate, complicit, impunity

Chapter 15: Reflections

Summary

In the book's concluding chapter, Gates states that despite the many positive relationships and support he had during his tenure as secretary, he was often angry because of the near impossibility of getting anything of consequence accomplished. He reflects on the wars, saying he is unsure of whether he would have supported the invasion of Iraq if he had been secretary when the decision was made, but that the war will always be tainted by the fact that the premise for invasion was wrong. He still supports Obama's Afghanistan strategy shift and troop increase in 2009 and believes the President was right in his decision to withdraw all troops and transfer responsibility for security to the Afghans by the end of 2014 because the country simply cannot abide a war with an indefinite end any longer. Still, the outcome of the Afghanistan war remains to be determined.

Gates believes that having very specific objectives is one of the keys to running a department as large and complex as Defense, and he gives much credit to the civilians who are part of the department's team. While he had a generally good relationship with Congress, he is sharply critical of the hypocrisy of many members with regard to budget reductions, its failure to appropriate money, and its rude, bullying treatment of witnesses who come before it. Gates got along well with both Bush and Obama, but had fewer issues with the former because most of the major decisions had been made by the time he joined the team. He concludes with high praise for the troops, noting that they were the reason he took the job and the reason he stayed. As time went on, signing deployment orders, visiting hospitals, writing condolence letters, and attending funerals took an emotional toll. When Gates saw that he was losing objectivity, it was time to leave. When he dies, Gates will be buried in Section 60 at Arlington National Cemetery where many of the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan are buried.

Analysis

As the title implies, the book's final chapter sums up Gates' feelings about his tenure as Secretary of Defense. Making it clear that he has no intention of taking another position in Washington, he pulls no punches in lambasting a wide variety of entities despite saying he liked and largely was treated well by almost all the people he worked with. However, he goes on to criticize the Obama administration for being overly controlling and insisting on micromanaging everything, and Congress for choosing parochial self-interest and partisan politics over the good of the country. Despite his efforts, he also expresses regret that he was unable to make a difference in the bureaucratic inertia that plagues the Pentagon.

Gates ends the book with another valentine to the troops, reiterating that although the term hero is thrown around too casually, many within the ranks of the military are



deserving of that term. He was proud to be called "the soldiers' secretary" because he cared so much about them and did his best to provide for their needs. He considers it the greatest honor possible that he will one day rest among the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan in Arlington National Cemetery.

Vocabulary

substantive, inertia, abyss, parochial, conciliation, minimalist, debacle, disingenuous, taint, albatross, impetus, divergence, culpable, reprimand, congenial, aspiration, sacrosanct, strident, duress, intractable, demonize, revile, outlier



Important People

Robert M. Gates

Robert M. Gates is the book's author and primary figure. Gates served as Secretary of Defense from 2006 until 2011, first under President George W. Bush and later under President Barack Obama. Previous roles included Director of the CIA, President of Texas A & M University, and various roles in the federal government serving eight Presidents. This memoir describes his experiences as Secretary of Defense at a time when the United States was involved in wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

President George W. Bush

George W. Bush, sometimes referred to as Bush 43, was the 43rd president of the United States. He served from 2001 until 2009 and brought Gates in as Secretary of Defense midway through his last term.

Barack Obama

Barack Obama is the 44th President of the United States, following George W. Bush into office. He took office in January, 2009, and asked Gates to remain as Secretary of State.

Condoleeza Rice

Condoleeza Rise was Secretary of State under President George W. Bush and, as such, a close colleague of Gates during his early years as Secretary of Defense.

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State under Barack Obama and worked closely with Gates while he was Secretary of Defense.

Leon Panetta

Leon Panetta has held a number of high-level government positions, including serving as Director of the CIA under President Obama beginning in 2009.



Hamid Karzai

Hamid Karzai has been President of Afghanistan since 2001 and has figured prominently in U.S. relations with that country and the war taking place there.

Mike Mullen

Mike Mullen is a retired U.S. Navy admiral who served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 until 2011, joining Gates as a holdover from the Bush to the Obama administration.

David Petraeus

David Petraeus is a retired U.S. Army general who has served as lead commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other top posts.

Stanley McChrystal

Stanley McChrystal is a retired U.S. Army general who served as top commander in Afghanistan among other posts.



Objects/Places

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. is the capital of the United States and home of the Pentagon, White House, and other federal government sites.

Iraq

Iraq is a country in the Middle East and the site of one of the two wars that took place during the time Robert Gates was Secretary of Defense.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country in Asia and the site of one of the two wars that took place during Robert Gates' tenure as Secretary of State.

The Pentagon

The Pentagon is the complex of buildings in Washington, D.C. that houses the headquarters of each of the armed services of the United States.

Walter Reed National Military Medical Center

Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, formerly Walter Reed Army Medical Center, is a large health care facility located in Bethesda, Maryland, that serves the needs of members of the military and their families as well as national leaders.

Dover Air Force Base

Dover Air Force Base, located in Maryland, is the site where the bodies of those killed while serving overseas are brought.

Themes

Duty

As the book's title implies, its primary theme is the concept of duty, which can take on many forms. In this case it refers to the author's sense of duty to serve his country when called. In the book's opening chapter, Gates clearly states that while serving as president of Texas A&M University, he had no intention of returning to Washington in any capacity. In fact, he turned down an earlier offer to join the Bush 43 administration as Director of National Intelligence. Although he took considerable time and effort to consider that offer, he did not hesitate when he was approached about becoming Secretary of Defense, stating that, "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."

Throughout the book, Gates returns to the idea that serving as Secretary of Defense was not pleasurable for him. He writes of the frustration and anger he felt almost constantly when faced with a president he felt did not support his own war strategy, a Congress unwilling to cooperate on anything of importance and a Defense Department that showed little sense of urgency despite the fact that two wars were being waged. Despite his dislike for the job itself, he stayed longer than he had planned because his sense of duty had expanded over time. In addition to the duty to serve his country, he felt an ever-increasing sense of duty to the military personnel he sent to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading him to expend every effort to get them the support they needed to do their jobs successfully and standing up to a sometimes-dispassionate administration to ensure that their work would not be in vain.

Bureaucracy and Government Paralysis

In a theme somewhat related to that of duty, Gates essentially accuses the U.S. Congress of dereliction of duty in discussing its unwillingness and inability to undertake even the most basic responsibilities with which it is charged by the U.S. Constitution. The inability of Congress to act is only one factor the author cites in the paralysis that continually hinders progress in Washington.

While Gates speaks positively about several individual members of Congress and about their thoughtful demeanor while in private, he abhors their behavior once the television cameras are turned on, calling them bullies who are far more interested in their personal interests and in bringing funding to their home districts than in the overall good of the country. From time to time, he lays such accusations at the feet of specific members he terms small-minded, citing a call in which Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid asked Gates to set aside Defense funding for a study on irritable bowel syndrome, for example.



Gates also takes aim at the White House, accusing Obama staffers of being more interested in the political ramifications of their actions than in the good of the country. His own staff at the Pentagon does not escape as Gates admits that he was unable to get such simple concessions as a reduction in the number of PowerPoint slides used during too-lengthy presentations. Almost every chapter mentions some level of bureaucratic red tape or self-interest that hindered the author's ability to manage the myriad of responsibilities with which he was charged.

Caring for the Troops

While it was a sense of duty and patriotism that brought Gates into the job of Secretary of Defense, it was his love for the troops that kept him there and drove the majority of his actions. One of his earliest observations upon assuming his duties was the lack of urgency among even the top military officers with regard to providing the equipment and support the troops needed to conduct the wars in which they were engaged. He writes about the enormous effort it took to procure mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles that could save lives and limbs, as well as other equipment and even "enablers" -- personnel necessary to care for and support those on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition, though, Gates writes at length about the emotions the troops and their families stirred in him and the toll those emotions took on him over time. He spent hours visiting wounded warriors, eating meals with enlisted men and women while on overseas trips, writing letters of condolence to the families of the fallen and attending funerals at Arlington. In a final tribute, he closes the book by stating his intention to be buried among those who died in Iraq and Afghanistan, resting "among my heroes for all eternity."

Styles

Structure

Duty is divided into fifteen numbered chapters of varying lengths. Each chapter has a title that is descriptive of the topic or topics it covers, and most have a few subheadings to break up the text into more specific topics. The book is a memoir so the author writes in the first person, describing his experiences from his own point of view and occasionally quoting another individual or media story. He also includes several excerpts from speeches, memos, or other documents where appropriate.

In addition to the narrative, the book contains a total of seventy-five photographs and plates divided into two sections. Most depict the book's author in his capacity as Secretary of State during the years 2006 to 2011.

Perspective

Tone



Quotes

A middle-aged woman came up to my table and asked if I was Mr. Gates, the new Secretary of Defense. I said yes. She congratulated me on my nomination and then said to me with tears in her eyes, 'I have two sons in Iraq. For God's sake, please bring them home alive. We'll be praying for you.' I was overwhelmed. I nodded, maybe mumbled something like, 'I'll try. I couldn't finish my dinner, and I couldn't sleep that night. Our wars had just become very real to me, along with the responsibility I was taking on for all those in the fight.'

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 12, Paragraph 3)

Importance: In this simple encounter, the enormity of his task suddenly becomes clear to Gates as he realizes the responsibility he has for the safety and well-being of thousands of troops.

I was struck in the meeting by the service chiefs' seeming detachment from the wars we were in and their focus on future contingencies and stress on the force. Not one uttered a single sentence on the need for us to win in Iraq. It was my first glimpse of one of the biggest challenges I would face throughout my time as secretary -- getting those whose offices were in the Pentagon to give priority to the overseas battlefields.

-- Author (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 39, Paragraph 4)

Importance: This theme is reiterated throughout the book as the author laments the insulation and the lack of a sense of urgency inside the Pentagon for the troops fighting two wars.

There was a Washington 'clock' and a Baghdad 'clock,' and the two moved at very different speeds.

-- Author (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 49, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This is the author's way of describing the different priorities and timetables set by Congress, whose primary interest was ending the war in Iraq as soon as possible, and commanders in the field, who wanted time to accomplish their goals.

There were no shortcuts to what I wanted to achieve. Young people are inherently skeptical, if not cynical, about the rhetoric of older people and those in authority, because too often their actions do not correspond. In the military, that is compounded many times over. The only way I could make any impact on the troops and dent their indifference to who might be secretary of defense would be through actions that demonstrated how much I cared about them.

-- Author (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 104, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This sets the stage for the many efforts Gates will make to provide the supplies and support needed by troops in the field even though it often meant battling through many layers of bureaucracy and outdated ways of doing things.



Even though the nation was waging two wars, neither of which we were winning, life at the Pentagon was largely business as usual when I arrived. I found little sense of urgency, concern, or passion about a very grim situation.

-- Author (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 115, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This extraordinary passage sums up one of the secretary's primary sources of frustration, which he continues to discuss throughout the book -- the fact that those who worked inside the Pentagon were insulated from the wars themselves and therefore felt no immediate need to change their mindsets in order to protect or care for the troops whose lives were in danger.

Secretary Rumsfeld once famously told a soldier that you go to war with the army you have, which is absolutely true. But I would add that you damn well should move as fast as possible to get the army you need. That was the crux of my war with the Pentagon.

-- Author (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 148, Paragraph 1)

Importance: This summarizes Gates' strong belief that the Pentagon's primary job should be ensuring that military troops have the training, supplies and support necessary to do the job they are being asked to do.

The end of the Soviet threat also ended the compelling reason for many countries to automatically align with the United States or do our bidding for their own protection. Other nations looked for opportunities to inhibit our seeming complete freedom and determination to shape the world as we saw fit. In short, our moment alone in the sun, and the arrogance with which we conducted ourselves in the 1990s and beyond as the sole surviving superpower, cussed widespread resentment. And so when the World Trade Center came down on September 11, 2001, many governments and peoples -- some publicly, many more privately -- welcomed the calamity that had befallen the United States. In their eyes, an arrogant, all-powerful giant had been deservedly humbled.

-- Author (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 150, Paragraph 1)

Importance: This compelling passage says what many Americans might not want to hear -- that other nations, some of whom are our allies -- have had reason to resent the arrogance the U.S. displays and the country's penchant for telling others how they should behave. As shocking and horrible as the 9/11 attacks were, the author makes the point that in the eyes of some, they proved that the U.S. is not as all-powerful as it would have others believe.

When I left Jerusalem, I well knew that there were different clocks ticking on the Iranian nuclear program. The challenge was how to slow down both the Iranian nuclear and the Israeli military clocks, while speeding up the sanctions/ pressure clock.

-- Author (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 183, Paragraph 3)

Importance: As he has done previously, the author uses the imagery of clocks going at different speeds to illustrate the difficulties in trying to navigate sensitive issues among entities with different agendas.



I didn't socialize in Washington. Every day I had a fight of one kind or another -- usually several -- and every evening I could not wait to get home, get my office homework out of the way, write condolence letters to the families of the fallen, pour a stiff drink, wolf down a frozen dinner or carry-out (when Becky was in the Northwest), read something totally unrelated to my work life, and turn out the light.

-- Author (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 220, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This passage speaks to the loneliness and isolation Gates felt during this period.

I would have to ignore the many jibes aimed at Bush and his team, which hardly diminished over time, and comments about the miserable shape U.S. national security and international relationships were in. I knew that in four or eight years, another new team would be saying the same things about these folks. I also knew from experience that, when all was said and done, there would be far more continuity than the new team realized in its first, heady days.

-- Author (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 282, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This passage provides an excellent summary of the atmosphere in the early days of a transition between administrations, as seen through the eyes of someone who has seen the same scenario occur many times and knows it will occur many times in the future.

The contest between Hillary Clinton and Obama for the Democratic presidential nomination further muddied the picture for me because there had been appointees from the Clinton administration who had supported Obama and thus earned the enmity of the Clinton crown, and to say the least, there were lingering resentments in the Obama camp toward Hillary and those who had supported her. The "team of rivals" approach worked a lot better at the top than it did farther down the totem pole.

-- Author (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 287, Paragraph 1)

Importance: President Obama received a great deal of publicity about his effort to emulate Abraham Lincoln's "team of rivals" approach to building a diverse cabinet, but here Gates makes it clear that animosity continued to exist among government employees further down the line, making it more difficult to form a cohesive unit moving forward.

Accordingly, I believed that our post-Cold War strategy of being prepared to fight two major regional conflicts at the same time, which determined much of our military's force structure, was outdated. We needed to sustain and modernize our strategic and conventional capabilities, but we needed also to train and equip for other contingencies.

-- Author (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 303, Paragraph 2)

Importance: Several times, Gates expresses the opinion that some forces at the Pentagon have been focused on the wrong things, and here he clarifies the need to realize that war will be waged differently in the future and we must begin to prepare accordingly.



All too early in the administration, suspicion and distrust of senior military officers by senior White House officials -- including the president and vice president -- became a big problem for me as I tried to manage the relationship between the commander in chief and his military leaders.

-- Author (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 339, Paragraph 2)

Importance: Here Gates sums up what will be a pervasive problem for the rest of his tenure at Defense and will hinder his efforts to conduct the two wars in which the U.S. was embroiled.

All this would give us a mission that the public and the politicians could easily understand: 'Deny the Taliban momentum and control, facilitate reintegration, build government capacity selectively, grow the Afghan security forces, transfer security responsibilities, and defeat al Qaeda.

-- Author (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 375, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This succinctly sums up the program Gates proposed to successfully bring an end to the war in Afghanistan.

Three years into the job, I just couldn't figure out why I still needed to be exhorting people on the urgency of taking care of the troops.

-- Author (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 447, Paragraph 3)

Importance: Once again, Gates expresses his growing frustration about the lack of interest administration officials seemed to have in providing the things the troops needed for their safety and well being.

Hearing the President express doubt about the strategy he had approved six months earlier, just as many of the surge troops were arriving in Afghanistan, and his lack of confidence in his commander and the strategy floored me. These feelings did not spring from a magazine article but had been there all along.

-- Author (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 488, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This passage crystallizes the biggest criticism Gates levels at Obama throughout the book -- the belief that the President did not fully support or believe in his own strategy, thus making it difficult for those who were tasked with carrying it out.



Topics for Discussion

Comparing Two Presidents

During his tenure as Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates served under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Discuss his impressions of both men, including their personalities, temperaments, and approaches to the Presidency.

War With the Pentagon

Why does Gates say he waged war with the Pentagon? What were the issues at stake? Give several examples of specific issues he faced and describe how he handled them.

Two Different Wars

Why does Gates call Iraq the bad war and Afghanistan the good war? How does he differentiate between the two? How do those characterizations play out in how the wars were handled during his tenure at Defense?

New President, Old Job

Describe some of the issues Gates faced when Bush left office and the Obama team took over. What ramifications did the issues have on Gates' job?

Washington vs. Baghdad Time

What does Gates mean when he says there was a Washington clock and a Baghdad clock that moved at different times? How did this concept affect how he and his military leaders approached their strategy in Iraq?

Tough Decisions

Identify one of the most difficult decisions Gates made during his tenure as Secretary of Defense and describe how he handled it.

Resign or Remain

Gates mentions a number of occasions on which he considered resigning his position. Choose one of those occasions and describe the circumstances, his reasons for considering resigning, and his reasons for deciding to stay on the job.



Getting Needs Met

Throughout the book, Gates talks about his battle to procure the equipment and other support needed by the troops overseas. Discuss some of the reasons this was, at times, so difficult to do and the steps he took to work around the obstacles he faced.

Supporting the Strategy

Why did Gates feel that President Obama did not seem to support the strategy he had authorized for Afghanistan?

World Leaders

Throughout the book, Gates discusses his relationships with a number of world leaders. Choose one of them and describe how Gates characterizes him or her. Do you think his assessments are accurate?