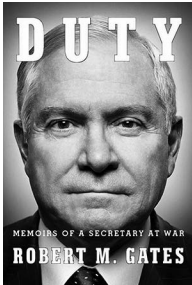


POLITICAL-MILITARY LEADERSHIP



New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
2014

618 pages

\$35.00

Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War

By Robert M. Gates

Reviewed by Dr. Steven Metz, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute

Duty is Robert Gates' second volume of memoirs and covers his time as Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Few people are better versed in how Washington works (or doesn't work) than Gates. He spent twenty-seven years in the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council before becoming the only Secretary of Defense asked to stay in office when the White House changed hands between political parties. Because of this, the book's release caused a major stir, particularly in Washington.

Gates' anger and unvarnished opinions about senior policymakers and elected officials, including some still holding office drew the most initial attention. While he respects the two presidents he served, Gates indicts Washington's hyperpartisan climate in general and Congress in particular which he describes as "Uncivil, incompetent in fulfilling basic constitutional responsibilities (such as time appropriates), micromanagerial, parochial, thin-skinned, [and] often putting self (and reelection) before country." He is particularly disdainful of Senator Harry Reid, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, and Vice President Joe Biden, at times resorting to unnecessary low blows as when he sarcastically writes that Biden "presumed to understand how to make CT (counterterrorism) work better than Stan (McChrystal)" even though Biden was talking about policy and strategy and General McChrystal's expertise was at the operational level of war.

Like any memoir, *Duty* does not weigh all sides of the story equally but concentrates on explaining Gates' position on key issues, particularly the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. One theme that will appeal to military readers was Gates' fierce dedication to the men and women in uniform, particularly those in combat zones. Time after time he excoriates the Department of Defense for its preoccupation "with planning, equipping, and training for future major wars with other nation-states, while assigning lesser priority to current conflicts and other forms of conflict, such as irregular or asymmetric war." At times this compelled him to take things into his own hands. He proudly recounts his efforts at forcing improvements in the care of wounded warriors and jamming through production of Mine Resistant, Ambush Protected (MRAP) armored fighting vehicles and increased intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

The crush of managing two wars and the daily operations of one of the world's largest and most complex organizations left Gates little time for broad questions about American strategy. But there is also no indication in *Duty* that he would have done so even if given the opportunity. For all of his talents, Secretary Gates was not a strategic visionary. For instance, there is no indication that he seriously questioned the assumptions that justified US involvement in Afghanistan even during

the Obama administration's major review of US strategy. Gates, like the rest of the administration, accepted the idea that without a major American effort, the Taliban would regain control over large parts or all of Afghanistan and again provide a base for al Qaeda; and that al Qaeda wanted to restore its base in Afghanistan, and having this would increase the chances it would pull off another September 11-level attack on the United States or US targets abroad. The failure to scrutinize the basic assumptions of American strategy (or to mention such scrutiny if it did take place) is a puzzling omission since by the time of the Obama strategic review, much of the American public and Congress had begun to doubt whether the security gained by US military involvement justified the monetary and blood costs. There are times when policymakers must grapple with big strategic issues rather than the most immediate ones. This did not happen while Gates was Defense Secretary.

While Gates did succeed in holding off congressional pressure and buying additional time for his military commanders, the fact that neither Iraq nor Afghanistan are likely to be seen as strategic victories for the United States should send a stark message to the US military. The United States treated its conflict with a transnational, nonstate enemy as a war less because doing so was most effective than because the military was the most powerful tool available. This problem has not gone away. Today the United States remains organized to use its high-tech and high-quality forces to fight relatively short, politically unambiguous campaigns against other conventional militaries. It is not organized to fight transnational nonstate enemies, whether ideological ones like al Qaeda or criminal syndicates, even though every indication is that this sort of conflict will persist. Gates understood this but there was little he could do other than implore the rest of the US government, particularly the State Department, to provide additional resources for Iraq and Afghanistan.

Through herculean and even heroic efforts, Gates helped prevent Iraq and Afghanistan from becoming utter fiascos. He was not, however, able to turn them into strategic successes or do more than nudge the Department of Defense in a new direction. But then no one else could have, and probably no one could have done more to stave off disaster than Gates did. The Department of Defense and American national security strategy were not demonstrably better after his leadership, but they also were no worse. Ultimately, *Duty* holds grim but important lessons for the Army's current and future strategic leaders: they will face a hyperpartisan political climate and missions that devolve to the military less because it is designed for them than because it is the least bad option. As they read Gates' memoirs—and all should—most will share his anger and frustration but, like Gates himself, most will also be determined to make the best of it they can.