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Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War

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BOOK REVIEWS

DUTY: A REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

Gates, Robert M. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. Newburyport, Mass.: Knopf, 2014. 640pp. \$25

The title of *Duty* could easily be *So You Want to Be the Secretary of War, Violence, and Suffering?* Gates's memoir takes the glamour out of the position and makes sure the reader grasps just how personally draining and ethically frustrating the job can be. It is a book worth reading, if only to learn more about the scope of the issues that typically face any conscientious Secretary of Defense.

To bring that point home, here are the more important challenges and issues that Gates had to deal with across two presidential administrations: scaling back the U.S. military presence in Iraq; scaling up that same presence in Afghanistan; defending two controversial war policies before an often hostile Congress; taking care of military personnel injured in Iraq and Afghanistan; explaining to families of those killed in both wars why their deaths mattered; building personal relationships with counterparts in other governments; dampening the negative effects of "turf wars" between White House staff and officials (both uniformed and civilian) in the Defense Department; sponsoring the development of antimine vehicles

that the career acquisition people in the Army did not want; tailoring the organization of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan; fostering an organizational climate that would allow the military services to move beyond "don't ask, don't tell"; and serving as a trusted adviser to two very different presidents from opposing political parties.

I find the list daunting. Robert Gates too found it daunting, but he took on those challenges and issues with energy, patience, persistence, and loyalty to the Republic. *Duty* is just the right title for his memoir. It is what Gates swore to do, and his memoir is an effort to describe his role and the role of other actors in some very crucial events.

The comments I have already read about the book focus on Gates's critical opinions of important personalities, including Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and several senior military officers. If those criticisms are all one comes away with after reading this book, the more important stories told by Gates have been unfortunately missed. If you read the entire book, you can step back and say, "Two

presidents gambled by committing the United States to two different wars, and both presidents needed someone to come along and ‘fix things’ when those two bets didn’t play out as the presidents expected and hoped.” Gates was “the fixer”—dedicated, a hard worker, disciplined, organized, experienced, well connected, and intelligent.

Gates was not in on the planning for the war against Iraq. As he says on page 568, “Had I been secretary of defense during the winter of 2002–2003, I don’t know whether I would have recommended that President Bush invade Iraq.”

However, Gates does not second-guess President Bush: “It would be disingenuous to say with ten years’ hindsight that I would have been opposed, especially since I publicly supported the decision at the time.” Moreover, after citing all the negative aspects of the war against Iraq, Gates says, “I cannot honestly claim I would have foreseen any or all of that.” In any case, when he took over from Donald Rumsfeld, he set aside his own personal concerns and embarked on a campaign to support President Bush. Gates agreed with former Secretary of Defense William Perry that “the consequences of failure in Iraq would be catastrophic—much more consequential than failure in Vietnam.” As Gates argues, “A defeat of the U.S. military and an Iraqi descent into a vicious civil war that likely would engage other countries in the region would be disastrous, destabilizing the region and dramatically boosting Iran’s power and prestige.”

As President Bush’s Secretary of Defense, Gates had three goals with regard to Iraq: defend Bush’s decision in late 2006 (even before Gates became Defense Secretary) to “surge” U.S. forces into Iraq, thereby allowing the troops

time to achieve the president’s goals; maximize “the possibility of keeping a substantial number of troops in Iraq for years to come”; and establish “a long-term security and strategic relationship with Iraq.” It was imperative to “avoid even the appearance of American failure or defeat in Iraq.”

In pursuit of these goals, Gates had to support U.S. commanders in Iraq, especially General David Petraeus, and to “buy time” in Washington for the surge to take effect. Gates puts it this way: “There was a Washington ‘clock’ and a Baghdad ‘clock,’ and the two moved at very different speeds. Our forces needed time . . . , but much of Congress, most of the media, and a growing majority of Americans had lost patience with the war in Iraq. . . . My role was to figure out how to buy time, how to slow down the Washington clock, and how to speed up the Baghdad clock.”

To buy time, Gates chose “to hold out hope of beginning to end it.” Once the surge forces were in place, by September 2007, Gates skillfully changed the debate over the war, “making the subject of the debate the pace of troop withdrawals so as to extend the surge as long as possible but also to try to defuse the Iraq debate as a major issue in the presidential election.” Gates is very clear on this: “I wanted to focus the Iraq debate on the pacing of drawdowns, a debate I thought the generals would win every time because it would be about battlefield conditions and the situation on the ground.” If he could buy time, the U.S. government would not “put at risk all we had achieved at such great cost in lives by leaving a fledgling Iraqi government at the mercy of its neighbors and its internal divisions.” Ultimately, “the critical question was how to

preserve and expand our gains in Iraq while maximizing support at home for a sustainable long-term presence there.”

Gates’s plan (for his “Washington campaign”) was in line with the goals of President Bush. As media reviews of *Duty* have already made clear, Gates thought President Bush had been both correct and courageous in opting for a troop surge. However, the media reviews that I have seen do not note as well that Gates also supported Bush’s intent to keep some U.S. forces in Iraq to support a post-Saddam government, train a new Iraqi army and national police, and remind the leaders of Iran that the United States would and could counter any Iranian efforts to subvert Iraq.

The key term here is “sustainable long-term presence.” Would Congress accept it? Could the volunteer Army do it without wearing out? Gates worked patiently and in a determined way to get everyone who mattered “on board” with President Bush’s long-term strategy. Yet he knew that implementing the president’s strategy would have a high cost, especially for the troops in Iraq. Gates admits that extending troop deployments in Iraq from twelve to fifteen months was the most difficult decision he would make in his entire time as secretary, but he also believes it was the right decision, and he was confident that it would be a temporary extension. Like General Petraeus and President Bush, Gates believed that the “surge” would work, but only if given enough time.

Gates has a lot to say about the conflict in Afghanistan and the decisions made in Washington regarding the conduct of the campaign there. A lot of media attention has been given to Gates’s descriptions of the disputes and discussions among key individuals,

including President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and Vice President Biden. This attention, however, misses a major point. Along with Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gates believed that “the war in Afghanistan had been neglected and underresourced [*sic*] in the Bush administration.” Yet Gates was very concerned that troop levels in Afghanistan be kept low enough so that Afghans would not perceive U.S. and NATO soldiers as occupiers (as against allies). Gates was aware that “embassy polling showed that in 2005 about 80 percent of Afghans saw us as allies and partners; by summer 2009, after nearly eight years of war, that number was down to 60 percent.”

President Obama had taken office committed to prosecuting a military campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Gates believed that when the new president asked him to stay on as Secretary of Defense Obama agreed with him that the United States would suffer strategically if it allowed the Taliban to appear to have pushed the United States out of Afghanistan. This was the link between Iraq and Afghanistan—the need to avoid having “extremist” Muslims see the United States as having been defeated in either place. But just how many soldiers would it take to force the Taliban to agree to a settlement? That was the question that often divided the new president’s White House from Gates and the military.

President Obama had agreed to a small U.S. troop increase in Afghanistan in the spring of 2009, but how many more soldiers were needed? Was there a parallel between Iraq and Afghanistan? Could a surge of forces in Afghanistan force the Taliban to negotiate with Hamid Karzai? Would Karzai even talk to them? From

September through November 2009, Gates and other senior officials met to answer these questions and thrash out a clear strategy for the campaign in Afghanistan. There were three basic questions they had to answer. Just what was the threat? What was the optimal way to deal with that threat—counterinsurgency or some form of counterterrorism? How would the president and his advisers know whether any strategy they adopted was working? It was clear to Gates that there was no unanimity among the president's closest advisers. Leon Panetta has said that all that was achieved by the major advisers after five lengthy meetings was an agreement that “we can't leave, and we can't accept the status quo.”

The sticky issue was how to deal with the problem. Early in his first term, President Obama asked Bruce Riedel (whom Gates describes as “a longtime analyst at CIA . . . [and] one of the best, most realistic Middle East analysts”) to lead a sixty-day review of the situation in Afghanistan. When the review team was finished, its recommendations were as follows: “Disrupt the terrorist networks in Afghanistan and especially Pakistan; promote a more effective government in Afghanistan; develop the Afghan security forces; end Pakistan's support for terrorist and insurgent groups; enhance civilian control in Pakistan; and use U.S. diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels to reduce enmity and distrust between Pakistan and India.” Gates called these recommendations “breath-taking,” requiring as they did “a fully-resourced counterinsurgency campaign.”

According to Gates, the new president “embraced most of the Riedel recommendations and announced the elements of his new ‘AfPak’ strategy in a televised speech on March 27, 2009

with his senior advisers standing behind him.” Gates was struck by the fact that the president “never used the words *counterinsurgency* or *counterterrorism* in the speech, but the strategy he announced was clearly a blend of both.” Though he “fully supported the president's decisions,” Secretary Gates had serious doubts that the resources would be available for the sort of campaign that President Obama had described—a campaign that used lots of civilian advisers, teachers, engineers, and lawyers.

In effect, President Obama said, his approach was to strike “the Taliban in their heartland” while at the same time infusing the U.S. advisory effort with a “surge” of civilians. Gates doubted that this approach would work quickly, if at all. The key factor was Pakistan. As Gates knew, Pakistan's “continuing toleration of the Afghan Taliban . . . was a hedging strategy based on [its] lack of trust in the [United States], given our unwillingness to stay engaged in Afghanistan in the early 1990s.” Just as troubling to Gates was the request of the new commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for significantly more soldiers. That commander, General Stan McChrystal, told Gates in late June 2009 “that he had found the situation in Afghanistan much worse than he expected.”

Secretary Gates was placed in a very difficult position. On one hand, he had defended having a relatively small number of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, to undercut claims by the Taliban that “outsiders” were occupying the country. Now the new ISAF commander was asking for a major increase in the number of military personnel. On the other hand, the president had embraced a strategy for Afghanistan that relied on

large numbers of American and European civilians to help the Afghans develop an effective and legitimate government, useful local schools, and health-care clinics. If the troops got to Afghanistan and the civilians did not, what then?

Gates took his concern to the White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. “I told Emanuel that the president needed to ‘take ownership of the Afghan War,’ both for the troops and for our allies. . . . He needed to acknowledge that the war could take years but that he was confident we would ultimately be successful. He needed to say publicly why the troops’ sacrifices were necessary.” Gates was acting then as the “fixer” that he was—the Defense Secretary who could make the best of a situation that was not to the liking of either President Obama or the ISAF commander.

However, there was another “player” in this drama, one that bedeviled Secretary Gates—then known as the National Security Staff, or NSS. This 350-person organization had begun as staff support for the members of the National Security Council and their deputies, but it had grown into a bureaucracy of its own, with what seemed to be a will of its own. As Gates puts it, “The National Security Staff had, in effect, become an operational body with its own policy agenda, as opposed to a coordination mechanism. This, in turn, led to micromanagement far beyond what was appropriate.” Gates says that for all its exhausting meetings, the process by which strategy in Afghanistan was hammered out in the fall of 2009 worked. That is, the different points of view were considered, reviewed, and then accepted or rejected by those serving as the president’s close advisers. Yet the implementation of this strategy was

hampered again and again by micro-management from Washington’s NSS.

In the presidential election campaign of 2008, Barack Obama had chosen to take on leadership of the campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban. But in 2009, according to Gates, he discovered that “U.S. goals in Afghanistan—a properly sized, competent Afghan national army and police, a working democracy with at least a minimally effective central government—were embarrassingly ambitious (and historically naïve) when compared to the meager human and financial resources committed to the task, especially before 2009.” In short, the problem was far more severe than Obama had thought.

Gates says that the president felt trapped. “President Obama simply wanted the ‘bad’ war in Iraq to be ended, and once in office, the U.S. role in Afghanistan—the so-called good war—to be limited in scope and duration. His fundamental problem in Afghanistan was that his political and philosophical preferences . . . conflicted with his own pro-war public rhetoric . . . , the nearly unanimous recommendations of his senior civilian and military advisers at the departments of State and Defense, and the realities on the ground in Afghanistan.” However, what Gates calls “the continuing fight over Afghan strategy in the Obama administration” had one positive outcome—that “the debate and resulting presidential decisions led to a steady narrowing of our objectives and our ambitions there.” As in Iraq, the policy of the U.S. government in Afghanistan shifted in response to events. The process that led to the shift in both cases was frustrating and exhausting, and the result in each case was not what either president had wanted.

According to Gates, each president accepted his disappointment and tried his best to find a realistic solution.

There is a lot more than Iraq and Afghanistan in *Duty*, but I have focused on these two wars for two reasons. First, the decision making in both cases illustrates the importance of our presidents and their key advisers (such as Gates). Second, a major decision made in the first term of President George W. Bush created the framework in which both Bush and his successor had to work. That decision was to engage in a “long war” with Al Qaeda and any affiliated group. That is, the threat of terrorist attacks on the United States would be dealt with by changing the character of the Muslim Middle East and Afghanistan, initially through military or quasi-military action, and then over time by involving the United States deeply in the affairs of both Iraq and Afghanistan.

When President George W. Bush authorized a preemptive attack on Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, he hoped, I am sure, that the attack would achieve multiple goals. One was to draw the fangs of Hussein’s regime. Another was to warn neighboring regimes that the United States government would and could take military action against them if they pursued policies like those of Hussein. Still another was to open possibilities for responsible, accountable, and efficient governments in the region. Yet another was to take away the Arab focus on Israel and turn it instead toward reform and modernization in the Arab states themselves.

These were very ambitious goals. The administration of George W. Bush hoped that these goals could be achieved within a reasonable human and financial cost. The Bush administration’s assumption

in this regard was wrong. However, as Gates understood, something had to be done to salvage the situation, and Gates worked hard with President Bush and others to achieve that.

The Obama administration took office with its own set of ambitious goals, including the aim of restoring stability and productivity in the U.S. economy. Like the administration before it, Obama’s found that its goals in Afghanistan (to defeat the Taliban and create a legitimate regime in Afghanistan) were likely to be far more expensive to achieve than Congress or the American people were willing to pay. What, then, to do? As Gates’s memoir shows, the administration stalled for time, in an attempt to keep the military situation in Afghanistan from growing worse while hashing out an approach that would allow President Obama to do two things that Secretary Gates did not think he could accomplish: salvage minimal but worthwhile U.S. goals in Afghanistan and simultaneously schedule the return of U.S. and NATO forces as Afghan police and army forces took up the fight against the Taliban.

Secretary Gates “bought time” for two different administrations while he dealt with serious budget issues, an often recalcitrant Defense Department bureaucracy (check out his account of his efforts to get MRAPs built and shipped to the theater), the issue of homosexuals serving in the military, the treatment of wounded military personnel, and diplomacy, especially relations with China and Russia. Is it any wonder that he felt worn out after four years and thousands of dead and wounded American military personnel?

Duty is not an easy read. It explains a lot about what a Secretary of Defense can and cannot do and how national

security decisions are made and then undone. Gates puts it very well: “While the national security apparatus to deal with . . . problems is gigantic, ultimately they all had to be addressed by just eight people: the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the director of national intelligence, the director of the CIA, and the national security advisor.” *Duty* is an interesting window into the thoughts and actions of one of those eight.

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Porch, Douglas. *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013. 434pp. \$23.88

Douglas Porch, military historian and academic, currently a distinguished professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, has written a highly polemical and critical intellectual history of counterinsurgency, aka COIN. It has been selected by the Army chief of staff for his professional reading list, so it is a must-read, at least for Army officers, and more generally for those who follow a debate in which sobriety and balance are rare virtues.

According to Porch, COIN’s intellectual roots lie in nineteenth-century imperialism, which was often justified in paternalistic ways. Even today, COIN’s mission is to “civilize” indigenous societies by importing Western norms and practices that are often severely at odds with local custom or resented because they are imported at the muzzle of an

M16. Whether one considers the French in Vietnam and Algeria or the British in South Africa, Malaya, Palestine, Kenya, Ireland, and Northern Ireland (and elsewhere), the most common root of insurgency, according to Porch, is that other peoples do not wish to be ruled by foreigners. Population-centric operations (Porch does not call them strategies) designed to win hearts and minds have frequently failed, because insurgency is less about grievance resolution for a “biddable population,” as COIN proponents assume, than about ideology or political goals. War among the people thus often becomes war *against* the people, for a variety of reasons, beginning with the fact that Western counterinsurgents often assume, with good reason, that “the people” are in cahoots with the insurgents, who otherwise would be unable to operate. Therefore, counterinsurgents seek to divide indigenous societies in the colonial manner so as better to control them, which only undermines the modern state building that COIN advocates seek to achieve. Furthermore, a Western tradition that sees guerrillas and insurgents as terrorists and criminal assassins and not as lawful combatants has often led to illegal detention, torture, denial of food, extrajudicial execution, disappearances, concentration camps, and other counterproductive efforts to isolate the people from insurgents, gain intelligence, and break the will of the insurgents. In this way, Porch argues that even in victory COIN usually comes at a heavy moral price.

Porch also objects to COIN proponents’ seeing themselves as technicians, applying the “lessons” derived from historical cases, especially Malaya. By focusing on grievance alleviation as their central concern, these military officers engage