

MAN OF ACTION

U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT M. GATES '65, L.H.D. '98
HAS DONE MUCH FOR HIS COUNTRY AND ASKS YOU TO DO THE SAME

BY MELISSA V. PINARD

UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU FOR MANDATORY PUBLIC SERVICE. AT LEAST THAT IS WHAT U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT M. GATES '65, L.H.D. '98 BELIEVES IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO. HE GAVE HIS REASONS DURING A MAY 15 INTERVIEW IN HIS PENTAGON OFFICE, A ROOM WITH TALL, NARROW WINDOWS OFFERING A GLIMPSE OF THE COUNTRY'S CAPITAL.

"I am a big believer in the notion that there ought to be mandatory public service for everybody, but you could take your choice," says Gates. "You could serve in the military, you could be a tutor in an inner city or rural school, you could be an assistant in a hospital, you could do trails in the national parks, but some notion that the freedom we have entails responsibilities as well as rights and that you need to give something back. Pick a time during your youth, between 18 and 26 like they used to do with the draft — but serve a year or two years."

When he delivered the 2007 Commencement address at the College, Gates made a similar point, telling the students that volunteerism is just not enough. He gave an emotional charge to the next generation to understand the necessity of giving back. He called upon students to take up the reins: "Will the wise and the honest among you come help us serve the American people?"

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates '65, L.H.D. '98 speaks with members of the press after talking privately with deploying troops and their spouses at Fort Campbell, Ky., on Feb. 1, 2008.





Above: Secretary Gates presents the Purple Heart medal to U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Brent A. Homan at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany on June 13, 2007. Homan was wounded in action in Balad, Iraq, on June 11, 2007. Gates was visiting troops at Landstuhl before attending the two-day formal NATO Ministerial meetings in Brussels, Belgium. **Center:** Gates visits Camp Montieith and attends a foot patrol with members of the Liaison Monitoring Team through the local town of Gnjilane, Kosovo, Oct. 7, 2008.

During college, Gates was inspired by some of President John F. Kennedy's speeches calling young people to public service, including the famous line from Kennedy's inaugural speech, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Following his graduation from the College, during which he received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award, Gates, a Kansas native, went on to pursue a master's in history at Indiana University (IU). While at IU in 1966, the Central Intelligence Agency recruited Gates and he went on to serve 26 years with the CIA, becoming the only director to rise through the ranks from an entry-level position. While at the agency, he earned his doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from Georgetown University in 1974.

Upon his retirement from the CIA in 1993, he worked in academia and wrote his autobiography, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*. He became interim dean of the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University in 1999 and in 2002 became the 22nd president of the sixth-largest university in the country.

Gates says that his service as president of A&M has made it more difficult to serve as secretary of defense. "I spent four and a half years watching 18- to-25-year-olds walk around campus in T-shirts, shorts and backpacks going to class and pursuing their dreams," he says.

"Then to quickly shift and see people exactly the same age in Afghanistan or in Iraq in full body armor or to see them at Walter Reed or Bethesda [medical centers] was very jarring for me."

As defense secretary, Gates understands the sacrifices these young soldiers make and realizes the weight of his decisions. "One of the hardest parts of the job is signing the orders that send men and women in harm's way," he says. "The hardest of all is signing a condolence letter to the families of those who have fallen, especially when I know it was I who sent them. And right up there as far as difficulty is visiting the wounded and seeing these grievously wounded young men and women, again knowing I sent them in harm's way."

He admires their courage amidst adversity. "More often than not, they lift my morale, rather than vice versa, when I visit them."

In the future, Gates plans to write a book about his role as a leader of large public institutions — the CIA, Texas A&M University and now the Department of Defense.

One of the biggest challenges he has faced in large organizations is communication.

"I guess the challenge with the Department of Defense is it's very hard to communicate to everybody," he says. "It's hard enough even in a relatively small university like William and Mary. It's tough in the intelligence community and it's toughest of all in this organization."

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Secretary Gates thanks Gen. David McKiernan '72, D.P.S. '04, Commander, U.S. Forces Afghanistan and NATO's International Security Assistance Force, after visiting field operating base Airborne, Kabul, Afghanistan, May 8, 2009.

“Communications is a challenge, becoming aware of problems is a challenge. I rely a lot on the newspapers and the Congress for that. There doesn't seem to be a line of people who work for the Defense Department outside my office wanting to tell me about problems. So you use a lot of different techniques to be aware of what is going on in the organization.”

Although the three major institutions he has led appear different on the surface, there are many similarities, according to Gates.

“They all report to a legislative body and get their budgets from a legislative body and you have legislative oversight,” he says. “In every case, retirees/alumni can assert a considerable influence on how the institution gets run. You have no financial incentives to motivate people. The motivation is principally psychological. In every case, the vast preponderance of people who work for you were there before you got there and will be there after you leave. So leading change in these large public institutions is a common challenge.”

And when Robert Gates leads an organization there will be change. “I don't do maintenance,” he says. “If I am going to do something, I am going to bring change. Just managing the status quo is not enough for me. I have a very low threshold for boredom.”

But change is not just for the sake of change either. When Gates makes a decision, it is well thought out and for the greater good of the

situation, such as when he decided to replace Gen. David D. McKiernan '72, D.P.S. '04 as commander in Afghanistan.

“Gen. McKiernan is a very fine man and a very fine general,” says Gates. “When we established a new strategy in Iraq, we brought a new commander in to take charge at the beginning of that strategy, so that one commander would have the continuity to implement the strategy over a period of time. I believe that that is important to do in Afghanistan as well,” he explains. “And so the decision did not involve any dissatisfaction at all with Gen. McKiernan, but better to have a commander there from the very beginning who can implement for a protracted period of time rather than change commanders six or 10 months after the new strategy was implemented. I believe Gen. McKiernan will retire with great honor and dignity and he should have the respect and gratitude of the American people.”

War strategy must evolve with tomorrow's war. The tactics have changed and so must the response, which means everything from strategy to how we spend our defense budget. “[War is] going to be very different than what war looked like in the past,” says Gates. “We've in the past thought of conventional war and asymmetric war or unconventional war, or low-intensity conflict. In the future these are all going to blend together and we are going to have what I call complex hybrid warfare — all aspects of which are lethal.

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Secretary Gates talks to Marines deployed to Camp Leatherneck located on Field Operating Base Bastion, Afghanistan, during a recent trip to southwest Asia May 7, 2009.



“For example, you could have a terrorist who is at the low end, if you will, of the conflict with a weapon of mass destruction and so just as lethal potentially as a state actor. By the same token you will have state actors who are using asymmetric tools to attack us where we are most vulnerable. They have learned enough from the first and second Gulf wars — they are not going to come at us head on, I think, but they are going to seek to exploit us where we have vulnerabilities.

“Conflicts will slide up and down a scale and we will be in multiple conflicts simultaneously in different places. I think this is a challenge that’s going to face the nation for a long time to come.”

Even if it requires facing tough questions from Congress on cutting spending in one area to move it to another, Gates remains ever vigilant in doing what is best for the troops.

“Our men and women in uniform are the nation’s greatest strategic asset and they are the first priority,” he says. “As the chairman of the joint chiefs has said, ‘If we don’t get the people part of the business right none of the other decisions matter.’ So people are the top priority, period.”

Responsibility for human life carries with it a heavy weight. To escape the stress of his position as secretary of defense, Gates reads voraciously, alternating between fiction and nonfiction. Currently, he is reading a new book by the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard Haass — *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*. He

also enjoys novels by James Patterson and David Baldacci.

Gates dealt with academic stress quite differently while he was at the College. There, he drove a school bus to take a break from the rigors of academics — two shifts for both elementary and high school students. “I would have driven that bus for nothing,” he says. “Considering the intensity of being a college student and studying for exams and everything else, being able twice a day to spend a couple hours with elementary kids was actually a huge relief. They were a lot of fun and we did a lot of crazy things. It was very relaxing for me. Driving the high school route was much less so.”

To keep the students in line on the bus, he had to resort to tactics that today might be considered politically incorrect. “I found that if I had a disciplinary problem with a sixth-grade girl there was nothing more effective seating her between two first-grade boys or similarly a first-grade boy sitting between two sixth-grade girls. And I had the boys sit on one side of the bus and the girls sit on the other side,” he says. “I found that it kind of cut discipline problems in half.”

What’s next for Secretary Gates? “Retirement,” he says emphatically. “To home in the Pacific Northwest. [It has] mountains, water and cool summers,” he says. “It’s also as far from Washington, D.C. as I can get in the continental United States, which was not an inconsiderable factor.” ■

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