

A Retrospective: Robert M. Gates U.S. Defense Secretary 2006-2011



Gates Thanks Troops, Bids Farewell

It's 110 degrees in the shade, and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates is answering questions from about 200 soldiers at a bleak U.S. installation near Kandahar, Afghanistan, in mid-June. At the end of the session, he tells them he has one more thing to say: "I've come out here to thank you for the last time for your service and for your sacrifice. More than anybody except the president, I'm responsible for you being here. I'm the person that signed the deployment papers that got you here. And that weighs on me every day."

It's tough for the secretary to get through this statement. He steps away from the microphone, and there are tears in his eyes. The soldiers in the audience -- from the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade -- are moved, as well. Gates receives prolonged applause. As he hands out commemorative coins to the troops, they thank him for his service and all he has done for them. "I've told friends that I would be more than happy if the only legacy I took away from this job is those kids out there in the field knew they had someone who was looking after them, all the time," Gates said in a recent interview with American Forces Press Service during his last trip to visit deployed troops.

Gates will retire as defense secretary June 30. The U.S. Senate has confirmed CIA Director Leon E. Panetta to take his place. It has been a sacred trust for the secretary to ensure the troops fighting the nation's wars have what they need to succeed. "If I had the knowledge that those [privates first class] and lance corporals, petty officers and airmen knew, that way up there in the chain of command there was somebody watching their back all the time, trying to figure out what they needed, that was most important to me," he said.

When Gates became defense secretary at the end of 2006, Iraq was gripped by a growing insurgency, and U.S. casualties were mounting. The Army and Marine Corps were being stretched almost to the point of breaking to maintain the level of forces in Iraq and, to a lesser degree, in Afghanistan. Something had to be done -- quickly. The secretary said he had to make four decisions very soon after taking office that still have ramifications.

- "The first was the decision, which I actually discussed in my interview with President

[George W.] Bush, to increase the Army by 65,000 and the Marine Corps by 27,000 to bring relief," Gates said. The Army and Marine Corps, he added, simply weren't big enough at that time to handle all the missions assigned to them.

- The second decision was part and parcel of the Iraq surge, and that was extending all Army deployments in U.S. Central Command to 15 months. "That was a really difficult decision and the [Joint Chiefs of Staff] chairman, [Marine Corps Gen.] Pete Pace, the vice chairman, [Navy Adm.] Ed Giambastiani, the Army chief of staff, everybody was telling me that I had to do this to provide some stability for the troops," he said. Gates was convinced that the only way he could give the troops a year at home, given the surge, was to extend the deployed tour to 15 months. "If we didn't do that," he explained, "we would be down to six or seven months at home and still have a year to 15-month tours." Gates knew this decision would be hard on the troops and their families, and even today, he thinks officials underestimated how painful and difficult that was for everybody. "That decision is a burden that I've never put down," he acknowledged.
- The secretary's next decision was to "regularize" the use of the National Guard and to try to get it to the point where they were being deployed as units. "I particularly personalized it with the [explosive ordnance disposal] guys," the secretary said. "You know, if I'm in that kind of a business, I'd sure as hell like to know the guy next to me, and have trained with him and have confidence and trust in him, instead of some guy from a different state I just met two weeks before we deployed."
- Gates' final decision at that time involved the cessation of the so-called stop-loss policy which involuntarily extended service members' time in the military, the secretary recalled. "I said, 'We have to get rid of stop-loss,' and I kind of tied it to the increase in the end strength of the Army," which had almost 25,000 soldiers stop-lossed, he said. "I felt that stop-loss was a break in the contract, a breach of trust," Gates said. "As far as I'm concerned, once we announce a decision, it's a commitment to the troops. Then, for bureaucratic reasons, someone will come back later and try to make exceptions -- extending this or doing that. That's breaking our word to the troops. No wonder none of them trust any one of us up the chain of command, because we can't be counted on to keep our word once we've given it to them.

"So, I have felt very, very strongly about that the whole time I've been in this job," he added. "Once we've made a commitment to these men and women, we have a huge obligation to keep."

Gates Overcomes Obstacles in Iraq, Afghanistan

The whole time Robert M. Gates has served as defense secretary, the nation has been at war on two fronts. When Gates came on board in December 2006, his focus initially was on Iraq, where sectarian violence threatened to rip the country apart. He then shifted his attention to Afghanistan, where the Taliban regained the initiative while the United States was

preoccupied with Iraq. Gates was the man President George W. Bush tapped to retrieve the situation in Iraq. The secretary was familiar with the situation on the ground. As a member of the Iraq Study Group, he had traveled in the country and spoke with U.S. and Iraqi leaders. He had met with the troops doing the heavy lifting and taking the casualties in Baghdad, Tikrit and Anbar province.

The day after Gates took office, he boarded an aircraft for Baghdad and consulted with U.S. and Iraqi leaders. It was the first of 13 visits to Iraq as defense secretary. "I had three priorities when I arrived: ... Iraq, Iraq and Iraq," the secretary said during a recent interview with American Forces Press Service. As the surge troops arrived in Iraq, violent incidents rose to 500 per week, and American casualties climbed along with them. The secretary had to convince Congress to stay the course and that it was essential to American security that people not perceive the United States had lost in Iraq. In one instance, he cancelled a trip to Latin America to be available to talk to U.S. senators who were wavering in their support for Iraq.

Despite initial doubt from some, the surge worked. At its height, there were more than 166,000 American service members in Iraq. By the summer of 2007, leading indicators in Iraq showed progress: the number of "no-go" neighborhoods was declining and violence was going down. The "Anbar Awakening" formed the Sons of Iraq security force and gave the Iraqi government breathing room to establish control and provide much needed governance and economic growth.

Now that Iraq is relatively peaceful and fewer than 50,000 American troops remain in the country as trainers for Iraqi security forces, it is easy to forget how dangerous the situation was. With American service members bearing the brunt of the fighting, Gates dedicated himself to getting the troops in place and providing the resources they needed to be successful. Improvised explosive devices cut through even up-armored Humvees, causing terrible casualties. Gates made it a priority to get mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles to the front. During one visit to Anbar province, U.S. Marines there showed Gates an MRAP that had survived 20 attacks – none of which injured anyone inside. He returned to the United States determined to break through the bureaucratic inertia that had stymied procurement of the life-saving vehicles.

The surge allowed the Iraqi security forces to learn their trades and become effective. American and coalition trainers worked with the Iraqi army and police to hone their fighting and peacekeeping skills. And it was successful. The Iraqi army that pacified Basra was a well-led and confident force operating with U.S. air and logistics support. Iraq is on its way to being a stable democracy in an area in need of stability. But some wonder if it can stay that way without American help after Dec. 31 when U.S. forces are scheduled to leave. The outcome in Iraq remains a cliffhanger, Gates said, noting that with the exception of radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, Iraqis in influential positions know the country will still need some U.S. help. "All the evidence we have, all the political leaders in Iraq -- with the exception of Sadr -- want us to stay for training and to have a presence," Gates said, "and we're prepared to do that." The secretary added that he believes it will happen. "It'll be ugly, it'll be at the last minute, and it'll create all kinds of hassles for us

logistically, but I think they see it as very much in their interest, and so do we," he said. "It's just a matter now of getting the ball across the goal line, and I think the conversations are about to begin, and most of the leaders are more forthright with us than they were in the past.

Even as conditions improved in Iraq, they were deteriorating in Afghanistan. American troops and their Afghan allies drove the Taliban from power in 2001. Many Taliban and their al-Qaida allies sought haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. There were few American and coalition forces in Afghanistan and the effort to train the Afghan national security forces lagged. The Afghan army was making progress, but training police was a problem. In 2008, Gates and Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called Afghanistan "an economy of force" mission – meaning there were enough troops to maintain the presence, but not enough to be effective. The Taliban took advantage of this and began infiltrating back into their strongholds in the southern part of the country. Kandahar City and Helmand province were particular strongholds. In January 2009, when President Barack Obama took office, there were 35,000 U.S. service members in Afghanistan. Gates stressed that the United States could not abandon Afghanistan as it did following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The lack of U.S. involvement led to the rise of the Taliban and gave al-Qaida a place to plan their attack on America on 9-11.

Obama sent more troops and materials to Afghanistan, and worked with national security leaders to devise a strategy and assess the requirements for implementing it. In December 2009, Obama announced the strategy during a speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. He would send a surge of forces into the country – 33,000 Americans and 10,000 coalition partners, and increase trainers for Afghan soldiers and police. The additional troops began moving into Afghanistan in January 2010 and the last of the surge brigades –the 101st Airborne Division's 4th Brigade – arrived in August.

The increase in the number of U.S. soldiers and U.S. Marines was felt almost immediately. The Marines took the fight to the Taliban in their strongholds in the Helmand River Valley. Marja, Lashkar Gah and Sangin were cities where the Taliban enforced their will and the Marines took them on and drove them out. In Kandahar province, the Arghandab district and areas south and west of Kandahar city were wrested from Taliban control. And that progress has continued. In July 2010, Gates took a stroll through the main street of Now Zad – a place he could not have walked through a few months earlier. The much improved security has brought out Afghan entrepreneurs and the main street is lined with shops and bustling with people. Afghan troops are taking over security responsibility from the coalition in many of these areas. The provincial and district governments are coming together and putting in place programs to encourage development. The coalition and their Afghan allies have taken the momentum back and this fighting season will be crucial to holding their gains, Gates said. He added that he believes the Taliban must understand they have been decisively beaten before they seriously attempt reconciliation with the government. As the secretary leaves office, there are 100,000 American service members serving in Afghanistan. That number will go down as Afghan forces take on security responsibility.

The Secretary's Unfinished Business

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has served for four-and-a-half years -- longer than all but four of his predecessors -- but he still has some unfinished business. Gates remains concerned about the treatment of wounded warriors. He regularly visited Walter Reed Army Medical Center here, the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, the site of the Defense Department's burn center. At Brooke, he said, he noticed the effect of the mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles he had worked so hard to field quickly. "One of the advantages of the MRAP is, compared to the first year I was in this job, the burn unit is almost empty," he said. "So many of these kids were getting horribly burned in the Humvees. The last time I was in Brooke there was no one to see in the burn unit. "It may be the worst ride in the world -- I think it may be like an old buckboard," he continued. "But it has saved lives."

Fiscal challenges remain for the department. Health care costs are skyrocketing -- from \$19 billion in fiscal 2001 to \$51 billion this year. "It's eating the department alive," Gates said. He doesn't disagree with those who say the significantly lower cost of the TRICARE military health care plan for working-age retirees is one of the benefits of their service. But nobody made any promise that it would never change, the secretary said. Annual premium costs for working-age retirees could go to \$520 from \$460 and then be indexed to keep the costs at one-seventh, one-eighth or one-ninth what their civilian counterparts pay for health plans, he said. "I've got no problem with retirees paying a fraction as part of their benefit, but there's nothing to say it has to stay at the same dollar figure forever," Gates said. "The department simply can't afford it. There's just no two ways around it."

Rumors have the department changing service member compensation as part of its belt-tightening, but this is not true, Gates said. "I'm actually more intrigued by some of the possibilities on retirement and on working-age retiree health care than I am on compensation," he said. "The truth is, the retirement system as it exists today really is not fair to about 70 to 80 percent of the force, which does not [serve the length of time necessary to] retire."

The system also works against good personnel processes, Gates noted. Lieutenant colonels or Navy chief petty officers are at the top of their games at the 20-year mark of their service, he said, with excellent skills and an enormous ability to contribute. "We make it impossibly attractive for them to retire," he said. But any change to retirement would have to be grandfathered, Gates said, so no one in the service today is affected. In addition, the secretary said, there should be something for the 70 to 80 percent of those who serve and walk away with nothing -- a 401(k) for example. "When they leave at five or 10 years [now], they walk out the door empty-handed," he said. "What kind of reward is that? This is where we are behind the entire private sector."

With his own retirement nearly at hand, Gates said, he may not be in office when the process of implementing repeal of the law that bans gay men and lesbians from serving openly in the military reaches the point of certification that the military is ready. "On 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' I've basically told the services to keep moving," he said. "We want to do this as fast as we possibly can. I don't want to rush it just so I can sign it. I also don't want to push it off so

I don't have to sign it. I'm basically letting the process go, and if it's ready for me to certify before I get out of here, I will. If it's not ready, that will fall to my successor."

During his last visit to Afghanistan as defense secretary, Gates met in town hall-style gatherings with troops -- something he didn't do during his first two years in office. "I always felt they were staged, and I didn't think I'd get candid questions," he explained. "The one thing I have never been willing to do in this job is use troops as props. You'll never find me in an event with troops behind me on the stage. It always makes me nervous. Another thing I don't like about town halls is how long they have to be there before I get there. They'd rather be in bed."

Gates gets candor from lunches he has with junior service members at bases at home and abroad. He gets questions and comments that run the gamut from personal to general. "I heard from an E-2 whose wife stepped on a nail and was refused treatment at a military facility because she wasn't on TRICARE Prime or something," he said. "I went absolutely nuts when I got back home, and I think we got that problem fixed. "The funniest one I've heard about a number of times is the weak crotches in the [Army combat uniforms]," he added. "I loved the comment one of the kids made. He said, 'You know, it's not too bad in the summertime, but in the winter, it can get to be a problem.'"

The lunches are totally off the record and no one from the chain of command attends. "That really rubs them raw," Gates said. "But they really have nothing to worry about. In four-and-a-half years, I've never had a kid say something negative about his commander. "I am more candid with these young people than I am with anyone else," he added. "It's because I trust them and believe in them. They are the only thing I will miss about this job."

Gates Details Efforts to Change Pentagon Culture

When he first took office, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates had no intention of changing the culture of the Defense Department. He was focused almost exclusively on the war in Iraq. During his two years with the Bush administration, he did tee up "broader issues that needed to be addressed by my successor, and punted those to my successor," Gates recalled. But he found himself on the receiving end of those punts, he said, when President Barack Obama asked him to stay on as defense secretary.

"The major, more dramatic steps that I took during the first term that went after the institution were really to just try and get things to the troops," Gates said. This started with the wounded warrior issue at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here and then the mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles needed to protect deployed troops from roadside bombs. He also pushed to improve battlefield medical evacuation and to get more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities into the combat theater. "But I became increasingly frustrated during that period with the inability to get any of those things done within the usual organization," the secretary said. He began thinking about what needed to be fixed, how to build more agility in the system, how to make people more realistic, and how to impose more discipline in what the department buys. "So that really teed up the agenda,

once I was given renewed lease to begin tackling these broader issues," he said.

So he went after the culture in the Pentagon, particularly the part of it that developed over 10 years of having an open checkbook. "I knew it was going to slam shut, because we already in 2008 were in economic crisis, and it seemed evident to me that there were going to be pressures on the defense budget," Gates said. "It seemed to me that in order to preserve the money for current needs and future modernization, we had to be very disciplined about looking at the programs that we had." Again, it began with questions: Are these programs working? Did they have any prospect of working? Did the original concept of how to use them make sense any longer? Could they be sustained? "That led to the 33 initiatives in April 2009," the secretary said.

"Next, it was, how can we begin to reduce overhead and be more disciplined in our spending to ensure that the tooth part of the Pentagon got the 2 to 3 percent real growth that it absolutely requires?" When Obama handed down direction for the Pentagon to find \$400 billion in savings over 12 years, it caused further soul searching in the building. Gates wants these cuts done very specifically with the realization by all parties that "salami cutting" -- percentage cuts across all activities -- would mean hollowing out the force. Gates ordered a comprehensive review of the department to find these cuts in the least damaging way. He said that any cuts involve tradeoffs between acceptable risks and defense capabilities that could be sacrificed. "I am determined that we will not repeat what we did in the 1970s and, to a lesser extent, in the 1990s, which is across-the-board cuts that end up hollowing out the force," he said.

Changing the culture continued by creating a new process for input from the services and combatant commanders, Gates said. He moved away from a semiannual meeting of defense leaders to more frequent discussions. "The combatant commanders believed their concerns were not paid attention to by the services," he said. "The key here was to bring the team together and get on the same page with the senior civilians and all the senior military leadership -- not just the chiefs, but the combatant commanders -- so all had an understanding of what we had to do and why we had to do it." Their regular involvement in the process changed the dynamic inside the building, the secretary said. "They had input into the process regularly," he said, "and I think that's one of the reasons the internal discipline was so extraordinary during this period."

It was highly unusual when Gates had all senior leaders involved in fiscal discussions sign nondisclosure agreements in the spring of 2009. "But the truth is I never had to have them sign them after that," he said. "They understood that we were all in this together, but they being involved in the process and knowing they had a way to make their views heard contributed. "If there has been a cultural change," he added, "it has been the internal cohesion across the services and between the uniforms and the civilians as we move this forward that is really quite profound."

Accountability is another hallmark of Gates' tenure in the Pentagon. When conditions for wounded warriors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center shocked America, Gates relieved the Army secretary, the Army surgeon general and the hospital commander. When an Air

Force B-52 mistakenly carried nuclear weapons from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., to Barksdale Air Force Base, La., he relieved the Air Force secretary and chief of staff. "It's pretty rare anywhere in Washington for someone at a senior level to be held accountable and to be held responsible, because they rarely lost their jobs," the secretary said. "It certainly got everybody's attention at a senior level."

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