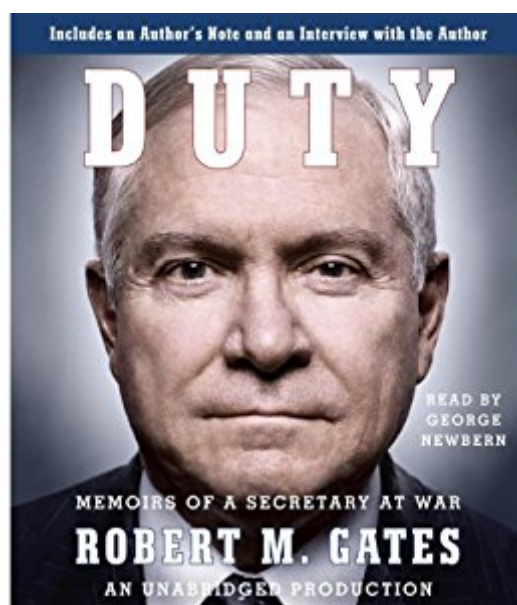


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# Duty: Memoirs Of A Secretary At War



## Synopsis

From the former secretary of defense, a strikingly candid, vivid account of serving Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. When Robert M. Gates received a call from the White House, he thought he'd long left Washington politics behind: After working for six presidents in both the CIA and the National Security Council, he was happily serving as president of Texas A&M University. But when he was asked to help a nation mired in two wars and to aid the troops doing the fighting, he answered what he felt was the call of duty.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

One paragraph from Gates is worth highlighting to encapsulate the book's overall theme - "I did not enjoy being secretary of defense. As soldiers would put it, I had too many rocks in my rucksack: foreign wars, war with Congress, war with my own department, one crisis after another. Above all, I had to send young men and women in harm's way." That quote frames what I believe to be the cathartic reasons that Gates wrote this book. I do not believe that he wrote this book for political reasons. The first two chapters chronicle those events which I feel set the tone for the rest of the memoir, namely, Gates' uncomfortable introduction to Washington politics in the midst of an unpopular conflict, having replaced an unpopular SecDef, as the Democratic Party in both houses flexes its newly gained clout. A significant portion of the third chapter is devoted to Iraq. It is also where Gates discusses his observations and opinions of prominent members of the Bush cabinet and military services. Chapter Four - entitled "Waging War on the Pentagon" - focuses on Gates'

struggles to overcome the entrenched bureaucracy within the Pentagon. Gates talks about Syria, Russia, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, China, North Korea, NATO, Eastern Europe, Georgia (Former Soviet Republic), and "of all things, piracy" in Chapter Five. The strongest points of this chapter are Gates' insights into his dealings with the Chinese, Russian and Israel leadership, as well as the somewhat symbiotic relationship between Israel and Iran. Chapter Six - entitled "Good War, Bad War" - examines the shifting operational/strategic perspective as the war in Iraq seemed to be going much better while the conflict that enjoyed strong bipartisan support, namely Afghanistan, seemed to be getting much worse. Gates' interaction with Vladimir Putin makes for more interesting reading. You will also find the author's perspective on the relief of the CENTCOM commander, Admiral Fallon, which highlights the fact that while administrations like candor from its military leaders, they don't like to read dissenting viewpoints in the national news. Chapter 7 is a bit like Chapter 3 (but shorter) in that Gates' once again looks inward when chronicling a series of events that both horrified (flying nuclear weapons around the United States and Dover mortuary issues), annoyed (aerial tanker contract and Congressional reactions to several confirmation hearings) and mildly amused him (Condoleezza Rice's reaction to a briefing on Somali pirates). He also presents his side of events leading to the replacement of the Air Force's senior leadership. In Chapter 8 ("Transition") Gates discusses how he walked a fine line between the incoming or outgoing administrations. He handles transition well, ably assisted by both the incoming and outgoing team, in a manner I can only describe as masterful. The title of Chapter 9 (New Team, New Agenda, Old Secretary) hinted at the first signs of stress between Gates and the new team in the White House. He has many words of praise for SecState Hilary Clinton, who instantly gains his respect and trust. This chapter also discusses inadequate aeromedevac in Afghanistan, the need to produce an MRAP variant suitable for that theater, more Wounded Warrior and family initiatives, approving the photographing of the arrival of fallen heroes at Dover, FY 2010 budget pains, Repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Iran, problems with USMC parochialism in Afghanistan, and a number of other related topics. Chapter Ten is where the narrative discloses that relationships are starting to fray. There are also problems between US diplomats and soldiers and the Afghan president. Gates adds considerably to the previous coverage (Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*) through his first-person observations. He also names who he believes to be Woodward's sources within the White House staff in an effort to explain the perspectives found in Woodward's account. Chapter Eleven (Difficult Friends, Difficult Foes) deals primarily with issues surrounding Iran, Israel, Russia, Vietnam, Bolivia, Pakistan, Korea (North and South), Wikileaks, and China during the 2009 - 2010 timeframe. He also reveals a disquieting session in the White House immediately following the earthquake in Haiti in which

mid-level White House staffers question the competence of the SOUTHCOM commanding general because the US military apparently cannot get a tremendous amount of aid to that stricken nation within a reasonable period of time. Ironically, the very scale of US military assistance prompted the French and Brazilians to complain about the United States acting like an occupying power. Chapter Twelve (Meanwhile, Back in Washington) discusses the disappointments experienced by Gates during this period. He observes that, "After the assurances from the president and Rahm (Emanuel) that they would oppose congressional action before the [Don't Ask, Don't Tell] review was completed, I felt there had been a breach of faith by the White House." Disappointment surfaces again during the FY budget development cycle. The chapter, however, does not concentrate exclusively on these events. Gates also discusses how once again he has to energize the DOD bureaucracy when the services and OSD fail to keep pace with enemy IED developments in Afghanistan. The first half of Chapter Thirteen (War, War, and Revolution.....) seemed, oddly enough, somewhat anti-climactic. It covers the removal of the US Ambassador to Afghanistan - Karl Eikenberry and the relief of General Stanley McChrystal, ISAF commanding general, but in a way that seemed familiar. It was one of the few sections where I did not find myself repeatedly thinking "I didn't know that!" The second half of the chapter, which deals with the revolutions in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, etc. evoked diametrically opposite reactions as I eagerly absorbed a great deal of detailed information about those landmark events. During the discussion prior to our Libyan intervention, you learn that stereotypes are made to be broken as the military chiefs and Gates initially argue against using airpower to assist the Libyan rebels while staffers and advisors with academic or political backgrounds push for the use of military force. Unlike Afghanistan, it does not take long for President Obama to come to a decision. Chapter Fourteen is where I am going to wind up my chapter summary. It covers the last months of Gates' tenure, focusing on his final trips to Russia (where he had a much better reception than in 2007, although the Russians were concerned about American involvement in aiding the Libyan revolutionaries - which blew back in our faces in Syria where the Russians counseled against our involvement), to China, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The world tour accounts segues into a discussion of military and defense succession covering the changing of the guard within DoD (Panetta replaces Gates), CIA (Petraeus replaces Panetta), ISAF (Allen replaces Petraeus), Afghan ambassador (Crocker replaces Eikenberry) and CJCS (Marty Dempsey replace Mullen). Gates' account of the Bin Laden Raid follows next. After initially coming out against a direct action strike, Gates was persuaded to support the raid. Within an hour after Gates informed Obama of his change of heart, the President approved the operation. The chapter ends with another discussion of bruising budget battles and his final trips to Iraq and Afghanistan.

found the book fascinating, informative, and plausible. That said, I would plead guilty to allowing my having read Donald Rumsfeld's memoir to influence my five star rating for Gates' much more candid account.

Years from now, this will be a valuable book for historians. I found it informative, but it can be a long read. I thought about why, even though it has some interesting facts and anecdotes, it was not the type I would say I can't put down until it's finished. Then, I realized the answer. Having been a former Army officer, it jumped out at me at one point: this reads much like after action reports I would often have to review. Most compelling histories and biographies/autobiographies maintain a strong story narrative in each chapter. While the book had good chronological breaks, it didn't give a full sense of an underlying theme. Again, it's an interesting read and it will hold your attention if you enjoy material about politics along with the ups and downs of both presidential administrations. I also believe it is fair and balanced as can be for someone who was in his position. In the end, I would be amiss, though, if I didn't say "Thank you, Secretary Gates, for your service. We need more like you."

Robert Gates has a doctorate in Russian and Soviet history and has worked under eight presidents. Gates served for 26 years in the CIA and NSC, and under Bush I became Director of Central Intelligence. After leaving the CIA he became president of Texas A&M University, leaving there to replace Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense. Author Gates then spent four and a half years as Secretary of Defense under both Presidents Bush and Obama. His memoir, 'Duty,' details decision making in both those administrations. While Gates didn't keep a diary himself, he was able to draw upon 40 books of notes by Geoff Morrell, former ABC White House correspondent who was Pentagon press secretary at the time. What's surprising about Gates' book is that, after a lifetime of keeping personal opinions to himself, he's so candid now. Obama is described as 'the most deliberative president I worked for,' and 'refreshing and reassuring' in his structured approach to decision-making, while Bush II as impossible to dissuade from convictions he held about Iraq. As for Afghanistan vs. Obama, Gates contends that while there was no doubt about the president's support for the troops, Obama also suspected he was being 'gamed' by the military into supporting their requests. Thus, Obama was in the position of not trusting General Petraeus - his commander there, disliking Afghanistan's president Karzai, feeling the war wasn't his, and primarily simply wanting to get the U.S. military out of there. Hillary Clinton, though 'smart, idealistic but pragmatic, tough-minded,' disappointed Gates with her admitting her opposition to the 2007 Iraq surge was

based on her assessment of domestic politics in her ill-fated run for the presidency. (Gates also notes that Obama did likewise.) Unfortunately, while Gates found Obama's decision-making approach laudable, he also found the president ill-served by some key advisors (eg. V.P. Joe Biden, Samantha Power - a 'humanitarian interventionist' on the national security staff, Tom Donilon - national security advisor, Denis McDonough - WH chief of staff, Ben Rhodes - deputy national security adviser). Neither Bush I nor Obama had good relationships with Congress or worked to establish 'close personal relationships with other world leaders.' More worrisome, to Gates, was the fear that Israel and Saudi Arabia would push Bush I into either direct war with Iran or supporting Israeli 'unilateral' action. (This was after also pointing out that Bush's Afghanistan strategy was 'historically naïve. As for his predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld - a man who prided himself on excellent leadership skills, Gates saw 'amazing bungling after the initial military success (in Iraq).'

Gates is more pointed in his criticisms of the \$700 billion/year Pentagon - for example, the various services pursuing their own interests, even if this including pursuing technology systems unable to communicate with each other. But Congress, unsurprisingly, gets the worst ink of all - 'broad dysfunction,' 'truly ugly,' 'most of Congress as uncivil, incompetent at fulfilling their basic constitutional responsibilities, micro-managerial, parochial, hypocritical, egotistical, thin-skinned, and prone to put self before country.' As for himself and why he retired from the job, Gates cites the emotional toll brought upon himself from visiting the wounded, writing individualized condolence letters, signing orders sending units overseas.' Obama's sudden decision to implement 'don't ask, don't tell,' his inability to trust that the administration would hold to agreements, the sense that 'discussions in the Situation Room allowed no room for discriminating analysis,' a sense that both Biden and Obama were unnecessarily distrustful of the military, and the feeling that others were trying to do his job also grated on the secretary. In fact, he flat out admits he 'did not enjoy being Secretary of Defense.' Nonetheless, he fought for the troops - buying mine-resistant vehicles over the objections of some generals, forcing the Air Force to scale back plans to buy high-tech fighter jets and boost spending on surveillance drones, and insisting that every wounded soldier would receive treatment w/l an hour of injury - when military doctors said two hours was good enough. Gates also lobbied for the Iraq surge and helped sustain Republican support for its implementation, as well as McChrystal's request for a similar surge in Afghanistan. Perhaps most importantly - 'Too many ideologues call for U.S. force as their first option.' Gates is referring to individuals on both sides of the aisle. Regardless, then-Ambassador Ryan Crocker (Iraq), per Gates, is proving prescient in predicting a humanitarian disaster on the scale of Rwanda . . . open the way to al Qaeda to return to ungoverned spaces . . . and open the way for Iran' if the U.S. left Iraq. It

doesn't look any better in Afghanistan either. It also seems like Robert Gates was involved in a number of wars - with the Obama Administration, Congress, and top military leaders, and always fighting for the troops.

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