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Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. New York: Knopf, 2014. Pp. x, 618. ISBN 978-0-307-95947-8.

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Thomas Ricks has called *Duty* “probably one of the best Washington memoirs ever.”¹ I concur, but not for the reasons Ricks or other reviewers have cited. A friend astutely described the book to me as “history’s first draft.” Robert Gates has written—from the heart and with little apparent editing—an expansive memoir replete with surprising opinions, lapses in logic, emotional swings, insights into politics in the Pentagon and the national security community generally, fascinating evaluations of daunting foreign policy problems, and frank acknowledgments of personal failures.

In the days immediately after the book’s release, the media (and hence the general public) fixated on Gates’s reaction to President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s admissions that, as presidential candidates, they had opposed the surge in Iraq for purely political reasons. “To hear the two of them making these admissions, and in front of me, was as surprising as it was dismaying” (376). Given the outrage Gates expresses elsewhere in the book, this is barely the raising of an eyebrow and hardly represents his overall evaluation of either Obama or Clinton. Nor is it earth-shattering news that Gates admires neither Rep. Nancy Pelosi nor Sen. Harry Reid.

In a much more telling, yet unremarked on, passage just seventeen pages later, Gates describes the formulation of policy toward Israel and Iran in early 2010. Writing of one session, he recalls that “I was put off by the way the president closed the meeting. To his very closest advisers, he said, ‘For the record, and for those of you writing your memoirs, I am not making any decisions about Israel and Iran. Joe [Vice President Joseph Biden Jr.], you be my witness.’ I was offended by his suspicion that any of us would ever write about such sensitive matters” (393). The striking irony of his writing at great length here about exactly “such sensitive matters” altogether escapes the former Secretary of Defense. *Duty* is full of similar inconsistencies, but therein lies one of the memoir’s strengths—its blunt, artless, warts-and-all honesty.

Another problematic aspect of the book is its evaluation of Washington politics. Gates especially decries the divisive political climate so painfully evident in his pre-confirmation hearings: “I had anticipated the partisan divide but not that it would be so personal with regard to the president and others in the administration. I had not expected members of both parties to be so critical of both civilian and military leaders in the Pentagon” (14–15). But he soon learned that partisan strife could serve a useful purpose regarding the war in Iraq. “Everything depended on the Republican minority in the Senate holding firm in using that body’s rules to prevent legislative action by a now Democratic-controlled Congress to impose deadlines and timelines that would tie the president’s hands” (50). In short, Washington’s dysfunctional atmosphere sometimes well suited his own purposes.

A more substantive example of Gates’s political bias comes in his story of Gen. Norton Schwartz’s difficult confirmation as Air Force Chief of Staff. Congressman Mike Rogers (R-MI), the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, “called Schwartz to say he believed the general had misled him in 2003–4 as then-director of the Joint Staff when Rogers complained about unprotected arms caches in Iraq. He said he intended to so inform the White House and his congressional colleagues. A few weeks later, Senator [Carl] Levin [D-MI, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee] told me we needed to meet ... to discuss the Schwartz nomination” (245). In the ensuing meeting, both Levin and Sen. John Warner (R-VA), the committee’s ranking member, faulted Schwartz for his evasive answers in 2003 regarding the number of US soldiers that would have to remain in Iraq after combat operations ended. Describing his confirmation

1. “In Command,” *NY Times* (13 Jan 2014).

hearing, Gates writes that he “was inwardly steaming ... [and] did not believe for a second that Schwartz had tried to mislead anyone in 2003 and felt that the senators, especially Levin, at that time had placed him in an impossible position, in essence demanding that a staff officer offer an opinion on a matter over which he had no decision-making authority ... all to score political points against [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld and the president” (246). That is, Gates singles out the Democrat Levin for presenting obstacles to his nomination, but does not accuse the Republicans Rogers and Warner of doing the same or of trying to embarrass the previous administration. This sort of political double standard is typical of the memoir.

In the realm of civil-military relations,² Gates comments on a significant disagreement in early 2008 about how to deal with Iran between the White House, on the one hand, and, on the other, CENTCOM commander Adm. William J. “Fox” Fallon and Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Michael “Mike” Mullen. In the middle of this debate, the *New Yorker* published an interview in which Adm. John M. “Mike” McConnell, director of national intelligence, averred that waterboarding was torture, prompting President George W. Bush to ask Gates, “What is it with these admirals?” Later, Fallon told Gates he had given an interview to *Esquire* that might embarrass the president, as indeed it did. The article implied that “only Fox Fallon was keeping Bush from attacking Iran.” A few days later, the president asked Gates, in Mullen’s presence, “Do we have a MacArthur problem? Is he [Fallon] challenging the commander in chief?” (187). In the circumstances, not an unreasonable question.

By contrast, in November 2009, after a lengthy and contentious internal debate regarding Afghanistan policy,

there was an exchange that was seared into my memory. Joe Biden said he had argued for a different approach and was ready to move forward, but the military “should consider the president’s decision an order.” “I am giving an order,” Obama quickly said. I was shocked. I had never heard a president explicitly frame a decision as a direct order. With the American military, it is completely unnecessary.... Obama’s order, at Biden’s urging, demonstrated, in my view, the complete unfamiliarity of both men with the American military culture. That order was ... proof positive of the depth of the Obama White House’s distrust of the nation’s military leadership. (383)

Gates, of course, is correct that President Obama’s statement “I am giving an order” was superfluous. But, given the president’s well founded belief that the military had been trying to “jam” him on Afghanistan, it was entirely understandable. In any case, it showed no more disrespect for the military than had President Bush wondering whether he had a “MacArthur problem,” which neither shocked Gates nor remained “seared” into his memory.

Gates applies different standards to the presidents he served, especially regarding their responses to military advice. “In making the decision to surge [in Iraq], Bush listened closely to his military commander in the field, *his* [emphasis original] boss at Central Command, and the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff, giving them ample opportunities to express their views. Then he rejected their advice. He changed his secretary of defense and the field commanders and threw all his weight behind the new team and *his* [my emphasis] new strategy” (48).

This, of course, is the prerogative of the commander in chief. Unless, evidently, the president is Barack Obama. On 10 September 2009, Gates sent President Obama Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s recommendations for conducting the war in Afghanistan. To Gates’s consternation, the president’s national security team quickly raised concerns. Considering McChrystal “the most lethal and most successful counterterrorism [CT] practitioner in the world” (364), Gates “was both astounded and amused in the weeks to come as Joe Biden; his national security adviser, Tony Blinken; [Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan] Doug Lute; and others presumed to understand how to make CT work better than Stan did” (364). Apparently, a brief, intermittent stint in the Texas Air National Guard gave President Bush the requisite

2. Richard Kohn anticipates much of what Gates has to say on this subject in his essays “Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations,” *The National Interest* 35 (1994) 3-17, and “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” *Naval War College Review* 55 (2002) 8-59.

experience to reject the nearly unanimous recommendations of his military leadership and make wholesale changes in that leadership. By contrast, in Gates's view, the Obama team dare not question, let alone reject, the generals' recommendations.

Civil-military relations were strained by the issue of "jamming"—the belief of many in the Obama administration that flag officers were going public about national security debates in an effort to force the president to accede to the military's wishes. To be certain, this was a problem during the Bush administration, too. In July 2007, Admiral Mullen told reporters that the US military was "too stressed to take on Iran" (193). President Bush remarked to Gates that it "looked like Mullen was auditioning for a job with the next commander in chief" (193). Gates observes "I just couldn't understand the lack of political awareness by senior officers of the impact at the White House of their remarks to the press" (193).

This continued to be Gates's view of the military's public break with the Obama administration over Afghanistan policy. "Again and again, I tried to persuade Obama that there was no plan, no coordinated effort by the three military men to jam him. I said that if there had been a strategy to do that, they sure as hell wouldn't have been so obvious" (369). In other words, Gates expects his reader to believe that the highest ranking officers in the American military, men who routinely testified before Congress and spoke with the press, were so naïve about public relations and domestic politics that they did not realize they were—again and again—painting the president into a corner? Far more reasonable to conclude that they were actively jamming the president.

On 15 January 2009, barely twelve days after President Obama took office, the *New York Times* published an article outlining Gen. Ray Odierno's opposition to the administration's plans for Iraq (323). On 31 August, the *Washington Post* reported that General McChrystal "was preparing to ask for a significant increase in troop levels in Afghanistan," a request that did not reflect the White House position on the subject (353). On 4 September, the *Post* published an interview with Gen. David Petraeus in which he stated "It won't work out if we don't send a lot more [troops]" to Afghanistan (367). On 21 September, Bob Woodward published an article for the *Post* entitled "McChrystal: More Forces or Mission Failure." Though Gates himself concedes that he later learned the article was based, in part, on documents leaked to Woodward by members of McChrystal's staff, he still claims "I'd be very surprised if Stan knew about it" (368). Within days, the CBS television newsmagazine *60 Minutes* aired an interview with Gates in which he expressed the same sentiments; in a speech on 1 October in London, McChrystal "dismissed out of hand the option Biden was supporting" (368).

The press then adopted the obvious story line: the military was jamming the president. Many sources reported that, Gates writes, "a campaign [was] being mounted by the military to force acceptance of McChrystal's recommendations, and [White House Chief of Staff Rahm] Emanuel told me that, according to reporters, there were four different sources saying that McChrystal would quit if he didn't get his way" (369). This, then, was the context of the Obama administration's belief that the military leadership was actively trying to thwart the president.³

Gates consistently criticizes President Obama, his national security team, and particularly Vice President Biden for allowing domestic politics to play a part in setting the course in Afghanistan. He seems to have forgotten George C. Marshall's often cited belief that "A democracy cannot fight a Seven Years' War." By the time President Obama took office, the war in Afghanistan had lasted over eight years, with no end in sight. It should have come as no shock to Gates that politics significantly influenced the Obama administration's handling of the war. To cite one example, during policy discussions on Afghanistan in 2009, the vice president, according to Gates,

argued throughout the process, and would continue to argue, that the war was politically unsustainable at home. I thought he was wrong and that if the president remained steadfast and played his cards carefully, he could sustain even an unpopular war.... The president and his advisers all emphasized that before any more

3. Once again, Richard Kohn (*ibid.*) could have predicted the events Gates describes, and he certainly would not have attributed them to the naïveté of flag officers.

troops could be considered, we would have to show success and a change of momentum with the troops we had. I was stunned. The Democrats controlled both houses of Congress and the White House was running scared. The skepticism I could understand; the politics I couldn't. (342, 349–50).

Did Gates really think Democratic members of Congress, many of whom were openly skeptical about continuing the war in Afghanistan, would simply accede to the president out of party loyalty? They were far more likely to hand him an embarrassing political setback if their concerns went unaddressed.

Much the most interesting observation Gates makes about the influence of politics in military affairs comes in his wrap-up of the events that culminated in “the order”: “After the president’s announcement, I wrote a note to myself: ‘I’m really disgusted with this process, I’m tired of politics overriding the national interest, the White House staff outweighing the national security team.... I’m fed up.’” Yet, in the very next paragraph, he adds, “To be fair, though, national interest *had* trumped politics, as the president made a tough decision that was contrary to the advice of all of his political advisers and almost certainly the least popular of the options before him in terms of political constituents” (384). Notwithstanding the question of what precisely “the national interest” might be and who may define it, one wonders what so distressed the secretary—that there were other opinions in the room and that he actually had to participate in a vigorous debate about how to proceed in Afghanistan?

Gates does make acute observations concerning military and foreign affairs that should have provoked serious discussions and debates. For example, of the four military services, he found the Air Force to be the most parochial and least cooperative. He cites specifically Air Force intransigence regarding the control of drones: “There was an unseemly turf fight in the ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] world ... over whether the Air Force should control all military drone programs and operations. The Army resisted, and I was on its side; the Air Force was grasping for absolute control of a capability *for which it had little enthusiasm in the first place*” [my emphasis] (129).

Gates goes on to say that “The Air Force leadership didn’t accept the urgency of the need for ISR ‘down-range’ or the need to think outside of the box about how to get more” (130). Instead, nearly every time the Air Force Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force came to him “it was about a new bomber or more F-22s. Both were important capabilities for the future, but neither would play any part in the wars we already were in” (130). Well, maybe not so important, given that Gates “killed” the F-22,

an exquisite aircraft designed primarily to take on other fifth-generation aircraft (presumably Chinese) in air-to-air combat and penetrate and suppress sophisticated air defenses. But we had been at war for ten years, and the plane had not flown a single combat mission. I would ask the F-22’s defenders, even in the event of a conflict with China, where we were going to base a short-range aircraft like the F-22. Did its defenders think the Chinese wouldn’t destroy bases in Japan and elsewhere launching U.S. warplanes against them? (319)

No other service branch receives such an extended airing of its internal problems and the headaches they caused Gates (238–49).

Gates’s evaluation of American policy in the Middle East also deserves careful discussion. “During my time in the Bush administration ... I was worried about the influence of the Israelis and the Saudis in the White House.... [Vice President Richard “Dick”] Cheney had a very close relationship with both [nations’ leaders], so they had a direct pipeline into the White House” (183). Gates’s assessment of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, too, is unflattering. While serving in the George H.W. Bush administration, Gates had told National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft “that Bibi ought not be allowed back on White House grounds” (388). His attitude changed little during his time as secretary of defense, when he found himself “exasperated” with Netanyahu (397). He concludes that “Jerusalem needs to think anew about its strategic environment” (398). In other words, Israel and, by inference, the United States are pursuing a potentially disastrous path in the Middle East.

Gates also provides fascinating insights into the termination of plans to deploy a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. Critics at the time called this a “sell out” of Poland and the Czech Republic akin Neville

Chamberlain's at Munich.⁴ As Gates tells it, he merely "canceled a couple of big parts of the missile defense program that simply couldn't pass the giggle test" (319–20). He also insists that the Russians would never accept a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. "What I hadn't counted on," he writes, "was the political opposition to the missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic.... Our presumptive partners for missile defense were stiff-arming us" (167; see also 401–2).

The matter of Russia's reaction to missile defenses in Eastern Europe is especially critical given the events that transpired shortly after *Duty* was published.

What I didn't tell the president [Bush 43] was that I believed the relationship with Russia had been badly mismanaged after Bush 41 had left office in 1993. Getting Gorbachev to acquiesce to a unified Germany as a member of NATO had been a huge accomplishment. But moving so quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union to incorporate so many of its formerly subjugated states into NATO was a mistake.... U.S. agreements with the Romanian and Bulgarian governments to rotate troops through bases in these countries was a needless provocation.... Trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching. The roots of the Russian Empire trace back to Kiev in the ninth century, so that was an especially monumental provocation. Were the Europeans, much less the Americans, willing to send their sons and daughters to defend Ukraine and Georgia? Hardly. So NATO expansion was a political act, not a carefully considered military commitment, thus undermining the purpose of the alliance and recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests. (157–58)

Though he complains about US policy in the Middle East and toward Russia, Gates suggests no new path in either area.

Contrary to Thomas Ricks's assertions, the primary revelations of this important and meaty book⁵ have nothing to do with the sensational details regarding the relationships between President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and numerous members of Congress. Rather, this memoir by a veteran and perceptive Washington insider provides valuable insights into vital issues of national security and ought to have provoked a vigorous policy debate. That it has not and likely never will testifies to Ricks's and to others' interest in trivia over substance.

4. See, e.g., Luke Harding and Ian Traynor, "Obama Abandons Missile Defence Shield in Europe," *Guardian* (17 Sept 2009), Press Release: "Congressmen on Missile Defense Caucus Blast President Obama's Abandonment of European Missile Defense" (17 Sept 2009), and Michael Kuz, "The Abandoned Alliance," *National Review* (8 Aug 2012).

5. So dense and full of detail is the book that it is easy to lose track of the chronology. I often found myself flipping back many pages to make certain of the sequence of events. Simply put, *Duty* needs more dates in its text.