

## Book Review

# DUTY – MEMOIRS OF A SECRETARY AT WAR

Robert M. Gates

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The reader should note that this is not a typical review of the memoirs of the twenty-second United States (US) Secretary of Defence and that this review is written from a particular perspective that will be clarified below.

Robert M Gates was not a typical US Secretary of Defence. He is the only Secretary of Defence in the history of the United States (US) to be asked to remain in office by a newly elected president (Barack Obama). President George W Bush appointed him as replacement for Donald Rumsfeld at the end of 2006. Gates served Obama as Secretary of Defence until July 2011. On his last day in office, President Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the highest civilian award in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that *Duty* does not contain any analysis or discussion of US defence policy, military doctrine or reasons for going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Author's note at the beginning of the book contains an accurate description of the subject and the contents:

This is a book about my more than four and a half years at war. It is, of course, principally about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where initial victories in both countries were squandered by mistakes, short-sightedness, and conflict in the field as well as in Washington, leading to long, brutal campaigns to avert strategic defeat. It is about the war against al Qaeda

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and Osama bin Laden, those responsible for our national tragedy on September 11, 2001. But this book is also about my political war with Congress every day I was in office and the dramatic contrast between my public respect, bipartisanship, and calm, and my private frustration, disgust, and anger. There were also political wars with the White House, often with the White House staff, occasionally with the presidents themselves – more with President Obama than with President Bush. And finally, there was my bureaucratic war with the Department of Defence and the military services, aimed at transforming a department organized to plan for war into one that could wage war, changing the military forces we had into the military forces we needed to succeed.<sup>2</sup>

In the Author's note, Gates makes it quite clear that *Duty* is a personal account of what he experienced, thought and felt while interacting with role players from the institutions mentioned in the paragraph quoted above.<sup>3</sup>

The reviewer started reading *Duty* with little expectation of finding anything of relevance to the current South African (SA) defence issues. This assumption turned out to be wrong. Any reader of *Duty* will soon realise that Gates' political and bureaucratic 'wars' were caused to a large extent by budget-related disagreements. Gates' personal account allows the reader to understand his reasoning regarding defence spending. Some of what Gates writes about his reasoning could also apply to spending in South African defence. This finding provided the motivation for writing the book review from a particular and narrow perspective with a question in mind: Which of the points made by Gates might have a bearing on spending in the South African defence?

Gates makes his views clear regarding the considerations on which defence spending should (and should not) be based:

I urged that across-the-board cuts – the simplest and most politically expedient approach – should be avoided. Spending decisions should be based on hard choices focused on priorities, strategy, and risks.<sup>4</sup>

Gates mentions some of the considerations that should be taken into account when the hard choices focused on priorities, strategy and risks are made. These include an appraisal of national interests, of international obligations and of the international military security environment. It is interesting to note that Gates characterises the global security environment as "... becoming more complex, more turbulent, and in some instances, more dangerous and the military challenges more diverse".<sup>5</sup> One expects such an environment to discourage large decreases in defence spending.

There is an interesting implication of Gates' contention about the hard choices on which defence spending should be based, namely that spending choices necessarily imply (or logically amount to) certain choices regarding priorities, strategies and risks. This remains true even if decision-makers are unaware of (or refuse to acknowledge) the implicit choices. Defence spending choices imply that some military capabilities are funded and others are not. The military capabilities available to a commander will affect which strategies offer hope of success and which do not, given a particular military security environment.

It is possible to argue that Gates' contention (about the 'hard choices' on which defence spending should be based) amounts to nothing more than the application of good military common sense. If that is so, then it follows that Gates, despite his best efforts, failed to persuade President Obama to apply good military common sense. Consider in this regard the quote below. It contains excerpts of a speech that Gates gave in March 2011 (three months before his retirement) to the senior military and civilian leadership of the US Department of Defense. It makes Gates' reasons for rejecting the way defence spending decisions were made by the Obama administration crystal clear:

I am of the view that the budget pressures we are facing are not because of a conscious political or policy decision to reduce our defense posture or withdraw from global obligations. I think it reflects a rather superficial view that the federal government is consuming too much of the taxpayer's money and that as part of the government, we share an obligation to reduce that burden. The debate that is taking place is largely free of consequences and certainly from any informed discussion of policy choices. As I have said before, this is more about math, not strategic policy decisions. ... If the nation decides to cut defense spending, then that is a decision we will honor and carry out to the best of our ability. But we have an obligation to do everything we can to inform that decision with consequences, choices, and clarity on how such cuts should be done to protect the nation's interests. ... We had to force the politicians, I said, to face up to the strategic military consequences of their budget math. For once, we had to abandon the military's traditional 'can do' culture and make clear what we 'can't do'.<sup>6</sup>

The reader may wonder to whom Gates was referring when he used 'we' in the quote above. From the context, it is clear that he was referring to the secretary and senior staff of the US Department of Defense. He was reminding them, amongst other things, that their function or role included the obligation to make the

civilian decision-makers (the politicians) both aware of and take responsibility for the strategic military consequences of their defence spending decisions.

Gates relates asking Obama during a discussion of defence budget cuts to say what he wanted the Department of Defense to stop doing. Gates provides some of the arguments he used at that meeting:

I made the same argument to Obama that I had made to Daley and Lew: What did he (Obama) want us (the Department of Defense) to stop doing? I advised him to keep in mind that the enemy always gets a vote. Suppose, I said, once you make these cuts, Iran forces you into a real war? I spoke from the heart: The way we will compensate for force cuts today in the next war is with blood – more American kids will die because of our decisions.<sup>7</sup>

In the last sentence, Gates is referring to one of the worst possible results of cutting defence budgets. He may also have been referring to a military aphorism (“Save money now – spend more blood later”). Gates’ words may appear melodramatic, but one should bear the context in mind. When it comes to defence spending, spending less could actually have the kind of effect Gates is writing about. *Duty* includes a description of Gates’ efforts to find the funds for replacing Humvees on patrols in Iraq and Afghanistan with mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs).<sup>8</sup> His account also includes a description of his efforts to reduce the average medical evacuation time in Afghanistan from two hours to one.<sup>9</sup> Both of these cases were literally about spending more money in order to save lives.

It is interesting to speculate about the consequences of applying Gates’s reasoning to defence spending decisions in South Africa. Consider, for example, what might happen if a South African Secretary for Defence reacted to a request for a reduced budget by saying:

If you cut the defence budget by that amount, Minister, please select from this list a capability that you wish the SANDF to lose. The first item is abandoning our maritime air search and rescue capability. The second choice is ...

It is possible for policy statements (in the Defence Review, for example) to imply budgetary increases. It is interesting to speculate, for example, about the outcome if an SA Secretary for Defence responded to a policy statement about peacekeeping by saying:

Minister, if you desire increased SANDF participation in sub-Saharan peacekeeping missions, you will need a significant long-range airlift

capability. Acquiring and maintaining such a capability (four Airbus A400M Atlas aircraft, for example) will cost 600 million euro initially and about 120 million rand annually. If this amount cannot be added to the current Defence budget, you might have to abandon the idea of adding regional peacekeeping to the capabilities and missions of the SANDF.

It should be clear at this point that Gates' reasoning about the hard choices, on which US defence spending should be based, also applies to other (non-US) defence establishments, including the SANDF.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> RM Gates. *Duty: Memoirs of a secretary at war*. London: WH Allen, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 550–551.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 551.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119–126.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304–306.