

and Henry Kissinger ruled the roost. I had no problem with the White House and the NSS driving policy. As I had witnessed time and again, the big bureaucracies rarely come up with significant new ideas, and almost any meaningful departures from the status quo must be driven by the president and his national security adviser—whether it was Nixon and Kissinger and the openings to the Soviet Union and China, Carter and the Camp David accords, Reagan and his outreach to Gorbachev, or Bush 41 and the liberation of eastern Europe, reunification of Germany, and collapse of the Soviet Union.

Just as Bush 43 had driven the Iraq surge decision in late 2006, I had no issue with the White House and the NSS driving the policy reevaluation early in 2009 on Afghanistan. But I believe the major reason the protracted, frustrating Afghan review that fall created so much ill will was due to the fact it was forced on an otherwise controlling White House by the theater commander's unexpected request for a large escalation of American involvement. It was a request that surprised the White House (and me) and provoked a debate that the White House neither sought nor wanted, especially when it became public. I think Obama and his advisers were incensed that the Department of Defense—specifically the military—had taken control of the policy process from them and threatened to run away with it. That partly accounts for the increased suspicion of the military at the White House and the NSS. The Pentagon and the military did not consciously intend to snatch the initiative and control of war policy from the president, but in retrospect, I can now see how easily it could have been perceived that way. The White House saw it as a calculated move. The leak of McChrystal's assessment and subsequent public commentary by Mullen, Petraeus, and McChrystal only reinforced that view. I was never able to persuade the president and others that it was not a plot.

I had served in the White House on the National Security Staff under four presidents and had strong views as to its proper role. I had come to learn that White House/NSS involvement in operations or operational details is usually counterproductive (LBJ picking bombing targets in Vietnam) and sometimes dangerous (Iran-Contra). The root of my unhappiness in the Obama administration was therefore not NSS policy initiatives but rather its micromanagement—on Haitian relief, on the Libyan no-fly zone, above all on Afghanistan—and I routinely resisted it. For an NSC staff member to call a four-star combatant commander

or field commander would have been unthinkable when I worked at the White House and probably cause for dismissal. It became routine under Obama. I directed the commanders to refer such calls to my office. The controlling nature of the Obama White House, and its determination to take credit for every good thing that happened while giving none to the people in the cabinet departments—in the trenches—who had actually done the work, offended Hillary Clinton as much as it did me.

These issues did not begin under Obama. There has been a steady trend toward more centralized White House control over the national security apparatus ever since Harry Truman considered his principal national security advisers to be the secretaries of state and defense. (That they were Dean Acheson and George Marshall certainly helped.) But even Truman initially had opposed legislation creating the National Security Council, convinced that Congress was trying to impose “cabinet government” on him. Since then the presidential staff assigned to national security has increased many times over. As recently as the Scowcroft-led NSC staff in the early 1990s, professional staff numbered about fifty. Today the NSS numbers more than 350.)

The controlling nature of the Obama White House and the NSS staff took micromanagement and operational meddling to a new level. Partly, I think, it was due to the backgrounds and résumés of the people involved. For most of my professional life, top NSC positions went to people who may have aligned with one party or the other, but they had reputations in the foreign policy and national security arenas that predated their association with the president—either from academia (such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Condi Rice) or longtime service in the military, intelligence, or foreign policy arenas (such as Frank Carlucci, Jim Jones, Colin Powell, Steve Hadley, Brent Scowcroft, and me). Inevitably there were some politically or personally connected handlers as well, but they were the exceptions. Obama’s top tier of NSS people, though, was heavily populated with very smart, politically savvy, and hardworking “super staffers”—typically from Capitol Hill—who focused on national-security-related issues only as their careers progressed. This changed profile may explain, in part, their apparent lack of understanding of or concern for observing the traditional institutional roles among the White House, the Pentagon, and the operational military.

Stylistically, the two presidents had much more in common than I expected. Both were most comfortable around a coterie of close aides

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350  
NSS  
staff

forces?; and last, a bundle of possible changes in military compensation and benefits. While I told the department's senior leadership that I was not comfortable with a defense budget that would grow at only the rate of inflation for ten years, I went on to ask, "With every other agency of government on the chopping block, can we credibly argue that a \$400 billion cut (or 7 percent) from the over \$6 trillion presently planned for defense over the next decade is catastrophic and not doable?" I began including Panetta in meetings on these issues in early June, since he would lead the effort as of July 1. Happily, Leon and I saw eye to eye on the comprehensive review.

While fulfilling my responsibilities to the president inside the Pentagon, I used my last public speeches to warn Americans about the consequences of significant reductions in defense capabilities. In a commencement speech at Notre Dame on May 22, I said that we must not diminish our ability or our determination to deal with the threats and challenges on the horizon because ultimately they must be confronted. "If history—and religion—teach us anything," I warned, "it is that there will always be evil in the world, people bent on aggression, oppression, satisfying their greed for wealth and power and territory, or determined to impose an ideology based on the subjugation of others and the denial of liberty to men and women." I noted my strong support of "soft" power, of diplomacy and development, but reminded the audience that "the ultimate guarantee against the success of aggressors, dictators, and terrorists in the twenty-first century, as in the twentieth, is hard power—the size, strength, and global reach of the United States military."

Two days later I spoke at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank in Washington, where various scholars had been critical of the earlier program cuts I had made. Ironically, I was at AEI to warn against further cuts to defense. I told the audience I had spent the last two years trying to prepare our defense institutions for the inevitable decrease of the defense budget. When looking at our modernization programs, I said, "the proverbial 'low-hanging fruit'—those weapons and other programs considered most questionable—have not only been plucked, they have been stomped on and crushed." What remained was needed capabilities. Those programs, I warned, should be protected "unless our country's political leadership envisions a dramatically diminished global security role for the United States." I urged that across-the-board cuts—"the simplest and most politically expedient

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, MAY 2015

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Knopf edition as follows:

Gates, Robert Michael.

Duty : memoirs of a Secretary at war / by Robert M. Gates.

pages cm

Includes index

1. Gates, Robert Michael, 1943—
2. United States. Department of Defense—Officials and employees—Biography.
  3. Cabinet officers—United States—Biography.
  4. Iraq War, 2003–2011—Personal narratives.
  5. Afghan War, 2001—Personal narratives, American.
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8. Civil-military relations—United States—History—21st century.
  9. United States—Politics and government—2001–2009.
10. United States—Politics and government—2009—
  - I. Title.

II. Title: Memoirs of a Secretary at war.

E897.4P48B76 2012 355.6092—dc23 [B] 2013026348

**Vintage Books Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-0-307-94963-9**

**eBook ISBN: 978-0-307-95948-5**

*Book design by Cassandra J. Pappas*

[www.vintagebooks.com](http://www.vintagebooks.com)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1