

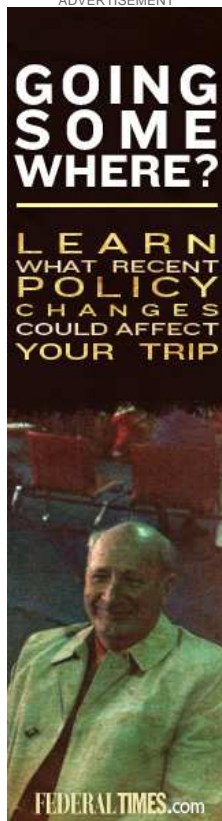


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## Robert Gates' Victory Lap

The Pentagon Wins, the Country Loses

By CHRISTOPHER PREBLE  
Published: 6 June 2011




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Before stepping down as U.S. secretary of defense in a few weeks, Robert Gates is taking a victory lap, warning the country - and implicitly, his successor, Leon Panetta - that cuts in military spending would increase risk to the force and the country. But the secretary exaggerates the threats facing us, and he misconstrues the benefits that we derive from our enormous military.

Most important, Gates focuses on the risk of spending too little without considering the risks associated with spending too much.

During his long tenure as defense secretary, Gates could have overseen a serious review of roles and missions; he refused, believing that he could fend off deep cuts in spending while preserving a military posture designed to defeat the Soviet Union. His failure to re-evaluate the purpose of the U.S. military merely postponed the inevitable day of reckoning and has increased the risk that our overburdened force will be asked to do more with less.

Gates has scored some successes and deserves credit for his willingness to ax a few unnecessary and costly weapon systems. These decisions, Gates likes to claim, saved more than \$300 billion. But that amounts to less than 5 percent of projected military spending over the next decade. Plus, a number of these programs were already slated for cancellation, the cuts might never materialize, and Gates intended that much of the savings from cuts be plowed back into the Pentagon, not returned to taxpayers or devoted to deficit reduction.

A military that costs less needs to be smaller and do less. Thankfully, we can cut military spending and reduce the burdens on the force without undermining U.S. security. Indeed, we are extraordinarily secure, by any reasonable measure.

What makes us secure? The combination of nuclear weapons and favorable geography. We can effectively rule out the prospect of land invasion (most countries can't), and a million-man amphibious operation from the sea is extremely unlikely. Any leader foolish enough to launch an overt attack on the United States would have to get past the Navy and the Air Force. These forces exist to deter attacks, and win a decisive military victory if deterrence fails.

Most of the growth in spending over the past decade, however, has gone to the Army and Marine Corps, to fight very different sorts of conflicts: nation-building operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that are indecisive by their nature. But as those missions draw to a close, both forces can be returned to pre-9/11 levels. After all, Gates has said that we are unlikely to attempt "forced regime change followed by nation-building under fire" any time soon.

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This wise judgment reflects the fact that such missions are enormously costly, unpopular with the American people and unlikely to achieve their stated objectives in a reasonable amount of time.

Most important, they aren't necessary. Good counterterrorism, which is to say effective counterterrorism, is cheap. It includes operations that have successfully degraded al-Qaida's capabilities over the past decade - like the one that killed Osama bin Laden. These occasionally rely on the precise application of force. But stationing 100,000 or more U.S. troops in Afghanistan, or anywhere else for that matter, is at best irrelevant, and often counterproductive.

The U.S. needs to focus its military efforts in a few key areas that are vital to U.S. national security, and call on other countries to do more for their own defense and in their respective regions.

Gates suggests that shedding certain roles and missions, and shifting burdens to others, entails intolerable risks. People in other countries might choose not to direct some money from generous social welfare programs to defense. Perhaps they will refuse to share some of the costs of keeping the oceans free from pirates, or fail to keep local troublemakers in their respective boxes.

According to Gates, that is a risk not worth taking. He seems to believe that every problem, no matter how small or distant, will inevitably arrive on our shores. Therefore, we cannot rely on other countries to do more - or anything, really - to defend themselves and their interests. As he told graduates at the University of Notre Dame, "make no mistake, the ultimate guarantee against the success of aggressors, dictators, and terrorists in the 21st century, as in the 20th, is hard power - the size, strength and global reach of the United States military."

But our military power doesn't do all that he says that it does, and understanding the limits of that power is both prudent and wise. The United States is an exceptional nation, but we are not the indispensable nation.

Today, American taxpayers provide half of the world's military spending, while our share of the global economy has fallen to less than one quarter. It isn't realistic to expect 5 percent of the world's population to bear these costs indefinitely. Gates seems to think that it is, or, at least, that there is no alternative. But if there is no alternative to U.S. power, then that is largely a problem of our own making. And it is one that we can solve.

Gates failed to do so; it is not clear that he even tried. Here's hoping that his successor does.

*Christopher Preble is director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and author of "The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free."*

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