



Opposing view: Robert Gates' disappointing legacy

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By Benjamin H. Friedman

Evaluating Robert Gates' tenure as secretary of Defense reminds me of a [Henny Youngman](#) gag. Someone would ask: "How's your wife?" Youngman's reply: "Compared to what?"

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Gates' best PR was his predecessor. [Donald Rumsfeld](#) offered an incoherent vision for the future of the military, and he patronized reporters and military commanders alike. Admittedly, Gates improved upon much of that. But compared with a secretary who would have pushed to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan and resisted the growth of the Pentagon's bloated budget in service of excessive global commitments, Gates disappointed.

Celebrations of Gates' managerial acumen ignore the bad policies it served. The most pernicious is the notion that our safety from the fractured and weak remnant of al-Qaeda requires indefinite nation-building campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. A better secretary would have questioned the need to reorder those nations, and the pretension that Washington has the power to do so at reasonable cost.

Gates instead backed surging forces to both countries. He has publicly pressured his administration to keep substantial forces in each. The bill for the surges, paid in blood and treasure, has been far higher than whatever security they bought us. That holds true even if you buy the myth that increased U.S. force was the cause of Iraq's diminished violence, or hawks' claims about Afghanistan's political progress.

Fans praise Gates' cancellation of wasteful weapons programs and speeches about fiscal discipline. But savings from those programs went not to taxpayers or deficits, but to a Pentagon that costs nearly \$700 billion a year and is still growing despite nearly doubling in the past decade. To prevent reductions in his budget, Gates exaggerated foreign threats, claimed that even mild cuts would hollow out the force, and derided those who suggested we save by defending fewer rich allies.

Some will say that serving the status quo was Gates' job; he gave presidents what they wanted. But Cabinet secretaries are critical shapers of the national agenda, not passive

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conductors of presidential whim. We should rate them not by how they implement policies, but by the policies they help make.

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