

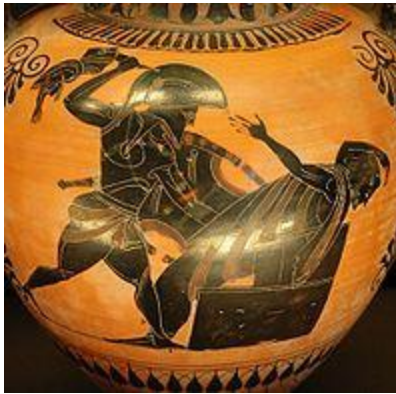


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Will the Real Robert Gates Please Stand Up?

Neoptolemus



Neoptolemus killing Priam

It's hard not to like the provocative nature of the SecDef's speeches—which often have serious messages and outright swipes at sclerotic bureaucratic habits. For example in his West Point speech, he talked over the heads of the cadets in the room and railed about the future as an “opportunity to attack the institutional and bureaucratic constipation of Big Army, and re-think the way it deals with the outstanding young leaders in its lower- and middle-ranks.”

Likewise, his advocacy for greater diversity and flexibility in careers and educational opportunities. “For example, instead of being assigned to new positions every two or three years,” Mr. Gates opined that officers could “apply for job openings in a competitive system more akin to what happens in large organizations in the private sector.” I really liked his public endorsement of Lieutenant General David Barno's proposals for Army reform and the need for tomorrow's smaller professional force to compete and retain the best talent as a “must do” for the incoming Army Chief of Staff.

But Mr. Gates has also a deliberate taste for rhetorical overstretch when he makes irritating if not dangerous comments on “likely” and implausible scenarios about the future use of military force.

His West Point speech basically told the Army that it need not plan, organize or equip itself for major wars in the future. Such statements commit numerous strategic and historical misstatements that are at odds with Mr. Gates' superstar status as a defense executive, and are actually more fitting of the junior Air Force intelligence officer he once was.

For example, this whopper "In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it."

Of course, neither of the last two Defense Secretaries actually advised a President to commit a large Army into our two current conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia. Such forces were ultimately required however, and it's the height of poor defense planning to try to suggest that the future will not pose other hostile adversaries or threats requiring large scale force commitments. Yes, these conflicts have been expensive and far more costly than predicted. But the lesson to be learned is not to embrace some "Iraqistan" version of the Vietnam syndrome.

That would be a false reading of past history, and a potentially dangerous limitation for future force planning. In fact, taken to its ultimate logic, comments like Mr. Gates probably make it more likely that some state will test the United States in the future predicated upon the reduced land force levels it produces and our lack of credibility.

Rather than learn the right lessons about the perils of force planning and embracing prudence and flexibility, we appear to be tempted now invest solely in the ways the U.S. would prefer to fight. Mr. Gates defaulted to the technologically based ways of Don Rumsfeld and re-embraced the aborted RMA and Transformation agenda with its emphasis on air and seapower. Well intentioned in terms of motive, but devoid of historically grounded reasoning.

Those recommendations are certainly at odds with another Washington official with the same last name who spoke at the National War College and wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* a few years ago. There Gates said that:

"War is inevitably tragic, inefficient, and uncertain, and it is important to be skeptical of systems analyses, computer models, game theories, or doctrines that suggest otherwise. We should look askance at idealistic, triumphalist, or ethnocentric notions of future conflict that aspire to transcend the immutable principles and ugly realities of war, that imagine it is possible to cow, shock, or awe an enemy into submission, instead of tracking enemies down hilltop by hilltop, house by house, block by bloody block."

So for those of us struggling to figure out where U.S. defense policy is going, will the real Robert Gates please stand up?

Neoptolemus, a retired infantry officer, is currently imprisoned as a senior defense official in the Pentagon. Neoptolemus was the son of the warrior Achilles and the princess Deidamia in Greek mythology.

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