



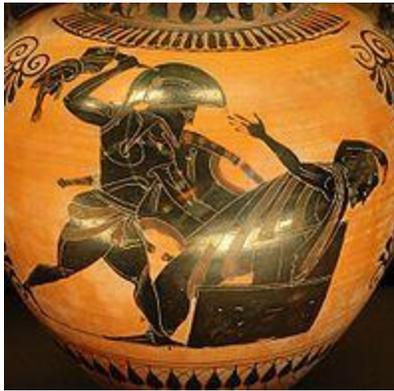
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## “Mr. Gates Doth Protest Too Much”

### Neoptolemus



Neoptolemus killing Priam

Mr. Gates continued his farewell tour with a strong speech at the Air Force Academy last week. Unlike his talk at the US Military Academy he did not talk over the student’s heads or treat them as tethered goats. Nor did he suggest that they’d wasted four years at the wrong Service academy or that their future profession was in doubt—as he unintentionally did at West Point. Instead he talked to them as the future Air Force leaders, the ones that will ultimately be “tackling the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century head on.” He spoke plainly but passionately about what the Air Force of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must look like – as well as the challenges and moral issues they would face as leaders.

As at West Point, the Secretary candidly discussed the conservative culture of the Pentagon, noting that when he arrived he still found all the Services – including the Air Force – looking at the world “through the prism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” preparing to win conventional and large scale fights against comparably armed competitors. His efforts, he noted, ran into a stone wall of cultural resistance and bureaucratic sacred cows, especially from the Air Force.

Almost three years ago I challenged the Air Force, and indeed our entire military, to do more, much more, to get needed unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets into theater, a process I compared to “pulling teeth.” Over the course of my tenure, I’ve also questioned whether the Air Force has the right mix of platforms for the future. Some, inside the Pentagon and out, thought I had it in for the Air Force.

Well actually some people thought he had it in for those who disagreed with him and that he was cutting off dissent about the F-22 termination. But that may be a minority opinion amongst Air Force advocates. It's fairly clear, as Mr. Gates stressed, that he is a fan of air power. He endorses American air supremacy as "indispensable to maintaining American military strength, deterrence, and global reach for decades to come." But he noted that to sustain our air supremacy, it will have to require different systems, personnel policies, and thinking than was the case for most of the Cold War. He cited the history of UAVs and the Air Force as an example of how necessary change was slowed by a variety of forms of institutional resistance.

The future leaders of the Air Force were warned to be aware of this particular history and the need to promote change and accountability. Yet he added a warning to the institution at large; "I'm concerned that the view still lingers in some corners that once I depart as Secretary, and once U.S. forces drawdown in Iraq and in Afghanistan...things can get back to what some consider to be real Air Force normal."

Despite his audience, Mr. Gates addressed the critical fallout from the wake of his controversial West Point speech. There he quipped that a future defense secretary who recommended sending large armies into future conflicts abroad "should have his head examined." Many commentators across the political spectrum jumped on that statement as dubious, including [Les Gelb](#), the former *NY Times* columnist and President emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations and [Bill Kristol](#) at *The Weekly Standard*. The latter asked "Does Gates really think it appropriate—while he's still secretary of defense, with troops fighting at his direction—to be undercutting the troops' mission as though he's resigned to their failure?"

It's a stretch to suggest that the Secretary aided and abetted the Taliban. My own objections to that quip was that it was a misreading of history and a mistaken conclusion that would return the United States to techno-centric "Standoff Warfare" at the expense of a balanced approach that avoided preclusive and narrow view of future scenarios. I do not object to the need to better shape our investments and future capabilities and don't subscribe to preserving our sacrosanct division of the Joint budget pie in fixed shares.

The Secretary correctly concludes that the United States "will face a broadening spectrum of conflict, and that our nation finds itself in an era of fiscal duress, the military's resources need to be invested in those capabilities that are of use across the widest possible range of scenarios." That is why the SecDef's comments about land forces in critical regions of the world made little sense. Mr. Gates protested:

...my message to the services is being distorted by some and misunderstood by others. At West Point last week I questioned the wisdom of sending large land armies into major conflicts in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and suggested the Army should think about the number and role of its heavy armored formations for the future. That has been interpreted as my questioning the need for the Army at all, or at least one its present size, the value of heavy armor generally, and the even the wisdom of our involvement in Afghanistan.

Well, yes that was the obvious implication. The SecDef protests that his budget submissions “over the last four years belie these mistaken interpretations.” To buy this, you have to assume his past budgets would reflect his future budgets as well as overlook the recent emphasis on large investments in joint tactical air and bomber fleets, carriers and attack submarines, as well as new ballistic missile submarines. The point is that Mr. Gates’ comments were about future priorities and strongly argued against substantial investments or even scenarios for ground forces, and seemed to re-embrace his predecessor’s transformation agenda. That is not a mistaken interpretation of the West Point speech. Mr. Gates’ other speeches, especially his San Francisco speech where he challenged the Marine Corps to rethink amphibious operations was equally oblique. Rhetorical flourishes and shock effect are clouding the message clearly.

The Secretary went on to defend his credentials in a curious way:

During my tenure as Secretary of Defense, I have approved the largest increases in the size of the Army and Marine Corps in decades. In 2007 I stopped the drawdown in personnel for both the Air Force and Navy. And I supported and have presided over the surges in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

This is hardly a compelling counter. I thought it was the President who actually offered the end strength increase in the Tank during the debate over the Iraq surge, a surge that the Iraq policy task force (a group that included the Secretary) was outright against. I will give the SecDef the credit for his belated support for our beleaguered land forces, but have to point out that he’s also approved real decreases in the Army and Marine Corps in the current Future Years Defense Plan.

The decreases are strategically acceptable but not without risk. However, the ancient MacArthur quote about interventions in Asia and the outright claim that there were no plausible scenarios for land forces in major conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was just ahistorical and astrategic. The Secretary himself and his predecessor both made major interventions in Asia, and those were not the product of strategic calculation, but circumstances created by our enemies. Instead of learning that insurgencies in Asia are costly or that countering aggression in the Middle East is best addressed by Tomahawks and TLAMs, we should recognize that the “enemy gets a vote” and plan accordingly.

History will eventually conclude that Mr. Gates stands at the apex of defense leaders in this century. He achieved a difficult balancing act, with an extraordinary amount of bureaucratic guile and grit. Despite his tired jokes about Washington, he has out mastered and outlasted the Mandarins in government. His patient tenacity in dealing with each Service helped steer a reluctant Pentagon into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While we can quibble with his speeches, when our Nation needed great leadership, he stepped forward, and for that he has our profound thanks.

*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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