INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT GATES

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Participants

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Nelson: For the transcriber, let’s just introduce ourselves so she can pick up on our voices. I’m Mike Nelson.

Engel: I’m Jeffrey Engel.

Gates: And Robert Gates.

Nelson: It is July 8th and we’re here in Mr. Gates’s home. You’ve done this before, so you know the drill. You will get a transcript; you will get to edit, redact, et cetera, all designed to encourage you when you’re trying to decide should I say this or not to say it, because you can take it out later if you want. The transcript is the only thing that will ever become public, at such time as the Bush 43 Foundation and so on choose to release things. Any nuts-and-bolts questions?

Gates: No.

Nelson: I didn’t think so, since you’re a veteran.

Gates: I guess I’ll probably see you guys again, when you’re doing [Barack] Obama. [laughter]

Engel: We were just discussing which topics transition through and which ones we should focus on.

Nelson: As in all these interviews, we’re interested in finding out something of how you became the person you were at the time that you entered the [George W.] Bush Presidency, so if you don’t mind, from the family you grew up in, in Kansas, how did you develop an interest in politics? History? Foreign affairs? Then how did you get to William & Mary?

Gates: I grew up in a house where we were a very modest, middle-class family, very close family. Growing up in 1950s Kansas was pretty idyllic. I had a few ground rules I had to obey, and other than that I had an enormous amount of freedom to explore and do whatever I wanted. My brother and I were familiar faces at local emergency rooms. We were a little on the adventurous side. I was a reader; I particularly liked biography and American history.

In high school I focused more on science and had a big debate with my father, “argument” is a better word. I wanted to go back east to school; I was a stupid teenager and thought that I had to
go back east to get a good education. That started when I was about 15, and eventually he relented. My brother is eight years older than I am, but basically my father said, I’ll give you the same amount of money to go to school that I gave your brother. If you want to go back east, you make up the difference.

I was going into pre-med. My final two choices were between Johns Hopkins and William & Mary. I chose William & Mary because it was a little better deal financially and I had a friend I had known in Kansas who was at William & Mary, a couple of years ahead of me, so I entered William & Mary as a premed student.

My first semester freshman year, I took chemistry, biology, English, calculus, and German. I did OK in everything but calculus; I got a D in calculus, as I always would tell the freshmen at Texas A&M.

Engle: Sounds like you’re telling my life story.

Gates: My father called from Kansas, and in those days, 1961, a long-distance call was a big deal. He said, “Tell me about the D.” I said, “Dad, the D was a gift.”

Anyway, I stayed. I didn’t change my major to history until my sophomore year. Partly I found that I was better at the lab work in chemistry and biology and so on, but my dislike of math and my ineptitude in math made aspects of chemistry, in particular, really hard for me. I realized that I probably wasn’t cut out to go in that direction. Just being in Williamsburg had an impact as well, being so steeped in history. There had been this long interest in American history and so on before that.

I changed my major to history, and as my education continued, I just kept moving east. I wish I could say it was out of intellectual curiosity, but it actually was more out of a perception, particularly as a result of dialogue with my professors, of where teaching jobs were going to be. By then there was a glut of professors of American history, so there were really no job prospects.

By the time I was through most of my master’s, it was a combination of Russian and eastern European history, but really more on eastern Europe. Then my entire PhD was on Russia and the Soviet Union. Out of that master’s program is where I was recruited by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency].

Nelson: You decided somewhere along the line you wanted to be a college professor?

Gates: Yes, my plan all along had been to be a college professor, or to teach. When I got my master’s, I had two job offers. One was from CIA and the other was to teach seventh-grade history in Williamsburg. I actually think the teaching job paid a tad bit more, but I decided to go ahead and do the CIA thing just because it sounded exciting and everything. By the time I did a stint in the Air Force and did my CIA training, I actually didn’t start full time at CIA in an operational job, a regular job, until January of ’68.

I began my PhD program at Georgetown in the fall of ’69.

Nelson: Were you in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]?
Gates: No. When I was recruited by CIA, CIA gave no draft deferments. This was at the height of the buildup in Vietnam, the spring of ’66. CIA granted no deferments, but they had a deal with the Air Force so that the Air Force would move you to the top of the list to go to Officer Training School. You’d go to Officer Training School and then you would spend a year at an operational base. Then you would be seconded back to CIA for two years. You did three years of active duty in the Air Force and then three years in the inactive Reserve.

I started at CIA in August of ’66, worked at CIA for about two months, until my Officer Training School class began. Then I went into the Air Force and was on active duty in the Air Force for three years, but two of those three, beginning in January of ’68, I was back at CIA as an Air Force lieutenant, but in civilian clothes and everything.

I started my PhD program because I had no intention of making a career of CIA. I wanted to be a college professor. I finished my PhD in the spring of ’74 and literally within a few weeks received my first offer from [Henry] Kissinger and [Brent] Scowcroft to come down and take the Soviet desk at the NSC [National Security Council]. I told my wife, “Well, I’ll do that for a year or two, and then I’ll go teach.”

Nelson: How did they know about you?

Gates: As with most cases in the NSC, I had a friend who was already there. Actually, it was not in a substantive job; he was the deputy executive secretary. But Kissinger had taken his Soviet expert, Bill Hyland, to State when he became Secretary of State, so there was a vacancy for a Soviet expert on the NSC. They clearly wanted somebody more junior, who would not be competitive with Hyland or [Helmut] Sonnenfeldt, those guys over at the State Department. That’s how I got the job.

Nelson: From the time you enrolled at William & Mary until the mid-’70s, there was a sort of a sea change in the attitudes of young people toward things like the military, the CIA, the NSC. Did any of that affect your thinking? Did you feel like you were sort of out of step?

Gates: No, because William & Mary was a very conservative campus. For the first three years I was there, it was completely segregated; Virginia was still segregated. There was one demonstration in my four years at William & Mary and it was when the administration canceled the taping of the TV show Hootenanny. They canceled it because it was to take place during finals.

And Indiana was pretty conservative, even as a big public university. As late as ’66, when I was there, Maxwell Taylor could come and speak and not be hooted off the stage. They actually had General [Lewis] Hershey, the head of the draft, on campus. There were some demonstrations, but they were, by later standards, pretty tame, so I really wasn’t affected much by it.

There is an interesting contrast, too, between those studying in the Soviet and east European arena and Sinologists. Most of the great teachers of Chinese history in the U.S., [John] Fairbank and others, were the children of missionaries, and they loved China. Most of the great early professors in Soviet and Russian history here in the U.S., after World War II, were émigrés who had fled Soviet Russia in the ’30s, and hated Russia and hated the Soviets, hated the Communists. Their students had a far more negative attitude toward the Soviet Union than
Sinologists had toward China. It was an academic environment where the Communists were really bad guys and needed to be fought, as opposed to the Chinese side or Latin American studies or African studies, or any of the other regional studies.

The other side of it is that, both with respect to China and the Soviet Union, the relationships between faculty in those areas and CIA and the Defense Department were always different from the relationships and attitudes of faculty in other regions of the world. For example, on the Soviet economy, virtually everything that scholars had to work with came from CIA and from the work their economists were doing, and to a considerable extent the same thing on China in the early years. There was always a closer relationship, more funding, more acceptable attitudes toward accepting funding from the security departments of the government than was the case on Latin American studies, which were very anti-CIA. For Africa studies and Middle East studies, it was more dependent on the individual faculty member and the countries you were talking about.

My whole academic environment was in conservative universities and then, of course, my PhD was at Georgetown. It was different from people in other fields and students in other majors.

**Engel:** How did you come to choose your specific dissertation topic, and what were the language resources and others that you brought to bear? And how much of that was out of intellectual interest versus what the CIA might find useful?

**Gates:** When I started my PhD, the relationship between the Soviet Union and China in the late ’60s was probably closer to open conflict than the relationship with the United States. In fact, in February of ’68 or ’69, I can’t remember, was when they had the conflict on the Ussuri River. A number of Soviet soldiers were killed and then the Soviets massively retaliated against the Chinese. It was a big deal.

[Anatoly] Dobrynin even approached the United States at one point to ask what our reaction would be to their use of nuclear weapons against China, so that was the environment in which Kissinger and [Richard] Nixon saw the opportunity to triangulate and be better friends with each of those two than they were with each other. What was your question again?

**Engel:** How did you come to choose your specific topic—

**Gates:** Because the Sino-Soviet thing was so hot then, it just seemed to me that maybe—How could we get a better handle on how to interpret where the Soviets were in terms of their policies toward China? By reading the works of their academics? Since everything was so closely controlled, it was clear that when relations were in one place, there were things Soviet Sinologists could write about that in another time they couldn’t.

A big deal, for example—and I can’t even remember the details of it at this point, going back into the 17th century and the Treaty of Nerchinsk or something—was about the Jesuits negotiating a peace, negotiating the border between Russia, the Russian empire and the Chinese empire. How they wrote about that had very direct relevance on the Russian Soviet claims, of 1968, ’69 about where the border was. I was intrigued, being at Georgetown, that the Jesuits had negotiated the treaty, because they were the only ones that spoke Russian and Chinese. Anyway, that’s how I picked up on that topic.
I’d worked at CIA just long enough that by the time I was working on my dissertation in 1973, I’d learned how to write pretty succinctly, because I was writing for the President and stuff. I handed in my dissertation, and my advisor said, “This is really terrific but it’s—I really have no issues with it except it’s too short.” So I had to go back and pump about another 200 pages worth of air into this thing. Where I had quoted a sentence or two, I quoted a page. I just pumped this thing up. It’s as if you hefted it and said, “Well, the substance is fine, but it’s not big enough.”

Nelson: Weighty subject, but the book itself doesn’t weigh enough.

Gates: I have to say, though, as I was telling Keith [Hensley] the other day, when I was up for confirmation for the first time as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence in ’86, I got a call from a friend at the Georgetown library who said there were several journalists there reading my dissertation. To which my response was, “It serves them right.” [laughter]

Nelson: It’s interesting to me that already you had experience in at least three domains that later would be of relevance to your subsequent career, but in particular your tenure as Secretary of Defense. You’d been in the Air Force, you’d worked for CIA, you’d lived in Washington and put in there the work you did on NSC. That’s a range of acquaintanceship with various tribes, you might say, in the national security community. Can you think about things that in each of these domains stood you in good stead in terms of navigating the challenges of being Secretary?

Gates: The NSC experience was huge for me, and had a big impact both on my time as Deputy National Security Advisor, then as DCI [Director of Central Intelligence], and then as Secretary. There were several lessons that I took away from those years under Nixon, [Gerald] Ford, and [Jimmy] Carter. One was that I soon became just about the only intelligence officer in the government who actually understood how intelligence was used at the White House in decision making, because I was there and watched it.

It was symptomatic of CIA at the time that they did not see that as an asset for them. I tried to give them guidance in terms of how to be more helpful to the President. It’s little stuff, like you guys have your timetable for getting your papers done. The Presidential briefing book for a trip, an international trip, closes at a certain point. It may be the smartest, best, and most insightful analysis ever written, but if it’s an hour late, it’s toast. It’s in the wastebasket. If you don’t understand that kind of timing, if you don’t know when the book closes, if you’re not in close-enough touch with the people doing that stuff, your work may not only not be relevant, it may be too late to affect decision making.

Another big thing I learned was the costs of bureaucratic internecine warfare and how badly Presidents were served when agencies wrangled with one another, and particularly when it’s less over substance than over turf. But they confused the two, or obscured the fact that it was over turf and not over substance. I also learned a lot about running meetings and the consequences of interminable meetings that led nowhere, where there was nothing—no action at the end of the meeting, no decision, no action, no nothing—just an ongoing conversation, a “bull session,” if you will.

There were many lessons I took out of those years—a big factor for me that had a big impact when I became Secretary was that for most of my career the Secretaries of State and Defense
hated each other. Israel nearly lost the Yom Kippur War because Kissinger and [James] Schlesinger weren’t speaking to one another and Schlesinger delayed resupply of the Israelis, which Kissinger was calling for. He delayed it because Kissinger was calling for it. [George] Shultz and [Caspar] Weinberger hated each other. Mel Laird and Kissinger, and before Kissinger [William] Rogers—Laird was probably the politically most canny Secretary the department ever had. As I wrote in my first book, if he couldn’t beat you in the White House, he’d beat you on the Hill. He’d just go around everybody.

I watched, and I saw all that. I thought, *This really isn’t good; this isn’t the way the system is supposed to work.* That had big lessons for me in terms of how I would approach both Condi [Condoleezza] Rice and Hillary Clinton.

**Nelson:** As a junior officer—granted, you were in a specialized arena—were there things that gave you a sense, when you were Secretary, that you had a feel for how things worked further down the chain of command than most Secretaries ever did? I have a specific example in mind, but anything that comes to mind?

**Gates:** No, because the truth of the matter is—and it was one of the big surprises to me when I became Secretary—operational plans, contingency plans, those kinds of things from the Pentagon, were *never* shared with the White House except maybe at the most senior—Presidential, National Security Advisor level. They were never discussed in broader meetings. That was totally different by the time I became Secretary and it took me aback.

Just to give you an example, during the Gulf War, 41 [George H. W. Bush] insisted that I go over to the Pentagon as Deputy National Security Advisor and review the bombing target lists with [Richard] Cheney. Go over to the Pentagon? Cheney and [Colin] Powell hated that. They fought it, and finally the President said, “No, it’s going to happen.”

It wasn’t that we suspected that they had mosques and hospitals and schools on the target list; it was that the President wanted to be in a position to assure himself so he could assure others that he was comfortable that we were not bombing any civilian targets in Iraq. But Cheney and Powell insisted on doing it with me themselves and resented every single second of it. That was totally different by the time I became Secretary.

**Engel:** Looking back now, are you happy with that evolution? Is that a good thing? During your time as Secretary of Defense, then, if there is more integration with the White House, on a lower operational level, that is, removing some of the fence around the turf of the Secretary of Defense, around the Pentagon, I well can understand Cheney’s and Powell’s concern.

**Gates:** No. When I became Secretary, I was more in *their* camp, and it mainly was because when you begin dealing with military operational plans, you’re dealing with the lives of troops—and the interagency and the White House leak like sieves. The Pentagon leaks as bad if not worse than anywhere else, but almost never about operational matters. It’s policy issues, programmatic issues, budget issues, turf fights, and stuff like that. There are almost never leaks about operational stuff.

The leaks about the [Osama] bin Laden raid all came from the White House and the CIA. I don’t think any of them came from the Department of Defense. Having all that stuff over there just is
an opportunity for more leaks, and, as far as I was concerned, puts troops at risk, so I really fought against giving up too much detail when I was Secretary, most of the time not very successfully. But there had been a quantum change in the degree of centralization and micromanagement, in my view, by the NSC. It is reflected in the fact that when I was there, when I was last on the NSC as Deputy National Security Advisor, the NSC had maybe 50 professionals on it; today it has 350.

Doug Lute’s operation on Afghanistan alone had 25 staffers. I told [Thomas] Donilon at the time, when you have 25 people at the NSC covering one country, they’re going to be spending too much of their time looking for stuff to do, and that’s when you get into micromanagement and into an NSC operational role, which I’ve always been totally opposed to. But the shift toward more micromanagement—Hillary ran into the same, and to a degree Condi—was much worse in the Obama administration than in the Bush administration. Hillary and I had a problem in common with the White House’s determination to run everything. I didn’t have that so much with [Stephen] Hadley as National Security Advisor and Condi and me in office in the Bush administration. It was not just a historical trend; it also had to do with specific Presidents.

Engel: It’s interesting to me as a historian to hear you say that, because when I think of a centralized White House controlling foreign policy, the first name that comes to mind is Kissinger.

Gates: I’ve written in my book that that was the greatest degree of centralized control since Nixon and Kissinger ruled the roost. But, in terms of the level of detail, it is significantly greater today than it was even under them. Then it was the two of them; it wasn’t the NSC staff. All the threads were in their hands, but it wasn’t in the hands of a GS-15 or a three-star on the NSC staff. It was in the hands of Kissinger, personally, and Nixon, personally. It was highly centralized, but it was also at a very high level, and that is one of the major changes.

[NBREAK]

Nelson: Do you have anything that carries over from this morning?

Engel: Yes. This is jumping ahead a little bit into the 1980s. First, I need you to describe your position in the last years of the [Ronald] Reagan administration. For the record, we were just talking about this in the car, where you stood vis-à-vis Soviet policy, the end of the Cold War, and the questions about where America was headed post–Iran-Contra in particular. Also, if you could relate that back to what we were discussing this morning, about how perhaps your training as a Soviet expert could have affected that thinking a decade later.

Gates: I have to say, as I have done on so many other occasions for this, that there is a serious misreading of CIA’s analytical work on the Soviet Union. The reality is that every President from Richard Nixon on made policy toward the Soviet Union grounded in the perception of their growing economic crisis. The reason Nixon felt that they could be pressured into an arms control agreement was because of their economic difficulties. CIA didn’t miss that. The first briefing in
which Ronald Reagan was told the Soviet regime could not survive, period, was just before his first meeting with [Mikhail] Gorbachev in the fall of ’85. Kay Oliver from CIA said the ancien régime cannot survive; the social alienation has become so great and the system is falling apart.

It was always easy to say the Soviet Union is going to collapse, like Senator [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan did. It is picking a date that gets hard.

Engel: That was my next question.

Gates: What I believed, and where I got it right, was that Gorbachev was dismantling the Stalinist economy, but because he wasn’t a capitalist and didn’t understand market forces, he had nothing to put in its place, and that led to the economic collapse of the early 1990s. Where I got it wrong was that I didn’t think he would move as fast as he did on foreign policy in terms of pulling the Soviet troops back from eastern Europe, in terms of telling the eastern European leaders you’re on your own, and so on.

But in terms of telling Presidents that this country is in trouble, the Agency did a great job. I use as the best example—it is in my first book—that when I became Deputy National Security Advisor in January of ’89, CIA’s reporting was so dire on the crisis in the Soviet Union that I received Bush 41’s permission the following July to create a very secret task force, or working group, to begin contingency planning for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Condi Rice led it. Two and a half years before Gorbachev fell, the Bush administration was beginning contingency planning on what it would need to do if that happened.

While most in CIA and I saw the Soviet Union continuing to be very aggressive in its foreign policy—and I would say that continued until about 1987—they were still pumping huge amounts of money into Angola, into Cuba. At a time when they were dying economically, the annual subsidy to Cuba, both economic and military, was about $7 billion a year.

They kept this aggressive posture until about 1987. That’s when Gorbachev flipped the switch. That’s when they started pulling back. We were late in seeing that; there are no two ways about it. But on the domestic side, the Agency was on top from the very beginning, mainly concerning the reforms, because he couldn’t replace them with anything. I was very much a part of that, heading the analytical side of the Agency until ’86. Of course, we were dealing with many other problems as well. Then as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, I had less of a role in that. I had only been the deputy for six months when Iran-Contra broke and when [William] Casey had his tumor. It was an interesting time.

Engel: What lessons—This is broad question, but we want to move chronologically forward, since we know you’ve covered a lot of this material with your Bush 41 interview.

Gates: The biggest lesson for me for governance in terms of Iran-Contra was that it sort of built on LBJ [Lyndon B Johnson] picking targets in the Situation Room. It showed the extraordinary dangers of the White House and the NSC having an operational role of any kind, which was one of the reasons why I pushed back so hard in the Obama administration against that very thing, because I had seen the risks to the President and to the country of doing that. Personally, the biggest lesson that I took away from Iran-Contra was that I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I hadn’t done enough as the deputy.
In other words, I went to the general counsel of the Agency about it, but I didn’t go any further. I made Casey and me go tell [John] Poindexter what we thought was going on. Of course, we didn’t realize he was at the core of the thing. I thought that, having alerted the White House and having alerted the general counsel, I had done my job. What more could I have done? I might have quietly gone to the White House counsel, I might have quietly sat down with the Deputy Attorney General, but my knowledge level was basically at the same level as Shultz’s and Weinberger’s. Weinberger clearly knew a little more, which is why he was indicted. I would think to myself, *Well, if Shultz is OK with this*—I considered George Shultz to be a man of just the ultimate probity, integrity. *If Shultz—He may disagree with it, but if he doesn’t think it’s wrong or illegal, I’ve probably done what I needed to do.*

The only thing that [Lawrence] Walsh came after *me* for was that he claimed that I had been told about Iran-Contra a few weeks earlier than I said I knew about it. Never mind the fact that I told him that I might have been told earlier, but I just forgot. This is when it made an impact on me, or it was told to me. The guy who Walsh thinks told me, my deputy at the time, Dick Kerr, testified that it had probably been in one of these late-evening sessions where he had gone through a checklist of about 10 or a dozen things with me, kind of just checking them off. He said he could easily see why it might not have registered.

If I was defensively minded before Iran-Contra, I became absolutely paranoid afterward. The funny conundrum I never resolved was, on phone calls, whether I should have detailed notes or nothing at all. The worst thing of all is partial notes. But then, from a governance standpoint, it was keeping the NSC out of operational stuff.

**Engel:** What was your initial reaction, then, in terms of things like keeping notes or things like keeping other people in the loop on what you’re hearing, checking with your deputies, checking with your lawyers. What was the initial reaction in the first years then, after those 41 years? Did that evolve over time? Were you more paranoid in that period than you were in later years? Did you become more paranoid about these issues as you went along?

**Gates:** Actually, the circumstances were so different under 41, really, even in the Reagan administration. It shows the importance of individuals. Having Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell in the National Security Advisor’s office, having Ken Duberstein in the Chief of Staff’s office, it’s a totally different atmosphere and a totally different environment in terms of process and doing things the way they’re supposed to be done. In a way, the paranoia just became more personal, in the sense of never leaving a stone unturned.

I don’t think after that, even as President of Texas A&M, I *ever* had a meeting with anybody that I didn’t have somebody else sit in.

**Nelson:** Maybe this isn’t something you were thinking about at the time, but by the end of the Bush 41 Presidency, you had a chance to observe several Secretaries of Defense at work. Because our focus in these interviews is on your time as Secretary of Defense in the Bush Presidency, had you formed any notions of what makes for a good Secretary of Defense? What traps Secretaries of Defense might fall into? Anything that shaped the sense of the job you were stepping into?
Gates: No, I can’t honestly say that I did. I worked with the military and interacted with the Secretaries pretty routinely from 1986 to 1993, but it was always on policy issues and really never had anything to do with internal DoD [Department of Defense] issues. Although I knew a lot about military affairs at the 30,000-foot level, I really was no expert on the Pentagon or acquisition or any of those kinds of issues relating to the Defense Department. I just knew that Cheney had tried to cut two programs as Secretary: the A-12, which was still in litigation 20 years later; and the Osprey, which is still flying.

Nelson: How about the military in general?

Gates: Not really. Again, I had very limited interaction, mainly with the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, almost never with the service Chiefs themselves or the service Secretaries. Every now and then, I’d have an interaction with the Assistant Secretary covering intelligence matters. But other than that, very little contact.

Nelson: How about the Presidents that you worked with? Did you come away thinking, Here are the qualities a President needs to have, based on what I’ve observed?

Gates: I would get this question all the time in speeches in 2012. When I would give speeches, in the Q&A [question and answer], I would say I have not found a better description of the ideal qualities of a President than the comment of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., about FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] in the early ’30s, when he said that Roosevelt had a second-rate intellect and a first-rate temperament. That’s what works best in the Presidency. If you look at George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, [Harry] Truman, [Dwight] Eisenhower, Reagan, and 41, that is the characteristic of all of them.

The smartest Presidents—Carter, [Woodrow] Wilson, [William] Clinton—have generally not been distinguished Presidents. It is these guys who have enough self-confidence to admit that they don’t have all the answers and to admit that they don’t—because I guess I put myself in the same category. They’re not experts; they’re not the smartest guy in the room, but they are the smartest guy in the room in terms of eliciting other people’s views and then integrating those in their minds into policy and figuring out how to communicate it, if not to the American people in general, at least to the people working for them.

Presidents who have always been the smartest kid in the room have a hard time doing that.

Engel: This might be splitting hairs, but I don’t know that I would have put Theodore Roosevelt on that list as a person who was confident, eliciting other opinions, and not thinking that he was the smartest person in the room. Perhaps it is a question only a historian would care about, but why would you put Roosevelt there?

Gates: I did because I didn’t think he was a first-rate intellect [laughter], and second, he had a great temperament, which was obviously very appealing. My subordinate descriptions of what comes under that umbrella may not fit all of them equally, but, in terms of just what Holmes said, he fits. It is pretty audacious to tell that to two Presidential scholars.

Engel: We’ll talk about it over tomorrow’s lunch. Actually, if you don’t mind, this is going somewhat chronologically out of order, but one of the things that is striking to me about your
time coming to the NSC, starting in ’89, and then your time coming back into the Pentagon in 2006, is that they’re both preceded by arguably the two biggest foreign policy studies that we can think of from the last 25 years: the Iran-Contra Commission and then the Iraq Study Group. Given that General Scowcroft played such an integral role, to my mind, in writing the Iran-Contra report [*Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair*] and then moving directly into government, and then your being integral in the Iraq Study Group and then moving into government, did you take any lessons from what you saw from him in ’88, ’89, when you began working on a larger commission? Obviously, you didn’t know that you were going to be Secretary of Defense subsequently.

**Gates:** No, because I really was completely on the periphery when Brent was working on that with [John] Tower and company. In a way, Brent probably didn’t learn very much from doing the Iran-Contra study, apart from having it reinforce everything he already believed about how the NSC ought to operate and how important it is to tell a President what he needs to hear.

The only thing that really helped me about the Iraq Study Group was that I was able to pretty well hit the ground running in terms of what was going on in Iraq and the problems that we faced. That might have taken me some months to get up to speed, or at least some weeks, had I not been a part of the Iraq Study Group. It gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of the key figures, both Iraqis and Americans, and particularly military, that I would be dealing with when I became Secretary.

I don’t think it helped much in terms of my approach to the job as much as it did helping me be substantively on top of my biggest problem when I became Secretary.

**Engel:** I want to delve into this more again chronologically as we get to it, but here’s one question I want to ask in response to what you just said. If Scowcroft did not find anything in ’87–’88, that really would have—As you said, it only reinforced what he already believed. Was there anything when you were involved in the Iraq Study Group that was shocking to you, or did things reinforce what you believed? As you said, you got more depth, more information, but was there anything that fundamentally was shocking to you?

**Gates:** I don’t think “shocking.” Again, in the idea of reinforcing and filling in, a lot of what I saw during the Iraq Study Group reinforced what I had already believed about monumental mistakes made in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. It filled that out to where it was beyond just an opinion to really understanding the breadth of the problems we had faced and that we had created for ourselves.

**Nelson:** We’re about at the point of the George W. Bush Presidency, but before we go into that, I wonder if there are aspects of your career prior to that point that we passed over that we shouldn’t have passed over, or that you’d like to talk about in greater depth?

**Gates:** No, it is something that we talked about earlier. That is, the benefit to me on becoming Secretary of Defense of having spent almost nine years at the White House and the NSC and watching the interagency—knowing where its strengths and its weaknesses were, knowing what created problems and created resentments, and what tended to diminish them, so I was able to avoid a lot of land mines coming in as a newcomer after an absence of 13 years.
The interesting thing, in a way that ill prepared me for the job, was that both as an NSC staffer and then as Deputy National Security Advisor for all that time, I had very little to do with Congress. I had very little interaction with Congress. What I had had between ’86 and ’89, shall we say, wasn’t a glorious experience.

One of the things I’ve reflected on, one of the huge differences between January ’93 and December ’06, was that there were, still, in January of ’93, when it came to foreign policy issues, significant vestiges of bipartisanship. In other words, Les Aspin played a big role in the House approving going to war in the Gulf because he thought it was the right thing for the country. Never mind that the Democratic caucus then denied him his chairmanship and he had to go crawling back and so on. They were still able to reach across party lines on some things, but particularly on national security. That had almost entirely dissipated by the time I came back.

Engel: As a person outside of politics through that interim largely, what did you ascribe that to?

Gates: It depends on whether you talk to Republicans or Democrats. [laughter] But it mostly happened in the House. Some people will say that it began with Newt Gingrich going after Jim Wright and the viciousness with which that took place. Others will say that it was the impeachment of Clinton. Others will say the cumulative effect of the Democrats controlling the House for 40-some years and the arrogance with which they did that and then the Republicans’ determination to take revenge when they finally got a majority.

But the thing that really began in the early ’90s was the steady erosion of the numbers—my best examples are in the Senate—of the people—center-left, center-right—that I regarded as bridge builders. David Boren called me in early ’94. He had been invited to become president of Oklahoma [University] and he was wrestling with it. He asked me to come down to his Senate office to talk about it. We talked for an hour. At the end I said, “David, there is an easy solution to your dilemma here. When you’re in your car or on an airplane and daydreaming, are you daydreaming about what you can accomplish at OU [Oklahoma University] or what you can accomplish in the Senate?” He just burst out laughing. He said, “That makes it easy.”

So you lost in fairly short order Bill Cohen, Sam Nunn, David Boren, Bill Bradley, and then over time Jack Danforth, Bob Dole, Nancy Kassebaum, a number of moderate Democrats, of additional Democrats. More and more from both parties, even in the Senate, which is less polarized than the House, all those guys from the center were disappearing. Olympia Snowe is the most recent. It’s not because any of them were in danger of not being reelected. They were just fed up; they were tired and frustrated because there was nothing happening.

Nelson: Did you play any role during the 2000 campaign?

Gates: Zip. For the 2000 election, staying in chronological order, the answer is no. Despite having worked closely with Condi and Steve Hadley and company, I never got one call, never was asked for my opinion about anything, never had any contact with them.

After the election, or while it was still being disputed, I called Condi Rice to make one suggestion, I said, “Condi, I don’t want a job. I don’t have anybody to recommend for a job. I just have one piece of advice for you. Whatever you do, don’t give Paul Wolfowitz an operational role, because he can’t manage his way out of a paper bag.” So of course they gave
him the biggest managerial role in the government. That’s the extent of my influence.

**Nelson:** What did you base that assessment on?

**Gates:** Watching Paul in the Deputies Committee and as Under Secretary for Policy throughout the 41 administration.

**Nelson:** That’s pretty specific, if you’re going to make your first contact, for it to be about one person.

**Gates:** Yes, and I actually liked Paul and I used Paul as a resource when I was doing some consulting in the ‘90s. I had nothing against Paul. People need to understand that people have strengths and they have weaknesses. Paul was a great Under Secretary for Policy, but if the role of the deputy is to be the day-to-day manager of the Pentagon, that is totally wrong. Especially when you have a guy like Don Rumsfeld, who is very policy oriented himself. It was putting twins in there in the sense that they both were policy guys. Paul was a disaster as an operational manager—as deputy.

**Nelson:** Was the occasion for the call that you had heard some—

**Gates:** I was reading that he was being rumored to head CIA, which I thought would be a really big catastrophe. I just said, “There are a lot of roles Paul can fill, but that isn’t it.”

**Nelson:** Why do you think you didn’t get any calls during the campaign?

**Gates:** Because I was a senior member of 41’s team, and because everybody knew I was close to 41. I was at that time the interim dean of the George H. W. Bush School and people who had been close to the father were absolutely kept totally at arm’s length. They didn’t want any—43 [George W. Bush] himself didn’t want anything to do with the people who had been close to his father; he wanted to be his own man.

**Engel:** That leads to my follow-on question: Did you understand that as 43 wanting to put a public face on his own independence, or was there a policy and ideological schism or difference that you perceived?

**Gates:** It was both. He very much wanted to be and be seen as totally independent of his father’s advisors. The last thing he wanted was a story about how he was relying on his father’s advisors. But I also think he considered himself tougher and more idealistic than his father. All these pragmatic realists around his father were not part of who he was running as: Scowcroft, Baker, me.

**Nelson:** Do you remember when you first met George W. Bush?

**Gates:** It was a photo op at the state capitol. He did these one-day seminars for all the senior people in state government, elected and appointed, mainly appointed. He showed up, the Lieutenant Governor showed up, and so on. I was asked to moderate one part of that.

A part of the deal was that several of us went up to the Governor’s office and had our pictures...
taken with him. When I interviewed with him in November of ’06 was the first conversation I’d ever had with the man.

**Nelson:** Really? So you didn’t really have an impression of him based even on your Texas experience?

**Gates:** I had a very good impression of him as Governor when I was at the Bush School.

**Nelson:** Based on?

**Gates:** A bunch of things, the fact that he received 40 percent of the Hispanic vote. His partner was Bob Bullock, a Democrat, the Lieutenant Governor. He had forged a really great partnership with this guy. There was a lot of bipartisanship in things they were doing in state government. Bullock, ironically, had the greater power. The Lieutenant Governor in Texas has more power than the Governor. The way they worked together—Just on a superficial level, he seemed to me to be a good Governor.

**Engel:** What had you heard at that point? We’re talking in the period around 1999–2000. From the people that you knew, Condoleezza Rice and others, with whom you had worked before, what were they telling you? You mentioned you didn’t have any policy—

**Gates:** I didn’t have any connections to speak of. I had one or two contacts with Condi, but only because she was on the Advisory Board of the Bush School at the time. Whatever contact I had other than this one call was maybe two or three calls having to do with the Bush School. That was it.

**Nelson:** Prior to 9/11 [September 11, 2001], how did you think he was doing?

**Gates:** [pause] This is very impressionistic, but it seemed to me he was sort of adrift. There didn’t seem to be a theme to the pudding at that point, but it was very superficial, because that was the last six months I was at the Bush School. I was moving back out here. To tell you the truth, I wasn’t paying much attention.

**Nelson:** You must have known Powell, Rumsfeld, et cetera—Rice, obviously. All these people.

**Gates:** Yes.

**Nelson:** Who better to have an informed opinion about whether these were good people? Were they a good team? Were the ways in which they interacted with the President good, functional, or not?

**Gates:** The big surprise to me was Rumsfeld, his appointment. I felt that Bush had to know what Rumsfeld had done to his dad in the mid-’70s, in terms of seeing Bush as a potential rival in ’80. How do you sideline him? You get him to go to CIA, because nobody will ever be elected President who was Director of CIA. [William] Colby was booted, the space became available, and Bush went in there. Bush basically had to tell the Congress he’s out of politics forever because they questioned him pretty closely about that.
Engel: Can I push on that for a second? Again, I’m trying to get you to think about your thoughts during this time period and not the personal interactions you had with some of these players later. You mentioned that the W. [George W. Bush] camp in the 2000 election was trying to create distance between themselves and the 41 crowd. This appointment of Rumsfeld is the classic example after the election, of course, of, as you put it, really sticking it to the 41 crowd in many ways. Yet there are two key moments that Bush 43 turns to the 41 crowd, almost for validation in many ways, or for solace. The first being the selection of Senator Cheney to be the Vice President, and the second being the selection of Jim Baker to run the—what was he called?

Nelson: Postelection campaign—

Engel: Postelection campaign manager. Just from the outside, did you make anything of that? What were your thoughts on that?

Gates: I don’t know the thinking. I didn’t have any thinking about Cheney. Cheney was very much in line with the more ideological, harder line that Bush 43 wanted to take and that the “Vulcans” represented, as opposed to the realists under his father. Then the Baker choice, as far as I’m concerned, that was just 43 being smart enough to go for the best, most ruthless possible person in order to win the Presidency. There I think he just went purely for talent and skill. This is not something he wanted to leave in the hands of a beginner. [laughter]

Engel: It may not have been intimate or even friendly, but did you have—Describe, if you will, your interactions with the Vulcan crowd during the ’90s, the late ’90s in particular.

Gates: I really didn’t have any.

Engel: None at all? Did you have an impression?

Gates: When I moved out here I kind of just—I move through life in pieces. I don’t drag a lot of former life along with me. I would have a rare telephone call, say, with Condi, or I would maybe encounter Hadley or some of these guys at the Aspen Strategy Group or something like that. In all honesty, I made little effort to stay in touch with them and vice versa.

Engel: Let me ask about the issues then, because one of the key issues obviously is Iraq. That is animating a lot of the interest among this group. What was your sense of U.S.-Iraqi policy in the late ’90s?

Gates: I had the sense that the effectiveness of the sanctions was steadily eroding and particularly around ’98, ’99, when Saddam [Hussein] threw the inspectors out. From a distance, it looked to me like he was trying to reconstitute those programs. That was clearly the message he was sending everybody.

I like to point out to people to go back to the UN [United Nations] Resolution 1441. If ever there were doubts in foreign intelligence services about what Saddam was doing, that would have been the time where you would have had a real fight in the Security Council, but instead you have the Russians, the Chinese, the French, all going along. Every intelligence service in the world believed he was doing what he said he was doing, and partly because that was a deception that he was trying to continue, largely vis-à-vis his own military and people, but also vis-à-vis Iran. In
my book, I went back through my stuff and I gave a speech six weeks after the invasion saying the situation in Iraq reminds me a little bit of the dog that catches the car: Now what are we going to do with it?

The bottom line of what I said in there, interestingly enough, was that if we have 100,000 troops in Iraq six months from now, we’re in trouble. We need to turn this over to somebody else, international peacekeepers or somebody, as fast as possible, but in the lead-up, I didn’t have any different view than anybody else.

Engel: Let me unpack that for a second, for the record. When you say you had no different view than anyone else in the lead-up, are you referring to the lead-up to the 2003 invasion?

Gates: Yes.

Engel: OK. For the record, can you tell us what your thoughts were during that period?

Gates: I was just watching the continued erosion. The irony is that the erosion of the sanctions, the power of the sanctions, was as the French, the Germans, the Russians, and everybody else was trying to do contracts and deals with Saddam. I saw the sanctions, essentially, as falling apart and thereby creating the opportunity for Saddam to reconstitute those programs if he chose to do so.

Nelson: How did you learn about 9/11?

Gates: I was on an airplane.

Nelson: Tell the story.

Gates: I was on my way to a board meeting in Cleveland. The pilot comes on and says, “Both World Trade towers have been blown up and every aircraft in America is being grounded. We are landing in Kansas City.” That was about 15 minutes away. We landed on the tarmac. I was on a TWA [Trans-World Airlines] flight and at Kansas City International Airport, one of TWA’s major hubs in those days. We actually had a gate, but there must have been two dozen big planes on the ground, just out on the tarmac, that had just landed.

We went right up to the gate. The gate agent got on a little microphone—I was sitting in first class and the gate agent said, “Now if you’ll all proceed from the airplane to the ticketing desk, we will proceed to reticket you,” blah, blah, blah. I thought to myself, *Every airplane in America has been grounded? There ain’t anybody going anywhere for a while.* Instead, I went to the hotel desk and reserved a room at the airport Marriott. That was on Tuesday. I didn’t get out of there until Friday, when I rented a car and drove to Denver, where I could get a plane back to Seattle.

I camped out in the Marriott for two and a half or three days. But every time I needed something, I’d agree to do an interview with Fox or CNN [Cable News Network] or somebody. They’d send a limo out to the hotel to pick me up. We’d go in, I’d do the interview, and on the way back, I’d ask them to stop by the Rite-Aid or CVS or grocery store, ATM [automatic teller machine], or whatever.
Nelson: The interviews were surely, “What should we do? What do we do?” What were your thoughts as they unfolded?

Gates: I’ll be honest with you; I hardly remember. It was pretty quickly identified as al-Qaeda. My general thinking was that these guys have been at war against us for eight years and we’ve just discovered we’re at war with them, because they hit us beginning in 1993 at the World Trade Center and the embassies, the Cole, Khobar Towers. I went through that: We’re living in a different kind of world. These guys have the capacity to do bad things, really bad things.

Nelson: Over the weeks that followed, how did you assess the performance of the Bush administration?

Gates: The easiest way to look at it is that I didn’t have any issues with any of it. I probably felt like they were doing a pretty good job, under the circumstances. I thought at the time, because there was a lot of commentary, at the time and since: People have not given proper credit, or proper weight, to the personal impact on all these people, that of having been in charge and having let the country down and the sense of utter fear they felt that something else was coming and coming quickly.

That was aggravated by the fact that, because the dots hadn’t been connected, all the filters that differentiate quality of intelligence reports—from rumor mongering to intercepts—all those filters were removed, so all of the intelligence about threats was coming into the White House with no filters. They then had, every day, reports of imminent attacks with nuclear weapons on Washington, New York, LA [Los Angeles], and Chicago. Those were just flooding into the White House. They were just buried in threats.

They were in an environment where for many months they were expecting another attack, another really big attack. People haven’t appreciated the impact of that on these individuals as human beings and the sense of responsibility they felt for their failure to protect Americans. This was the first successful, foreign-based attack with loss of life on the continental United States since the War of 1812.

That’s a point I would make in speeches all the time. The other point I would make, and still make, is this: Who thought, on September 12th, that we would go more than 10 years without another successful attack? Nobody believed that. All Americans believed there was going to be another attack. Much of what has been written about those months and the interrogations and the wiretaps and all those things was a manifestation of the belief that the country was at war, was under attack, and we were going to be attacked again, and how you prevent that.

I put some of the things that were done in the same category as Lincoln lifting habeas corpus, Roosevelt interning the Japanese. There was a fear for the survival of the nation. They were determined to do whatever they could to prevent it.

Engel: Let me preface this question by saying I would only ask this to another professionally trained historian. You’re telling us that assessment in 2013, after having time to reflect and time out of service as well. At what point do you think, between 2001 and two minutes ago, did that sense that the personal failure of the administration to prevent an attack, did you begin to perceive that within the administration on a personal level? Did the people tell you this? Did
you—

**Gates:** It was almost immediate.

**Engel:** Really?

**Gates:** Because I’d been there. I’d been the Deputy National Security Advisor; I’d been the Director of CIA. I was thinking to myself, *What would I be feeling if I were in their shoes today, September 12, 2001?* It is just this huge burden of failure, that thousands of people lost their lives because I didn’t do my job right and a bunch of other people didn’t do their jobs right. What’s wrong with us? How do we fix this and how do we fix it overnight? A big chunk of what I just said two minutes ago I believed from almost the very beginning. I guess I was very sympathetic to them for all those same reasons.

**Engel:** Let me follow up on this for a second. Aside from the things that were in the headlines—the Cole attack and the embassy attacks and what not—had you given a lot of thought to al-Qaeda as a problem in the interim? Could you speak to that?

**Gates:** There were two levels of strategic intelligence failure. There was the specific, and I think there was a broader, deeper, lack of understanding of Islamic fundamentalism. I remember when I was on the NSC and either right before or right after the Islamic revolution in Iran, the then Deputy National Security Advisor, David Aaron, wrote, “Ask CIA for their assessment of Islamic fundamentalism.” The CIA came back and said they didn’t have anything. We didn’t know anything.

Here they’d just taken over Iran, with huge strategic implications. That level of ignorance continued certainly until 1993, but even then—The reality is that on 9/11 we didn’t know jack shit about al-Qaeda. That’s the reason a lot of this stuff happened and the interrogations and everything else, because we didn’t know anything. If we’d had a great database and knew exactly what al-Qaeda was all about, what their capabilities were and stuff like that, some of these measures wouldn’t have been necessary. But the fact is that we’d just been attacked by a group we didn’t know anything about. In a way, the failure to appreciate Islamic fundamentalism is a far more valid criticism of the intelligence community in the ’80s and ’90s than the collapse of the Soviet Union.

**Engel:** What do you ascribe the failure to? There are many theories circulating around that perhaps this was simply a generational shift, that people who had been trained as Soviet specialists were just not thinking in the ’90s about other parts of the word.

**Gates:** I’ll reveal a bias of mine: area experts, country experts, are sometimes the very last ones to see a revolutionary change coming, because the history of most countries is a history of continuity. In discontinuity, they find too many reasons why that won’t happen.

The guy who was covering Iran, the senior analyst on Iran, in 1979, had spent 20 years working on Iran. He spoke Farsi. This was not some sort of liberal arts generic analyst; this was a real expert, and he and everybody else missed it.

When I was head of the analytical side of the CIA, I set up a separate group called global issues.
They were to look, not from a country aspect in terms of looking at terrorism, but to look at the factors that give rise to terrorism and discontinuities and to develop metrics. How can you gauge when the temperature is rising on certain issues and among certain elements of the population and so on? I’m not sure whether it contributed very much or not, but it was a different way to come at my concern that the area experts are very often the last to realize that a revolution is about to take place.

We totally misread the Arab spring. The Arab spring is all about revolution. As a result, the consequences are going to be with us for a hell of a long time. Arab spring sort of connotes reform, the flowering of reform and the building of institutions and sort of all peace and good will and is mainly bullshit. 

I realized later, and it would have been politically controversial, CIA should have had sections working on religious issues, because the truth is that we have serious international problems being created by Christian fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, and Islamic fundamentalism. But tell me if I would like to go up and testify about that on the Hill.

Engel: Even after the Helsinki Accords and the greater emphasis on human rights, with religious rights being among them, there was no sense of that in the CIA?

Gates: No sense of studying extreme forms of religion and what the potential consequences are of that. It’s a pretty touchy subject for the American government, right up there with monitoring student groups.

Nelson: I was thinking when you were talking about it with empathy, the sense of responsibility that people in the administration must have felt. You’ve been there, so you knew what that was like, but you were not there at the time. Did you have any occasion to reach out to people you knew in the White House and provide words of whatever: comfort, insight, advice?

Gates: No. In fact, I remember vividly saying to somebody in 2004 or 2005 that during the second Clinton administration I had gotten one call from Madeleine Albright. I remember saying to somebody, well into the Bush administration, as I say, in 2004, that at that point I’d gotten one more call from Madeleine Albright than I had gotten from the Bush administration.

In 2004, I was totally opposed to the Intelligence Reform Act. I wrote a 16-page paper to Joe Lieberman and Susan Collins, the co-chairs of this effort in the Senate, the government, operations, whatever it is, detailing why the new law won’t work. It didn’t matter; they passed it, and the President signed it.

You can imagine then my astonishment when I got a call in early January 2005 from Hadley, asking me if I’d be willing to consider being DNI [Director of National Intelligence], the first DNI. It was clear that having passed the law and recognizing it was unworkable, they had decided among themselves there was only one person who could try to make the unworkable work. That was the first time they had reached out to me for anything.

Nelson: What did you tell them?

Gates: I really struggled with it. By then I was president of A&M. I flew back to D.C.
of Columbia]—It was Monday before the inauguration—and spent several hours with Hadley and [Andrew] Card. They were willing to give me everything I wanted. Among other things, the law did not empower the DNI to fire the head of a single intelligence agency and yet he was responsible for all of them, so we worked that out. We worked our way through a lot of these things, and they basically gave me everything I wanted. I still have the file of exchanges between them and me and faxes and emails of what I was demanding and what they were prepared to give.

But they made a mistake that Monday in the White House that no car salesman would ever make; they let me off the lot without closing the sale. [laughter] I went back to A&M and we went back and forth for the rest of the week. The President went to Camp David after the inaugural and I was to call Andy Card on Monday and give him my final decision. I’m pretty sure they thought I was going to take it, and I thought I was going to take it.

I took a walk around campus that Sunday night, smoked a cigar. I concluded I didn’t want to fight with Don Rumsfeld for the next four years, but mostly I didn’t feel like I had gotten far enough on my agenda at A&M. I really did not want to go back to Washington and I did not want to leave A&M, particularly with so much started but not done.

I called Card on Monday and told him I wouldn’t do it. He was just stunned, because they thought it was a done deal. I told my wife after that, “The good news is we’re safe now, because this administration will never ask me to do another thing.” As I put it, another great analytical moment.

Nelson: The President, there was never any moment in this process—

Gates: This is where they screwed it up, because if I’d been doing it, toward the end of this meeting at the White House, I’d have orchestrated for the President to come down the hall, throw those guys out of the office, sit down, put his hand on my shoulder or on my knee, and say, “I need you to do this for the country.” There is no saying no to the President under those circumstances. But they never brought the President in to me.

Nelson: Do you have any sense of why not?

Gates: The same thing happened a little bit with the Secretary of Defense job. The White House has gotten itself into this situation—and this isn’t the only White House—where they cannot tolerate the idea of somebody telling the President no directly. They want a firm answer before the conversation with the President, so that the President never gets surprised or never gets turned down. It’s bullshit, because there’s a certain category of appointee where you’re not going to get him if the President doesn’t make the ask, and sometimes even he is going to get turned down.

The irony is both Obama and I were turned down by John Hamre. We both talked to Hamre about being Deputy Secretary under me and John turned us both down. But in this case, and I don’t know whether it is peculiar to the Bush administration, because I wasn’t involved in that many appointments when I was in government before, but they didn’t involve the President.

But regarding Secretary of Defense, Hadley called me and asked me if I’d do it and then two
days later [Joshua] Bolten called me and asked me if I’d do it, sort of just to make sure.

Engel: Let me delve in here for an instant, because this is actually something that has always been a puzzle for me, because I remember quite clearly being at A&M when you announced you were leaving to become Secretary of Defense. You may recall you gave a talk at the Bush School. In fact, I’m sure you don’t recall, but we went out to dinner that night and you said time and again that when the President of the United States asks you to do something, the answer is yes.

When you were having this first conversation about becoming DNI and you pointed out that the President at that point did not walk down the hall, is that splitting hairs a little bit? Because it seems to me that clearly the President of the United States is asking you when his Chief of Staff is asking you? Explain that difference to me.

Gates: I probably overstated when I was talking to the class or said that, because there were other factors on the DNI decision. First, I’d already done that. The truth is that the way they’d written the law, I felt like I had had a stronger position as DCI than I would as DNI, and why the hell would I want to come back and just fight all the time with everybody. That was a big part of it for me, as well as this sense of unfinished business at A&M.

To be honest with you, I had felt for a long time, because every now and then people would talk about me for National Security Advisor and stuff like that, that I had no interest in that. I told my wife, “There are only two jobs that I would ever go back to D.C. for, and the good news is, nobody is ever going to offer me either one of them.” That was State and Defense.

Nelson: Why wouldn’t you want to be National Security Advisor?

Gates: Why? Those guys work all the time; they put up with all that bullshit in the White House, all those Presidential and staff egos. No thanks. I’ve been there, done that, got the t-shirt. That’s why, when Hadley called in October of ’06, the answer was an immediate yes as opposed to the two weeks of wrestling with the DNI job.

Engel: Because it was a job you had already put in the category that you would be interested in?

Gates: We’re jumping ahead a little bit, but as I put it to Hadley, it was very simple. It was a very simple conversation. He said, “If the President asked you, would you agree to become Secretary of Defense?”

I said, “Steve, we have kids out there fighting and dying and doing their duty; how could I not do mine if the President asked? So the answer is yes.”

Nelson: Back to the DNI appointment: Is it possible that you weren’t being offered the job; you were being offered the job with a 99 percent certainty that your meeting with the President would not reveal some fundamental difference of temperament or whatever?

Gates: No, there was never any question. They were clearly going back and forth with him, because the authorities I was asking for they couldn’t deliver; only the President could deliver.
Nelson: Since we’ve already tiptoed across the line into your Secretary of Defense experience, is there anything between the period we just covered and the time you got that call from Steve Hadley? Is there anything in those intervening years that we’re overlooking here that would be relevant to your service in the Bush administration?

Gates: Well, I learned a lot at Texas A&M—

Nelson: Oh, please, go with that.

Gates: —that contributed to my success as Secretary. Dealing with faculties, dealing with deans—although the Texas legislature wasn’t the Congress—kept my skills honed in terms of dealing with legislators, how you get things done in a big organization. I’d done a lot as DCI in a relatively short period of time, so the A&M experience built on that, but I would say strengthened my skills in managing a huge, diverse organization that was culturally resistant to change, and in terms of how you bring people along, and make them your allies in an effort, even when their own ox is being gored—I would leave it at that. The A&M experience—I was a significantly better Secretary of Defense having led a big university than I would have been otherwise.

Nelson: Tell us about some of the things you learned about managing a huge, diverse institution with a culture resistant to change. What did you learn that worked in that setting?

Gates: I started doing that at CIA.

Nelson: Well, begin there.

Gates: It is fundamentally that in all these very diverse organizations, for all practical purposes, everybody has tenure, so no matter who you are, if you don’t get buy-in from those people, any change you try to bring will either never occur or will be so much an alien graft that it is rejected the second you leave. This is the subject of my second book, by the way, how you lead change in big public institutions, big public bureaucracies.

What I learned is that the leader has to set the goals, preferably in consultation with the professionals. Even when it came to the goals at A&M, there was a lot of dialogue with the deans and with faculty and so on. There had been a huge effort before I came to A&M, under my predecessor, to identify what it would take to move A&M into the top 20 public universities by the year 2020. It was a big effort. They had identified 11 things that needed to be accomplished; they called them imperatives.

The first thing about being a leader is to know you can only accomplish three or four really big things, not 11, not 12, maybe two or three or four, so my dialogue with the deans at Texas A&M and the faculty went like this: of these 11, which will have a more dramatically leveraging effect on the others, so that if we focus on these three or four it will enable the rest? Elevating the faculty was one; academic buildings was another. The graduate program was another, and diversity was the fourth. Those became the four pillars of everything I did at A&M. It was focused on those. It was a product of the dialogue, with my provost at my side, with all the deans and all these people. What are the goals we should focus on here? What will have the most—
My challenge was easier at CIA, because six weeks after I became Director, the Soviet Union collapsed. The goal at CIA and the intelligence community became very straightforward: How do we reorient this massive intelligence community away from a singular focus on the Soviet Union and the Cold War to a much more diverse set of problems in the world? When I arrived at Defense, it was this: What do we have to do to be successful in Iraq and then Afghanistan, including what do we have to do to better support the troops?

When I was kept on by Obama, then it was a very wide broadening of the aperture. How do we restructure the Defense Department for the future so we’re able to take on a wide and unpredictable scale, range of military challenges premised on the reality that for 40 years our record in predicting where we would use military force next was perfect; we had never once gotten it right. There wasn’t a single instance: Grenada, Panama, Iraq twice, Afghanistan, Libya twice, Haiti, the Balkans. In not one instance did we know six months before we would have troops deployed and in action in those places.

How do you develop a military that isn’t focused on fighting two big regional wars but a military that is trained and equipped to be maximally versatile across the broadest possible range of conflict? How do you restructure the budget in a period when you know the budget is going to go to hell? How do you restructure the budget to take money out of overhead, out of tail, and put it into tooth? How do you show the Congress and the American people we actually can do this, do hard things?

The agendas in each of these three institutions were shaped in that way. At CIA and at Defense, they were fairly self-evident. At A&M, it was more of a collaborative process. But then at the next level it was OK, now you have the goals. How do you get there? That’s where bringing everybody in mattered.

Just to give one example, on the budget, on the efficiencies exercise, as Secretary of Defense in 2010, where we cut $178 billion out of overhead, over a four-month period I had 60 meetings ranging from two hours to eight hours. Both at A&M and as DCI, I used task forces. Here’s the task: We’re going to restructure the National Reconnaissance Office. Here is the chair of the task force. The task force is a broad range of people from across the entire intelligence community.

Then I did something unprecedented. When they issued their report and the recommendations, I made it available to anybody in the community who wanted to read it and invited comments. Then when I did a decision memo, I made it available, in draft, to anybody who wanted to comment on it. Today I would do all that online; we didn’t have the capacity to do it, but the drafts were easily available.

I wanted the maximum possible input. I wanted everybody to feel that they’d had a shot at being a part of the process, because even if you don’t participate, if you’ve had the chance to participate, it makes it a hell of a lot tougher for you to come back later and complain. The result was, in every one of these instances, there was great buy-in.

At A&M, I used task forces. Every single task force had faculty and students on it, as well as administrators and sometimes outsiders and so on. The key was how to get people on board. I used those very same techniques at the Department of Defense. At A&M, controversial issues
would come up that were very important for the faculty and not very important to anybody else. For example—You may remember this—a big issue came up about a living wage.

The truth is, A&M paid pretty well and was the economic backbone of the community. But there was a strong group of people in the faculty and in the administration, among the university staff, that felt we needed to raise the wages. I did then what I would do multiple times in the Defense Department: to buy time, I directed a review. I did this with don’t ask, don’t tell. I did it with several issues, including the Iraq War. I put faculty members, local citizens, staff members, and everybody on it to first let the passions cool. At least I was doing something. Let the passions cool. Get the data together. We actually ended up raising the overall salaries a little bit for the staff, so it led to a positive result.

The issue went away, and didn’t bankrupt the university, but the idea of buying time to look at an issue and let passions cool I would use time and again in the Defense Department, but I first used it at Texas A&M. Those are some examples.

Nelson: It’s fascinating. Let’s have a short break.

[BREAK]

Gates: There are two other things, including another technique I first used at A&M and then used at Defense. There is nothing that makes an impression and sends a message to an important constituency in a big institution, particularly constituencies that are accustomed to being ignored, like the faculty, as to have them make a suggestion and for you to say, “That’s a hell of a good idea, let’s just do it.”

I did that when the faculty recommended—apropos of this living wage thing—forming a staff council. Mainly it was a draw on my time, but it was a chance for staff to present their issues and have a dialogue with the president of the university. I said, “Sure, there’s absolutely no downside to this except it costs me a little time.” The faculty reacted as if they thought, Wait a second; let’s reexamine this. Is this really a good idea?

Being open on the issues that matter to me, doing something on issues that matter to them, was immensely helpful. It goes to the second point I was going to make, which is for me, at all three of these institutions, but I’m especially conscious about it at A&M and at Defense, there was very little that I did where I didn’t have a strategy, where I didn’t know where I wanted to go and figured out a strategy for getting there. It wasn’t just imposing it or figuring it will take care of itself, or just telling somebody to do it, but rather, How do I get from here to there and keep everybody on the bus?

One of the results of that was that virtually nothing I ever did as Secretary was overturned by the Congress, or rejected by the Congress.

Nelson: Because you included Members of Congress in this process?
Gates: No, because I didn’t have anybody running to Congress complaining.

Nelson: No end runs.

Gates: Because they knew there was a solid front, they just didn’t go there. I did the same thing at A&M—I’d also keep the relevant legislators informed of what I was doing. I did the same thing as DCI. I set up something as DCI that has never been done since. I told Boren and Cohen, Chairman and Vice Chairman of the SSCI [Senate Select Committee on Intelligence] and head of the House Intelligence Committee, “The way your hearing structure is set up, I never get a chance just to talk to you about things that are going on that I’d like for you to know, that you ought to know. There is no setting and I can’t have 60 staff members sitting there while I’m telling you, or even 30 members.”

I then started meeting with those guys about every three weeks in the late afternoon, one staff guy on their part and I brought my deputy and one staff guy, and I told them everything. If we had a counterintelligence investigation against somebody, I’d tell them that. I had no secrets from those guys. From the day I became DCI forward, there wasn’t another major problem with the oversight committees on the Hill.

I would do the same thing with [Carl] Levin and [John] McCain and with Ike [Isaac] Skelton and his number two.

Engel: That sort of personal trust building works very well traditionally when people get along. Did you find any instances where you decided this was not working out with the legislator or what not for any personal reasons?

Gates: No, I was lucky in the legislators. I’m very negative about Congress, but my experience is that, especially for the most senior Members, if you get them away from a television camera and the press, they can be pretty reasonable. If you’re fair with them, they’ll be fair with you. I disagreed with Levin on lots of stuff. He was my principal adversary on Iraq, but it never was personal. When he told me he would do something, he always did it, and vice versa.

Engel: Can we go back to something you said just a moment ago, that there are two to three, at the most four, things that a transformational leader can hope to change within a large organization? But at the same time you said that you wanted to ensure that you had given significant thought, strategy, as to where you wanted to go. Both at A&M and at the CIA, I guess, but most important for our purposes at DoD, when you came into those organizations, which of those two, three, four things did you know you wanted to do ahead of time? And which of them did you, as you put it, sort of pause and take a step back to reflect and decide, here’s where we need to go?

Gates: Mostly I didn’t have a clue at A&M. At CIA, events dictated the agenda and the goals: the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the impending collapse. At Defense, events dictated it: first, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were my two highest priorities in the Bush administration, along with taking care of the troops. I actually had a strategy session with my senior staff, just four or five guys, in December of ’08.

As I put it in the book, we had this strategy session over martinis, steaks, and red wine, always a
Engel: Before you go any further—December of ’08, is this before or after you decided to stay on?

Gates: This is after I’ve already been announced. It was what does Gates 2.0 look like? I decided that it was what I just described in terms of the budget, in terms of shaping the force. I’d talked about shaping the force in 2008, but it was mainly rhetorical, because I was going to be gone. But now I said, OK, now these guys are going to learn I actually meant what I said.

Engel: We want to make sure we start getting into the nuts and bolts of the Pentagon days, but I have two things I want to follow up on from what was said already. I’ll do it in chronological order. When I was asking about the 2003 invasion, you said, and I wrote down this quote, that there were “monumental mistakes” postinvasion. Could you go into some detail for us of what you perceived to be mistakes, not of the invasion, but immediately in the postinvasion—

Gates: First, allowing the looting to take place. But even more significantly, the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the de-Ba’athification. On the first, it just seemed monumentally stupid to me. You have 400,000 guys who know how to use weapons and you have just made them all unemployed. The counterargument I heard when I mentioned this at one point was, “Well, the Iraqi Army had largely already dissipated after we invaded.” I said, “OK, I got that. But you put it out that if everybody comes back to their job, they’re going to get X dinars a month to feed their families, they’ll have a place to live, and they will still be part of the Iraqi Army to take care of their people, they’ll come back.”

Second, on de-Ba’athification, as I said time and again, it is like these guys never read a book about de-Nazification and how the manager of the local power plant was a Nazi, but he really wasn’t a Nazi. He had to be a member of the party to get the job. What you’re really talking about is the upper crust of the party. Once you say, “Anybody who was ever a Ba’athist can’t have a job,” you no longer have any teachers, managers of plants, or anything else. Those were the two biggest mistakes as far as I was concerned.

Engel: Neither of those are necessarily affected by what is oftentimes a criticism made of the administration at this point, that there were simply not enough troops for occupation.

Gates: That was what led to the looting. If you had had enough troops to sustain order, particularly in Baghdad, that would have mattered.

Engel: The second point, going back to your discussions with the White House about becoming DNI, you went into some good detail for us about the negotiations that you had with the White House about what it would take to get you to do this. Say a little more, if you would, about how those negotiations would have been put into effect. Is this something that you would have gotten the President’s promise to back you up on these issues? Could you have gotten it in legislation?

Gates: Legislation? Having passed the Reform Act, Congress was not going to touch this issue again, so it all had to be through empowerment from the President. Just to give you one specific, I said, “I need to be able to fire the Director of the CIA.”
Hadley said, “Well, you can’t fire the Director of CIA, because he’s a Presidential appointee.” I said, “Got it. I want a guarantee that if I tell the President I want the CIA Director fired, he’d fire him.” They got it. And I said, “I want a deal on the defense agencies, where I either nominate the heads of those agencies and Rumsfeld concurs or vice versa. If there is a disagreement, we go to the President. But they have to know that they’re accountable to both of us, not just to Rumsfeld.” We went through a bunch of stuff like that.

Engel: For something like the first issue—that is, you’d want the authority to fire high-ranking individuals, Presidential appointees—would you have expected it to be an open secret that this is your power? Would you expect the President in the press conference announcing your appointment to say, “And I’ve given him this power”?

Gates: We never got that far. The benefit that it had was that it was—It’s a little bit like Washington as the first President. Because I would be the first DNI, nobody would actually know what I could or couldn’t do, but for me to simply say, “The President has given me the assurances that I require to be able to do this job effectively.” The truth is all of it would have come out in the confirmation hearing.

Engel: I see, because—

Gates: Because they would all be asking, “How the hell are you going to make this mess run?”

Nelson: By the way, I don’t remember who was the first DNI.

Gates: John Negroponte.

Nelson: Did the White House realize these were good ideas and did he have these—

Gates: No.

Nelson: You and he didn’t talk about—“John, you should really ask for this”?

Gates: No, because he never called me. I didn’t think I was in much of a position to offer advice since I turned it down. [laughter]

Nelson: Well, the assigned topic is how I became Secretary of Defense. Would you give a talk on that subject?

Gates: It’s a very short story, and we’ve already been through a good part of it. I was giving a speech for Norman Borlaug. I don’t know if you ever heard of him. Norman Borlaug is the winner of the trifecta: Nobel Peace Prize, Congressional Gold Medal, Medal of Freedom, the father of the green revolution. He was on the faculty of Texas A&M for the last 20 years of his life and he was active until his mid-90s. I was giving a speech at his request at the World Food Prize in Des Moines. I received an email from my secretary saying that Steve Hadley’s secretary had called and they wanted me to call him right away.

Nelson: This was when?
**Gates:** I can’t remember, Friday morning, maybe.

**Nelson:** What week?

**Gates:** October, around October 20th.

**Nelson:** Before the election.

**Gates:** Oh, yes, three full weeks before the election, at least, a little more than three weeks before the election. She says, “They really want you to call back right away.” I said, “Well, tell them I’m on the road.” As I write in the book, I’d worked in the White House for nine years. I knew that most of the time when the West Wing is calling and it’s urgent, it’s always urgent for them. I said, “It will keep. Tell him I’ll call him back Saturday morning.” They’re also not accustomed to being treated like that. It’s important to get things right in the first instance, but I had no idea why Hadley was calling.

**Nelson:** No idea at all?

**Gates:** Especially since we hadn’t talked since I turned down the DNI job. I take it back, just to go back to the first term. I was offered one job by the administration. Condi called and asked if I would be interested in being on the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. I said, “Sure, I think could be helpful there.”

The next thing I knew, I got a call from Presidential Personnel asking me if I would be willing to chair some obscure declassification board. I had my secretary give them an answer; I didn’t even call them back, so I did have that experience. But clearly that had run into huge political problems that even PFIAB [President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board] was too prominent for a former 41 person.

I called Hadley on Saturday morning, and we had exactly the conversation that I described: “If the President asked you,” and I said exactly what I said earlier. He said OK. Then I didn’t hear anything for a couple of days. Then Josh Bolten called and said, “I just want to follow up on Hadley’s call and confirm that you really are willing to take this on.” Then I realized they were serious when he said, “Now, is there anything in your background, anything that you’re doing now, corporate stuff, illegal immigrants working for you, all the things that have caused confirmations to blow up in the past?”

“Well,” I said, “I do have a Mexican housekeeper,” and I could hear this [makes sighing sound]. Before he began to hyperventilate, I said, “It’s OK, Josh, she has a Green Card and she’s on her way to citizenship.” That’s when I realized that it was pretty serious, that this was actually something that might happen.

He said, “We need to arrange an interview for you with the President.” I said, “I can slip into Washington and get back to A&M without it being noticed on Sunday evening, the 13th, and have dinner.” He called me back shortly thereafter and said, “That’s too long. Could you get to the ranch early in the morning on the 6th?”

I said, “Yes, I could do that. We’re going to have out-of-town guests, but I’ll get up early and get
out.” They don’t know what my schedule is, anyway. That’s when I realized this was very likely
to happen, but it was still in the “might be” column.

I got up about five in the morning and drove—Joe Hagen then called me about the arrangements.
They were very precise. I was to meet him at such-and-such a grocery store in McGregor, Texas;
he’d be driving a white Durango. I was to park, get in the car, and he’d drive me to the ranch.
We had this clandestine meeting; I met with Bush in his office at the ranch. He drove over. They
were having a 60th birthday celebration for Laura. He absented himself, came over by himself,
and we met at 7:30 or 8 o’clock in the morning, for about an hour.

Nelson: What did you talk about?

Gates: He went through his priorities, his concerns that Iraq was going badly, that we needed to
make a change in strategy. We talked about the surge.

Nelson: Really?

Gates: A surge. He asked me to think about a new commander, and he mentioned [David]
Petraeus. Then he talked some about Afghanistan, talked about some of the challenges facing the
department. Then he asked me what questions I had. I said on Iraq, I think it is going badly also,
and that there is a need for a change. I told him that I had supported a surge as part of the Iraq
Study Group, and in fact had sent an email three or four days before Hadley first called me, and
had sent an email to [Lee] Hamilton and Baker, saying we ought to recommend a surge of
25,000 to 40,000 troops in Iraq.

I said that I thought that our goals were too ambitious in Afghanistan, that it was being neglected
and that we needed to narrow those goals. I told him that I thought the Army and the Marine
Corps were too small for what they were being asked to do; they needed to be bigger. I told him I
thought that we pulled a bait-and-switch on the National Guard, that overnight they’d gone from
being a strategic reserve to an operational force. Neither the guardsmen’s employers nor their
families had bargained for what they got, and it was a big problem we had to address.

I told him that I was no expert on it, but I thought the Pentagon was buying too many Cold War–
era weapons for the kinds of challenges we were likely to face. We talked about all those things
and then he leaned forward. It was clear that the interview was coming to an end. He leaned
forward and said, “So what about Cheney?” I said, “Cheney?” He said, “I want you to know that
he is an important voice, but he is only one voice, and my voice is the only one that matters.”

I said, “Well, I’ve gotten along with Dick for a long time. I got along with him when he was
Secretary. I know he and Rumsfeld are close. I’ll never replicate that, but I think we can get
along OK.” That was it.

The only person that I had told other than Becky [Gates] that I was having this meeting—I had
actually talked to 41; 43 never knew it, but I let 41 know. Forty-one had gotten me to A&M and I
didn’t feel like I could make a commitment to leave, much less do what I was going to do,
without talking to him. I think he was really excited about the prospect. I think he was more
excited because he felt like it would really help his son more than anything about me. He made
this point: A&M needs you, but the country needs you more.
As I put it in the book, as I was driving back to College Station, I pretty well felt that what up until that morning had been a “might be” was now going to be a “will be.” Sure enough, later that same day I received a call from Bolten, basically saying, It’s done. Can you be in Washington on Wednesday for an announcement?

**Nelson:** The day after the election?

**Gates:** Yes.

The President also said—and this is the reason I mentioned about 41—“My father doesn’t know anything about this.” I thought, Oh, shit.

Actually, the first time he will know that is when he reads my book.

**Nelson:** We’re not going to tell him. Was the uncertainty in your mind about whether you would be offered the job or whether you would take it? Had you already decided to take it?

**Gates:** I had already made my commitment to Hadley and Bolten. I was in. They knew I was in. My head was already there. But it was a function of never having had a conversation with the guy. If the chemistry hadn’t clicked, it might not have happened.

**Nelson:** I really want to ask you about that, because this was your first time with him, and talking about something very serious and for the length of an hour. What were your impressions of him? What did you learn about him during that hour that was new to you or that had deeper nuance?

**Gates:** The first thing, he was extremely candid, just like the question about Cheney. I would never have brought that up, but I also was extremely candid with him and he didn’t bat an eye. I found that very reassuring. I came away thinking, I can tell this guy what I need to tell him and he’s not going to punish the messenger. I can be as honest with him as I need to be.

**Nelson:** Something we overlooked, Jeff, I guess, is to ask Secretary Gates about the Iraq Study Commission, just one particular thing at the moment. That is, in the email you sent endorsing a surge with about 25,000 troops, did you have a mission in mind for those 25,000 or would those 25,000 go there to do something different?

**Gates:** The whole key was about securing Baghdad and protecting the population.

**Nelson:** The Petraeus idea of “clear, hold, and build” was something that was already in the current—

**Gates:** It wasn’t that articulated in the summer and fall of ’06. But clearly the idea, based on our trip in September to Baghdad, was that you had to provide better security for the people of Baghdad.

**Engel:** My understanding of the Army side of this debate over the surge is that there were actually two separate questions going on at this time. The first was to surge or not and to embrace COIN [counterinsurgency] or not in sort of a get-out-and-see-the-population as the
prize. The second question was did you do outside of Baghdad or inside of Baghdad first.

**Gates:** The really big question—and it was not just the Army, it was virtually the entire uniformed leadership, [George] Casey [Jr.’s] position and [John] Abizaid’s position—was the importance of transferring security responsibility to the Iraqis. The more we did, the less they’d do. The more we did, the less pressure they’d be under to do more, so they opposed any surge at all. Their mission was transferring security and then to get out.

Before the attack on the mosque in the spring of ’06, Casey had intended to be down to 10 brigade combat teams by the end of the year. It was only in the summertime he realized he couldn’t do that because the security situation was just going to hell. The issue, as framed for the Iraq Study Group, was that Casey was completely wedded to this transfer-of-security strategy, and Abizaid and the Chiefs all supported him. What I only got a hint of with the Iraq Study Group and even on my first trip as Secretary, was how much subordinate commanders, like [Raymond] Odierno, disagreed with that and thought that there needed to be more troops.

But we pressed [Peter] Chiarelli and a whole bunch of others that we talked to very hard about whether they thought more troops were needed. They all toed the line because they were all subordinate to Casey. I give Bush a lot of credit. In essence, because Iraq is not going well, at the end of 2006, for all practical purposes, he fires the Secretary of Defense, the combatant commander, CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] commander, the field commander, and goes against the unanimous advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to approve the surge.

For those who talk about Obama neglecting the views of the military or disagreeing with the military or so on, this is as stark a case as I have ever read about, since [Abraham] Lincoln, in many respects, or the conflict or the disagreement between Roosevelt and [George] Marshall about sending materiel to England rather than building up the U.S. Army first. There are a handful of these examples in the 20th century and early 21st century, but this is a stark one of a President and his civilian advisors directly disagreeing with all of their uniformed leaders to take a major step.

**Nelson:** Well, to compound the degree of difficulty, you just had an election. It was probably in all of American history the closest thing to a national referendum in a midterm election and the verdict was get out of Iraq. The new Democratic Congress—

**Gates:** And the President doubles down.

**Nelson:** It’s an extraordinary thing.

**Engel:** Explain this one a little bit, because this is also an administration that had a President who had, like a catechism, like a mantra, said, “I follow the advice of my generals. I’m not going to pick targets in the basement of the White House. I’m going to do what my generals say.” Then, as you point out, he went for the junior varsity in some sense and put them into play, neglecting the entire JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff].

**Gates:** I think it worked. There are those who would argue that he and Rumsfeld rejected the recommendations—for example, of a larger troop force, for the original invasion, and certainly for the period postinvasion—so there’s one place where they disagreed.
One of the Democratic criticisms of him was that he hadn’t paid any attention to his military when he went into the war. What I later learned from Hadley and others was that actually the military was split in those days, at the beginning, between those who supported Rumsfeld’s idea of a lighter, faster, more technologically advanced—and those who wanted a much heavier troop presence. But the light invasion force was a manifestation of how little they had thought about what was going to come after.

My experience was that Bush listened to his generals and always listened respectfully, but was not in the slightest hesitant to disagree with them. It was particularly true in ’06, when it was perfectly apparent that their strategy was failing.

Engel: I’m struck, in a sense, that this is a case where the uniform military personnel were, in essence, making a political argument, that being if we give too much more to the Iraqis they’re not going to stand up and do things for themselves. You have the civilian leadership making, in essence, a security argument, that we need to get more boots on the ground to accomplish physical security of a population, which almost gets down to a level of tactics and not strategy.

Gates: No, it was high strategy. It was fundamentally that you cannot transfer until security has improved. The military was arguing transfer and then security will improve. But in fact, as they were transferring, security was getting worse. Their strategy was clearly not working, so Bush did have that to his advantage.

The lesson the Democrats took from that was to get the hell out. We were just talking about what Bush’s lesson was.

Engel: How much of that lesson do you think was—I don’t want to say “internalized”—quietly not being disputed, if you will, by the upper echelon of the military that was against the surge? Let me go back to that for a second to ask this, was there a sense that rather than double down—if the choice is double down or get out, and get out with your tail between your legs, then there were elements in the military in 2006 who were ready to say, “It just isn’t worth it. It’s not a question of our strategy is going to work or the other strategy won’t work, but we need to get out.”

Gates: I never heard anything like that.

Nelson: I know it is a little bit out of sequence, but we haven’t talked at all about how you became part of the Iraq Study Group and how their recommendations took shape, what you learned from that experience, how your recommendations were different. Could you talk about that? It seems to me that you had a deep immersion on the big issue you’d be dealing with as Secretary of Defense.

Gates: Well, Baker was a Secretary of State with whom I’d had some differences, but we got along fine. It was much to my surprise when he called me at A&M and asked me to be on this. I said, “I’m willing to do it, but is the President on board with this?” He said, “That was the first question I asked. I’m not going to do anything that makes life harder for him.” There was a kind of mythology at the time that Bush embraced the formation of the Iraq Study Group. I think he more acquiesced in it and thought it might be politically helpful and just might come up with some recommendations that would be helpful, but I would say he never really embraced it,
especially after the report came out.

It was a very congenial group; we got along well. Interestingly for me, the person who knew virtually nothing about foreign policy was in some way not surprisingly the best questioner, and that was Sandra Day O’Connor, because of her ear for inconsistency, illogic, conclusions not based on fact. It was extraordinary to watch her at work. As I put it in the book, to gently puncture a number of expert balloons.

We met eight times; we had the trip into Iraq. The only other thing I’d say about the Iraq Study Group is that—and I have this all in my book—given where the Iraq Study Group came out in its final recommendations while we were still in Baghdad, Bill Perry wrote a memo saying that there ought to be a surge. Then as soon as we came back, Chuck Robb, who was going to miss the next meeting, did an email building on Perry’s memo and also arguing for a surge. Then a week, four or five days before Hadley called me, I did a memo calling for a surge. They were all more complicated than that, but all three said you need significant additional troops and you need them in Baghdad.

The only three members of the ISG [Iraq Study Group] to put on paper their recommendations, all three recommended a surge. Yet when the final report came out, the surge was nowhere to be found in the main recommendations. In fact, it is relegated to page 75 or something out of 93 pages.

Nelson: It is not in the executive summary?

Gates: It is not in the executive summary at all. Two things happened: First, I left before they started putting together the final recommendations. I resigned because of the nomination. Second, the midterms came. The Democrats dug their heels in against the surge. Baker and Hamilton were so concerned to have a unanimous report that they relegated it to a sentence in the far back of the study.

Bush saw the Iraq Study Group, the report and the recommendations—because all through 2007 that report played a big part in the debate—as a path out of Iraq, as opposed to a path to success. He saw it as an exit strategy, and therefore rejected it. Many pieces of it he adopted, actually, but in terms of that thrust, he rejected that entirely.

Nelson: Perry, Robb, Gates—How did the idea of the surge percolate its way into the—

Gates: It was in sessions that we held in Baghdad, talking to the military. I would say Chiarelli probably played a big part in that. He didn’t come right out and say, “We need more troops,” but he was saying we needed to improve security in Baghdad. He never strayed from the official, the orthodox, line about no more troops, but he kept talking about how we had to have better security in Baghdad before we could do anything.

Nelson: I associate this entirely with Petraeus, which shows my—

Gates: Petraeus had no role in it.

Nelson: None at all? That’s interesting.
Gates: In September of 2006, I didn’t even know who the hell David Petraeus was, had never even heard the name.

Nelson: Now when you met with Bush in Crawford, did you talk at all about the report, the Commission?

Gates: Yes. I told him what my recommendation had been.

Nelson: Did you tell him where you thought? Was he concerned about—

Gates: He wanted to make sure I would support a surge.

Nelson: I’m asking something in addition to that, and that is, was he concerned about what this group would end up recommending? Obviously it was going to be something he’d have to respond to.

Gates: Not particularly, it didn’t seem to me. I think he had a sense where it was going to come out.

Engel: Would you say that the President was uncomfortable with the Iraq Study Group’s recommendation because it seemed to him a way out rather than a path toward success?

Gates: Yes, an exit strategy to get our troops out.

Engel: Could you say a little bit more about what your sense of the President’s aspirations and views were in Iraq at this time and how—granted you weren’t in the room at the time—you sensed they had changed, as a citizen, from 2003 up until that point?

Gates: We didn’t go into that, obviously, but my sense is that his aspirations at the end of 2006 were considerably narrower than they had been in 2003.

I talked to Condi about this. In 2003, it was all about weapons of mass destruction; they really hadn’t thought about what their goals were. As Hadley put it to me, once it was clear there were no weapons of mass destruction, now that they had Iraq, then it became a matter of having to bring democracy and these other things all evolved into becoming the goals for Iraq, which were quite ambitious.

I never had this discussion with the President, but I think his goal at that point was to stabilize Iraq, and that if you could stabilize the security situation, that they could then get on with politics and reconciliation and be a country.

Engel: What was your reaction, again as an expert, but also as a citizen, before 2006, when you began hearing the administration talk about democracy as a goal and using the term “freedom” ubiquitously, especially given your experience in 1990 and ’91, having been part of a group that decided not to go and take this extra step?

Gates: One of the funny things about this is—I used to tell people all the time—Baker and I used to talk about how much shit we took between 1991 and 2003 for not going all the way to
Baghdad. Of course, we’d make the argument that the coalition would have shattered, that it wasn’t under the authority of a Security Council resolution. I would argue Saddam wasn’t going to sit on his veranda waiting for the 20th Mechanized Division to drive up and arrest him; he’d go to ground, form an insurgency, and we’d end up occupying two-thirds of Iraq and have to repair everything we destroyed. Go figure. After 2003, I never heard that criticism again. 

Here is something that is going to make Bush uncomfortable about the book. My aspirations in Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan, were significantly more modest than the President’s. They didn’t lead to any differences in policy decisions, but just attitudinally. I wanted Iraq stabilized and taking care of its own business in a way that we could get out of there without suffering a major strategic failure; without having another Vietnam on our hands. I wanted to get out with our international credibility intact and with enough stability there that Iraq could sustain itself, so we could disappear and it wouldn’t look like we left with our tail between our legs, that we’d actually accomplished what we set out to do: we’d served up a new political system for the Iraqis on a silver platter, at a huge cost, and now it was up to them what happened to the country.

I felt we had achieved that objective by mid-2008, by the time the surge actually was over. Similarly, my goals in Afghanistan were very simple and straightforward. It affected my attitudes under both Bush and Obama, which was to crush the Taliban, weaken them to the extent you possibly can, strengthen the Afghan security forces so that they can keep the Taliban out or down on their own, and prevent anybody from ever using the country as a launch pad against us again, period.

Under both Bush and Obama, the political aspirations and articulated goals I thought were a pipedream; they were talking about the work of generations, at least decades. But if you did stabilize the security and if you did keep bad guys like the Taliban under your thumb, then these other good things could develop over time. It went to the same issues I had with the Obama administration’s attitude toward the Arab revolutions. Democracy and freedom depend on democratic institutions, on the rule of law, on civil society. None of these countries has any of that. Until those institutions are built, there cannot be enduring freedom or a democratic process.

What you need is a government that is at least moving in that direction. I never had this discussion with Bush or even Condi or Hadley, because they’re true believers. They still think this Freedom Agenda is a huge part of Bush’s legacy. Maybe someday it will be, but as we were fighting the wars, I thought that to articulate it as our near-term goal was setting ourselves up for failure.

Engel: When you say you never had that discussion because they’re true believers, is that because it would be politically, bureaucratically imprudent, because you’d be banging your head against the wall? Because it wasn’t part of—Did you not see it as part of your portfolio as Secretary of Defense to have that discussion? It seems to me that this is potentially something that might be—

Gates: I’d say all of the above. There was no point to it. The policy was set. The aspirations were set. It just would have created unnecessary strife and tension within the team on a matter I couldn’t do anything about anyway. To this day, we don’t talk about it. I’m business partners
with Condi and Steve and we don’t talk about it. We did edge over into conversation about Syria the last time we were together, because I’m much more cautious than they are about acting in Syria, but it is the same tension.

Nelson: Is this an accurate characterization of what you said: what if you debated that issue in the administration? The result of that debate would have had no effect on what you did as Secretary of Defense? In other words, what you were doing as Secretary of Defense—

Gates: Absolutely not. It had no impact on my support for the surge or what the surge was doing, or how we dealt with [Nouri al-] Maliki, because the tactical issues were predominant. How do you get the Iraqis to vote for some of these key metrics, reconciliation bills? It wasn’t for the future of the world; it was just whether you can pass something.

Nelson: I have a couple of nuts-and-bolts questions about your appointment. One is, did you talk at all with Bush or anybody else in the White House about the timing of your appointment before or after the election? That was their call?

Gates: That was all their call. I will tell you the Republicans, in the Senate in particular, were pissed as hell on the timing.

Nelson: But not at you.

Gates: Their view was that if Bush had announced this change six weeks earlier, they would have kept control of the Senate.

Nelson: Could you walk us through the nuts and bolts?

Gates: As I like to tell people—and it helped with humility—I think the attitude of Washington was captured by an editorial cartoon of me in my confirmation hearings; all it has me doing is standing with my hand upraised, saying, “I am not now, nor have I ever been, Donald Rumsfeld.” [laughter]

Engel: Why do you think the President didn’t come to that realization or didn’t act on that realization—not that you’re not Don Rumsfeld, but that moving Secretary Rumsfeld six weeks earlier could have been critical? It seems to me that I recall—I understand his political position, but all the polls were suggesting that—unless I’m mistaken—

Gates: Bush did not want to have the decision interpreted in political terms. In a way, it was kind of a head-in-the-sand approach, because he had to know everybody would interpret it that way, regardless of when he did it. It would actually look worse the day after the election than had he done it—at least people would have said that’s a politically smart move—six weeks before. The Republicans would have all applauded up on the Hill, “You gave us a fighting chance here.” But I have no idea; we never discussed it.

To this day, I don’t know who put my name in his head. I’m told that it was a friend of his whom I don’t know. Basically, it was that I’d been on the Iraq Study Group, knew Iraq, had run big organizations, was a Republican. Little did they know. [laughter] But I have no idea; it’s still a mystery to me.
Nelson: The confirmation process. A lot of attention has been drawn recently to how arduous the process is within the executive branch and then on the Hill. Because this is a common concern and a common experience for many people, could you take us through your confirmation process? What did you have to do to satisfy the executive branch? What did you have to do to get such a strong endorsement from the Senate?

Gates: First, it is an arduous process in terms of the paperwork that needs to be filled out. Washington has become, both in the White House and on the Hill, very unforgiving of mistakes, meaning unintentional errors. The recommendation to me was to hand it all over to a law firm that specializes in this in Washington, to do all that paperwork, because they do it for everybody and they know exactly what has to—every jot and tittle—so they did all the paperwork for me. I was only $40,000 poorer.

I can’t imagine the cost for somebody with the complexity of Hank [Henry] Paulson or somebody like that. But this is very atypical. My confirmation was a piece of cake. The Senate sent down 60 pages of questions, but there is a bureaucracy in the Pentagon that answers all those. You have to be prepared to respond to questions about those answers, but you don’t have to sit down and write them out yourself. The hearings themselves were essentially a walk in the park; everybody was so happy to have me there. I will say—let me go back 15 years to a very different confirmation, both in ’87 and ’91 for me, both of which were very hard. One I withdrew; one I was confirmed.

I will say this, and it was my attitude in ’91, if I’m not tough enough to take a tough confirmation hearing and to deal with United States Senators, I’m not tough enough to take on the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoĭ Bezopасности]. My attitude is—particularly with the security agencies, State, Defense, DNI—if you’re not tough enough to go through an arduous confirmation process, you’re probably not tough enough for the job.

But below those levels, it has gotten completely out of control. You need to have that kind of vetting at that level, but for Deputy Secretaries, Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, it is totally out of control in terms of the number of questions, in terms of the holds, in terms of just the bullshit you have to put up with. An individual Senator using nomination as leverage on an issue totally unrelated to the nominee; that all needs to be fixed. We’re at a point now where at any given time about 25 percent to 30 percent of all confirmable positions are vacant at any given moment. Partly that’s the White House; partly it is the Congress.

An administration usually isn’t fully staffed, or staffed as fully it is going to get, for nine months after inauguration. It’s just ridiculous.

Nelson: In the two months, roughly, between Bush’s announcement of your appointment and Senate confirmation, what were you doing during those two months to get ready for the job?

Gates: Well, I still had a full-time job. I probably was in Washington maybe a total of two weeks during that time, two and a half weeks. I give General [Peter] Pace and Robert Rangel and Gordon England a lot of credit. My general attitude on preparing for confirmation for that job was I don’t want to be stupid, but I also don’t want to be too smart. I don’t want to know too much, particularly on acquisition issues, because in the same committee—just to take the
tanker—you’re going to have Jeff Sessions and Patty Murray, Alabama and Washington. Those two will never agree on the tanker: Airbus, Boeing. I wanted to stay out of all that bullshit.

I knew that my confirmation was all about my attitude and my general philosophical approach more than it was about how deeply steeped I was in defense issues, so my preparation was focused more on the structure of the department. I knew who the Under Secretaries were and what they did, the authorities of the services, the service Secretaries, my authorities under Title X, things like that, where I couldn’t afford to look uninformed. But when it came to a lot of specific issues, I said, “I don’t want to know.” Better to say, “I don’t know the answer; I’ll look into it.” The stock answer ought to be “I’ll look into that when I get in the office.”

Nelson: Were you forming opinions about any changes you might want to make in personnel or structure?

Gates: I was pretty open on it. But one of the critical decisions that I made during that hiatus, which may have been one of the most important decisions I ever made as Secretary, was I decided to walk into the building completely alone and to keep everybody. I wasn’t even going to take a secretary. I was going to communicate the message to the entire building—which was expecting a huge purge—I’m assuming you’re all competent and capable until you prove otherwise to me. We don’t have time to mess around with a lot of new people. The last thing a neophyte Secretary needs is a bunch of neophytes around him, and in the middle of two wars. I don’t have time to get a bunch of people confirmed. We have to act and we have to act now on these issues related to the war. We’re just going to move on from here. I was later told that that sent an enormous message to the building.

Nelson: I’m told you also established the practice of not staying in the office longer than you needed to, so that people working for you would feel like it was OK for them to go home.

Gates: Yes, I felt this way for a long time, including at CIA. I knew enough about the Defense Department to know that if I stayed until 7 or 8 o’clock, hundreds of people would stay, worrying that I might call or need them, or need something, or whatever.

George Marshall was my model. I had read a lot about Marshall. He was the architect of victory in World War II. He had 12 million men under arms. He went for a horseback ride in Rock Creek Park every morning. He said no good decision was ever made after 3 o’clock in the afternoon. He went for a horseback ride at RCP in the afternoon. Washington has gotten too full of itself. It started in the [John] Kennedy administration, where the idea of burning the midnight oil showed how serious you were.

My attitude is that exhausted people make stupid decisions, so if you can’t get done and get out by 5, 5:30, 6 o’clock, you’re probably not very efficient about the way you do your job. As the boss of the biggest organization on the planet, I left the office every night that I could—sometimes I had meetings at the White House that would go until 6:30 or 7, and I just hated those, but that’s another story—I would try to leave the office by 5:30 or 6 every night.

Now, I would take two briefcases full of in-box with me. There’s a difference between doing my in-box in my office and doing my in-box at the house. If I did it at the house, if those folks wanted to go home and have dinner with their kids and their families, they could do it. If they
wanted to stay and work, that was on them, but they weren’t having to stay for me.

One other thing: in four and a half years on the job—only four people held the job longer than I did—I never once went into the Pentagon on a Saturday, not once.

**Engel:** Let me ask a follow-up on that. I am a big George Marshall fan myself, and I have proof of this because I named my son Marshall. I was struck when I went to the Marshall Museum at VMI [Virginia Military Institute], that they have listed his daily calendar, which, as you point out, has “ride” and “ride,” beginning and end. As you look at that list of 21st-century America, you realize the thing that is missing is that there is no place on the list for answering email. I was struck immediately by how much Marshall—how much more a person can accomplish without that.

**Gates:** I didn’t do emails.

**Engel:** Can you speak about that for the future historians reading this oral history. What was your use of technology?

**Gates:** The other thing that used to drive me crazy, and this goes back as far as the first Bush administration, you’d walk into offices in the White House and at the Pentagon and everybody had a TV on in the background set for CNN or Fox or wherever. I thought that was absolutely nuts. The only email I did as Secretary was personal email. I never did one thing by email as Secretary.

**Nelson:** Why?

**Gates:** It was a practice I started—Email was pretty primitive when I was DCI, but I didn’t want a Chief of Station to send me an email saying, “Unless I hear back within two hours, I’m going to overthrow the government of X” [laughter] and have me read it six hours later, when I finally get to my email. For the kinds of issues that the Secretary of Defense or the head of CIA deal with, email is crazy, it’s totally not the way to do business. It is too informal. It’s too dangerous in the sense that people put things in emails that do not belong in emails. You would not put them in a written memo or a hard-copy memo. I just felt it was very unprofessional.

I’ll be honest with you, and I have a paragraph on this in the book. I didn’t do Facebook; I didn’t blog; I didn’t tweet. All those things are for a different kind of work. I am critical of the senior military who do all those things, because it removes the aura of authority. Most of the blogs and tweets are about boring travel—what-I-did-over-the-weekend stuff. But no, I never used email for official business; everything was hard copy. If I authorized something, I wanted my signature on it, and I wanted to make sure that things that didn’t have my signature on them never happened.

And, as you point out, it also saved a hell of a lot of time. I did have one miscue from which Robert Rangel saved me. I was very eager to establish the same kind of personal relationship with the troops that I had with the students at A&M and for them to know that I had their backs. My first idea was to have a special email account where they could communicate directly with me. Rangel, who has the best poker face of any human being I’ve ever met sat down at my little table; he looked at my little note, he looked at me and he kind of arched his eyebrows and he
said, “I have one figure for you to keep in mind: 2 million. That’s how many people there are in
the military, 2 million. That’s a lot of fucking emails.”

I said, “You’re probably right.”

Engel: I wonder if you had any 30,000-foot philosophical conversations with people in both the
Bush and Obama administrations about events in the world that seemed at least superficially to
be driven in some ways by new media, by new technology. I’m thinking about one that happened
in the Obama years, for example, the first Egyptian revolution, which everyone said was a
revolution conducted by blog and tweet and Facebook. What was your reaction?

Gates: The first time it happened was before all that. It was the intervention in Somalia in 1992,
which I called the first CNN war, meaning caused by CNN. Bush would have never intervened
in Somalia had it not been for the CNN pictures of starving Somalis, zillions of them, and the
hardship in that country. My favorite story about this goes back to that time: I was coming back
from lunch to my office, northwest wing of the White House when I was Deputy National
Security Advisor. I was walking up the north driveway and they had all the reporters there along
the grass, the cameras and everything.

This pretty young thing came out with the bud in her ear and she was all excited, “Such-and-such
has happened in such-and-such a place and what are you all going to do about it?” I looked at her
and I said, “First, I’m going to go into my office and find out if what you just said is true, and if
it is, then we’re going to do the unthinkable: we’re actually going to sit down and think about it
for a while and then maybe we’ll decide what to do.” This notion that a problem identified in the
morning has to be solved by the evening is so pervasive and is just so nuts. The problem is that
politicians, and I would say Presidents and their advisors, allow themselves to be driven by this
rather than by exercising the discipline to say: “Whoa, we’re going to take our time, and we’re
going to think about this. We don’t need to react instantly. I frankly don’t care if you go out and
say we’re dithering or whatever. Your ‘dithering’ is my ‘thinking.’”

There are so many examples that I can think of from both the Bush and Obama administrations
where they allowed themselves this demand on the part of the White House communicators to
force a response to everything. It is part of the permanent campaign. You can’t let something go
unanswered for two hours or six hours, and it spills over into policy.

Both administrations were always trying to get me to go on the Sunday shows. I’d tell them go to
hell. What they never understood is that the more infrequently you appear, the more people pay
attention when you do.

Nelson: On the same day you were confirmed by the Senate, the Iraq Study Group met with
President Bush. Were you at that meeting? If not, did you hear about how it went?

Gates: No and no. To the extent I did hear anything about how it went, it was that he sat there
and listened, that was about it.

Nelson: When was the surge? This is something that hadn’t been decided yet, is that right? At
the time you become Secretary—
Gates: I think it was decided in Bush’s mind.

Nelson: OK. How was it that it became a decision?

Gates: He was not prepared to say he had made a final decision until I had had a chance to go to Iraq. He got my recommendations after talking to the commanders. I had said in my confirmation that I was going to go and I was going to listen to the commanders, so the final decision was not made until we met at the ranch in late December. It was not formalized until around the 8th of January, and I think he gave his speech on the 10th of January.

Nelson: When you made a trip to Iraq, or in general if you make trips to a site, other than talking to the commanders there, were there things you learned that you wouldn’t have been able to learn otherwise?

Gates: I got a perspective from the commanders in private that they might not have given me in a video conference or in a big conference. To tell you the truth, most of what I learned that I couldn’t learn anywhere else was when I met with the troops.

Nelson: Could you talk about what you learned from the troops?

Gates: It was everything from equipment issues to their experience in dealing with the Iraqis or the Afghans on the ground, what’s working, what’s not working.

Nelson: Are there settings in which troops are more forthcoming?

Gates: I orchestrated from the very beginning something that pissed off most of the commanders. I would try to orchestrate a meal either with junior officers, meaning lieutenants and captains, or junior enlisted, or junior NCOs [noncommissioned officer]. I did more of the latter than any of the others. It was generally a group of about 10 or 12 of them, maybe 15, sitting around a square table. I would not allow any of their commanders in the room. The only person other than me in the room besides them was my guy who was a notetaker, because I demanded that any time a kid brought up an issue with me we would get back to him with an answer if I didn’t know the answer. They’d pretty much tell me everything.

Nelson: The equipment issue was one that I gather you turned into a change in policy, in practice.

Gates: Yes.

Nelson: Others?

Gates: A lot of them had to do with family issues, treatment of their families. I can give you a couple of examples.

Nelson: Yes.

Gates: This is one I’d never heard in the Washington area. I was sitting there, and this kid told me, “We have a problem with our fatigues, our BDUs [battle dress uniforms].” I said, “What’s
that?" He said, "Well, when you're crossing the fences and jumping over stuff and everything, the crotches tear out." He kind of smiled and said, "It's OK in the summer, but it gets a little breezy in the winter."

As I said, I'd have never found that out back in Washington. Also, there were problems in medical care for their families back home. About half of what I learned from them had nothing to do with Iraq or Afghanistan, but issues relating to them and their families and so on. One bunch of kids told me the Afghans they were training were deserting because their officers were ripping off their salaries. Another one was that the Iraqis were lazy and those who weren't lazy were stoned. It gave me a little ground truth.

Nelson: You had to make the decision to extend the length of tours from 12 to 15 months. I'm wondering if your conversations with troops gave you a sense of how that would be received, if it gave you the confidence to—

Gates: I'd only had one trip to Iraq and one trip to Afghanistan before I made that decision, so I really didn't—and I didn't telegraph it. That was probably one of the hardest decisions I made as Secretary.

Nelson: Did you get blowback on that on subsequent visits?

Gates: Not that much. It was interesting. The troops tend not to complain up the line on stuff that they know they can't change, but I heard from families. One of my junior military assistants told me—he heard from his friends—"15 months is more than just 12 plus three. It also brings into effect the law of twos: now you miss two Christmases, two birthdays, two anniversaries, et cetera." I knew when I made it that it was going to be incredibly hard on families and on the troops, but the alternative was, because of the surge, to cut short their time at home. It was either extend the deployment by three months or cut their time at home by three months, down to nine months. I just felt I couldn’t do that.

Engel: You said a moment ago that that was one of the most difficult decisions you made. I was wondering if you could tell us about the most and/or a list of them.

Gates: That was the most difficult one, having to do with the troops themselves. Obviously, any time you fire somebody senior, that is a tough decision, and I made it on a number of occasions. Nobody had ever fired a Chief of Staff and Secretary of a service at the same time. I don’t know why as a historian this escaped my attention, but I didn’t realize until afterward that when I fired [David] McKiernan, it was the first time a field commander had been fired in a war since [Douglas] MacArthur. Those were all tough.

Just signing the deployment orders was tough, knowing that I was sending these kids every week into harm’s way. I mentioned earlier that only four had lasted longer than I had. It’s worth mentioning the four, because it had an influence on my decision to leave. Of the four were [Robert] McNamara and Rumsfeld; both had to resign in disgrace. Weinberger was indicted, and the fourth was Charles E. [Erwin] Wilson of the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower administration. I said there is no good precedent here for staying longer. [laughter]

Nelson: When you fired the field commander, would it have made a difference if you had known
that this was the first such action since MacArthur? Would you have handled it differently?

**Gates:** No, because firing the service Secretary and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force at the same time had never been done before.

One of the things that was enormously empowering for me was being willing to leave, and everybody knowing that I wouldn’t mind it if I was fired. The irony is that the more people knew I wanted to leave, the more they wanted me to stay. It made me what I wish more people were in D.C., which was willing to take big, bold steps, challenge orthodoxy, and not worry about the consequences, just do what I thought was the right thing and move on.

The irony is that it backfired, in terms of it didn’t make people want me to leave, just the opposite. I’ve often thought that if more people, particularly in Congress, had that attitude: go, do the right thing for a couple of years, and if I get defeated, I get defeated. I told many audiences, “If I could go and, in just one term, help put the country on the right track financially, and get defeated the very next election, I could go to my grave knowing I had made a huge contribution to my country.” But these guys who have decided to be careerists, and most of them are now, having that prestige, having that job, having that title, having that deference means everything to them now. There are very few who are willing to push their chips to the middle of the table. For me, that was the only fun part of the job.

**Nelson:** What kind of shape was the Pentagon in when you became Secretary?

**Gates:** It was very hard for me to know, actually. If I listened to Members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats and old friends, it was in a hell of a lot of trouble. Here is what people were telling me in my courtesy calls and what Levin actually said in the hearing: there was disdain for the senior military and civilian leadership of the department and several levels down, a feeling that the department was contemptuous of the Congress, that it was an outlier in the interagency, difficult to deal with, impossible to get to agree on things. It was dysfunctional in many ways, but mainly for having alienated basically everybody in Washington.

As I write in the book, I don’t know how much of that was sour grapes about the outcome of the election, the midterms; how much of it was animosity toward Rumsfeld; and, frankly, how much of it was sucking up to the new guy by trashing the old guy, which is a finely developed art in Washington, so I really don’t know. If I listen to what people tell me, and there were people, including John Hamre and others that I really respect and who knew the building, then those issues were real, so one of the chapters in my book is titled “Mending Fences, Finding Allies.” There were huge problems with the intelligence community, just because Rumsfeld insisted on centralizing everything in the department.

He had fired Jim Clapper as the head of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (GIA), which does all the imagery stuff. Clapper had been Director of the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] when I was DCI and had supported subordinating NSA [National Security Agency] and GIA to the new DNI. Rumsfeld hated the idea and fired Clapper for it, so I turned around and hired Clapper as Under Secretary for Intelligence. He had been out of government six months. But I knew him to be a man of great capability and extraordinary integrity and there was a lot of suspicion that, under Steve Cambone, intelligence at Defense had gone into areas where it did
not belong.

I had Clapper go through all that; that was his highest priority. We discontinued one program, but other than that, many of the allegations were exaggerated or wrong.

**Nelson:** How about the growing reliance of the Defense Department and the State Department on private contractors? At one point, there were about 160,000 American troops in Iraq, and there were 180,000 people under contract.

**Gates:** You have to start breaking that down. A big portion of those people, also in Afghanistan, were support people. Those are the guys who ran the commissaries, ran the laundries, provided the services. We’d been headed in that direction in the military for decades. Better to have a GI, a trained soldier, soldiering than peeling potatoes. Many of those folks are involved in that: housecleaning and stuff like that.

Many of even the security people were engaged in guarding fixed installations or convoys. The people who actually caused the most trouble were the security personnel hired by State to protect their people and visitors. Some of those guys were bad actors. Like in most instances, probably a minority gave a bad name to everybody. They were disrespectful of the Iraqis. They’d throw frozen water bottles through the windshields of cars that were following too close. They’d hit other cars and scatter people off the streets and so on. It had grown willy-nilly, without anybody being in control of it. One of the big issues that Condi and I had to face was how to get it under control after it blew up and to put them under some kind of jurisdiction.

My attitude was that I didn’t want anybody—any American or anybody being paid by Americans—who carried a gun in Iraq who wasn’t responsible and accountable to Petraeus. That’s where we eventually ended up. But there was a lot of bureaucratic BS [bullshit] between State and Defense over who had jurisdiction and this, that, and the other thing. The other big issue was whether it would be military jurisdiction or Justice Department jurisdiction. Everybody eventually agreed it would be military. It was a big problem.

It became a problem in the Defense Department, and part of it was having so much money. When Michèle Flournoy became Under Secretary for Policy, I was stunned when she told me she had more contractors working for her than she had civil servants. One of the central strengths of the policy shop is a cadre of career civilians who have a lot of continuity and experience, so she set about changing that. But even inside the Pentagon it was a huge problem as well. In all honesty, the benefit of contractors, as opposed to civilian employees, is that you can hire a contractor for a year and then he goes away. You don’t have to pay him lifetime benefits. In the long term, it is a hell of a lot cheaper to have a contractor than to hire a full-time civilian employee or use full-time military, but it really got out of control.

As part of my efficiencies exercise in 2010, we put some very stringent limits on contractors and on reducing the number of contractors. Whether they implemented that or not, I don’t know.

**Engel:** I’d like to shift gears a little bit if we could. We spent a lot of time talking about your relationships in Washington within the defense community and Congress, for example. I’d like to shift a little bit to your relationships and work outside the country, to your relationship with allies and adversaries. Let’s take the allies first. Describe, if you will, when you first took on the
job in 2006, where you saw the United States, especially in its Iraq and Afghanistan policies in relationship to its allies, and where you wanted them to go.

**Gates:** First of all, the situation by the end of 2006 was dramatically better than it had been, say, in 2004. Gerhard Schroeder in Germany had been replaced by Angela Merkel; [Jacques] Chirac had been replaced by [Nicolas] Sarkozy, so in two of the countries that had been most hostile to our invasion of Iraq, you had significantly more pro-American leaders come into power.

Also, with the passage of time and other issues coming up on the international agenda, more-traditional interests began to reassert themselves. By the second term, Condi had begun to put a different face on things. Colin had been significantly hampered, first by the fact that he didn’t like to travel. There is a certain wisdom in his comments in his book about the Secretary is not the traveling salesman, and shouldn’t be on the road all the time, but there is a balance there, and Colin didn’t travel enough. Condi was reaching out.

Bush had become a little kinder and gentler, so the situation with respect to our European allies had improved quite a bit by the time I got there. Bush, including to this day, was always well regarded in Africa, because of a variety of his initiatives, which interestingly enough the Obama administration was jealous of and wished they could come up with as big an idea as the Millennium Fund [Millennium Challenge Account], the AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome] thing that he did, and a couple of other things.

The Asians felt neglected, and they were. Even after I got there, they were—like the Australians—miffed. We have a 2+2 Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense with counterparts, but when it came our turn to go to Australia, Condi bailed and sent her deputy, sent Negroponte. That left the Asians feeling neglected, but it wasn’t hostility; it was just that we weren’t paying attention.

**Nelson:** By “the Asians,” meaning?

**Gates:** Australians, South Korea, Indonesia, the Japanese. I went to Asia a number of times in 2007 and ’08. I was always glad that Hillary’s first trip was to Indonesia, because it sent a powerful signal. In my view, that represented the pivot to Asia, not what was done two or three years later. The bottom line is I felt that relationships with our allies were in better shape by the end of 2006 at least than certainly the Obama folks ever were willing to acknowledge.

I made a big, positive impression just a couple of months after I took office at the Munich Security Conference, which is where [Vladimir] Putin got up and just railed at the United States. I think he thought that this anti-American diatribe would appeal to this group of European elitists and politicians and think-tankers and so on, but in fact he totally misread his audience and all the questions were hostile.

This was my first speech abroad as Secretary and I rewrote the front end of the speech by myself, sitting and listening to him. I took this line: I listened with interest to what your speaker yesterday had to say and I guess it’s true, that your speaker and I have a different background than most of you, because we are both old spies. The difference is that I’ve been a university president, so I’ve been to reeducation camp, and I know the line is “be nice or be gone.” I concluded that section by saying one Cold War was enough; we need to work together. We and
Russia and the rest of you need to work together. Anyway, it went down as a huge success, with headlines all over Europe.

The other piece of it was that some have divided Europe in different ways: east bloc, west bloc; north, south; old Europe and new Europe. Everybody knew I was referring to Rumsfeld’s comments. I said, “I have only one division for Europe and for the allies; it is allies that fulfill their commitments and those that do not.” I then went on to talk about how they needed to shape up on Afghanistan. [laughter] Ironically, one commentator said that I had been a huge hit even though my message had actually been tougher than Rumsfeld’s in terms of what I was telling them their shortcomings were, but the tone was so different that it had a very positive impact.

If there was a consistent theme in my discussions with our allies through my whole time, it was their failure to invest adequately in defense and their failure to follow through on their commitments in Afghanistan.

Nelson: You met with, for example, Tony Blair, in the middle of January to talk about the surge. Was a decision made, in effect, and you were informing him?

Gates: Yes.

Nelson: And you could still count on his cooperation?

Gates: Yes.

Nelson: Why was that?

Gates: I don’t know; you’d have to go back to before me. Blair and Bush just forged a unique relationship. Blair to this day is like Gorbachev and [Brian] Mulroney. They are all three a hell of a lot more popular in the United States than they are at home.

Nelson: But there was no sense of “I’d like to be asked instead of being told?”

Gates: No.

Nelson: The groundwork had already been laid, I guess? You’re nodding your head yes.

Gates: I don’t recall him saying anything about it.

Engel: I’m going back to the point you made, in Munich and then beyond, that Western allies, especially European ones, needed to not only fulfill their short-term commitments but also to invest for the future. Could you talk about that in the context of the current austerity concerns, both in Europe and, frankly, within at least the Obama administration, less so with the Bush administration, although it depends on when you want to date things. There seems to be a fundamental question of relations going back to Roosevelt, to this day, as to how much—

Gates: My final speech in Europe as Secretary, the other end of the bookend, in June 2011, was a very tough speech. I basically said this: You need to understand that I am the last of the generations of Americans in senior positions in government who grew up in World War II or the
Cold War and remember the role that NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and Europe played in our mutual defense and the importance of our relationship and who have an emotional as well as historical tie to Europe. Those who come after me, in the Obama administration and beyond and in the Congress, have no such memories, no such emotions, and no such ties. They will look at this relationship as a cost/benefit analysis, and you come out on the short end. They will wonder why we invest in Europe in defense. I’m it. I’m the end of the line. It had quite an impact; it is still being quoted over there.

I go back to the Carter administration. NATO had a guideline beginning in the ’70s that countries would spend 3 percent of GDP [gross domestic product] on defense. Then sometime, I think in the ’90s, that was reduced to 2 percent. As I often said, by the time I left there were five countries that met the 2 percent threshold and two of them were Croatia and Greece. We saw the results of that in Libya. Twenty-eight nations voted to go in, half participated at all, and eight participated in the strike mission. And even against a poorly armed, raggedy military, the French and the British ran out of precision-guided munitions 11 weeks in and had to come to us. Britain, for the first time since World War I, is now without an aircraft carrier.

Engel: I want to ask about some of the specific events of this period in a moment, but let’s reengage that issue a little bit. Even though it is after the W. years that in theory we’re going to talk about, there are some who might argue that that disparity you’re describing, of Europe being unable to fulfill its own security needs and commitments, is actually in some ways in America’s best interests, that this makes them more reliant on us than they would be if they were militarily sustainable. Does this hold any water with you?

Gates: No, because I would flip it on its head. America’s political ability to act unilaterally militarily, particularly after Iraq and Afghanistan, is going to be extremely limited. When we do act, it is going to be a fundamental requirement, as it was in ’91, that we have as broad a coalition as possible. That means a coalition that actually has capability to carry some of the burden. My attitude on Syria and Libya both was—and the Balkans—let the Europeans deal with it; that’s their vital interest, not ours. But they don’t have the capacity.

Engel: Let’s talk about Georgia. Walk us through, if you will, your recollection of the Georgia crisis and its—I’m hesitant to say its resolution—its state.

Gates: I’m more evenhanded in my book, but that whole thing, as far as I’m concerned, was a grotesque, strategic mistake by [Mikheil] Saakashvili. These two states had declared their autonomy at the same time that Georgia declared its independence, in ’91, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There was a fight during the ’90s between the Georgians and these guys, and finally the Russians get everybody to agree to stop and put “peacekeeping forces” in those two provinces.

Every August the Georgians shell the capital of South Ossetia, but it is kind of a cursory thing, like a Fourth of July celebration, but with real fireworks. [laughter] Meanwhile, Georgian covert forces are stirring up trouble in South Ossetia. Then, in August 2008, they really launch an offense and Saakashvili goes to the border of Abkhazia and tells the Georgians on the other side of the border, “You will be home soon.” He is doing everything he can to provoke the Russians. Then the Georgians launch a massive artillery salvo at the capital of South Ossetia on August 4th or 5th. That’s all the provocation the Russians need, so they come across, right into Georgia.
When we were in the middle of the crisis, I rather sardonically said in a press conference, “Both sides have been careless with the truth in dealing with us.” [laughter] But my attitude then and now is that the Russians set a trap and a headstrong, impetuous Saakashvili walked right into it and gave them the excuse that they wanted.

The interesting thing to me is, there is a visceral, personal hatred of Saakashvili on the part of the Russian leaders, and particularly Putin, that is very real. I have not seen that with any other leader in the world, but they really hate that guy.

**Engel:** Preceding this crisis?

**Gates:** And they think he’s crazy. Yes, ever since he was elected President.

**Engel:** To what have you heard that ascribed?

**Gates:** Just the way he has conducted himself, the way he has behaved.

**Engel:** Correct me if I’m wrong, but the crisis winds up being, in a sense, ultimately helpful for the United States in its missile-defense plans.

**Gates:** Primarily because the Poles had been slow-rolling us on the deal, and a week after the Russians invaded Georgia, they signed up. [laughter] Go figure.

**Nelson:** What is missile defense about and is that something you saw as an important part of our—

**Gates:** Missile defense in Europe is all about Iran and only about Iran. Even during the Bush administration, Condi and I proposed to Putin that we would be willing to a delay in placing the interceptors in Poland until the Iranians had tested a missile that could reach Europe, because the Russians kept saying it was against them. We said it’s all about Iran. They kept saying the Iranians are 10, 20 years away. Putin showed me a map that had range arcs on it of the range of Iranian missiles. It looked like a school kid had drawn it with a little colored-pencil protractor. [laughter] Putin said, “Our intelligence says they won’t have a missile that can do this for blah-blah years.” I said, “Well, you need to get yourself a new intelligence service.” Now, telling Putin that was really kind of sticking it to him. That was kind of fun, actually.

Later, [Dmitry] Medvedev came back and said, “You were right about the Iranians,” in terms of their missiles and stuff, words that never would have crossed Putin’s lips, but it was all about Iran. We were willing to allow the Soviets, the Russians, to have observers inside the facilities, willing to have joint data centers. We were willing to go pretty far. The funny thing is that the GBIs [Ground-Based Interceptor] that were our proposal under Bush literally had no capability to attack any of their missiles, and even upgraded never would.

The proposal for a change was put forward in the Obama administration, in the nature of the interceptors, to go to the SM-3s [Standard Missile-3]. The Republicans all accuse Obama of doing this to please the Russians, and about six weeks later the Russians suddenly tipped to the fact that these things are a hell of a lot more dangerous to them than the GBIs, especially for future generations and became even more adamant against the SM-3s than they were the GBIs.
The notion that we’d done this to please the Russians was—

The point was, the piece of this that the Republicans missed in the change was that despite the initial enthusiasm, by the end of 2008 it was really clear that the radar would never be deployed in the Czech Republic, that the domestic politics had turned completely against it. The opposition, which was about to come to power in parliamentary elections, was totally against it and the public opinion polls were totally against it. It was like three to one.

The same kind of opposition was developing in Poland, and public opinion in Poland was very far on one side against deploying the interceptors. We might have eventually gotten an agreement and ratification in Poland, but I don’t think we ever would have in the Czech Republic. The whole thing became a centerpiece of the relationship with Russia under both Bush and Obama.

Engel: Describe, if you would, their rationale for their position.

Gates: It’s very simple: they believe that in the future these missiles in place in eastern Europe would have the capacity to knock down Russian missiles. If they ever built the fourth generation of the SM-3, it actually would have some capability to do that. It has never been about current capability; it has always been about 10 to 15 years from now.

Nelson: Something we passed over is the Walter Reed scandal and how it became known to you and how you decided to go about taking the actions you did, your immediate response and then your longer-term response. That was one of those issues that if somebody had CNN on in their office, they’d be sitting all day, for quite a while. It was a more prominent, public, emotional issue than Defense Secretaries usually have to deal with.

Gates: It was an emotional issue for me, but I also saw it as a huge opportunity. At this point I was mending fences, finding allies, being Mr. Nice Guy, repairing the interagency, being nice to the Congress, being nice to the military, meeting with the Chiefs down at the tank instead of in my office like Rumsfeld did. I was doing all this stuff to mend fences and be nice. I knew it was important to make it clear I could and would be ruthless when necessary. Walter Reed gave me that opportunity, and on its merits it had to be done.

One reason it had such a big impact was that nobody had been fired in the Bush administration, no matter all the terrible things that had happened: Katrina, the wars, and everything else.

Nelson: Except Clapper.

Gates: That was sort of below the radar. Actually, that was one of those deals where he was just inched out.

I read about Walter Reed in the *Washington Post*. I said at a staff meeting, “We have a problem. It’s not a public relations problem; it is a problem of how we deal with our wounded.” This was in February. I asked for a report and had it within a couple of days. Then I went out to see Building 18 myself. The more I looked at it—What really set me on fire was the cavalier approach of the Army leadership.
We fired the hospital commander, the Army did, with some pressure from me.

**Nelson:** The Secretary of the Army fired him?

**Gates:** No, Fran Harvey. Two things happened that sealed the deal: I read in the paper Harvey saying that this was not that big a deal and it was a couple of NCOs [noncommissioned officer] not doing their jobs. Then he appointed in [George] Weightman’s place as commander of the hospital General [Kevin] Kiley, who had been the previous hospital commander, and most of this started on his watch. That iced it for me.

Harvey was on a trip to Florida. I recalled him, called him into my office. He later described it as bloodless. He said there was hardly any emotion, no anger, no nothing. I just matter of factly told him he was fired; I wanted his resignation the next day. Then I made sure Kiley was fired within 24 hours. Kiley had gone to the newspapers calling it yellow journalism and it was all wrong and he intended to fight this. I said, “OK, I now know all I need to know to make a decision.” I just fired them all. It had a stunning impact in Washington.

**Nelson:** Explain that.

**Gates:** Nobody had been fired for not doing their jobs properly in forever, and certainly not in the Bush administration. The news commentators were saying that Gates clearly hasn’t gotten the memo from the Bush administration on this stuff and that somebody was being held accountable. Of course, it was in an area that was of special emotional sensitivity to everybody, how we were taking care of our wounded.

The challenge for me was how to differentiate between the quality of the medical care at Walter Reed—the doctors and nurses and staff in the hospital, which was never anything but five stars—and where the problem was, which was in the treatment of outpatients, guys going through rehab and having to live in these squalid conditions. But it was also the bureaucratic quagmire that they were being forced through, in terms of getting appointments and everything else. It was just a huge mess. It was another one of those places where there were—I addressed the question as, OK, who is to blame?

Well, Walter Reed was BRACCed [Base Realignment and Closure Commission]. Are you going to invest a bunch of money in a hospital that is going to close? Especially when you’re going to get rid of all the people there? How are you going to get anybody to go work there, any new people? The list went on and on, but fundamentally nobody expected these wars to go on very long and nobody expected the hospitals to be under the stress that they would be under, especially for these complex wounds and the time and rehabilitation that it took to go through it.

**Nelson:** I want to ask you a naïve question and that is why, when you fire somebody, don’t you just say, “You’re fired.” Why say, “I want your letter of resignation”?

**Gates:** Even when people screw up—The truth is the guy had given a lot of good service in other ways. You don’t have to rub salt in the wound. Everybody knows damn good and well he was fired, so when I say, “I asked for and received the resignation of the Secretary of the Army,” everybody knows what the hell that is. It’s just one of those tiny social graces.
I fired virtually every vice president at Texas A&M and I gave every one of them a face-saving way out. I would tell people at A&M, You can play this any way you want. You can tell all your friends in the press that you think I’m a rotten son of a bitch and you won’t work for me one more day and I won’t say a word in response, or you can say you want to spend more time with your family, or a hundred other things, but you’re gone. How we characterize it, I’m willing to work with you and do it in a way that makes it easiest for you.

Nelson: But in this case, you wanted to send a message.

Gates: Mostly I wanted to fire him. Mostly I thought he had really been insensitive, and it got to me as somebody—I saw this at CIA all the time. My threshold of tolerance for people when there is a big problem and people at the lower end of the totem pole bear all the weight—I have no tolerance for that. The same situation, exactly the same circumstances, occurred with the Air Force nuclear programs in 2008. The leadership simply didn’t understand, couldn’t understand, why it was a big deal.

Because they didn’t understand the problem, they had to go. The original Air Force review punished two or three colonels and a bunch of NCOs. Ultimately, by the time I was done, nine generals were disciplined and the Secretary and the Chief of Staff were fired. There it was what they had not done, but it was also to send a message that the stewardship of the nuclear mission was the most sensitive thing we had and it had to be perfect.

Nelson: Did you consult with or even inform anybody in the White House before you took any of these actions?

Gates: I told the President what I was going to do. They are his appointees, actually. Technically, I have to get his permission to fire them, but he, Bush, never hesitated in any case, even when I did the two at once, which was a really big deal.

Engel: Let me draw an analogy, which I hope you’ll appreciate. This is, of course, the same tactic that Gorbachev took after the small airplane landed in Red Square. Here was an opportunity to get rid of a whole bunch of dead wood, or whatever term you want to use. Looking at the Air Force example, how much of this were you able to go through the rolls and say, “I want to get rid of this person and that person, this person”?

Gates: No.

Engel: Everybody was specifically involved in the nuclear issue?

Gates: And they found it very difficult to believe, because most people in the Air Force figured I really fired them because they had insisted on more F-22s and I refused. It was also attributed to the fact that I had demanded more drones and they were pushing back on my demand for more UAVs [unmanned aerial vessel] and cruise missiles. But if it hadn’t been for Admiral [Kirkland] Donald’s report on their responsibilities, they’d have stayed in their office. After all, it was very sensitive—[T. Michael] Moseley was the most senior Aggie general in the services. [laughter]

Engel: Can you walk us through this idea, because this is important and we’re thankful that you’re telling us about it, your leadership style in particular. Walk us through with greater detail,
if you would, even if it is going over some of the same terrain you just did, how you found out about the crisis.

**Gates:** It was actually in two stages. The first stage was when the nuclear-armed cruise missiles were inadvertently flown around the country and nobody knew it, including the pilots of the plane; they were supposed to be dummies and they were the real McCoy. That’s a pretty big lapse there. That’s where some colonels lost their jobs.

**Engel:** I’m trying to recall at what point that became known. Did some sergeant open the box and say, “Oh, my goodness! This is real.”?

**Gates:** It actually became public within a couple of days. I don’t remember how it became public, whether it was leaked or we actually put something out about it.

**Engel:** I remember seeing it on CNN.

**Gates:** I don’t remember. Then a couple of months later, we ended up with ICBM [Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles] nosecones being shipped to Taiwan. They were supposed to be helicopter batteries. One of my concerns with that was the impact on the Chinese, that they might believe that somehow surreptitiously we were trying to give Taiwan nuclear weapons. Great, like I needed this. [rolling eyes]

I had Larry Welch, a retired Chief of Staff of the Air Force, look at the first incident. He came back and talked about systemic problems and recommendations. As I say in my book, I should have acted more vigorously then, but I decided to let the Air Force handle it. Then this other incident happened. Then I had Admiral Donald, the head of the Nuclear Propulsion part of the Navy, the old [Hyman] Rickover job, look at the whole Air Force nuclear thing, including the Taiwan shipment. He came in with a report that talked about how the whole nuclear mission in the Air Force had deteriorated. The more I found out, the worse it became, in terms of test materials that were 15 years old and just the corrosion of discipline and one mistake after another.

I decided the only way to communicate the seriousness of the situation, but also as a message to the American people, to our allies, and to our adversaries that we actually took this seriously, was to fire those guys, to do something so dramatic that it was evident to everybody that this situation had become intolerable.

The truth is, most of these larger problems, other than the specific incidents, had been building for a decade. They were the result of budget cuts. They were the result of the Air Force’s focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fact that the best people and the promotions were in those wars and flying planes and supporting those wars. As we reduced the nuclear arsenal and the Soviet Union collapsed, clearly the sensitivity and the importance of the nuclear mission in the Air Force declined. It didn’t in the Navy, because those submarines are out there every day, so the discipline and training has to continue.

The reason I fired these guys was fundamentally—After the first incident and even after the second, Admiral Donald found all these systemic problems in 45 days. That’s all I gave him to do his report. The failure of the Air Force leadership to do the same, to take the problem
seriously enough to find out what Admiral Donald did, led me to believe they didn’t understand the magnitude of the problem, couldn’t fix it, and wouldn’t, and I fired them.

Nelson: How did you go about selecting replacements?

Gates: The bench was really thin on the military side and one guy who had played an enormously important role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was General [Norton Allan] Schwartz, who was the head of Transportation Command. This guy had just worked miracles. He developed alliances with Fred Smith at FedEx and these guys were just logistics geniuses. He had flown cargo aircraft. He had been in Special Ops in the Air Force, but for the first time in the history of the Air Force, he was also not a bomber pilot and not a fighter pilot. I decided to break the fraternity by having somebody who hadn’t done those things.

Then Mike Donley had been the Director of Administration and Management at the Pentagon the whole time I was Secretary and before, under Rumsfeld. Mike was very competent, a very capable guy, affable but tough-minded, really a good manager. Mike had also been the Acting Secretary of the Air Force for a year or six months early in the Bush administration and had been maybe an Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, but he had been Acting Secretary at some earlier point. I made him Acting Secretary again and then ultimately went to Bush and said, “Let’s just make him the Secretary.”

He was actually the only service Secretary continued on by Obama and just stepped down, just retired, last month.

Nelson: This is the time to wrap things up for the day.

July 9, 2013

Nelson: This is day two, July 9th, of the interview with Robert Gates. Let me begin by asking the question I warned you I would ask, and that is, between last night and this morning, is there anything you thought of connected with stuff we’ve already talked about or something we left out in the period up to your early time as Secretary of Defense?

Gates: I don’t think so.

Nelson: You said that when you started the job, you kept the existing team in place.

Gates: I was getting all kinds of advice from people on who to fire. I never really was of the sentiment that there was a need for a big purge. People were telling me to form my own transition team, to manage it, and so on. There was, I later learned, a huge amount of anxiety in the building, so it is hard to overstate the impact on the Pentagon of my announcing a) that I was coming alone, and b) that I wasn’t going to fire anybody, nobody. I only had one job to fill and
that was the Under Secretary for Intelligence, because Steve Cambone had already resigned.

As I said yesterday, it was one of the best moves I could have possibly made.

**Nelson:** You say people were telling you. Where was that advice coming from?

**Gates:** It was, I think, Hamre. I can’t remember some of the specifics. Some of it was in news stories they were writing about my impending arrival. There were a number of “defense experts” or Washington hands who believed that I needed to clean house and so on.

**Nelson:** When you were meeting with Senators during this period, doing courtesy calls, were you getting advice?

**Gates:** Both Republicans and Democrats were very critical of both senior military and civilian leadership, not just Rumsfeld. Nobody was saying explicitly to me, “You need to fire everybody,” but implicit in their remarks was that I should.

**Nelson:** Over the two years that you were in the Bush administration, did you make any other changes?

**Gates:** Among the civilians, the only other job I had to fill was about nine months in. I didn’t fire any other senior civilian other than over Walter Reed, which we talked about. The Under Secretary for Acquisition Technology and Logistics resigned about nine months in. It was all very cordial; he was just going on to another job. The general counsel resigned to take a better job. That was self-initiated; I wouldn’t have fired either one of them.

**Nelson:** That’s a remarkable thing. I wonder, had that been your pattern as DCI and at A&M?

**Gates:** My one regret, actually, as DCI was that I probably didn’t fire enough people. As I mentioned yesterday, when I was at Texas A&M, I fired all but one vice president in the university and then made a lot of other changes as well: fired the athletic director, fired the football coach.

**Engel:** People still talk about that.

**Gates:** My line at the time was that I had overthrown the governments of medium-sized countries with less controversy. [*laughter*]

**Nelson:** Why then did you change your practice when you came into this position?

**Gates:** The main reason was my belief, as I mentioned yesterday, that we were in the middle of two wars. Any confirmation process is going to be protracted. Polarization had gotten to the point on the Hill where any senior confirmation in the national security arena was going to be tough. I just didn’t feel like we could afford the loss of time that would be involved in bringing new people on board. I was worried that the time it would take for somebody to learn how to do the job was time we didn’t have when it came to Iraq. There was, for me, a huge sense of urgency to get Iraq on the right track as fast as possible, and that if I started making a bunch of changes around the department, it was going to be a huge distraction. I just decided I have to
keep my focus on why I’m here and I’m here because of Iraq.

Engel: Can I jump in on that? That’s something that future historians are going to want to get a sense of in this period: where Iraq was, where the surge was, where the politics were. Much of what you described is a concern for the troops in Iraq, a concern that the casualty rates are high and the strategy is not working. Can you speak to us about whether or not you thought that was it or did you fear actually losing the war, and if so, what that looked like to you?

Gates: We were losing the war, because in the kind of conflict we were in, by not winning we were losing. Some of the Taliban have said, “You have the watches, we have the time.” A big chunk of the first part of my book is about my strategy on how we could keep the Congress from voting limits—voting us out of Iraq or voting such stringent limits on troops that we couldn’t win—and at the same time buying enough time for the surge to be successful.

My whole winter, spring, and summer were focused on those strategies. We were losing, partly because we were running out of time at home and partly because the strategy wasn’t working in Iraq. I knew the casualty rates were going to get higher. When we sent in the surge—it was like when we surged in Afghanistan, because the whole point was that we were sending U.S. troops into places they hadn’t been: Sadr City and places like that. There were going to be higher casualties, but I wanted to do everything I could to keep those casualties as low as possible. That’s why the MRAPs [Mine Resistant Ambush Protected] and ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance], and a bunch of other stuff that I did.

There is a balance here. I was determined that we would be successful in these wars and I knew that that would entail higher costs in blood, but I was determined to keep that number to the lowest possible level and to provide the best possible care for those who were wounded and for the families of those who were killed. But by spring, I was writing 120, 130, 140 condolence letters a month; the casualty rates just skyrocketed that spring during the surge, but it was necessary to achieve the objective.

I realized when I arrived that what was really daunting was that we were losing, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. We were in the middle of two wars and we were losing them both. I make the point in my book, if you look back to the post–World War II period over this whole stretch, what is obvious is it is incredibly difficult for America to win a war, but we can still lose them. We did in Vietnam, and we almost did in Iraq, so that was what lay behind the sense of urgency: it was the clock ticking in Baghdad and it was the clock ticking in Washington.

Engel: Given the domestic political concerns here, both the financial and the sense that the public, especially after the 2006 referendum election, was clearly fatigued by the war, I’m thinking, as you’re talking, about the work that Peter Feaver did at the White House, suggesting that Americans would actually tolerate higher casualty rates so long as they saw progress along the way. Did you engage that discussion at all? Did you engage that office?

Gates: No, but I believed that. I believed in my gut, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, that if people thought we were being successful, that the strategy was working, it would both give us more time and they would tolerate the casualties. It was stalemate that was unacceptable, stalemate or losing, but actually, stalemate was even worse than losing, because you just keep putting kids
into the meat grinder and for no purpose.

In a way, where we were was the worst of all possible worlds, in that we had a stalemate, but it was trending negative. We were moving from stalemate toward loss, not the other way. The surge totally reversed that.

**Engel:** One question I’m trying to puzzle out in this, as I’m listening to you, is the number of times you refer to your job as winning the war in Iraq and then also the number of times you refer to winning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At that time, 2006 and then moving forward, can you prioritize for us where your workload was on the two issues?

**Gates:** Iraq.

**Engel:** Just completely, at that point?

**Gates:** Iraq was, partly because there wasn’t much I could do in Afghanistan. My first trip to Afghanistan was in January of ’07 and in the response to the American commander there, I extended a battalion of the Third Mountain Division for about another 120 days to take a—We had had a big Taliban spring offensive in 2006. It was going to be even bigger and worse in 2007, so I extended this unit of the Third Mountain Division. I then added another brigade a couple of months later, but as the military saying at the time went, at that point I was “out of Schlitz.” I had nothing more to send.

As I write in the book, until we began to back off the surge in Iraq, there were no more troops to send to Afghanistan. We basically played small ball in Afghanistan after I made those two troop decisions. I moved the troop levels in Afghanistan from around 21,000 when I arrived to about 30,000 by the end of the Bush administration, but that’s all I could do.

**Nelson:** Any change in mission?

**Gates:** No, not at that point. The Bush administration came to the realization, I would say, in the late summer of ’08 that the strategy in Afghanistan wasn’t working, either. Just as there had been three reviews of Iraq strategy going on in the late summer and fall of ’06, there were three reviews of Afghan strategy going on in the late summer, fall of ’08: one led by Doug Lute at the White House in the NSC, one led by State, and one by the Pentagon under the Joint Staff. Bush made some decisions about future troop levels at that point, in fact in April of ’08 pledged to send additional troops into Afghanistan in ’09. The press all said, “How can he do that? He won’t even be President.”

My response was that everybody, including Democratic candidates for President, is saying we need to do more in Afghanistan. This is not a controversial decision; everybody seems to support it. I had so little I could do in Afghanistan; it was really on the margins. The real focus for the first 18 months or so I was in the Bush administration was almost entirely on Iraq, not because I didn’t think Afghanistan wasn’t important or because I thought we were doing well, but rather because there was so little I could do in addition to what I had already done.

**Engel:** There was a very popular argument at this period, continuing until today, that Afghanistan crumbled because resources were sent in 2002 and onward to Iraq. Where do you
stand on this issue? Do you have thoughts on this issue?

**Gates:** I totally believe that.

**Engel:** You do?

**Gates:** Not that Afghanistan was crumbled, but that the resources and senior-level attention were all diverted to Iraq from the war in Afghanistan. After the initial shock of being expelled from Afghanistan in late 2001, early 2002, beginning at about 2003 the Taliban began to reconstitute themselves on the Pakistani side of the border, and we really weren’t paying attention to that. As they trained, recruited, and got more weapons and began coming back into Afghanistan, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar, you began to see Gulbuddin Hekmatyar getting more active in the east as the Taliban was getting more active in the east. There was this regrowth of a Taliban insurgency in the years 2003 to 2006 that maybe some experts noticed, but from a senior policy standpoint didn’t have an impact, because everybody was so focused on Iraq.

In the book and in this interview, I go back to my concern, expressed to President Bush in my interview at the ranch, in November, that we were neglecting Afghanistan and it was in trouble.

**Engel:** This is related, but here’s a further extension from the last question. Do you think that if that attention had been paid to Afghanistan from 2003 until the 2006 period that you just described while the Taliban was reconstituting—if American attention had actually been focused, would that have been enough to win the war, whatever “winning” actually meant at this period? Or, as you point out, the Taliban had the time, would we just be delaying the—

**Gates:** I used to argue that there were three wars in Afghanistan. There was the war in 2001, early 2002, which the United States out-and-out won, boom, done deal. The Taliban are out of power, they’re gone, hold elections, reconstitute a government, and so on.

The second war was between 2003 and the end of 2008, and that’s where the Taliban reconstituted, came back into Kandahar, Helmand, and so on into their old stomping grounds and increasingly denied access to coalition forces, to Afghan government, Afghan forces, and so on, and essentially occupied significant swatches of territory in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Then the third conflict began in the spring of 2009, when Obama approved the additional 17,000 troops and continues until this point. One of the continuing themes through all three periods is the insufficiency of civilian expertise from the American government. But a second is that until really 2008 our efforts with respect to training and building the Afghan security forces were minimal. While our political objectives in Afghanistan were quite ambitious, our objectives with respect to the Afghan security forces were *ludicrously* modest. Through 2003–04, we were planning and thinking about an Afghan security force of 5,000 people, because we were scaling it to what we thought they could afford.

The other problem that we had all through that period was that we kept changing guys who were in charge of training the Afghan forces, and every time a new guy came in he changed the way that they were being trained. The one thing they all had in common was they were all trying to train a Western Army instead of figuring out the strengths of the Afghans as a fighting people and then building on that.
This is an excursion away from your question, but it goes to my view of the whole campaign in Afghanistan, which was our unwillingness to make Afghans our real partners in this; we were going to run the show. Whether it was aid or military strategy, we told the Afghans what we were going to do; we didn’t ask them what they needed or ask for their ideas. It is one of the reasons why so many of the development projects are so detested. They are what the Dutch or the Germans or the Americans thought the Afghans needed or what they wanted to do, as opposed to what the Afghans wanted.

This is part and parcel of a real neglect of the whole Afghan approach, until the very end of the Bush administration and then the Obama administration.

Nelson: When you would talk with soldiers who had done tours in both theaters, what would they tell you about the difference between Afghanistan and Iraq in terms of how the war was being conducted? Does anything stand out in your memory?

Gates: Our troops and officers thought the younger Iraqi troops were good, and once they were trained and gained some confidence—First, they began acting and dressing like American soldiers, from the sunglasses to everything. But what was characteristic of their more senior officers, from the colonel level above, these guys had all been trained by the Soviets. They didn’t think we had anything to teach them at all, so they were very resistant to our efforts to structure and train the Iraqi security forces.

Ironically, at a lower level, they were pretty receptive, but at a more senior level, they were pretty resistant. One of the biggest differences that our guys had to deal with in the Afghans versus the Iraqis was that almost everybody they were dealing with in Afghanistan was illiterate, so even the most fundamental things—A component of our training over the last few years, a big part of it, has been literacy, just rudimentary literacy for Afghan soldiers and even junior officers. You have less human capital to work with in Afghanistan than you did in Iraq, which was a highly literate country.

Nelson: Just a couple of general observations that people have made, and I wonder if they resonate with you. I want to talk about Congress more broadly, but one thing that has been observed recently is a declining percentage of Members of Congress who have ever been in uniform. Did you observe that? Did you think that had an effect on Congress’s ability to make sensible judgments about the war?

Gates: No, and frankly, it was Members of Congress who had military experience that I found to be the biggest pain in the ass.

Nelson: John Murtha?

Gates: John McCain, Duncan Hunter Jr., Joe Sestak, because these guys figured since they’d been in the military they knew it all, even if they were, in the case of Duncan Hunter Jr., a captain. His ambit was the size of this room in terms of his knowledge and so on of broader strategy. Sestak had been a three-star admiral. That was very awkward, by the way, because [Michael] Mullen had actually fired Sestak. Then Sestak gets elected to the Congress and he’s sitting right there, as a freshman sitting right there in front of us. Of course, he’s shooting daggers at Mullen the whole time that we’re testifying.
And McCain never saw a problem that he didn’t think could be fixed by blowing it up. He caused the Air Force untold problems. Actually, the guys with military experience, and as a matter of fact particularly the more recent military experience, as opposed to guys who had fought in Korea or World War II or something, were more of a problem than the ones who didn’t. They thought they had all the answers.

**Nelson:** It occurs to me that you never served in government at a time when there was a Republican Congress. Is that right? Even though there were Republican Congresses, they didn’t overlap with—

**Gates:** Not until 2010.

**Nelson:** Right. Yesterday you expressed a minimal high regard for Congress in general.

**Gates:** That would be the most generous possible construct. [*laughter*]

**Nelson:** Could you elaborate on that? What was it about Congress that you found most inadequate?

**Gates:** Where do I start? One of the things I write about in the book—I had this reputation for bipartisan calm and respectfulness and being very patient. One of the things that I’ve enjoyed writing about in the book is what I was really thinking sitting there. At one point in the spring of ’07, these guys, particularly on the Senate side, were just hammering me on the inability of the Iraqis to pass de-Ba’athification law, oil sharing law, an election law, some fundamental laws that essentially would shape Iraq for a long time to come.

I was sitting there thinking to myself, *These guys have emerged from 4,000 years of despotism. They’ve been at this democracy business for a year. You guys, on the other hand, have been in business for 230 years and can’t even pass a goddamn appropriations bill, much less deal with any of the serious problems facing our country and you’re complaining about them not meeting benchmarks? How about some benchmarks for you guys?*

I prepared five budgets as Secretary. Not once in the four and a half years that I was Secretary was there an appropriations bill signed by the beginning of the fiscal year, not once. Twice we ended up on continuing resolutions for an entire year. War funding often was dribbled out to us two and three months at a time, so these guys who were yelling about efficiency and waste and mismanagement and so on at the Pentagon are making it virtually impossible to run the place efficiently, because I don’t know whether I’m going to get the money in time to pay the bills.

They always treated me well. I have no complaints. Literally out of the whole Congress maybe two people gave me a hard time. But the way they treated my subordinates and the way I saw them treat others I found most reprehensible. One should expect sharp questioning and tough questioning, but their bullying, hectoring, insulting, demeaning, kangaroo-court environment, the personal attacks I thought were just beyond the pale. I was just enraged by the way they treated people, and particularly once the little red light on the TV camera went on.

As far as I was concerned, they were not only rude, nasty, and stupid, they were incompetent at a fundamental constitutional responsibility, which was appropriating money. Other than that, mark
me down as ambiguous.

**Nelson:** How did you keep that from spilling over?

**Gates:** Huge discipline. I was exhausted at the end of every hearing, totally exhausted. I was probably the only member of the executive branch who had the guts or the audacity to tell them, “Here’s how long I’ll testify. You want me? I’ll come up for two and a half hours; I’m leaving at the end of that. I’m getting up and walking away.” They would agree to it. None of these all-day hearings for me, or these hearings that would go on for five or six hours—bullshit—while they wander in and out. I wasn’t going to do that. That’s part of the demeaning part of it, as far as I’m concerned. I’m willing to have a bladder test with [Bashar al-] Assad, not with Ike Skelton or Carl Levin.

**Nelson:** Well, you had not only a Democratic Congress, but you had a Congress that, as we discussed yesterday, felt like it had a mandate to force this war in Iraq to a conclusion. Strategically, how did you deal with that situation? How did you keep Congress from constraining you in active ways rather than just through—

**Gates:** They tried many times. What was critically important was that we were able to hold the Republican minority in the Senate to prevent an override of a veto or to allow something to go to a vote where a simple majority would be sufficient. There were some Republican defections. It became very dangerous in the summer of 2007; we hung by a whisker.

As I write about it in my book, I actually had a three-prong strategy for trying to avoid those constraints. The first was I asked Petraeus for a report on how the surge was going in September. The whole surge didn’t get in until probably July. I was able to argue with Congress: “The whole surge just arrived (or hasn’t even fully arrived yet). After all this time, can’t you give it until September to see whether it is actually working?” It was a very tough argument to counter.

The second was that as the surge was going in—and this created real problems between me and the Vice President, and some of the conservatives who were the most active proponents of the surge—I began to hint at withdrawing the surge before the surge was even in. I began to say, “If this goes well, we could begin bringing troops back out by fall.”

**Nelson:** Fall of—

**Gates:** Fall of ’07. I asked Petraeus, “How long does the surge need to last?” He said, “At least a year,” so at least until January of ’08. Ultimately, the last surge troop came out in July of ’08.

The third strategy was, essentially, to not challenge the critics of the war but rather to try and flip their criticism into an asset. When Levin complained about the lack of passage of key legislation or the lack of reconciliation, I would tell him in public, “That is a good thing for you to say that, because it increases the pressure on the Iraqis. They know that; it helps them understand the pressures that we’re under.” This was an important change of tone on the part of the administration and Rumsfeld in terms of validating the criticism. But it also lanced the anger behind it, because you’re sitting there agreeing with them saying, “Yes, you’re right, we do need that legislation. It is important to get it done.”
The combination of those things—with the steadfastness of the Republican minority in the Senate and the President’s willingness to use his veto power—all helped beat back the effort by the Democrats and some Republicans to constrain us or to force us out. They passed legislation at one time or another that would have forced us to begin withdrawing from Iraq by the fall of 2007 and by the end of 2008 and so on. They tried this again and again. And even more clever on Murtha’s part was the proposal that we would have to certify that every soldier had been properly trained before a unit could be sent.

Another stratagem that nearly was successful was an innocent-sounding amendment by Jim Webb that basically would have required that every soldier have at least the same number of days at home that the soldier had spent in Iraq or Afghanistan. That came within three or four votes of winning; it was a damn near-run thing. It would have required us, ironically, to extend a number of units in Iraq and Afghanistan because troops would not have put in their time at home to relieve them. We would have had to mobilize more of the Guard and Reserve. It probably would have cut the troop strength by a third and it would have been totally impossible to manage, because he was demanding it for each individual soldier, not a unit. The record keeping would have been overwhelming, and we damn near lost that vote.

We were dealing with this all through 2007 and the first few months of 2008, but the key test came in September of ’07. A number of these measures came to votes in the Congress and they all failed. At that point, I knew we would be able to complete the surge.

The other thing that helped enormously in this was that we began to see by July of ’07 that the surge was actually working, began to see improvements, and began to see a decline in casualties, sectarian killings, and things like that. By the fall of ’07, even Levin admitted the surge was working; he would argue that it was irrelevant, because political reconciliation hadn’t taken place, but from the military standpoint, by late summer, early fall it was undeniable that the surge was working. That also was a huge help. This was all-consuming for me through 2007 and the first part of 2008.

There was general agreement among the Democratic candidates that we needed some kind of lingering presence in Iraq beyond 2008, 2009. Therefore my goal—which I worked on with President Bush, and he was the only one in whom I totally confided all this, in terms of my strategy, and he was totally onboard every step of the way—was to try to get Iraq in a place where we were debating the pacing of the drawdowns rather than the merits of the war.

I figured the generals would always win the argument on the pacing of the drawdowns. My arguments would be to the Democrats, “Well, you complained Bush didn’t pay enough attention to the generals at the beginning of the war, how could you not pay attention to the generals here at the end of the war?” But my objective was to try to move Iraq off of center stage, politically, by the end of 2007, so that the Democratic candidates for President wouldn’t say something in the campaign that boxed them in in terms of a continuing, long-term presence in Iraq, which I felt was absolutely critical. My goal was to have Iraq in a place politically in the U.S. so that that didn’t happen as the primary campaign season got underway. It by and large worked.

Nelson: You mentioned Petraeus, and yesterday you said you didn’t know him until late in the game. A testimony in ’07 turned out to be very effective in my memory of it. What gave you the
confidence, as you came to know him better then, to bring him before Congress and have the effect he would have?

Gates: My original plan had not been to have him—When I asked for a September review in January, I hadn’t thought it would involve congressional testimony; it would just be his assessment of how things were going. Then as I put more and more weight on that as a way to delay congressional action, then the Congress became more and more interested in hearing from him. I spent enough time with Petraeus over the first six months of 2007 that I knew his capabilities in terms of communicating. He is very matter of fact and low-key in his presentation; he doesn’t get angry. He has a lot of self-discipline in that respect. He was also testifying with probably one of the finest diplomats in our history, Ryan Crocker.

This incredible partnership between the two of them—There was never any doubt in my mind that they would do well. What was disarming about their testimony was their candor in terms of the problems they faced and the challenges in Iraq. They didn’t really pull any punches, so many Republicans were disappointed in their testimony, but other Republicans, including the leadership, basically said, OK, after this testimony we can hold the Republicans in the Senate.

The other thing that helped was that the critics of the war were so over the top in their questioning of Petraeus and Crocker, and going back to my early comments, rude and insulting to people who had given their lives to the service of their country; that had a huge impact. Then, of course, the “Code Pink ladies,” the demonstrators, and then finally the Moveon.org “General Betrayus” ad, all played together in terms of their testimony being a turning point, the review and the testimony. It contributed to the defeat of all those bills a couple of weeks later. Their testimony, I think, was on September 10th, these votes were, I think, on September 21st, and they all failed.

When that happened, that was the first time I believed we could see our way through this thing and be successful, but I used the same trick in trying to prolong the Iraq surge beyond September. After the September testimony, I then asked Petraeus for another review in March in terms of how far the drawdowns could go beyond the surge troops in the latter half of 2008. This also got me into trouble with the conservatives and with Cheney and everybody, because I said, “My hope is that circumstances on the ground will be such that the pace of withdrawals can continue in the second half of 2008 at the same pace as the first half of 2008, which would have brought us back down to about 10 BCTs, brigade combat teams.”

Again, I was just trying to hold the carrot out there, because I told Bush, “What’s important right now is not the troop levels, but the public sense of the direction of the trend line. If the trend line is down and is steady, we’re going to be OK.” That was because at one point we went through this big fight in 2008 in the White House, in essence on whether we should stop the drawdowns for the rest of the year to have the maximum possible force—The surge force would be out, but keep the 15 BCTs—through the end of the year and then maybe have Bush make a decision in December to pull a couple more out in the new administration.

I argued strongly against that, saying, “If you stop the drawdowns, you’re sending the message that our strategy is not succeeding, that we’re stalemated again. No matter what the gradient of the decline, of the curve, you have to show that the trend line is steadily down to keep this thing
from becoming a political football again in the Presidential election.” He agreed with that.

Engel: Let me jump in here with something that has come up several times. It strikes me that you have a very difficult dance to play here, domestically and also internationally. Specifically with ears and listeners in Iraq, because fundamental to COIN is having the population believe you’re not leaving, that you’re going to stay and be there to protect them. Putting forward units out and saying we’re not going to pull them back is crucial to having this counterinsurgency methodology work. How at the same time can you say in Washington we are going to hint at reducing troops, we’re going to keep the troop levels coming down, and yet have the people in Iraq think, on the street level, that the troops are not actually going away?

Gates: First, we had had real success in improving the security situation and were moving very quickly to partnering with Iraqi forces, and Iraqi forces were increasingly taking responsibility for security. Second, there is a huge difference between Iraq and Afghanistan. The Iraqis wanted us the hell out, no matter what the gloss, no matter what the things we did for them, no matter that we gave them a future, blah, blah, blah. For most Iraqis, we are the occupiers.

Obama comes in for a lot of criticism for not having gotten a post–December 2011 troop presence in Iraq, but the reality is we damn near didn’t get the Strategic Framework Agreement in December of 2008. It was because the Iraqis politically did not—None of their elected representatives wanted to vote, and be recorded as voting, to keep an American military presence at all, for any period of time, much less, even until the end of 2009 or 2011.

We barely got the agreement at the end of the Bush administration, so I don’t know how hard Obama pushed or not, but I know how close a thing it was at the end of 2008; the Iraqis wanted us out. The fact is, as I described in the book, Maliki was totally opposed to the surge. He said it is totally opposite of all the trends, of where we have been headed, toward more Iraqi control of security and so on, so it was not a big issue in Iraq. It is a bigger issue in Afghanistan, where they don’t want us to leave, at least the majority of the population and certainly not the politicians.

Nelson: It is a naïve question, but how do you conduct a surge in a nation whose leader doesn’t want it? How did you make that happen over his—Or was it just an expressed opposition?

Gates: Bush brought him around, I guess, to what I would call at best tepid support. He was willing to allow it, not block it, but he wasn’t going to support it publicly or say anything that indicated that he thought it was a great idea.

Nelson: How did Bush persuade him?

Gates: Bush was really—Obama made the decision he was not going to communicate as frequently or through video conferences with either Maliki or [Hamid] Karzai as Bush had done. Bush was a pretty successful mentor to both Maliki and Karzai in terms of coaching them, in terms of how to be a leader. Maliki was chosen precisely because he was weak and nobody opposed him. Nobody knew he’d become a would-be strong man again. But then, he was still in a pretty weak position and really required U.S. support. Bush also just had a way of talking to them.

When they talked, it was generally just the two of them, an interpreter, and maybe Hadley on our
side and one other guy on Maliki’s side, so it was really a private conversation. I don’t know many of the details of what he said, but I do know that each time after he talked to Maliki we were better off.

**Nelson:** Again, here’s a big-picture question that may or may not connect with the situation, but this was the first election in a very long time when neither the President nor the Vice President is a candidate, right? You mentioned Cheney earlier, the Office of the Vice President. I’m interested in hearing more about your relationship with him, your observations of his role in these debates. To what extent did his being essentially apolitical in terms of future ambition matter? To what extent did it matter that Bush was constitutionally term limited?

I’m just thinking about it, this was a time usually in a Presidency when somebody is running, but here was an election where nobody was running and the President couldn’t even if he wanted to.

**Gates:** I don’t think Bush would have changed a thing if he had been eligible to run again. I don’t think any of these decisions with respect to Iraq would have been different.

**Nelson:** Because? That’s a remarkable thing to say.

**Gates:** Because I think he felt in his gut, in his heart, that what he was doing was the right thing. He had to do it. You can say what you want about him, but he is a man of deep conviction. He is also a guy who, once he makes up his mind what he needs to do, is going to do it. There is just no doubt in my mind that his decisions on the surge and what we did in 2007 would not have changed one whit had he been running for President in 2008. In fact, I would make the argument that the politics were on the side of doing what he did if he were going to run again. He had to show success in Iraq after the disasters that had happened in the earlier years.

**Nelson:** Cheney’s take on—

**Gates:** One thing that Cheney and [Joseph] Biden both have in common is, in my opinion, they both were lousy readers of the Congress. The guys who were perhaps the most experienced politicians at the top of their administrations, I thought were the least accurate in forecasting what Congress would and would not do.

**Nelson:** That’s remarkable, for that very reason. Could you say more about why?

**Gates:** They just got it wrong all the time. Cheney did not grasp how thin the thread was that held our Iraq policy together on the Hill through 2007. He was oblivious to how at risk everything was on the Hill, that a handful of votes was all that stood between our policy and total reversal of it by Congress.

I remember one exchange where he was talking about something on interrogations or something else. It was just a meeting with Hadley, him, and Condi and me. He said, “We have to pay attention to the Republican base in the Senate.” Condi looked at him and said, “What’s that? Four or five Senators?” [sound indicating explosion] There were times—Biden would repeatedly say, “The Congress will never support this; the Congress will never do this.” And of course they did, particularly with respect to Afghanistan. Biden underestimated. Where Biden particularly got it wrong was that Congress hates the idea of taking an action that clearly will leave them
holding the bag if failure follows. They always try to fudge it up and make it ambiguous or something, or give the President an out, a waiver, or something, because they hate the idea of being held accountable for a failure.

Anyway, there really were no differences on strategy among us, including Cheney, on Iraq, during this period. Cheney disagreed with my holding the carrots out and thought that I was giving aid and comfort to both domestic and foreign enemies. He never put it that way, but—The truth is he never braced me on it directly; I just heard about it around the circle.

Nelson: As Secretary of Defense to former Secretary of Defense, did you ever have any particular conversations with Cheney?

Gates: Very little. But something that meant a lot to me was that there were several occasions where Cheney—it would be a sidelong comment on the way out of the Oval Office or something—would say, “You’re doing a great job as Secretary,” particularly after I fired somebody. [laughter]

Nelson: One more thing, to pick up on Petraeus and Crocker. It’s clear that they were enormously impressive in their appearance in Washington, but what made them so effective in Iraq?

Gates: Their command of the situation, their knowledge, their perspective, their experience. It was the whole package. And the way they presented themselves. Crocker at one point was asked by Hillary Clinton about the likelihood of major reconciliation legislation being passed in a certain period of time and Crocker smiled and said, “My optimism is under control.” [laughter]

Engel: Let me circle back for a couple of questions that have come up. I want to ask first about the continuing presence in Iraq and negotiations for the 2008 agreement. What was your desire at this point in terms of the continuing presence, strategically? What was in the best interests of the United States and what was politically available, in your view? How close did we get to what you wanted?

Gates: The issues that concerned us were more about jurisdiction over U.S. troops, jurisdiction over contractors, and operational freedom for our troops. We never had any issues over the timing of when we would be out of the towns and cities and villages or the end date of December 2011. Those were never matters of dispute in the administration. These other three issues were the key issues. They were very sensitive on the part of the Iraqis, the way we finessed the jurisdiction over the troops issue. I said, “We have to have operational freedom, we have to protect our soldiers, but I’m flexible on contractors.”

On the protection of the soldiers, the Iraqis wanted to say that they would exercise jurisdiction over any soldier who committed a felony in Iraq. Well, being pro-Israeli, even under Maliki, was a felony in Iraq, so we weren’t going to go down that road. The words that we finally agreed to between us—First, their jurisdiction would be limited to heinous crimes committed while a soldier was off duty. The way we finessed it was that I signed a piece of paper that basically said no soldier in Iraq is ever off duty. It wasn’t like there were many places to go off post to entertain yourself or get drunk, so this was not a big deal.
Then we got the operational freedom. On those two, we got just enough so that we were OK, but it was close. It required some semantic jujitsu to make it work, but ultimately we felt that we were OK with what we got.

Now, I did make one mistake in the negotiation. I said, “Have them go talk to the South Koreans, the Japanese, and some others with whom we have status of forces agreements.” Well, that was really stupid, because of course these guys just laid out all the rapes and all the things that had gone wrong and they never had any jurisdiction. That was a really stupid mistake; I should never have suggested that.

Engel: When you’re having these conversations with Iraqi officials over this language, or negotiations with the language, did you get the sense that the Iraqis wanted to find a workable solution but were simply looking for political cover, in a sense, for it at home?

Gates: There was a fair amount of that. This was another area where we had been less conscientious than we should have been in both Iraq and Afghanistan, especially Afghanistan, that is, their sensitivity on sovereignty issues. There was some sincerity in their concerns, but I also think it was kind of 50/50 between sincerity and political cover. The Department of Defense was not, as I recall, part of the negotiating team; it was largely NSC and State that negotiated it, but they were working very closely with us and with Odierno. I never felt that Defense’s interests or military interests were neglected in the discussions.

Engel: Let me pick up on the sovereignty question. I want to circle back to something that you said earlier, specifically talking about Afghanistan, that American forces, both civilian and military, didn’t listen to Afghani concerns enough and called all the shots. Why?

Gates: That’s just the way we do things. My argument to Petraeus at one point was—I told him, “The hardest call you’re going to have to make is identifying that point at which the Iraqis doing it barely adequately is better than us doing it excellently, because the sooner you can get the Iraqis doing it, the better off we’ll be.”

The interesting thing, as I said earlier, is that this applied every bit as much to the civilian side as the military side. It wasn’t just Americans. The Dutch, the Germans, the French, the Spanish, the Italians, the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations]—none of these people were going to the villages and saying, “What do you need?” They were coming in and saying, “Here is what we’re going to do.”

Engel: That’s fascinating as a historian, because that is not a new problem. Afghanistan in particular, this is the cradle or the death of empires, whatever phrase you want to use. I’m curious, was there any reflection from 2006 on, or discussions with people before 2006, about trying to find a historical parallel in Afghanistan to defeat the cycle of hate, in a sense?

Gates: This goes to many of the issues that I had with [Stanley] McChrystal’s proposal for a big troop increase, because I was very sensitive to the footprint. I knew that with 120,000 soldiers the Soviets couldn’t win. Fred Kagan wrote an article for the Weekly Standard—It actually was an article written for me and it was a good eye opener for me. He reminded me that the Soviets were trying to revolutionize Afghan society. They killed a million Afghans, sent five million more into exile, and terrorized the entire country. They depopulated the rural areas because it
was easier to control them in the cities. They basically tried to destroy Afghanistan, so there was no wonder that the Afghans hated them.

On the other hand, the Afghans welcomed us when we came in and threw out the Taliban. As late as the end of 2010, early 2011, 60 percent plus of Afghans still regarded us as their allies; that’s a huge difference. If they understand we’re there to help them, as opposed to oppress them or force them to change their traditional ways, it is a huge difference. As McChrystal put it, in our secret meeting in Belgium to talk about this big troop increase in August of 2009, “It’s not the size of the footprint that matters, it’s how you use it.”

One of the changes that he and I worked out, because I felt that our previous commanders had not paid enough attention to it, was how we dealt with things like civilian casualties, and convoys running down the middle of the road scattering livestock and people. It’s the little things in terms of showing respect for people. The day-to-day kinds of stuff, rather than the big policy pronouncements, are the ones that make the difference in terms of how the average Afghan looks at you.

Every time we had a huge fight with Karzai or he blew up in public, in every single instance he had been talking to us for months in private about that problem. We didn’t pay attention. Whether it was private contractors, night raids, you name it, in every instance this guy was telling us, directly, it was a problem. Many of these things we could have prevented had we just been listening better. I make this theme throughout my book. I made this point time and again inside the administration, particularly in the Obama administration. People were just dissing Karzai: “He’s a crackpot.” “He depends on us for everything.” “He is a terrible ally.”

I’d say, “We’re not such a great ally, either. If we were, we’d be listening better, because he’s been telling all of us about this forever.”

The other thing, just in terms of Karzai’s attitude, is this: the United States, blatantly, tried to shape the outcome of the Afghan election in August of 2009. The UN High Representative, Kai Eide, was briefing the NATO defense ministers. Just because of the alphabet, he would sit next to me at those meetings. He and I became good friends, partly because I’d been a strong proponent of creating his job and putting him in it. But he leaned over to me and said, “I will say”—This is his first meeting after the election—“I am going to tell the ministers that there was blatant foreign interference in the Afghan election. What I will not say is it was the United States and Richard Holbrooke.”

The reason Karzai made deals with the warlords and engaged in fraud in the election was that, unlike the previous election, when we had supported him, he knew we’d walked away from him, so he basically said the hell with you.

Nelson: Back to the election. You said earlier that you were pursuing a course of conduct as Secretary of Defense in part with the idea of keeping the Democratic candidates from committing to something that they would then have to act on if they were elected. What was your impression as you learned—Obama’s Presidential candidacy coincided with your time as Secretary of Defense and you became more aware of him, Hillary, Biden, and others who were running for President. What impressions were you forming, especially of Biden and Obama,
since you later served with them?

**Gates:** I didn’t pay much attention to Biden, because I didn’t think he was going anywhere, so it was basically Clinton and Obama that I was paying attention to. Going back to what I said earlier, the key thing for me was that neither of them was saying we ought to walk away from Iraq or we ought to have zero troops in Iraq or that we ought not have a long-term commitment to helping Iraq. What they wanted was the war over. Or that he wanted in particular the war over as soon as possible in terms of our combat operations.

I was trying to shape the debate, if you will. Let him say all of that, but don’t put him in a box. Try not to do anything that will cause him to say every last soldier out by X date, period, and thereby put himself in a box. I think it was largely successful.

**Nelson:** Was this through any kind of communication or—

**Gates:** No.

**Nelson:** Through signal sending?

**Gates:** No, it wasn’t even signal sending. It was just trying to conduct ourselves in a way that didn’t precipitate that.

**Nelson:** You mentioned McCain earlier as a thorn in your side, so to speak.

**Gates:** Actually, I said he was a pain in the ass. I guess that’s not a historian’s term. [*laughter*]

**Nelson:** The public perception of McCain in ’07 and ’08 was that he was the leading champion outside the administration of the surge.

**Gates:** He was.

**Nelson:** So what was the problem? Why was he a pain in the ass?

**Gates:** He was just cranky. He was never happy about anything. He was not a pain when it came to Iraq; it was sort of everything else. The problem with McCain is—he reminds me of a friend of mine once, a fairly prominent guy, who, before a confirmation, said, “I’ll be for you or against you, whichever will do you the most good.” McCain is a difficult ally because of the way he conducts himself and the way he talks. He antagonizes more people than he wins over. Sometimes he would just be so over the top, it would make other people who might be fence sitters mad. In that respect, he was a difficult ally on Iraq. He was so strong and so hard-over and so acid in his comments about people, that people who maybe weren’t fence sitters but weren’t hard-over in terms of a long-term presence or something like that, he would drive them further away.

**Nelson:** Who did you support in ’08 and when did you make that—?

**Gates:** I didn’t support anybody.
Nelson: You didn’t have a preference?

Gates: All I wanted in ’08 was to get the hell out.

Nelson: Did you have a preference between Obama and McCain?

Gates: Not really.

Engel: Did you vote?

Gates: Yes.

Engel: Are you willing to tell us who you voted for?

Gates: No.

Nelson: Your lack of preference, was that because of equal and great enthusiasm for both or doubts about both?

Gates: That was part of it, but mainly my view was that I was going to be gone and it was going to be someone else’s problem.

Nelson: We’ll come to that.

Gates: My attitude was let me just keep my head down. Partly it was because I was so focused on being, and being seen as, nonpartisan, and as just doing what I thought was in the best interests of the country. That perception of me was a big asset in what I was trying to do. For example, Nancy Pelosi and I probably couldn’t agree on the time of day, but she always treated me with great cordiality and in a very friendly way. We would have breakfast together from time to time. We never agreed on anything—the budget, Iraq, Afghanistan, you name it—but she always treated me with great respect. By maintaining that—First, it would have been inappropriate for me to say anything publicly about either one of the candidates once they were chosen, to intrude myself into the political campaign, but I also was absolutely convinced that I would be gone in January of 2009.

In fact, I had a little countdown clock that my deputy had given me early in my tenure. As I recall, when he gave it to me early on, it had 715 days, but it showed the days, hours, minutes, and seconds until noon on January 20, 2009. It had a label on it, “Time back to the real Washington.” I’d bring it out; I’d show it to people all the time. I’d say, “This is how much time I have left.”

Engel: Given that your expectation until late November 2008 is that you’d only be serving two years, 700-odd days.

Gates: Actually, my conviction began to waver in July.

Engel: Of ’08?

Gates: Of ’08.
Engel: Let me jump back a second until we get to that. I was wondering yesterday and didn’t get a chance to ask why, in 2006, when you left A&M, you did not—Or did you?—try to secure a leave of absence, as opposed to stepping down in full.

Gates: No. When I left A&M, I knew I was done. I was at four and a half years at A&M. I pledged to stay seven years, first five and then ironically, given yesterday’s conversation, at the request of the regents I agreed to stay until seven. I would have been only six months away from that in January of ’09. I had my wife to think about. We’d been away from home at that point for six and a half years. Our kids are up here, so it was time to go home. The thought of asking for a leave of absence never even crossed my mind.

Nelson: What happened in the summer of ’08 that caused you to wonder whether the clock really was going to run out your time?

Gates: There had been some articles, some speculation in the spring and early summer about whether either McCain or Obama would ask me to stay on at least for a while because of the wars. This was the first Presidential transition in wartime since 1968, so 40 years. Then in mid-July 2008, I got a call from Senator [John] Jack Reed, who said he was getting ready to go on a trip to Iraq with Obama; they were going to have a lot of time together. If he asked me to stay, would I consider it? I said, “I would be willing to have a conversation about that.” That was my first indication, other than just press speculation, that something was afoot.

Then one of Obama’s close advisors on military and defense matters, Richard Danzig, who had been Secretary of the Navy under Clinton, said that he thought I had done a great job as Secretary of Defense and that I could do an even better job under Obama.

In October, and I can’t remember exactly when, I received another call from Jack Reed, and he said, “Obama would like to have a conversation.”

I said, “I can’t do that before the election; it would be totally inappropriate.” Then I did something I don’t think has ever been done in American history. I said, “But how about if I give you some questions to shape that conversation?” I wrote out 10 questions for Obama to answer. Usually it is the President-elect that asks the questions; this time I was giving the exam. I had the questions hand-delivered to Reed, who gave them to Obama.

Nelson: What kind of questions?

Gates: The very first question was “Will you trust me? We don’t know each other; we’ve never met. Can you trust me?” Then I asked him where he was headed on Iraq, where he was headed on Afghanistan, on the budget, on al-Qaeda. I asked him about who the rest of the team was going to be. They were along those lines. I got word back from Reed that the questions had intrigued him, that he was even more interested in talking to me now, and whether I wanted the answers in writing. I said, “No. We’ll just let it shape the conversation.”

Then a day or two after the election, maybe three days after the election, I got a call about setting up a secret meeting on one of his trips to D.C. Right after the election, I snuck out of the Pentagon and he and I had a clandestine meeting in the fire station at general aviation at National Airport. They pulled all the trucks out and my motorcade went in. Then his motorcade came in;
he was on his way back to Chicago. He just left his plane with all the reporters and everybody sitting on the tarmac. Everybody knew that he was having a secret meeting with somebody, but nobody knew with whom.

My chief of staff and my secretary, Delonnie Henry, both knew what I was doing, but they were telling the rest of my staff, my military assistants and so on, that I was in a closed-door meeting. My “closed-door meeting” ran long, so one of them peeped in the peephole and I wasn’t there. He’s watching CNN, watching Obama’s motorcade divert. He put two and two together, but they never said a word. We met, he pulled the list of questions out of his pocket, and we went through it.

Nelson: What did he say?

Gates: He basically said, I trust you based on everything I’ve seen the last two years. We were pretty much on the same—In a way the strategic framework agreement had shaped the endgame in Iraq, so it was really just details. We hardly discussed Iraq, because I was assuming that we would get the agreement. We talked about Afghanistan, where he said we needed to do more, which was very consistent with what he had been saying, which certainly accorded with what I said.

On al-Qaeda, I remember very vividly. I said, “Are you going to be as aggressive in pursuing them, on their 10-yard line, as opposed to our 10-yard line?”

That was the point at which he said, “I’m no peacenik.”

Engel: Did you believe him?

Gates: Yes, I did.

Engel: Why?

Gates: In part, because of his answer on Afghanistan. And we talked about the budget. The nation was plummeting at that point economically. He said, “Defense is going to have to be a part of this, but I don’t see any major changes at least for the first year or so,” which proved to be completely accurate.

Nelson: Did he tell you who else would be on the team?

Gates: Interestingly enough, he said, “If I ask you to stay, I can’t appoint [Charles] Hagel to anything.” He’d been thinking about Hagel for a senior job since the beginning. They became very good friends in the Senate.

Nelson: Because it would be two Republicans?

Gates: Yes.

Nelson: He talked about Jim Jones as National Security Advisor. He talked about Hillary, but said that her husband’s many connections and commitments and stuff might complicate that. I
think those were the only positions that he really discussed.

Engel: Did you have opinions or comments on those suggestions?

Gates: On the one comment that he was thinking about Jones possibly for Secretary of State also, I made a comment that I later realized, and I say in my book, was a really stupid comment, coming from me. I said, “I worry that if you appoint a general, it will look like you’re militarizing foreign policy.” Then I realized after the meeting that there is George Marshall, there is Colin Powell, and they sure as hell didn’t militarize foreign policy. That was a dumb comment, but Jones would have been a bad idea for that job anyway.

Engel: Why?

Gates: I just don’t think he had—To be a successful Secretary of State, you really need to have deep knowledge of the facts and of history and circumstances and so on, and you have to really study hard. But he was congenial and I liked him and everything.

I came away feeling that Obama had been very open with me, very candid, and allowed me to be very candid with him, and that was a very important outcome of the face-to-face meeting. We met for about an hour. Essentially, he asked me to do the job. I said, “For how long?” I said, “I think maybe a year; that gives you time to get your whole team in place and everything else.” I also said, “I understand that this has to be your Department of Defense and that the senior civilians will all need to be replaced.” I told him there were two or three of those appointees I might recommend that you keep, for example Jim Clapper, who is totally apolitical in the intelligence job, and a couple of others. He said, “We’ll look at that.”

I said the other thing he might think about is whether we, because we’re in the middle of two wars, agree to having senior Bush appointees remain in place until their successors are confirmed. He said he would think about that. It turned out that he did it on a case-by-case basis. There were a few who wanted to leave right away, but many stayed, which was completely unprecedented. But if the idea of keeping me was continuity, then having some continuity in the department made sense as well. Anyway, he was very open to all of that. I said, “About a year,” and he said, “Let’s keep it open.”

It was the beginning of probably 10 conversations we would have over the next two and a half years of him wanting me to stay longer. At one point, he basically said, I want you to stay even until the end of the second term. I said that would be 10 years; it was not going to happen. But he was always pressing me to stay longer.

Nelson: Did you tell the President or anybody in the administration?

Gates: I told the President and Hadley that I was going to the meeting, because of the likelihood of a leak. I told the President after the meeting that it was going to happen. He was very pleased. I think he believed that he just saw a way for his Iraq policy to be seen through to completion and to sustain some of the things that he felt were important.

Engel: I want to stay in this time period to ask you a further question about your voting record. Again, not to ask you again who you voted for, but as you point out, things beyond the defense
realm were really declining rapidly by the time of the election. When you sat down to think about who you were going to vote for, when you walked into the proverbial ballot booth, how much did you make your decision as a person primarily concerned with defense issues and how much did you factor in other issues? In a sense, did you see one candidate perhaps better for defense, but the other candidate as better for all the other things going on in the country?

**Gates:** I had very mixed feelings. I was looking at the whole picture but I also—It was both. The truth is, I wasn’t sure McCain would be better for defense than Obama. Because McCain was such a pain in the ass, I could see him really putting his fingers into the pie over in Defense and making a mess out of stuff, making life impossible for the Secretary and for everybody else, just because of meddling, and I was worried about his impetuosity and his tendency to shoot from the hip all the time. I really felt he had anger-management issues, so those were things—

On the other hand, there was Obama’s total inexperience; he had never run anything in his life and had been a community organizer and a legislator. Legislators, by and large, do terribly when they’re put in the executive branch. Cheney was an exception, but he had been Chief of Staff in the White House before he had been a legislator. Most legislators are terrible managers, because they want to make everybody happy and they’re unaccustomed to taking responsibility for anything.

**Nelson:** Could you compare Bush and Obama in as wide-ranging a way as you choose?

**Gates:** Like most Presidents, they both avoided the Washington social scene. They’re most comfortable around a coterie of close friends. I had a very businesslike relationship with both of them. The Bushes invited Becky and me to Camp David probably four or five times and it just didn’t work. She was either here in the northwest or I was on foreign travel. It got to the point where I was quite embarrassed about it, because I felt they might think we were snubbing them in some way for what was really a very privileged invitation.

The two couples of us, in neither Bush nor Obama’s case, ever had dinner together. Every now and then Obama would say, “You need to come up and have drink. We need to have a drink together,” but nothing ever came of it.

**Engel:** Never had a drink?

**Gates:** No. It was very businesslike; he was casual and relaxed, informal and friendly, but it was a business relationship with both. As I write in the book, because I didn’t mountain bike, I missed my sports-bonding chance with Bush, and because I’m a foot too short and athletically inept, I didn’t get on the basketball team with Obama, and I don’t play golf, so nothing happened. Obama is obviously much more analytical, Bush more instinctive. Both of them are far less sentimental than 41. I never saw Obama tear up. The only times I saw Bush tear up were a couple of occasions during Medal of Honor presentations; that’s the only time.

**Engel:** How would you compare them as strategists?

**Gates:** That’s an interesting question. I never thought of it in those terms. I’m not sure either one of them was a particularly good strategist. As I think about it, Obama approved the Afghan strategy in December of ’09 and soon had reservations about it. I think many of Bush’s decisions
were tactical decisions that became strategic decisions. Then I think about Reagan, with a longterm view of how to deal with the Soviet Union: first build up strong, with the appearance of strength as well as the reality, then flip and negotiate from a position of strength; Nixon, with respect to China and Russia; the first Bush with respect to managing the collapse of the Soviet Union. His was very tactical on eastern Europe because it all happened so fast. But in terms of how to manage the relationship with the collapsing Soviet Union, it was pretty strategic.

I never had the sense that either one of those guys, at least in foreign policy, had a particularly strategic bent. They both hated Congress. It was really funny to sit and listen to Biden, Clinton, and Obama all trash Congress.

Nelson: This was a Democratic Congress when you were there.

Gates: Yes, exactly. They both had the worst of both worlds with Congress. They were neither much liked nor much feared. Neither spent much effort in trying to cultivate the Congress or Members of Congress.

Engel: Would you fault them for that?

Gates: Yes. In fact, in that respect, they were much more like Jimmy Carter and Nixon than they were Johnson, Ford, Reagan, and Bush 41, who really had some real friendships up on the Hill and cultivated Members of Congress. [Thomas] Tip O’Neill really, really liked Reagan and really, really hated Jimmy Carter. But these guys—The way I put it in the book is that Members would vote what they believed on policy issues, would vote with the President if they agreed with him on the policy, if they thought it was in the best interest of the party or the politics, but they wouldn’t vote for the President just because he was the President or because they had some affinity for him.

Engel: I have one follow-up.

Gates: Then we’ll go to lunch.

Engel: I want to pick up, and this is not a George W. Bush question, but it is a point about what you just said about Reagan as a strategist. You were there and I wasn’t, but when I think about Reagan, I think about exactly what you described, but perhaps without the intent. That he had essentially two strategies and two foreign policies. In the first term, building up strength; in the second term, greater reconciliation. You described it as though that was the plan all along. I might say that was the plan only because Gorbachev gave him the opportunity. You were there and it is your field more than anything. I’m just curious.

Gates: For me, the key is, the buildup had only just begun by 1984. Shultz came to Reagan in the late summer of ’84. He told him [Andrei] Gromyko was coming to New York for the UN. Traditionally, the U.S. President had met with the Soviet Foreign Minister every September. The Foreign Minister would come to Washington for a meeting, and that went back a long, long time, at least back until early Nixon. But it had been stopped after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. There had been no such meeting for four or five years. Shultz told Reagan, “Gromyko is coming to New York. Do you want to see him?”
Shultz made clear in his memoir that he made no recommendation to Reagan. Reagan thought about it and said, “Now it’s time.” That was the beginning of a change. It was far too early to know who or what Gorbachev was. This was Reagan, before Gorbachev had begun to change the Soviet Union, saying now it is time to change the tenor of this relationship. It also followed 1983, which I describe in my book as the year of living dangerously. That was the year of the Able Archer exercise, when we came closer to nuclear war than anybody realized on our side. The “evil empire” speech, the killing of Major [Arthur] Nicholson in Berlin, the deployment of ground-based missiles, to have the Pershings and others in Europe to counter the SS-20s—1983 was a rough year in the Cold War, more than most people realized at the time. There were so many things that happened that were bad. In a way, it helped shape Reagan’s view that we needed to get this thing back on a different track.

[Nelson: We’re back from a lovely lunch hosted by Secretary Gates. I interrupted him at lunch because he was about to start talking about the relationship between 43 [George W. Bush] and 41, and I wanted that to be something we captured for posterity, so talk about it as extensively as you’d like.

Gates: They both hate the idea of anybody “putting them on the couch” in terms of trying to analyze their relationships, their motives, their feelings, stuff like that. Any press articles that talked about any of those things, they just totally hated, because in their own way they’re very private people. For very public people, they’re very private people.

My perception, having worked for them both and being closer to 41, is that it is evident to everybody that there is an incredibly deep and abiding love between the two of them, but there is also a competitive element to it when it comes to 43, of not being seen as a clone of his father, of being totally his own man, his own ideas, his own staff, his own senior officials, his own library. In all of these things, he wanted it to be very clear that he was not in his father’s shadow. It is one of the reasons why anybody who had served in a senior role for his father—and I would say in that context more people like Baker and Scowcroft and folks like me than, say, Cheney or Powell. I’m not sure there is a distinction or why, but I think that was the case.

Here’s one example: I’d been in office about a month—I was e-mailing and 41 was in town and wanted to come over to the Pentagon and just say hi and meet some of the people around me, see the office, see me at my new digs, and maybe meet a few of the senior military. We got it all set up and I received a call from Josh Bolten; 43 didn’t want it to happen, thought it would give rise to a newspaper story and he didn’t want that, so 41, I think gnashing his teeth, canceled the visit, and he and I had breakfast in the White House instead. He was really ticked that they had been so sensitive.

A month or two later, I was coming back from the White House and took a call from my secretary in the car. He said, “Bush 41 is on his way over here, and if you don’t hurry, he’s going to beat you,” so we raced over, red lights and siren, and I beat him by about two minutes. He
only stayed about 15 minutes, but I think he wanted to make a point, and it wasn’t to me. There is that peculiar tension that is there.

**Nelson:** Was he his father’s son in noticeable ways?

**Gates:** In two ways that I noticed, and maybe it is because I’m sensitive to it. The son, just like the father, treated everybody around him equally. He was as kind to the household staff as he was to his most senior Cabinet officers. He was never imperious with people. The lower ranking you were, the nicer he was, which is not to say he wasn’t nice at the senior level, but he just went out of his way to be respectful and treat everybody with equal dignity, which is just like his father.

Then there were the little personal touches, the writing of notes and letters, reaching out to people on the staff who might have a sick child or something like that. He’s a very kind man and a caring man, just like the letter to me that I described to you that he wrote the day before the library opened, on the death of my mother, which prevented us from going to the library. That is very characteristic of both father and son.

**Nelson:** You made a reference at lunch that I don’t think you meant to be diagnostic, to ADD [attention deficit disorder]? 

**Gates:** The way I would put it is neither one of them had much patience for long philosophical discussions or conversations, political or policy discussions that didn’t go anywhere, that were just bull sessions. They had no patience for that at all. No patience for slide shows, and I’m very sympathetic on both counts. Bush 43 in particular wanted people to get to the point. It was a rare CIA briefer who got more than about two minutes into his briefing before Bush started interrupting with very pointed questions. He was actually a more aggressive questioner than Cheney was.

The other way people underestimate him is in terms of intellectual curiosity. He was always reading something, almost always nonfiction, lots of history and biography. He was always asking people around him what they were reading. Among the seniors—Hadley and Rice, the Vice President and Bush and me—people were recommending books and sharing books and things or going out and buying books that somebody else had liked. I never once was in a conversation with Obama like that. But Bush was always reading, and right up until the end of his Presidency was taking what he called “deep dives,” which were briefings and meetings on substantive issues with experts that would just delve down into the details of particular issues and so on.

**Engel:** Did you discuss the content of the nonfiction?

**Gates:** Not a lot, but sometimes.

**Engel:** Can you think of an example?

**Gates:** Not off the top of my head.

**Engel:** This dovetails with a follow-up question. You mentioned the influence of the [Frederick]
Kagan article on your thinking about Afghanistan. What did you read to educate yourself about Afghanistan?

Gates: Well, I had a fair amount of experience with Afghanistan, because I had been pushing arms across the border into Afghanistan in 1986. I had been watching this country for 20 years. Mostly I would read articles. I wouldn’t say too many books, but all the intelligence assessments, things like that, many of which had a historical background.

Nelson: Were there particular reporters during your time at Defense who you thought were getting things right?

Gates: I’m not sure I’d put it that way, but the Defense Department, while I was there at least, benefited, and the public benefited, from a group of reporters who were not only quite capable, but were knowledgeable on defense-related issues. Probably the ones I admired the most were Thom Shanker of the New York Times, Bob Burns of the AP [Associated Press]—some of their names slip my mind now, but there were a number who were quite capable.

Nelson: Are there any books about the Bush Presidency or about the events of that time that you’ve read between then and now that you think are particularly good or particularly bad?

Gates: The only ones I’ve read were Bush’s, segments of Cheney’s, and Rice’s. I read them mostly just to remind myself of things for my book. One thing I found interesting: when I was in New York in the summer of ’11, in July, to meet with potential bidders on my book, under the auspices of my agent, I met over a two-day, three-day period with 15 publishers. Let’s just say that the people who run the book publishing business in New York are not George W. Bush’s natural constituency, but to a person they admired his book; they thought it was a terrific book, really a well-done book, not just because it was a bestseller, but because it was a very good book.

Nelson: What did they like about it?

Gates: They didn’t go into any details.

Engel: I’m hesitant to ask this question, but do you share that opinion?

Gates: It is very honest. It is a good book, a very good book. I am more linear. I like the story to begin, have a middle and an end, rather than episodes, and his is more about episodes. There are things I wish he had talked about that he didn’t, or that he had written about that he didn’t, but other than that, what he has written is really good.

Nelson: The Bob Woodward books occupy a special place.

Gates: They do have a special place on my bookshelf. They sit right on the borderline between fiction and nonfiction, all of them.

Nelson: Give future readers, students of the Bush Presidency, some guidance about how useful they are, if they read those books.

Gates: Woodward’s books?
Nelson: Yes.

Gates: First, you need to understand Woodward starts with a point of view, and he generally writes his books from the perspective of his best sources. In both the Bush and Obama administrations, his best sources were on the NSC, so his book on the surge and that last book on the Bush administration could be subtitled “How the NSC, with the Help of [John] Jack Keane, Won the War in Iraq.” The same thing with his book Obama’s Wars on the first couple of years, year and a half or so, of the Obama administration. Clearly, Jim Jones, Doug Lute, among others, were his very best sources, so the books are written from the standpoint of the White House and the NSC.

The problem is, for me as a historian they’re useless, in the respect that they are anecdotal. It is hard to tell what’s fact and what’s not and whether a conversation is reconstructed memory, from notes—Where did it come from? How could somebody have that good a memory? People may say the same thing about my book, but in my case, I have notes, either my notes or my senior staff’s notes.

I haven’t been a fan of his books ever since he wrote Veil about CIA. He described things about Bill Casey that I knew were not true, that ranged from the trivial to the significant. The trivial was him describing Bill Casey visiting Bandar [bin Sultan], the Saudi Ambassador, and having a stickpin microphone and planting it in the sofa. Anybody who knew Bill Casey at all knew that the odds were far more likely that he’d stick it in his knee than into the cushion. He had no digital dexterity whatsoever, or he would drop the damn thing in front of Bandar. [laughter]

Then there’s the made-up conversation in the hospital at the end of the book. I was the guy who put the security around Casey in the hospital. I knew nobody could get in there without being identified, so I’m not a big fan. Woodward has this technique that a lot of journalists have, but he has perfected it, which is to go to somebody and say, “Here’s what somebody is saying about you and that’s what I have to go with unless you give me a different perspective.” Then you end up telling him stuff.

Cheney and I were the last holdouts to talk to him for the last Bush book. The book essentially was already written by the time I talked to him. I told Hadley, “I’ll do it if you guys want me to, but why do you help this guy? Why are you cooperating with him?” I would have the same conversations in the Obama administration. “What the hell possesses you to want to be a part of these books?”

Engel: What was the answer?

Gates: “Well, if we didn’t help him, he’d write a very negative—” It’s the usual bullshit.

Engel: I want to ask a broad question, and since it is a historiographical question for the future, it strikes me that one of, if not the most central question for future historians of this period, is going to be not only the decision to go to Iraq in 2003 but how Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003 on fit into the broader Global War on Terror. Could you revisit for the record your thoughts about how you perceived Iraq and Afghanistan evolving, before you became Secretary, as part of the global war and were they still, by 2006, part of the Global War on Terror and what that term even meant to you at the time.
Gates: I don’t think Iraq before March of 2003 was part of the Global War on Terror. I was never persuaded that Saddam had any meaningful connection to al-Qaeda or provided shelter. He had sponsored terrorism for a long time, but it had nothing to do with Islamic fundamentalism or al-Qaeda. It was very much for the same reason as Syria and Libya and the others. Iraq did become a part of the Global War on Terror, because once the insurgency began, al-Qaeda essentially took it over. It became the central front in the war against al-Qaeda because of their leadership of the Sunni insurgency in significant parts of Iraq, particularly in the west and the northwest.

It wasn’t in early 2003, but it became central and defeating al-Qaeda in 2007, 2008, begun by the sheiks at the end of 2006 because of their brutality, but whether the sheiks could have brought it off without the help of the additional Marines, I’ve always questioned. The sheiks started the uprising against al-Qaeda, but it was our Marine reinforcements that allowed it to be successful.

The key in Afghanistan was keeping al-Qaeda out. The big debate that went on and on in the Obama administration was the nature of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. As to the willingness, on the part of a number of people, to allow the Taliban to be a part of the political process, if they disavowed al-Qaeda, I guess I was in the middle on that. I thought that was an interesting—I didn’t rule it out, but I wasn’t one of the enthusiastic supporters. I was on the cusp on that one, or in the middle.

In Afghanistan, it became more of a matter of keeping al-Qaeda out. The question was whether, if the Taliban came back, since al-Qaeda got them booted out in the first place, would they disavow al-Qaeda? Did they owe al-Qaeda anything? Hillary’s and my view was that it all had become symbiotic, that a success for the Taliban was a success for al-Qaeda and vice versa.

Engel: Given that Iraq was not about al-Qaeda in 2003, but as you put it, became about it through al-Qaeda’s decision making and through its initiative, you also mentioned, before lunch, that by 2008, 2009, we were on al-Qaeda’s 10-yard line. Did we get to the 10-yard line then without going to Iraq?

Gates: No, the 10-yard line was part of a policy assertion or question that I framed for people, that it is better to fight them on their 10-yard line than on our 10-yard line. In other words, better to fight them in Afghanistan than in New York. That was the context for that comment.

Engel: How much did al-Qaeda’s decision to make Iraq a battlefield enable the United States to weaken al-Qaeda globally?

Gates: The defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq was a significant victory. The problem is that al-Qaeda is not a static entity. All through this period, it is metastasizing and changing. The core, what I, in private at least, referred to as either the Mecca or the Jerusalem of al-Qaeda, is there on the Afghan-Pakistani border. That is their holy place. That is where they defeated one superpower. The perspective that I had that most of the rest didn’t, because they were too young, was that having defeated one superpower, if they were able to defeat a second superpower, it would be
enormously empowering globally for extremist fundamentalism.

If they could take down both the Soviet Union and the United States in that area and defeat them, that would be a huge historical achievement. Nonetheless, these al-Qaeda branches began cropping up in 2008, 2009 in Somalia, in the Horn of Africa, in Yemen, in North Africa, in Mali, the Maghreb, and even in Asia. You saw an organization that was changing form constantly, so in an operational sense, the Afghan-Pakistani border became less important, but in an ideological sense, it remained central to the whole historical narrative of extremist Islam.

Engel: How would you describe the entire conflict since 2001, or from al-Qaeda’s perspective, of much longer duration? How should future historians think about this period? I threw out before “Global War on Terror,” but obviously that’s a controversial, disputed term. What term would you use? “Age of Anxiety”? What works for you in trying to think about this entire conflict in this period?

Gates: We get a little cavalier about—we’re going to have a war on poverty. We’re going to have a war on cancer. We’re going to have a war on terrorism. Terrorism is a technique. It is not an entity; it is not a movement. I always refer to it as the “war on violent Islamic extremism” or fundamentalist extremists or violent extremists. Because if you declare War on Terror, that implies that if you don’t defeat terror, if you don’t end terror, you fail. You can’t end terror. Terror is as old as humankind. It has been a historical technique for however many years. You look at the last quarter of the 19th century and there were probably more leaders killed, assassinated by terrorists, than at any other time in modern history, including in the last 20 years.

It is a technique. I didn’t want to make the fight in the Bush administration—Mike Mullen wanted to make the fight; he wanted to get rid of the term and did. My attitude toward him was Mike, it’s a fight you don’t need to fight. If we’re going to fight with the White House, let’s have it be over something real, and not what we call something. They’ve been calling it this for six years. If you think you’re going to change their minds about it, you’re not, so why spend the political capital?

You set yourself up for failure when you characterize something that you can’t do. Terrorism is like a public health problem or like crime. You can never eradicate it entirely. What you can do is control it and bring it down to a level that is manageable and that allows you to go on with your lives without sacrificing your values or your culture. Frankly, that’s what we have accomplished over the last 10 years.

Engel: Would you say that that is the way you would want to describe the conflict then, as a war against radical Islamic extremism or fundamentalism and not so much defeating it in terms of eliminating it, but bringing it down to a reasonable level?

Gates: When it comes to a specific group, you can defeat it, but when you say it is a “Global War on Terror,” you’re not talking about a single group. Can al-Qaeda be defeated? My attitude is that they may not be defeated now, but they’re sure as hell on the ropes and they certainly don’t pose the kind of dangers to western Europe or the United States that they posed even five or six years ago. Can you eliminate it all together? I doubt it. But you can certainly keep it so far back on its heels that it’s not a particular danger to you.
Nelson: This brings up a related issue: the debate and discussion over the use of drones as weapon delivery systems. Essentially the criticism of that use is predicated on the idea that for every terrorist you kill you’re creating some multiple of that. The use of drones, I guess, started when you were Secretary of Defense?

Gates: It started early on, but the use of drones for targeted killings and in the way that they’re being used now mostly started on my watch.

Nelson: What do you think, now that you’ve seen that play out over time?

Gates: First, one shouldn’t exaggerate how frequently the drones have been used for killings as opposed to for collecting intelligence. The vast preponderance of UAV capabilities we have are used for intelligence collection, not for launching Hellfire missiles. Actually, the military rarely uses armed drones, because we are operating solely within Afghanistan; we aren’t operating in Pakistan. The armed drones have mostly been used by CIA.

Frankly, Hillary and I thought there ought to be more controls on them, that there ought to be a greater say on the political side about when they were used, how frequently, and under what circumstances. Leon [Panetta] rejected that totally and [John] Brennan and the President backed him up.

Nelson: You mean when Leon Panetta was head of CIA?

Gates: Yes. Hillary and I weren’t objecting to the use of the drones, but right after something terrible happened in our relationship with Pakistan, was this a good time to launch another drone attack? There should be a little modulation there in terms of the political environment.

The idea that you create a new terrorist or more terrorists for every drone you use, that’s a nice phrase, but I don’t believe it. You probably radicalize some people, but most of the people—The number of innocent people who have been killed by those things is very small. You have to deal with the reality that some of the worst terrorists surround themselves with civilians precisely to avoid being hit.

The other thing that people don’t understand about drones is the limits on their use, on their utility. The only places you can use drones are where you have complete control of the air, where you have the permission of the state that you’re flying over, or where it is ungoverned space. No one has ever used a drone over Venezuela or a Middle Eastern—We haven’t used drones in Europe because they’re low, slow, and noisy; they’re easy to shoot down. You have to be pretty careful where you use them, which automatically inhibits the areas in which you can use them and the frequency with which you can use them.

Nelson: When you, as Secretary of Defense, oversaw the more frequent use of drones, did you think of this as a tactical issue? A strategic issue? A change in the nature of warfare? What was appealing about it?

Gates: The real-time fusion of intelligence collection and military operations is a revolution in war. Our ability to identify a target, hit the target, go in and do site exploitation, and then use that intelligence information to help inform the next operation has never been done at this level of
intensity or accuracy of this virtuous circle of an operation: intelligence collected from the site of
the operation informing the next operation and the next operation and so on. It is a combination
of sensor suites. It is the drones and it is the planes like right behind you, the Liberty aircraft,
which are basically King Airs outfitted with millions of dollars of sensors. Those aircraft, first
used in Iraq, can map IED [improvised explosive device] networks, because they provide 24/7
real-time video.

You’re able to trace a truck from point A to point B, but with the recordings, you can back it up
and find the truck at point B, where it blows up, and reel back and find point A, where it started
from. We learned how to do that in Iraq. The Army did it with what they call Task Force ODIN
[Observe, Detect, Identify, Neutralize]. We moved all of that; I bought 50 of those airplanes. The
Air Force hates them, because they’re off the shelf, they’re cheap, and they’re not very
sophisticated, but they do the job.

If you had to have a division of labor, in terms of how you use those assets, Predators are
targeting aircraft, whether it is intelligence or very precision targeting for collection of
intelligence or killing individuals; the Liberty aircraft and the other sensors that we have are
more intelligence collectors and network identifiers. They give you a much broader view of the
battlefield. It is all that information coming together that has been such a game changer.

**Engel:** Let’s talk a little bit more about something that you just mentioned that is going to be
significant to future historians, the division of this question and its arguments over who will
control the use of these drones, CIA, DoD, and what role the State Department will play.
Especially given your particular, almost unique, history, being both head of the CIA and of the
Pentagon, I’m sure you understood where Panetta was coming from, but did you have sympathy
for his argument, to want to keep that as a CIA operation?

**Gates:** It wasn’t a matter of keeping it as a CIA operation; nobody was arguing against that. It
was that somebody outside of CIA who had a policy perspective should have a say in how
frequently those attacks were used. Often, CIA becomes so convinced of the elegance, so
attracted to the elegance of their own operation, that they see it in complete isolation from
everything else that is going on. I’ll give you an example, because my attitude was the same
when I was DCI.

Every now and then, we would get an opportunity to collect really good intelligence on an ally.
For all the bullshit that is in the newspapers right now, we need information. We need it for
counterintelligence; we need to know if they’ve been penetrated. We need to know what they’re
doing against us, and so on. Every now and then, these opportunities will present themselves, but
the consequences of getting caught are so huge, politically, that when we would have one of
those opportunities, I would go to Baker and I’d say: “Jim, here’s the opportunity, but here are
the consequences if we get caught. If you don’t think the potential benefit outweighs the risk, we
won’t do it. We think it is a great, elegant operation, but if the costs of getting caught are so
enormous as to vastly outweigh the value of the information, we’ll not do it.”

I don’t think any DCI before or since has ever done that, but I understood the political
consequences of intelligence operations gone wrong. I wanted to give them a say. I don’t think
Jim ever turned me down, ever said no. But it was an important precedent in terms of how these
things ought to be done when the political fallout is potentially enormous.

All the argument was about was how do we limit the political fallout in places like Pakistan by inserting some policy guidance in terms of the timing and the frequency of these things. It wasn’t who would do it. For me, the division between Title 10 and Title 50 was always quite clear. If we wanted to be able to deny it, it had to be Title 50, it had to be CIA, even if it was an open secret. Because the military could do it under Title 10, under the military, but if push comes to shove, you can’t lie; you can’t say, “No, U.S. troops weren’t there.”

Nelson: Why did administrations allow the DCI to make that call about whether to consult or not to consult?

Gates: It’s a good question.

Nelson: Did you have an opinion on that when you were Secretary of Defense that you took to someone—?

Gates: As I said, I supported Hillary. I said that even if it is Hillary herself, somebody—not the ambassador, if you want to make it Hillary—an outside voice that has a broader perspective than just intelligence is needed.

Nelson: You and the Secretary of State thought the same way, but Panetta prevailed?

Gates: Yes.

Nelson: Because? You didn’t take it to the President?

Gates: No, the President was sitting right there in the middle of the conversation. Hillary made this point and Panetta was on the video screen and he pointed his finger through the screen and said, “Hillary, you’re wrong.” I’m not sure that anybody but Panetta could have gotten away with that.

Nelson: The fear was that if they were consulted on these things then their fingerprints would be on them from a political—

Gates: No, no, it was just a question of how far to push the envelope. I’ll give you an example. It didn’t happen in this context, so this is completely hypothetical. This guy [Raymond] Davis was caught January 2011 after he shot two Pakistanis. He was a CIA guy in Lahore. He had all kinds of spy gear in the trunk of his car. He shot two Pakistanis dead and was arrested and we were trying to get the guy out. Would that be a good time to launch a drone attack? That’s the kind of question I’m talking about.

Engel: You were suggesting that the CIA, in this case, should, as you had done, consult with people?

Gates: Yes.

Engel: But the ultimate decision would still lie with whom?
Gates: Let’s say Hillary and Panetta disagree, then it should be the President’s call.

Nelson: We have all too little time left with you.

Engel: I just want to follow up on one more thing. If you had been in charge of CIA and not the Pentagon, given what you already told us that you did in a similar situation, going to Secretary Baker, do you think you would have ultimately had a different opinion when talking to the President in 2010, 2009 about this issue?

Gates: No. It wouldn’t have been an issue for me. I said, “Sure, you guys are the ones making the policy decisions.”

Engel: Given the time pressure, we’ll start talking through the personalities. One of the things we always like to do is get a sense of your relationship with the different individuals within the administration. You already talked about the President to some extent, but focus back on the W. years. Tell us a little about your relationship with the Secretary of State in the 43 administration.

Gates: Condi had once worked for me. I had not known her before Scowcroft hired her for the NSC, but Condi and I became very close collaborators, because we both, as Soviet experts, were convinced Gorbachev’s reforms would fail and that the odds were very real that he would be thrown out. We felt very strongly, first, that the administration ought to have reacted more strongly to Gorbachev’s repression in Lithuania and in the Baltic States in ’89 and early ’90. And we felt, along with Cheney and [Lawrence] Eagleburger, that we ought to open the door to the President talking to other Russian reformers including, above all, [Boris] Yeltsin. Baker, Scowcroft, and the President wanted to keep all their chips on Gorbachev and not undermine that relationship by seeing somebody like Yeltsin, whom Gorbachev hated and vice versa.

What we finally got was an agreement that Yeltsin could come see Scowcroft in the West Wing and the President would just spontaneously drop by, so it wasn’t a meeting with the President per se. Condi and I were very much on the same wavelength in terms of how to deal with the Soviets. She also played a big role in the staffing work that was done on German reunification. We worked pretty closely together. I knew Condi and I would get along well when I took the job. My attitude toward her was very much my same attitude toward Hillary, and that was my belief that I didn’t need to be as aggressive and as forceful and as outspoken publicly as Rumsfeld had been.

I was perfectly content to let the Secretary of State be the primary spokesperson for the United States. I also felt I didn’t have to throw my weight around, as I write about in the book. Everybody knows who has all the money, all the troops, and all the guns. The Secretary of Defense never has to elbow his way to the table; nothing can be accomplished without the Secretary of Defense.

It seemed to me that I could lie back and not be as pushy, and not insist that everything go my way. My attitude toward Bush and Obama both and toward the Secretaries of State was that there were a handful of really big issues that mattered a lot to me. There were other issues where I didn’t agree, but I didn’t consider them important enough to fight, so I just acquiesced. Other than the issue of getting more civilians into Iraq and Afghanistan, I’m not sure that Condi and I ever had a disagreement.
Engel: Can you give us some examples of issues where you perhaps disagreed privately, as you said, but did not want to fight?

Gates: I mentioned one yesterday. I thought that the “Freedom Agenda,” if you will, maybe is great rhetoric, but what are the practical implications of it? Do you tie yourself to certain things by making that a centerpiece? The diplomatic outreach to North Korea—Cheney was absolutely adamantly opposed to it and I didn’t give a shit. I didn’t think it would work, but I saw no harm in trying. There were things like that.

Engel: I need to ask this question, and it is going to be putting you “on the couch” in a sense. Yesterday, when you were describing the period even before 2000, the election of 2000, all the way up to 2006, you noted the few, if any, times that people from the administration called you for your opinion, called you for a job, even. I detected yesterday that maybe you were peeved at not being called.

Gates: No, because to tell you the truth, I never did it when I was Secretary or when I was president of A&M or Director of CIA. I never called my predecessors to ask their advice or anything, any more than I resent not being called in. One of the reasons I left was so that I wouldn’t be called; I was tired of being called. No, I wasn’t peeved at all. I guess the word I would use is “bemused,” but when I reflect on my own practice, it’s not surprising. You just don’t have time. Most of the time it’s political; it’s to cover a base: Well, I consulted with So-and-So. It is not real. You’re completely out of touch; you’re not current. Maybe you have some words of wisdom, but I think—I think Shultz was really wounded that Baker never called him, but National Security Advisors probably do that more with one another than the Cabinet officers and I don’t know why. My guess is that it is mainly political.

Engel: This brings up a follow-on, in a sense, to the 41 relationship you had, given how close you are to 41. The one question we didn’t ask when you were talking about him: was there ever a moment where either you went to him and sought his counsel or that he offered his counsel, or counsel just happened to appear in the midst of one of the social calls you were describing while you were Secretary?

Gates: No.

Engel: It did not stray to any topic of current events whatsoever?

Gates: When we would have breakfast or something, we would talk about what was going on in Iraq or something, but he never offered advice. I heard he never offered advice to 43. If he were asked, he would respond, but he never offered is what I heard.

Nelson: Did you talk with Rumsfeld in the interim?

Gates: In the interim, yes. I think we had two meetings, each about an hour, with him going through the issues that were in front of him. It was very cordial; he was very gracious, very nice to me.

Nelson: Were there others you wanted to ask about, Jeff?
Engel: Hadley.

Gates: Hadley and I first started working on the NSC together in 1974, so we’ve known each other 40 years. I was 30 years old when I first met Steve Hadley and we had stayed in touch over the years. One of my favorite stories about Hadley was that he was representing Cheney at a deputies’ meeting during the coup attempt against Gorbachev. It was the strangest deputies’ meeting I ever had. It was in the Roosevelt Room and the backbenchers were Scowcroft, the President, and Cheney. They sat against the wall. The deputies were at the table.

We put together a statement for the President, opposing the coup. I’ll never forget. Hadley had been at the deputies’ meeting. He came into my office and said, “You know, there is a problem with the statement.” We’d just spent two hours fussing with it, had the President on board and everything. “There is a problem with the statement.” I said, “What’s that?” He said, “It never actually condemns the coup.”

I said, “But look at all this. Look at this! Goddamn it, it does too.” He said, “It doesn’t say, ‘The President condemns the coup.’” I said, “Goddamn it, you’re right.” I changed it, took it in to the President and Scowcroft, and it was approved. And of course the headline the next day was “President condemns coup attempt.” Steve is very meticulous, very careful, and very calm. He is incredibly difficult to ruffle, so he was very easy to work with. As I said, we’ve been friends forever. We had not stayed in really close touch, because I moved away from D.C. in ’94, but we’d run into each other at places like the Aspen Strategy Group and stuff like that from time to time.

Engel: My understanding is that the records from the Deputies Committee from the 41 administration are basically nonexistent; there are records of who was in the meeting, but there are no minutes. Does that jive with your recollection, and if so, is that something that you did intentionally and then carried forward?

Gates: It’s probably true, because there was no—it was generally the role of the NSC staffer to take notes, so I’d be surprised—the problem is that they may be looking in institutional files for the NSC rather than in the files of individual staffers, because my guess is that they were not submitted as formal minutes and typed up and circulated.

Engel: Was that intentional?

Gates: No. Things were moving so fast when I was the deputy that there were times when we had four deputies’ meetings a day. At the end of every meeting, there was a list of action items. Everybody had to be back to meet within two hours having talked with their principal. Then I would report to Bush and get a decision.

One of the reasons that these worked the way they did was that in the middle of a debate—we’d be arguing about something and everybody would be arguing what the President believed or what the President wanted to do and everybody had a different point of view. I would say, “Well, shit, I’ll just go ask him.” So I’d get up in the middle of the meeting, walk upstairs, walk into the Oval Office, ask him, come back down, and say, “Here’s what the President believes.” No one ever forgot that, that there was that kind of access.
Engel: Obviously in a less informal way, did you feel you had that level of access, to just pick up the phone any time you wanted to and talk to the President, either President Bush or President Obama, when you were Secretary?

Gates: Yes, absolutely. I probably didn’t call them as often as I might have, because I didn’t want to bother them. I had regular meetings. I saw each of them multiple times almost every day, so if I had something, I could just pull him aside.

Nelson: Yesterday you talked about the expansion of the NSC staff. Did that color your relationship with Hadley?

Gates: No, because the expansion—it grew; it was bigger under Hadley than it had been under 41 or under Scowcroft and me, but it was not nearly the size that it is now. The huge growth took place in the Obama administration.

Nelson: Did you feel like Hadley ran a fair process?

Gates: Absolutely.

Engel: I’m going to have to go pretty soon, which is why I’m going throw out something that may extend beyond my departure. The question of Iran has only been touched on tangentially. Could you describe for us how you viewed Iran in 2006, especially as involving itself in the conflict in Iraq as a supplier and additionally how that related to Iran’s nuclear program in terms of how the United States, in your opinion, dealt with it, or should have dealt with Iran?

Gates: I felt that one of the principal outcomes of the overthrow of Saddam had been to empower Iran, so it upset the balance in the region.

Engel: Can you repeat that? I’m not sure I quite understood what you said.

Gates: Saddam was Iran’s nemesis. Ironically, by taking him out and by taking the Taliban out, the United States removed Iran’s worst enemies on both their west and east borders, thereby empowering Iran in the region. I’ve always felt this is the toughest foreign policy problem I’ve ever faced, the nuclear problem. Iranian involvement in Iraq was minimal. They provided these explosive penetrating devices, but there really wasn’t much we could do about that. The MRAPs started to help diminish the impact of those, that and additional armorning. At the very end, they were providing some other weapons, some rocket-assisted missiles, but tactical rockets that in effect had the potential to create a lot of casualties, but never did.

When we caught five of the Iranian Quds Force guys inside Iraq and put them in the slammer, that really grabbed the Iranians’ attention, and my attitude was that we should never let them go. But the Iranians were desperate to get them back. For me, the toughest issue with respect to Iran was the nuclear program.

We had considerably more time than Cheney thought we did. Cheney wanted to take care of the problem before Bush left office, or have the Israelis take care of it. When the Israelis came in with a laundry list of stuff, military equipment they wanted, Cheney wanted to give them everything, and I recommended giving them nothing.
Engel: Just to clarify: This was a list of materials that they thought was necessary for the United States to give them to accomplish the mission?

Gates: For Israel to be able to successfully attack Iran: some bunker-buster bombs, air-refueling capability, overflight over Iraq, and some other military equipment. Cheney wanted to give it all to them; I said: “Don’t give them anything. If you give them one thing, you’re giving them the green light to attack, and we don’t need a third war in the Middle East right now. Let’s just get the hell out of Iraq and Afghanistan before we go looking for trouble.”

I weighed in very strongly with Bush. The argument that I used ultimately prevailed, and even Cheney grudgingly agreed: if we allowed Israel to overfly Iraq to attack Iran, there was a high likelihood that the Iraqis would tell us to leave immediately and we would lose the war in Iraq; we’d lose everything we’d gained by virtue of the surge. Because Iraq was still so important to both Bush and Cheney, that argument—I know it made an impact on Bush; I think it made an impact on Cheney as well.

We undertook a number of measures to put additional pressure on the Iranians. I ordered a lot of military contingency planning. We began a process of strengthening our military capabilities in the Gulf and strengthening the neighbors in the Gulf, including a huge arms deal with Saudi Arabia that I personally cut with the King for $60 billion of F-15s and helicopters. We took a number of steps as a deterrent to Iran, but also to be ready in the event Iran—that included sending a second aircraft carrier to the Gulf to be ready if Iran started something, which was a real possibility, because they’d seized these British Marines. After that happened, I directed that we would not conduct any boarding without a helicopter gunship or a warship within range. I basically said I was never going to allow American sailors or Marines to be taken prisoner by the Iranians.

The big thing during the Bush administration was that there was a huge improvement in the defense relationship, between Ehud Barak and me. We had first met when he was head of the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] and I was DCI, so I’d known him a long time. We gave the Israelis a lot of stuff, and particularly a lot of missile-defense stuff. We sent an X-band radar to them. We funded the Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and some other programs for the Israelis, or contributed a lot of money to them. While we weren’t satisfying the Israelis’ request for offensive capabilities, we were basically giving them everything in the warehouse on defensive capabilities.

The issue of attacking Iran was not as urgent in the Bush administration as it would become in the Obama administration. Our diplomatic efforts to increase the sanctions and to drop the hammer on Iran were dealt a devastating blow toward the end of 2007 with a new National Intelligence Estimate that said the Iranians had stopped their nuclear weapons program in 2005. As my French counterpart characterized it, the estimate was, in his words, “a hair in the soup.” [laughter] A typically French statement.

Once we got past the Israeli request for equipment in the spring of ’07, the question was what to do about Iran, other than ratcheting up the pressure in every way we could. As Bush put it—and it’s as far I’ll go, David Sanger notwithstanding—Bush directed us to develop options between diplomacy and all-out military for slowing down the Iranian program.
There were many different things going on vis-à-vis Iran. After we got past the issue of what to give the Israelis, there was no discord in the administration about doing the other things we did.

**Engel:** Obviously, I’m not going to ask you to reveal, nor would you, any operational secrets here, but if the 2007 NIE [National Intelligence Estimate] said that Iran had stopped nuclear production and the President subsequently ordered means between diplomacy and operations, why? Was it preventive? Was there—

**Gates:** It’s fair to say most of us didn’t believe the estimate.

**Engel:** That’s actually the follow-on question.

**Gates:** There was a lot of skepticism, but the question was not—in a way, as too often happens, the estimate was too narrowly focused. It was focused on the weaponization, but not on enrichment. Our efforts were aimed at stopping enrichment. If they couldn’t enrich, they couldn’t build a weapon. If you stopped them from enriching, then it would dramatically increase the time necessary if they did decide to resume a weapons program, or a weaponization program.

**Engel:** Two questions: firstly, how successful did you feel that those operations between diplomacy and military were; and secondly, where would you place yourself on the spectrum within the administration of those, as you put it, who did not agree with the NIE. Where would you put yourself on the spectrum as to the degree of your disagreement with the NIE?

**Gates:** First, the measures made a contribution. They did slow the program. I’m often asked what I would have done differently had I been the Secretary of Defense in 2002, 2003, vis-à-vis Iraq. My response is this: I don’t know, but I do know one thing. Having spent my life as an intelligence analyst, I’d like to think that I would have questioned the intelligence on the weapons of mass destruction more aggressively: how recent the information was, the quality of the sources, and so on.

At the same time I was Deputy Director for Intelligence for a period of 2-1/2 years, I was also the Chairman of the National Intelligence Council that produced the interagency intelligence assessments. I’ve always believed that intelligence estimates, in making black-and-white calls, almost always err, and that the best way an estimate can help a President is by outlining the evidence and the possible courses, the possible paths, events might take, and then making your best case, but being modest about the level of your confidence that you can predict the future, because we’re terrible at it.

That shaped my attitude toward the estimate: Maybe they’re right; maybe they’re not. Even if they’re right, the Iranians can change their minds tomorrow, so it doesn’t affect policy, in terms of what we need to do, in the slightest.

**Engel:** Did you have specific conversations about this with the Vice President?

**Gates:** We discussed the estimate at great length in the Situation Room. We were briefed on it at great length. We cross-examined the experts and the authors at great length.

**Engel:** Did you come away with the same level of confidence, or lack of confidence, in the
assuredness of the—?

**Gates:** Again, at that particular moment, the case that they had stopped weaponization was pretty persuasive, but as far as I was concerned, it was irrelevant, because it was a decision that could be reversed in 24 hours. The case I made was that it didn’t affect the decisions we had to make at all. Where it was a problem—a hair in the soup—was getting our allies to help us. I knew the damn thing would leak. It was actually my proposal to put out the declassified version of the key judgments. With this, then, of course, the allies were sort of asking, “So why is the administration upset about Iran?”

**Engel:** I’m afraid I have to leave.

[BREAK]

**Nelson:** Going down the list of people, Rice and Hadley and so on, I wonder if we could end that list with Peter Pace and then Mike Mullen.

**Gates:** Yes. Pace was a great partner; I really enjoyed working with him. He and Mullen were both practicing Roman Catholics, which affected Pete’s views particularly on don’t ask, don’t tell. I really enjoyed working with Pace and I wanted him to have a second term as Chairman the third and fourth years, but when I talked to—Bush had made a mistake after Petraeus was confirmed by chastising the Congress, saying, “How can you support the general but disagree with his policy?” It infuriated the Democrats, who felt they had been crossed.

I went to see Levin in early spring, probably in April, of ’07 as a routine matter, to tell him we were going to put Pace up again and ask if he was OK with that, if he would support it. He surprised me by saying probably not. He said he’d talk to the other Democrats, but that they felt he had been a part of all of the decisions with respect to Iraq as Vice Chairman and then as Chairman and that he thought it would probably be difficult, but to talk to the Republicans.

Then I talked to John Warner, and Warner said he thought it would be a bad idea, but he would talk to the other Republicans. He came back and said he thought that there would be real trouble getting Republican support, so I talked to McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Saxby Chambliss. Graham said, “You need to get somebody else, because if you send Pace up here, we’re going to relitigate the whole war. It is just going to be an opportunity for the Democrats to attack Pace, attack Rumsfeld, and attack the President.”

I was no stranger to difficult confirmations and I knew how ugly it could get. I was concerned in the first instance about Pete Pace. Here was a guy who had given a lifetime of service to the country, and what I was hearing from both Republicans and Democrats was that he might not be reconfirmed. It would really be problematic, and the odds were probably against it. To see him have his reputation destroyed and sent out, tail between his legs, I thought was unacceptable. I thought Pete Pace ought to leave with flags flying and the thanks of a grateful nation.
Second, I talked to Mitch McConnell, and McConnell’s view was that Republican support for the war and for the surge hung by a thread and that a controversial confirmation could easily break that thread and put the whole strategy at risk. He said, “I recommend you listen to the Republicans on the Armed Services Committee.”

So after talking to all these guys, and hearing all these people saying, “You shouldn’t do it”—The Wall Street Journal later accused me of ceding the Secretaryship to Carl Levin on this decision, when in fact it was the Republicans’ lack of support that worried me the most. Very reluctantly—I kept Pace informed of all of this as I had these meetings, because we had a very open relationship—I finally had a long conversation with the President and told him that for both of those reasons I thought he should not renominate Pace.

Pete wanted to fight, but was very graceful in accepting the decision. I don’t think he or his wife ever blamed me, but they were very bitter toward various people on the Hill whom Pete had thought were his friends and supporters and learned the hard Washington lesson. Then the question was who should take his place. His recommendation was Mullen.

I sent Pete Chiarelli—my senior military assistant, a three-star Army guy—down to talk to Mullen. I got the sequence wrong. When Chiarelli was appointed, he made courtesy calls on the Chiefs. He reported back to me that Mullen had said, when Chiarelli asked Mullen, the Chief of Naval Operations, what worried him most, Mullen’s response was “the Army.” Chiarelli was really impressed by that and so was I. I had gotten to know Mullen in the several months since I had become Secretary, so I recommended him to the President and he was pretty easily confirmed. We were together for better than four years. We had some disagreements, but on nearly every big thing we worked very harmoniously together; it was a great partnership. I don’t think I ever made a decision of any consequence without consulting with Mike.

Nelson: You made a connection between General Pace’s Catholicism and his views on don’t ask, don’t tell.

Gates: The interesting thing is that they were both practicing Roman Catholics, but Mike came to a very different conclusion. Mike’s decision to support repeal, as he put it in the hearing that we had in 2009, was that the bedrock of military culture is integrity, but the don’t ask, don’t tell law in effect forced men and women in uniform to compromise their integrity by being dishonest about who they were. For him, that was a fundamental character contradiction that couldn’t stand. His testimony was quite historic in that respect, which, by the way, put all the other Chiefs on the spot, because he offered that as a personal opinion: “But I don’t know what the effect will be on the force, so that’s why we have to do this review,” and so on.

Nelson: This is from memory now, but I remember reading at the time about a speech you gave at Duke, I think. If I remember it accurately, the focus of that speech was on the potentially worrisome disconnect between the all-volunteer force, the professional military, and the larger civilian society. Am I remembering that correctly?

Gates: Yes, the main thrust of the speech at Duke, though, was a challenge to these kids at this elite university to consider the military.

Nelson: Right.
Gates: If you want a lot of responsibility early in your life and you want to make a real difference, think about the military. After I had retired, in the fall of ’11, I received the [Sylvanus] Thayer Award at West Point. To the entire corps of cadets, I gave a speech about this disconnect. I talked a little bit about it at Duke, but I really went into it at West Point, that too many in the military come to think of themselves as superior in character, patriotism, and culture to the civilians they’re protecting and think that their values and their ethics are higher. I said, “Down that road lies real trouble. If you begin to think of yourselves as something separate in American society, from the society that you’re protecting,” and I went into it in more detail.

Nelson: What was the spur for that worry?

Gates: Basically, demographics. Ironically, at a Q&A session toward the end of my time in office, in Afghanistan, a senior NCO stood up and said, in opposition to changing don’t ask, don’t tell, “Our values and our culture are better than those of most Americans.” That stuck in my craw. But it was also how many officers were the sons and daughters of those who were already in the service. If you look at Mike Mullen, he has two sons, both in the Navy. General [Martin] Dempsey has at least one kid in the Army. Petraeus has a son in the Army; [Stanley] McChrystal has a son in the Army. It just goes on and on.

What prompted my speech was a worry about this developing into a caste of some kind of Pretorian guard detached from the country. Now, ROTC and the National Guard help mitigate that, but in the active service, it is probably more true. It is probably less true in the Air Force than in the other services, but it is even true there.

Nelson: Is this a comment on the creation of the all-volunteer force some 40 years ago?

Gates: No. You cannot find, I don’t think, a single senior officer who would want to go back to the draft. This is the best military we have ever had—the greatest generation notwithstanding—in terms of training, in terms of skill, in terms of being battle and combat hardened, in terms of being entrepreneurial and innovative, particularly at the middle and lower officer levels. It has never been better. The question is how to stay connected with the American people.

Nelson: No, I wasn’t asking if the all-volunteer force was on balance a bad idea, but is this an unfortunate consequence, this trend that you’re describing?

Gates: Yes, and probably an inevitable one. But I also think the all-volunteer Army has made Presidents more willing to use force.

Nelson: Here’s another reason to bring back the comment you made yesterday, describing your first meeting with President Bush, about your concern regarding the Guard and the Reserve being used in ways that they were not intended to be, or were not best used—

Gates: It was really more that they were being used in a way that was contrary to their expectations when they joined up. If you were in the National Guard in 1941, you knew you were going to war, but not in 2001.

Nelson: Right.
Gates: My concern was mainly for the officers and NCOs who had joined the Guard before 9/11 and who expected to go to summer camp and do one weekend a month and be called up for natural disasters and in the event of a national crisis. Now they’re doing a 15-month combat tour, something their employers and their families never anticipated, and neither did they. I said we had to deal with that reality.

Nelson: I wonder, even though on balance it may be a negative, does it leaven the tendency toward a military caste by having this infusion of people who still think of themselves as civilians?

Gates: Except they deploy independently, so you’re not blending National Guard units and active units. The National Guard brigade deploys as a National Guard brigade and they tended—The regular Army guys in charge tended to give them less combat-stressful or less frontline or strategically important roles. It was more convoying and stuff like that.

Nelson: What do you think about the academies and ROTC? Do we need the academies, for example?

Gates: I believe absolutely so.

Nelson: Why is that?

Gates: In terms of military professionalism, that’s where you get many of your military engineers. There is an emphasis on science in the academies that you will not find in most public universities, and in most of those I would wager very few in ROTC are in engineering school—partly because there’s no time. The engineering curriculum is so challenging in most universities that there is just not time to do something as time-consuming as ROTC.

Nelson: I might add foreign language proficiency as an asset.

Gates: One of my initiatives along those lines was—You have all these kids in ROTC all over the country. Before, requiring language proficiency was limited to special operators, but we had regular line captains and lieutenants out in villages in Iraq and Afghanistan, having to rely on interpreters. How about incentivizing the kids in ROTC to take languages that we care about in their university? If you take two or three years of a language, you can pick it up pretty fast, even if it has been a few years. Just nominally I said, “Anybody who is on an ROTC contract, if they take Arabic, they get $50 a month more. If they take a second year, they get $100 a month. If they get a third year, they get $150.” Even at A&M, that’s a lot of beer money! There are now about 6,000 kids in ROTC taking the nine languages that are important.

Nelson: When you spoke at Duke, but not by the time you spoke at West Point in 2011, a number of schools that had kept ROTC banished ROTC. Now, because of the change in don’t ask don’t tell, they’re inviting it back. Did you see that as a part of your hope, that elite university students would be more likely to choose the military?

Gates: Yes, at least give them the opportunity. Now, the truth is in many schools, many elite universities, there isn’t enough interest to merit an independent ROTC program. What you have in North Carolina, as an example, is an ROTC that draws from Duke, North Carolina, and N.C.
State. Among the three, they have a very vibrant and big ROTC program, 200 to 300 kids. Yale came back in with Navy ROTC—as befits Yale I suppose, kind of elitist—but they’re banded together with several other universities for a comprehensive program. It’s the same thing at Harvard, with MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. MIT never quit its ROTC program.

Nelson: That’s right. Beyond that, which will affect a certain number of people, what is the long-term strategy to keep officers from becoming a warrior caste?

Gates: I don’t think people have thought about it very much. I don’t think there is a program. Dempsey gave a speech along those lines just in the last couple of weeks about the importance of staying connected. It may have been at West Point; I can’t remember. My own view is the role of commanders in getting their forces involved in the communities near where the big posts are.

We’ve done it to ourselves for budgetary reasons and efficiency. We essentially have no active-duty Army posts in New England. They’re almost all in the South and Southwest, except for Fort Lewis. As we go to fewer and fewer, and bigger and bigger facilities, ironically, that separation will become even greater, because they become so much more self-sustaining.

Nelson: Two years ago, I read that there were ten ROTC units in Alabama and two in New York State.

Gates: Recruiting offices?

Nelson: Yes.

Gates: This is the conversation I had with Obama about the need to proceed with care on repealing don’t ask, don’t tell, about our not knowing what the consequences would be. I said it is just fact of life that we tend to draw into the military kids from families that have more conservative cultural values. They may not be politically conservative, but have more conservative cultural values and are predominantly from the South, the Midwest, and the Mountain West, and are from smaller towns and rural areas, not New York City or San Francisco or L.A. [Los Angeles] and so on. We’re not dealing with coastal populations here, and we just don’t know.

The best result of the survey, or the review that we undertook, was showing that 75 percent of those folks either thought it wouldn’t hurt or might actually help to get rid of don’t ask, don’t tell. That to me was the green light that we could proceed. It’s not as if we had a plebiscite, but what it told me was that the problems in implementing it would be manageable.

Nelson: This may be a good place to stop, because what it brings to mind is the management philosophy, the leadership philosophy you talked about yesterday, of first, letting things play out over time, and second, giving people an opportunity to be heard. That seems to be an approach you weren’t able to do in every area as Secretary of Defense, because there was an urgent agenda already awaiting you, but on this one, it seems to be an application of that leadership philosophy.

Gates: Yes, and part of my concern was that the military had never had an open conversation about this. To what degree there had ever been a conversation, it was probably whispered conversations over beer. People had never had a forthright conversation about it. It got people
talking about it. It got it up on the table. It kind of got it—if you’ll forgive the expression—out of the closet and made it something that people could talk about openly.

I remember Jeh Johnson—the general counsel who was the cochair of the review—telling me he was talking to all of the senior NCOs at Central Command. There was some skepticism, some questions and stuff. Finally, one guy said, “What are you going to do if people don’t cooperate?” The command sergeant major stood up and said, “They will vote with their feet.” He was basically saying, We’re going to do this. There were some surprising things like that that came out.

**Nelson:** This has been enormously helpful and enjoyable, thank you.

**Gates:** Glad to help.