

---

INTERVIEW  
9:30 AM

PENTAGON CHANNEL  
MARCH 13, 2007

---

### **Interview with Defense Secretary Robert Gates**

MS. : I'd like to get started, sir. I'd like to talk about Walter Reed. Yesterday, the acting Secretary of the Army announcing changes already in effect at Walter Reed.

When you heard of the conditions at Walter Reed, what was your first reaction?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT GATES: I read them on Sunday morning, the first piece in The Washington Post on Sunday morning of President's weekend, and then the second piece the next morning on Monday, and Tuesday morning, I brought both segments of the article to my morning staff meeting, and basically said, I think we have a serious problem here and we're going to get on top of it as quickly as possible.

I was very concerned. I think that, you know, like so many, I had gone to Walter Reed to visit our wounded and, you know, I think, first of all, I haven't heard a single complaint anywhere about the acute care at Walter Reed and the doctors and the nurses and the staff are just terrific. They are the best in the world. There is just no doubt about that, but the outpatient care, clearly, had some problems and it was evident from the news articles, and I felt it was important to take it very seriously from the very beginning.

MS. : Sir, when the President's bipartisan panel and your independent review group come back with their findings, how will you be able to enact change in a timely manner, given the fact that the military medical system spans not only the Defense Department, but the Department of Veterans Affairs as well?

GATES: I think the important message here is that we're not waiting for any of these panels to report. The Army has already put together an action plan for Walter Reed, and not just the facilities, but looking at all aspects of the outpatient care and their transition, either back home or to Veterans Affairs or back into the service and getting rid of a lot of the bureaucratic problems. There clearly are staffing shortages in being able to provide the proper support.

So all those things we can act on and act on quickly. The group that I appointed to look at Walter Reed and to a lesser extent, Bethesda, co-chaired by Togo West and Jack Marsh, will report probably within about three or four weeks. So they'll give us another series of actions that can follow on to the Army's action plan and I don't expect, I would hope that as these other commissions begin their work, that as they find things, they'll let us know, so we're not waiting a few months until the end of the process to know the problems they found, so we can actually begin acting on them, perhaps even before they finish their reporting.

So I guess the bottom line is: We're acting right now and we will continue to act. It is a big problem. I was concerned from the very beginning that there was an issue with the hand off between the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration, and the President's commission is going to look at that.

So I think that, I think, we have action in place and we will see a continuing series of actions down the way, and what I have told people is that after the war itself, I think, this department has no higher priority than taking the best care in the world of our wounded troops, and I am prepared to allocate whatever resources we need to make that happen.

MS. : Servicemen and women in Iraq and Afghanistan and chow halls may see this interview on TV as will families across the country on their cable channels if they subscribe.

Do you have something you'd like to say to them directly about your personal commitment to our wounded?

GATES: Well, I would say this and it's really more about those in uniform generally. You know, I just came back, came to this job from being president of a huge university, 46,000 students. I felt a personal responsibility for every one of those students to return them safely to their families. I feel exactly the same way about those in uniform today.

I feel personally responsible for each and every one of them, and I care about what happens to them. I care about their safety. I care about their families. I'm mindful of the sacrifices, not only the troops make, but their families make and anything we can do to make their lives better and to make sure that they know how much they're appreciated, I'm prepared to do, but I take it as a very personal responsibility.

MS. : Thank you, sir. From 46,000 to millions, it's quite a jump.

I'd like to change gears now and talk about what's in the news right now, today. What is your personal opinion of the, "Don't ask, don't tell" policy in the military?

GATES: Well, look; you know, I think, personal opinion really doesn't have a place here. What's important is that we have a law, a statute that governs, "Don't ask, don't tell," that's the policy of this department, and it's my responsibility to execute that policy as effectively as we can. As long as the law is what it is, that's what we'll do.

MS. : Obviously, top on the minds of military members is the situation in Iraq; the military sending 4,700 more troops to support the 21,500 part of the troop increase.

So far, Mr. Secretary, is the new Iraq security plan meeting your expectations?

GATES: As General Petraeus has said, it's really early to make any judgments. The Baghdad security plan is only really been underway for a couple of weeks or so. I think that his view and what he has said and what others have said is that the early signs are

encouraging, but it will be months before we can really tell. The Iraqis have, to a considerable extent, fulfilled the obligations that they have made so far in terms of appointing their own commander for the Baghdad area, appointing two sub-commanders, bringing the troops in that they promised while the original battalions that showed up were light, 50 to 60 percent. The Iraqis got on top of the problem and began offering some additional incentive pay, and so the last couple of battalions I'm told have been – have shown up at over 90 percent strength and one or two perhaps, even over 100 percent strength.

So, again, early signs encouraging, but way too early to draw any conclusions at this point.

MS. : Because it is early to tell, what do you personally use as your measuring stick for success in Iraq?

GATES: As I've told the Congress, I think, in the security area is where we will first see whether the Iraqis are keeping the commitments that they've made to us, first of all, along the lines of what I've just described in terms of appointments and the structure. Certainly, in terms of providing the troops that they had promised, the government staying out of political interference with the military actions, their willingness to go into all neighborhoods, not just Sunni neighborhoods and so on, and at this point, those are measuring, we can measure those things and those are the areas where the Iraqis have pretty well fulfilled the commitments that they have made.

Success of the plan, militarily, the whole part of clear hold and build remains to be seen. The build parts remains to be seen, and those will take longer for us to evaluate how they're doing.

MS. : Also on the minds of service members, the presence of IEDs and EFPs in Iraq. Last month, you confirmed Iranian involvement in supplying either the technology or the weapons themselves for explosively formed projectiles being used in Iraq.

How are we counteracting these EFPs?

GATES: You know, I go home each night and handwrite notes and condolence letters to parents, and behind every one of these letters is a sheet that tells me how that troop died, and about 70 percent of them are from these IEDs. While the explosively formed penetrators are only about two percent of the attacks, they are disproportionately lethal. I think the evidence is pretty solid that at least the materials for this and some of the machining associated with the EFPs is coming out of Iran. What we're not certain of is how high the level of approval these operations goes. That's the area of uncertainty. The fact that these things are coming out of Iran, I think, is not in question.

MS. : How great a threat, sir, to U.S. forces are foreign fighters using Iraq as their own battleground?

GATES: Most of the foreign fighters as I read the intelligence, many of the foreign fighters are, in fact, suicide bombers and they come across the border from Syria, perhaps several dozen a month and they are responsible for a lot of these attacks. I think most of the suicide bombers are those who go into marketplaces and are killing other Iraqis to tell you the truth. I think most of these – the irony is foreign fighters are coming into Iraq and killing Iraqis.

Most of the attacks on our troops are the IEDs placed by al Qaeda or the insurgency or the Jash al-Mahdi or snipers and that sort of thing. So the suicide bombers are mainly killing Iraqis. Similarly, these truck bombs, these vehicle-borne IEDs tend to be driven into marketplace areas, into high-density populations and killing people.

So, I think, I think, in fact, one of the messages that perhaps we haven't adequately gotten out is that these foreign fighters are coming into Iraq principally to kill Iraqis, not to kill coalition forces. There are clearly some that do, but by and large, they're killing Iraqis.

MS. : At the informal defense ministerial in Spain and again at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, you emphasized the need for an even greater effort from NATO forces in Afghanistan. In the short time that has passed in the past month or so, have you seen an increase in effort from NATO forces in Afghanistan?

GATES: Actually, several countries have stepped up their commitments in Afghanistan in the last two or three weeks, the Australians, the British and others have announced that they're sending more troops into Afghanistan, and I think this is very important. This is one of the, you know, for my whole career in government before we were fighting the Cold War and NATO never fired a shot, and now they have six different missions. With this new definition of the security of NATO and it really is consistent, I think, with our strategy that when it comes to dealing with terrorists, it's better to fight on their ten yard line than to fight on our ten yard line, and NATO has embraced that mission and so all of the NATO countries in one way or another engaged in Afghanistan, as well as a number of countries from Europe and elsewhere that aren't members of NATO.

I think this is very important in terms of the legitimacy of the Afghan government, but also in terms of the effectiveness of the overall activities in Afghanistan, both the fighting and the economic development.

MS. : You mentioned fighting terrorists on the ten yard line in Afghanistan. How great a threat to the stability of Afghanistan is the support of other nations to the Taliban, al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations?

GATES: I don't have the impression that other nations are providing much support to al Qaeda. I think that individuals do and they have a variety of fronts and other ways that they get money. Similarly, I think the Taliban are pretty much on their own, nobody much liked their governance in Afghanistan. There clearly is a problem along the Pakistani border and the Taliban and al Qaeda are both using some of the wild areas on

the Pakistani side of the border as havens. Now, we're working with the Pakistanis to try and deal with that problem.

MS. : The new combatant command announced in Africa, sir. Former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General James Jones has said, it's more important to be proactive versus reactive on the continent of Africa.

Do you agree with that? And do you think it's a feasible goal given the current operational tempo of the U.S. military?

GATES: I think it is a good idea to be proactive, and I think that the different nature of AFRICOM makes it less affected by the operational tempo of our forces. This allows -- the creation of AFRICOM -- allows us to focus on Africa in a way that we can't, when European command controls half the world practically, and so it allows us to focus, particularly on missions like humanitarian missions, peacekeeping, helping and supporting other peacekeepers, peacekeepers from other nations, training the military, establishing stronger relationships with their military.

So it's more like Southern Command in the respect that it has a variety of missions that are really not directly combat-related, but are related to overall U.S. interests and U.S. military interests in the continent of Africa.

MS. : So, in essence, those missions are already proactive.

Sir, how do you see this combatant command unfolding? Do we know yet?

GATES: I think we have a pretty good plan. Actually, by legislation, have to stand it up, I think, by the end of this year or thereabouts and it's already staffed, working out of European Command and many of those staff will just transition from European Command to AFRICOM.

So I think we're in pretty good shape.

MS. : Okay. Before the Senate Appropriations Committee, you gave testimony where you made the point that the amount of money the U.S. is expected to spend on defense this year is actually a smaller percentage of the Gross Domestic Product than when you left government 14 years ago and less than during the Vietnam and Korean war. Even with that, given the billions of dollars we're spending in Iraq on equipment and personnel, should another major conflict arise, do we have the resources as a nation to respond to it?

GATES: Yes, we do, and all of our adversaries, potential adversaries should be aware of that, but as General Pace has said, where we are because of our commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan is that we would not be able to act against those other threats as quickly or as precisely as we would if we weren't involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, and sure, a major role would be played by the Navy, by the Air Force. We do -- we have over two million

people in the armed forces of the United States, 200,000 are deployed forward in CENTCOM, and so there is a significant reserve of manpower here, but that we clearly have some equipment shortages here at home because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so as General Pace says, we might not be able to respond according to the timelines we would wish in the event of another conflict and we might not be as accurate with some of our weapons and so on, but no one should make – have any misconception that the United States is not fully prepared to take on any adversary anywhere.

MS. : National Guard and Reserve troops, obviously, playing a large role in the global war on terrorism. In January, the Defense Department announced a reduction in the number of months that Guard and Reserve troops can be mobilized for.

Given that, can the Guard and Reserve still fulfill all their missions at home and abroad?

GATES: I think that they can. We clearly are working hard to replenish their equipment. We have in the FY '07 supplemental and the FY '08 budget, we have about \$9 billion budgeted for equipment, strictly for the National Guard. I think that moving to the unit, activate mobilization of the Guard is an important step. There will be a painful transition period because we've been using individual volunteers over the last several years, and so, some units are going to have to deploy early and some are going to be extended, but my hope is that in a year or so, we will be at the point where we can begin with the increase in the end strength in the Army and the Marine Corps and these changes in mobilization policy, that we can begin to get back to the kinds of dwell times here at home that we want, one year deployed, five years at home, but it's going to take us a little while to get there.

That said, I think, that the changes in policy and, particularly, the one year mobilization, total mobilization time puts a premium on their earliest possible notice to units that might be deployed because their training is going to have to be done before they get into the theater and before they're activated or mobilized, rather than during the mobilization period.

So that – we're going to have to change the way we go about preparing these units to deploy, but I think we can manage it.

MS. : That's great, sir. It'll be great to see the dwell times get back to a place that family members are happy.

GATES: Well, we all want to see that.

MS. : Absolutely. Operation Iraqi Freedom reaches its four-year mark this month. With multiple deployments and long tours and casualties for individual soldiers, how do we maintain morale in the conflict that some military analysts say could last for years to come?

GATES: Well, you know, when I was president of Texas A&M, there were a lot of Aggies serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I'd get a lot of e-mails from them, and I think they're consistent with what I hear when I visit Afghanistan and Iraq now and there are three things that the troops say, one, I do want to come home. Two ...

(Tape break)

... Well, I think, that more predictability for them is very important, and that's one of the reasons for the year-long, limiting the mobilization to a year, I think, that's one thing we can do to help the families. Again, longer, advanced notice before mobilization so that they have time to plan. My hope is that with the change to unit mobilization and the increase in the end strength, we'll get to a point where there's much more predictability for the families about their person in service being deployed.

Other than that, you know, what is critically important, it goes back to the very first question you asked, knowing that if their service person, men and women, is injured, they're going to get the best care in the world from the battlefield to home and with attention to the needs of the families under these circumstances as well.

MS. : I was reading a speech that you gave, sir, when you quoted John Wayne and you said, John Wayne said, "There is right and there is wrong."

I was wondering if you'd share your view on public service and personal responsibility.

GATES: Well, I referred to John Wayne as a great American philosopher, and he basically said, there's right and there's wrong, you can do one or the other. If you do the one you're living. If you do the other, you may be walking around, but you're as dead as a beaver hat, and what he was trying to say is the importance of integrity and I think for a leader, it's important to be seen to have your actions consistent with your words. Accountability is obviously very important to me, taking care of our people.

So I think that, I think, leadership is more than just making decisions about budgets and administrative decisions and so; it's setting a tone, and I would say a tone, not just of integrity, but of caring, of communicating to every person in the organization that their well-being is important to you, and that you want to know if somebody is not being treated right and that you'll take care of that and for the people to have the confidence that that's the attitude of the people that are making decisions that affect their lives.

MS. : You mentioned receiving e-mails from your students serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. In your few months in office, have you had a chance to establish a communication system like that with and I realize it's a good deal more you're dealing with now, but the thousands of troops serving now in downrange locations?

GATES: I've really wrestled with this because I miss the direct communication and feedback because it gives – it will give me a sense of what the real problems are and what's the ground truth, and I've tried on all of my trips and visits here, trips to Iraq and

Afghanistan, as well as my visits to military facilities here in the U.S. to arrange breakfast or lunch with enlisted people and invite their comments and their suggestions and I usually tell them, look, this is probably the only time in your entire career you're going to get a chance to give advice directly to the Secretary of Defense, so let's open up, and they do and it's very important to me, but it's very anecdotal, obviously, and so I'm continuing to search.

One of the things that I've started, in fact, just started last Friday is having lunch with all the senior enlisted of each of the services, so the Sergeant Major of the Army and his counterparts in the other services, as well as the Chairman Senior Enlisted Adviser, and I was going to do that once a quarter and it was so useful to me, I've decided to do it every couple of months because I figured they're more in touch with what's going on out there than just about anybody, and they came up with some good ideas for me in terms of how to get a better feel for what's going on, for example, when I visit a facility to have part of my visit, to have my host be the senior enlisted person on the base or on the post and take me around to the barracks and various facilities on post and see for myself with them in the lead.

So I'm looking for a variety of different ways to establish that kind of contact and get more direct feedback.

MS. : I know you took the time to go running in Munich with the Marines. Did they have their breath enough to share their thoughts with you?

GATES: They clearly could have run circles around me. I always insist on leading so I can set the pace and I think they were basically walking on their hands behind me.

MS. : Sir, I'd like to go back to when you first decided to take the position of Secretary of Defense. With this administration having less than two years left in office, why did you accept that position?

GATES: Well, two years ago last January, I was asked to be the first director of National Intelligence and after really wrestling with the request, I turned it down for a lot of different reasons. When I was asked to take this on, I really didn't hesitate and the reasons were, I think, understandable. When we have soldiers, when we have young people fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan and we face challenges from Iran, North Korea, all the other challenges that we face around the world, there are so many servicemen and servicewomen making sacrifices and their families are making sacrifices, and when the President came to me and said he thought I could help, I don't know how you say no under those circumstances. I think with so many others serving and sacrificing, it seemed the least I could do.

MS. : What do you look to accomplish?

GATES: Well, clearly, as I've indicated, the war in Iraq has to be my highest priority. I also want to make sure that we don't neglect Afghanistan and that what has been a real



success there remains a success. So I think trying to help develop a strategy that will put Iraq in a better place and on a path to where we have – where there is a country there that can defend itself and sustain itself and be an ally of ours in the war on terror is really important.

It's obvious there's a heated debate here in Washington, but I think everybody agrees that we can't leave Iraq in chaos and where everybody is just wrestling with how do you, how do you get to that place and I think that's my principle. It has to be principle priority. I think that there are others as well. I think continuing the initiatives on transformation of the force. The Army is a very different Army than when I left the government 14 years ago, and I really applaud the moves that have been made over the last several years to make it more agile, more expeditionary. The other – same thing going on in the other services, some very positive, very good things are going on in this transformation process and I want to continue those.

MS. : I have a question now that may bring us back to running with the Marines. We often talk at the Pentagon Channel to our deployed troops about what they do to relax in a combat zone. Given your high stress job, sir, what do you do to relax?

GATES: Well, until for the last 35 years, I run every morning, but unfortunately, age has caught up with me and so now I power walk. It's about the only time I get out of doors during the day, so that's really important to me and, frankly, a treadmill bores me to death, so being outside is important.

When I leave here, I like to backpack, fish, but I haven't found a lot of spare time so far.

MS. : Not so far. Former Secretary Rumsfeld had a very distinct management style. What would you like to share with our audience, service members and families, about the management and leadership style that you bring?

GATES: Well, it's really the same style that I had as Director of Central Intelligence and as president of a big university. In all three institutions, the professionals were there before you got there and they'll be there after you leave, so if you want to bring about effective change, you have to include them in the decision-making process. It seems to me it's up to the leader to set the goal, but then to include as broad a group of people as possible in the decision-making about how do we get from where we are to achieve that goal, and that kind of an inclusive decision-making process, I think, ensures that change is actually lasting because those who are left behind after the leader departs have embraced it and it's their change, it's not just his or her change, it's the institution's changed, the professionals who have embraced it.

So I think trying to ensure that there is lasting change is really important and the only way you do that is by an inclusive process and listening to people and then making decisions. As I've told people in all three institutions at the same time, I don't think an inclusive decision-making process need be a protracted one.

MS. : Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

GATES: Thank you.

-----