

# The Evolution of Airpower Under Gates

By Rebecca Grant



**Defense Secretary Robert Gates, over time, has dramatically reshaped the Air Force.**

USAF photo by TSgt. Erik Gudmundson

**“A**s Second Lieutenant Gates at Whiteman Air Force Base [Mo.] 40 years ago, I would never have imagined being on the same stage with the Air Force Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force. ... It is a real honor.” So said Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates in a formal ceremony marking USAF’s 60th anniversary in September 2007.

Nine months later, he fired both the Air Force Secretary and Chief of Staff. And early the next year, Gates altered the Air Force’s combat force structure with an early end to production of the F-22 and cancellation of the 2018 Bomber program. Higher on his agenda were “JSF and Reaper,” as he said in his April 7, 2009, press conference detailing the budget decisions.

Of course, Gates has often praised the Air Force, too. His lengthiest and most gracious pronouncements on airpower came in September 2009. He commended everything from increasing Predator remotely piloted aircraft orbits to battlefield airmen to airpower legend Billy Mitchell himself.

Gates’ initiatives also have cut a much wider swath. Program cancellations hit all services, and the Secretary once famously singled out the Navy for having too many ships.

The larger issue is whether the Gates-led remix of airpower will cause weaknesses in American military power over the long term. In 2010, the impact of the Gates cuts on major military muscle began to draw criticisms from experts concerned with maintaining forces to counter rising peers like China.

“Gates is running the Pentagon at a time when other risks facing the United States have been growing while American power relative to those risks has been declining,” wrote former Sen. James M. Talent in *The Weekly Standard* in December 2010.

## Surprising Changes

The SecDef may or may not exit the Pentagon in 2011. When he does depart, he will leave as one of the longest-serving Secretaries of Defense, and his tenure will have left a deep mark on airpower.

Gates declined, through his public affairs staff, an interview for this article. What follows is a review of the major themes and influences at play over the last four years as major decisions on American airpower were made.

Little evidence of the changes to come was visible when Gates was sworn in as Secretary of Defense on Dec. 18, 2006. The war in Iraq was at a frustrating and deadly low, and conflict in Afghanistan was picking up. His first testimony to

Congress in January 2007 centered on adding 65,000 soldiers to the Army and 27,000 to the Marine Corps. By 2011, the increase approved for Iraq would bring the Army’s active force to a post-Cold War peak of 547,000 and would vault the Marine Corps above Cold War levels, to a total end strength of 202,000.

Gates’ defense of the budget was an eloquent plea to go forward with the troop increase and with major strategic funding. This was no ordinary budget. The Fiscal 2008 defense budget was 11 percent more than the previous year and would in fact become the peak defense topline of the post-World War II era, adjusting for inflation.

“Five times over the past 90 years, the United States has either slashed defense spending or disarmed outright in the mistaken belief that the nature of man or behavior of nations had somehow changed, or that we would no longer need capable, well-funded military forces on hand to confront threats to our nation’s interests and security, Gates said, adding, “Each time we have paid a price.”

He warned of the perils of not investing in defense and even recommended four percent of gross domestic product as a goal. Gates fully defended the F-22, the Army’s Future Combat Systems program, Navy shipbuilding, and the F-35 Joint

**An MQ-9 Reaper lands at JB Balad, Iraq. The unmanned aerial vehicle—and the F-35—should be priorities, says the Defense Secretary.**

Strike Fighter. He supported missile defense, too.

“I have believed since the Reagan Administration that if we can develop a missile defense capability, it would be a mistake for us not to do so,” he added.

Gates repeated the same themes in what he termed “my second and last posture statement” delivered in February 2008, as Congress was wrestling with Iraq war supplemental costs. All told, it was a defense of broad and balanced military investment.

Yet while Gates was defending the gigantic budget requests, several of his speeches suggested he was germinating an idea that the US was, in fact, investing too much in conventional force structure.

Three main parts to the concept emerged. First was the idea that conventional, theater forces would not be used anytime soon.

“It is hard to conceive of any country challenging the United States directly on the ground—at least for some years to

The third and final theme was tactical. Gates observed that adversaries had “gone to school on us” from the Gulf War of 1991 onward, as he put it in the AUSA speech. Hence, they would not dare a direct challenge, in his view.

### **A New Defense Strategy**

In April 2008, he delivered a speech to students and faculty at Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. The speech started with praise for Air Force operations and a thoughtful discourse on the late Col. John Boyd, noted tactical airpower theorist.

Then, near the end, came a new insight: With 16 months as Secretary of Defense under his belt, Gates was fed up.

“I’ve been wrestling for months to get more intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets into the theater,” he said. “Because people were stuck in old ways of doing business, it’s been like pulling teeth. While we’ve doubled this capability in recent months, it is still not good enough.”

His emphasis on unmanned vehicles stemmed from his focus on war efforts. However, it was taking on wider sig-

traditional orientation was true of our procurement procedures, military health care, and more.”

Gates went on to say that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had been longer and more difficult than foreseen.

It was with this focus that Gates developed a new, classified National Defense Strategy that encapsulated his shift of priorities.

Here lay the likely point of debate between the Secretary and the Joint Chiefs. As he later summed up in an article in *Foreign Affairs*: “We must not be so preoccupied with preparing for future conventional and strategic conflicts that we neglect to provide all the capabilities necessary to fight and win conflicts such as those the United States is in today.”

His course for defense policy began with the idea that the US would not get involved in a major ground war requiring the Army’s canonical combination of maneuver and fires from mounted vehicles. “Where on Earth would we do that?” he asked in the article. Beyond this, Gates saw no real competition. He called on his years of preparing CIA intelligence estimates and dubbed Russia’s military power “a shadow of its Soviet predecessor.”

If conflict arose, Gates contended that “US air and sea forces have ample untapped striking power should the need arise to deter or punish aggression—whether on the Korean Peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, or across the Taiwan Strait.

“So although current strategy knowingly assumes some additional risk in this area, that risk is a prudent and manageable one,” he concluded.

No longer was he out defending record budgets. The new themes of the strategy quite simply downgraded many of the core modernization programs of the services in favor of a new focus on “the wars we are in.”

Gates did so over at least early objections of the Joint Chiefs. “Defense sources said Gates’ strategy met resistance among the Joint Chiefs of Staff because of its focus on irregular warfare,” reported Josh White of the *Washington Post* in July 2008.

This was dramatically resolved behind the scenes. According to a participant, the Chiefs could not in good conscience approve a lack of focus on fundamental capabilities—the more complicated forms of theater warfare that make up the essentials of joint operations in a contested battlespace. Gates simply brought in the new strategy document and signed it in front of them.

Still, with President George W. Bush’s second term expiring, the strategy ap-



**Gates addresses students at the Air War College, Maxwell AFB, Ala. During remarks there, Gates called the F-22 “a niche, silver bullet solution” and said it was better to bank on the F-35.**

come,” he said near the end of a speech to the Association of the United States Army in late 2007.

It coordinated with the second part, which was an assumption that the war on terrorism was more or less a permanent institution. “The War on Terror is not likely to end any time soon. Radical Islamists are on a different clock altogether, a clock that records time a millennium or so into the past and generations into the future,” he told another group in the fall of 2007.

nificance as a prospective new defense planning rubric.

The best exposition of how Gates saw the strategic situation came in an article derived from his West Point speech and later published in *Parameters*.

“At the turn of the 21st century, the US armed forces were still organized, trained, and equipped to fight large-scale conventional wars, not the long, messy, unconventional operations that proliferated following the collapse of the Soviet Union,” the SecDef wrote. “The same



peared to have a short shelf life. It was a “strategy destined to be overtaken by events” since a new Administration would write its own strategy, Michele Flournoy, then president of the Center for a New American Security, told the *Washington Post*.

Aside from the *Foreign Affairs* article, the strategy itself barely made headlines, given the economic crisis and the election campaign. Gates himself deferred many major decisions, such as how to restart the KC-X aerial refueling tanker competition in order to leave it to the next Administration.

The change of Administration in January 2009 and the surprise request to Gates to stay on was a major shake-up. Not only did Gates remain, thereby becoming the first Secretary of Defense ever to do so, the new political landscape gave him an opportunity to insert some of his strategic concepts in the Fiscal 2010 defense budget.

### The Yawning Gap

“I punted all these balls to my successor and discovered I was the receiver,” Gates told Fred Kaplan of *Foreign Policy* in a July 2010 interview.

By all accounts, he soon forged a strong working relationship with President Obama.

“Their biographies were very different, but their executive sensibilities were nearly identical,” Kaplan wrote of Gates and Obama last fall.

Six months into the shift, the late John P. Murtha, then a US Representative (D-Pa.) and chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee, elaborated on the politics of Gates’ changed situation in more detail. “There’s a big difference in his authority and responsibility now,” Murtha told defense reporters in June 2009. “Under the other Administration, he was a figurehead. He was ready to leave. He was not pleased or happy with the job,” Murtha said.

In contrast, with the Obama Administration, Murtha said he thought Gates was “very happy with the way things are



**Top: The F-35 in test. Along with unmanned aerial vehicles, the F-35 program, with the possible exception of the troubled B variant, is fully supported by the Secretary. Above: Gates speaks at a Veterans Affairs summit in Washington, D.C. He believes the F-35, existing F-22s, and legacy aircraft will ensure air supremacy far into the future.**

working out and the authority he has to run the Defense Department as it should be run.”

The result was a series of cuts in conventional forces that executed many of the themes for which Gates had argued in his defense strategy.

Hints came first with Gates’ January 2009 statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee. “Efforts to put the bureaucracy on a war footing have, in my view, revealed underlying flaws in the institutional priorities, cultural preferences, and reward structures of America’s defense establishment—a set of institutions largely arranged to plan for future wars, to prepare for a short war, but not to wage a protracted war,” he said. As a result, Gates said he intended to concentrate on the “yawning gap between the way the defense establishment supports current operations and the way it prepares for future conventional threats.”

“I believe that the FY 2010 budget must make hard choices,” Gates warned. DOD would pursue greater quantities of systems that represent the “75 percent”

solution instead of smaller quantities of “99 percent” exquisite systems.

On April 6, 2009, Gates announced the list of cuts to bring Pentagon investment more in line with his stated priorities. It was not just airpower that was cut: Major Navy and Army systems got the ax, too. However, the cluster of decisions on fighters, the new bomber, helicopters, and airlift scrambled modernization plans.

The larger context for airpower reflected a desire to push quantity, specifically, the F-35 and the Reaper. Gates accordingly did not himself take on

any detailed discussion of the qualitative differences between the F-22 and F-35, and he was dismissive of direct air-to-air threats.

“The intelligence that I’ve gotten indicates that the first [operational capability] for anything like a fifth generation fighter in Russia would be about 2016, and in China would be about 2020,” he said.

So what should the US prioritize? “JSF and Reaper,” summed up Gates.

Despite the push for quantity, the Secretary did not emphasize industrial base concerns. Issues such as protecting the skills of design teams or coping with the lack of new starts in military aerospace programs “did not play a significant role in most of the decisions,” Gates acknowledged. There was no favoring of capitalists. “You guys know better than I do that most of these companies have multiple programs with us,” he said.

The strategic rationale for putting off revitalization of core capabilities was pulled tight as taffy in debates surrounding early termination of the F-22. The primary public phase of the debate lasted from Gates’ announcement in April until

the Senate floor vote on July 21, 2009.

Gates spoke at length on the F-22 at Maxwell in April 2009. "There is no doubt the F-22 has unique capabilities that we need," he began. "But the F-22 is, in effect, a niche, silver-bullet solution required for a limited number of scenarios to overcome advanced enemy fighters and air defense systems," Gates concluded.

Better, in his view, to bank on the F-35 in part because it would be bought in greater numbers.

"In assessing the F-22 requirements, we also considered the advanced stealth and superior air-to-ground capabilities provided by the fifth generation F-35s now being accelerated in this budget, the growing capability in range of unmanned platforms like the Reaper, and other systems in the Air Force and in other services."

The Gates assessment was that overmatch would continue, because Russia and China would not develop their own fifth generation fighters for several years. "By then we will have more than 1,000 fifth generation fighters in our inventory," Gates said.

"The combination of F-22s, F-35s, and legacy aircraft will preserve American tactical air supremacy far into the future. Moreover, a key additional—and yet untapped—part of this mix of capabilities is unmanned aerial vehicles," Gates declared in September 2009.

Emphasizing unmanned aerial vehicles fit well with major Gates themes of focusing on irregular war and lowering the priority on forces for peer conflict.

"We know that the future will see an increase in unmanned systems of all kinds, with further reach and more capabilities. What are the implications of this reality on the number and types of manned fighters we need since the UAVs must be considered a key component of our air capabilities? And since UAVs do not [need to] refuel midair, how will this affect the number of tankers we buy?" he asked.

"These UAVs are a new piece of the equation," Gates said during a media roundtable. "It's not just Predators doing strikes. It is long distances, long dwell. If I recall correctly, an F-16 has a range of about 500 miles. The Reaper has a range of about 3,000 miles." Per USAF fact sheets, the Reaper's range is 1,150 miles and the F-16's is 1,955 miles. (Gates' comparison did not account for air refueling.)

Reapers, therefore, would be "an increasing part of the Air Force arsenal going forward."

To be sure, bringing unmanned strike aircraft into the fold was not so different from the Air Force's own plans. Chief



**L-r: Gates, Air Force Secretary Michael Donley, and USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz at Donley's swearing-in ceremony at the Air Force Memorial in 2008. Gates insists he is committed to long-range strike capability.**

of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman had put unmanned vehicles into the mainstream of Air Force operations in the mid-1990s. Subsequent leaders pushed developments such as arming Predator with Hellfire and worked to increase combat-ready systems.

### The Wisdom of the Mix

The lingering question was not about more UAVs, but about deliberately taking more risk with the very forces that might come in handy for deterrence in the Pacific, for example. While Gates spoke of the "ample, untapped striking power" of USAF and Navy airpower, officials of both services were testifying to fighter gaps and shortfalls.

Some analysts taking stock of the Gates decisions in 2010 pointed out that the risk was growing faster due to steady progress by China and others on a range of conventional forces.

"Mark my words, for all *Newsweek's* veneration of Gates' budgetary visions, today's thinking about defense spending is hobbled by the Pentagon's inability to distinguish sufficiently between the serious challenge of irregular wars, and the need to deter truly existential threats posed by nation-states," wrote retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles J. Dunlap Jr. in a September 2010 commentary for *foreignpolicy.com*.

Muted warnings about long-term risks never went away. "Now if you look at the threat, you have to consider China as one of the threats down the road," Murtha told defense reporters in June 2009. The independent panel reviewing the QDR in summer 2010 shot back with specific

entreaties to beef up long-range strike capabilities and naval power.

Picking up this theme was former Senator Talent. "There is real concern in Washington over Gates' leadership," he said. "He uses the current counterinsurgency missions as an excuse for not sustaining programs that are necessary to ensure the United States will be able to contain Russia, Iran, and especially the growing power of China."

Talent, for one, left the door open for a change in direction on the part of Gates. "He still has the time to say that, unless Congress adds substantial funding to modernize the military and fully supports changes necessary to reform the Pentagon, no responsible Secretary of Defense can continue to guarantee American security within an acceptable margin of risk," Talent suggested.

Long-range strike may end up being the litmus test. "I am committed to seeing that the United States has an airborne long-range strike capability," Gates said in his September 2009 address to the Air Force Association. "Whatever system is chosen to meet this requirement—be it manned, unmanned, or some combination of the two—it should be one that can realistically be produced and deployed in the numbers originally envisioned," he added.

The Gates airpower strategy of 2008 to 2010 deliberately put a hold on investment in the most advanced and high-intensity systems in favor of those needed to win today's wars or which could be purchased in large numbers.

The wisdom of this airpower remix may not be known for years. ■

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