



**U.S. Department of Defense**  
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

## Speech

### **Remarks to the Heritage Foundation (Colorado Springs, CO)**

*As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Colorado Springs, Colorado, Tuesday, May 13, 2008*

---

Thank you.

It is always good to be away from Washington, D.C. – and of course the beauty of the Broadmoor and Colorado Springs make it especially difficult to go back to the place where many folks often become lost in thought because it's such unfamiliar territory.

I appreciate the opportunity this morning to share some observations about the state of America's military.

For starters, I should note that, despite my job description, I may not actually be the best person to speak at a conference titled, "The Military Beyond Iraq." I say this because for much of the past year I've been trying to concentrate the minds and energies of the defense establishment on the current needs and current conflicts. In short, to ensure that all parts of the Defense Department are, in fact, at war.

This was driven home to me just a couple of weeks ago during a visit to Fort Bliss, Texas. That post is undergoing an extraordinary change, with massive amounts of new construction, to include gleaming, new barracks to house the soldiers who will be coming from other posts and countries. In the days before we touched down in El Paso, news broke of scenes of squalor in a barracks at Fort Bragg for paratroopers just returning from Afghanistan. These were experienced, battle-tested soldiers who may be considering whether they want to make a career of the Army – troops we can ill afford to lose.

Then there was the case of the outpatient facilities at Walter Reed. One of the reasons upgrading these quarters had not been a high priority is because the hospital was scheduled to be closed in a few years due to BRAC. So there was a bureaucratic and financial disincentive to spend new money – something that could make budget sense during peacetime, but not when troops are being seriously wounded in combat nearly every day. Young men and women who step forward and join this country's armed services must have confidence that they and their families will be taken care of if something happens on the battlefield. As I've said before, after the wars themselves, we have no higher priority.

A similar dynamic may have been at work in the case of MRAPs, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected – where we are talking about spending more than \$20 billion for a vehicle that many people see as not having much use beyond Iraq. In fact, the expense of the vehicles – which are nearly a \$1 million apiece – may have been seen as competing with the funding for future weapons programs with strong constituencies inside and outside the Pentagon.

There is a strong case to be made that IEDs and suicide bombings have become the weapon of choice for America's most dangerous and likely adversaries – and the need to have a vehicle of this kind won't go away. Even if that weren't the case, if sending thousands of MRAPs halfway across the world can save the lives and limbs of young Americans, and can demonstrate to those troops, their families, and to the country that everything is being done to protect our servicemen on the front lines – then I think this money is more than well spent.

And in fact, MRAPs have performed. There have been 150-plus attacks so far on MRAPs

and all but six soldiers have survived . The casualty rate is one-third that of a Humvee, less than half that of an Abrams tank. These vehicles are saving lives.

In my view, America's key asymmetric advantage is our people. And getting the present right when it comes to care of our men and women in uniform will go a long way towards making sure we have the kind of force we need in the future.

I use these examples as an introduction to a wider point. There is a good deal of debate and discussion – within the military, the Congress, and elsewhere – about whether we are putting too much emphasis on current demands – in particular, Iraq. And whether this emphasis is creating too much risk in other areas, such as:

- Preparing for potential future conflicts;
- Being able to handle a contingency elsewhere in the world; and
- Over stressing the ground forces, in particular the Army.

Much of what we are talking about is a matter of balancing risk: today's demands versus tomorrow's contingencies; irregular and asymmetric threats versus conventional threats. As the world's remaining superpower, we have to be able to dissuade, deter, and, if necessary, respond to challenges across the spectrum.

Nonetheless, I have noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called "Next-War-itis" – the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict. This inclination is understandable, given the dominant role the Cold War had in shaping America's peacetime military, where the United States constantly strove to either keep up with or get ahead of another superpower adversary.

And, certainly, one cannot predict the future with any certainty. Soon after 1900, Winston Churchill said that he could not foresee any "collision of interests" with Germany. In the 1920s, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he said that there wasn't the "slightest chance" of war with Japan in his lifetime. Today, rising and resurgent powers with new wealth and ambition are pursuing military modernization programs. They must be watched closely and hedged against.

But in a world of finite knowledge and limited resources, where we have to make choices and set priorities, it makes sense to lean toward the most likely and lethal scenarios for our military. And it is hard to conceive of any country confronting the United States directly in conventional terms – ship to ship, fighter to fighter, tank to tank – for some time to come. The record of the past quarter century is clear: the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Israelis in Lebanon, the United States in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Smaller, irregular forces – insurgents, guerrillas, terrorists – will find ways, as they always have, to frustrate and neutralize the advantages of larger, regular militaries. And even nation-states will try to exploit our perceived vulnerabilities in an asymmetric way, rather than play to our inherent strengths.

Overall, the kinds of capabilities we will most likely need in the years ahead will often resemble the kinds of capabilities we need today.

The implication, particularly for America's ground forces, means we must institutionalize the lessons learned and capabilities honed from the ongoing conflicts. Many of these skills and tasks used to be the province of the Special Forces, but now are a core of the Army and Marine Corps as a whole. For example, at West Point last month, I told the cadets that the most important assignment in their careers may not necessarily be commanding U.S. soldiers, but advising or mentoring the troops of other nations.

What we must guard against is the kind of backsliding that has occurred in the past, where if nature takes its course, these kinds of capabilities – that is counter-insurgency – tend to wither on the vine.

There is a history here. During the 1980s, a Princeton graduate student noted in his dissertation that, about a decade after the fall of Saigon, the Army's 10-month staff college assigned 30 hours – about four days – for what is now called low-intensity conflict. This was about the same as what the Air Force was teaching at the time. That grad student was then-Army Major David Petraeus.

Going forward we must find, retain, and promote the right people – at all ranks, whether they wear stripes, bars, or stars – and put them in the right positions to see that the lessons learned in recent combat become rooted in the institutional culture. Similarly, we shouldn't let personnel policies that were developed in peacetime hurt our wartime performance.

For years to come, the Air Force and the Navy will be America's main strategic deterrent. We need to modernize our ageing inventory of aircraft, and build out a fleet of ships that right now is the smallest we've had since the late 1930s. These forces provide the strategic flexibility we need to deter, and if necessary, respond to, other competitors. The American people have been generous when it comes to funding their Armed Forces over the past seven years, and they are likely to be supportive in the future. What we should expect, though, is a heightened level of scrutiny in the Congress, and by the public, for how this money is being spent – particularly when supplemental war funds are no longer available for modernization purposes.

Two points on the subject of procurement:

First, I believe that any major weapons program, in order to remain viable, will have to show some utility and relevance to the kind of irregular campaigns that, as I mentioned, are most likely to engage America's military in the coming decades. In Texas, I had an opportunity to see a demonstration of the parts of the Army's Future Combat Systems that have moved from the drawing board to reality. A program like FCS – whose total cost could exceed \$200 billion if completely built out – must continue to demonstrate its value for the types of irregular challenges we will face, as well as for full-spectrum warfare.

Second, I would stress that the perennial procurement cycle – going back many decades – of adding layer upon layer of cost and complexity onto fewer and fewer platforms that take longer and longer to build must come to an end.

Without a fundamental change in this dynamic, it will be difficult to sustain support for these kinds of weapons programs in the future.

A few words about global risk – the threats we face elsewhere in the world while America's ground forces are concentrated on Iraq.

This is an understandable concern. I remember being a Second Lieutenant at Whiteman Air Force base in the late 1960s. There I caught a glimpse of the impact of the Vietnam War on America's overall strategic strength: White-haired lieutenant colonels were being reassigned to Southeast Asia to make up for our pilot losses there. Some people have made similar comparisons to the impact of Iraq on the Army.

Today's strategic context is completely different. While America's military was being bled in Vietnam, a superpower with vast fleets of tanks, bombers, fighters, and nuclear weapons was poised to overrun Western Europe – then the central theater in that era's long twilight struggle. Not so today.

It is true that we would be hard-pressed to launch a major conventional ground operation elsewhere in the world at this time – but where would we sensibly do that? The United States has ample and untapped combat power in our naval and air forces, with the capacity to defeat any – repeat, any – adversary who committed an act of aggression – whether in the Persian Gulf, on the Korean Peninsula, or in the Straits of Taiwan. There is a risk – but a prudent and manageable one.

The last point I'd like to address is the strain placed on our ground forces, especially the Army.

Along with Fort Bliss, I've visited a number of other military installations over the past year, including Fort Hood and Camp Pendleton – the largest Army and Marine bases respectively. It is a difficult thing to look a family member in the eye whose father or son or daughter is being deployed again – sometimes on a second or third tour. And it's even harder to do with the families of those who have been killed or wounded.

This is the second longest war in American history since our Revolution, and the first to be

fought with an all-volunteer force since independence. To be sure the stress is real. There are metrics that need to be watched – such as the number of waivers granted to new recruits, suicides, as well as incidents of divorce and other signs of wear on military families.

There are a number of measures underway and trends that should ease the strain on this small sliver of our population who have borne the burden of this conflict:

- More and better programs to improve the quality of life for soldiers and their families;
- The ground forces are growing by more than 90,000 over the next five years – with a bigger rotational pool of troops and units individual soldiers and Marines will deploy less frequently; and
- U.S. force levels in Iraq will decline over time – the debate taking place is mostly over the pacing.

As I mentioned before, the discussion about the stress on the Army today is informed by the Vietnam experience – and the terrible shape of the service afterwards, where there was a loss of nearly a generation of NCO leadership and rampant discipline problems. So far, none of those ailments are present today.

Overall, our service men and women and their families have shown extraordinary resilience. Morale is high, as is recruiting and retention – particularly among units either in or just returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Soldier for soldier, unit for unit, the Army is the best trained, best led, and best equipped it has ever been – skilled and experienced in the arduous complexities of irregular warfare.

But there is a more fundamental point that I will close with – and again, historical perspective is important. It is impossible to separate discussions of the “broken” Army following Vietnam – a conscription army – from the ultimate result of that conflict. At a congressional hearing last year, General Jack Keane, former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, recounted the profound damage done to the Service’s “fiber and soul” by the reality of defeat in that war.

The risk of overextending the Army is real. But I believe the risk is far greater – to that institution, as well as to our country – if we were to fail in Iraq. That is the war we are in. That is the war we must win.

Thank you