

Eagles'

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public service,
Dr. Robert M. Gates
looks back.

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BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA



REAL AMERICAN HERO

By Bryan Wendell

Dr. Robert M. Gates, Eagle Scout and former defense secretary, knows what it takes to be a leader.



After addressing the newest Green Berets at Fort Bragg last year, former Defense Secretary Dr. Robert M. Gates toured the North Carolina Army base with one of the men who trains the soldiers.

Gates turned to the instructor with a question.

“Can you tell the difference between a kid who was in the Boy Scouts and one who wasn’t?” Gates asked.

The man looked at Gates like he’d lost his mind.

“Of course,” the instructor said. “They know how to do most of this stuff already.”

Gates wasn’t surprised. As a Distinguished Eagle Scout, he knows how Scouting changes a man in ways you can see (he still bears a scar from Philmont) and ways you cannot.

He credits his time in Boy Scout Troop 522 of Wichita, Kan., for giving him leadership skills, a sense of service before self and the ability to compromise.

“Nothing teaches leadership skills like being in charge of a bunch of 12- and 13-year-old kids and trying to get them to do what they don’t want to do,” Gates says. “It was a lot like dealing with Congress.”

Gates, who was defense secretary from December 2006 until his retirement in July 2011, was known for his ability to navigate the stubborn Washington bureaucracy to get things done.

“Only when people are unwilling to bend — when people are insisting that it be their way or the highway — that’s when we encounter great national crises,” Gates says. “It’s what precipitated the Civil War. It’s what has led to a lot of the paralysis we see in government today.”

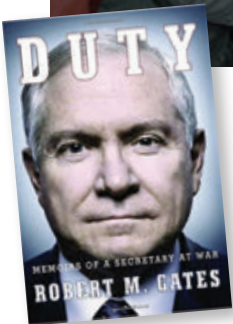
Gates was never shy about criticizing Congress in his long career of public service — including nearly 27 years with the CIA and 4½ years leading the Defense Department.

In his 2014 book, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, he says Congress “is best viewed from a distance — the farther the better — because close up it is truly ugly.” He called the majority of Congress “micro-managerial,” “thin-skinned” and



ON THE WEB

WATCH an exclusive interview
with Distinguished Eagle Scout
Dr. Robert M. Gates at nesa.org.



And when the TV cameras pointed toward these congressmen and congresswomen?

It's no surprise, then, that after living in Washington, D.C., most of his life, this career public servant retired to the other Washington.

Retirement keeps him busy. He travels to speaking engagements, is chancellor of the College of William & Mary in Virginia (his alma mater) and was national president of the Boy Scouts of America from May 2014 to May 2016.

Nearly every wall of Gates' spacious study is filled with books. One entire side is biographies — from Abigail Adams to Chuck Yeager. Gates has alphabetized them by the subject's last name.

There are biographies of world leaders (Stalin, Mao, Thatcher), biographies of American leaders (Hamilton, Kennedy,



Reagan) and biographies of famous people (Einstein, Twain, Tina Fey).

But his favorite item here isn't a book or a flag or a medal.

The job of defense secretary requires extensive travel to visit the nation's military and its allies around the world. In his 4½ years on the job, Gates spent more than 1,500 hours in the air. He traveled in a Boeing 747 transformed into an airborne command post. The plane could be refueled in midair, survive an electromagnetic pulse attack and communicate with nuclear-armed submarines using a mile-long antenna unspooled behind it.

104: Different countries visited, including several trips to Iraq and Afghanistan

1,599: Hours in the air — equal to more than 66 days

It's a piece of armor from a mine-resistant armored-protective vehicle, known as an MRAP. It's the size of a piece of toast. And it has a big hole in it.

As defense secretary, Gates lobbied hard for this extra armor, even circumventing Congress when needed. This particular square of steel is the reason the group of soldiers inside that MRAP are alive today.

"I was prepared to spend whatever it took to protect those young people and bring them home safely, and allow them to accomplish their mission," Gates says.

In other words, Gates understood that the job entailed more than just visiting military bases for handshakes and patriotic speeches. What a leader does outweighs what he says.

"Young people — and perhaps almost everyone — are pretty skeptical of rhetoric from senior leaders," he says. "What matters are actions that, over a period of time, build a pattern that people look at and say to themselves and to others, 'OK, he or she is the real deal. This person really is looking out for me.'"

A CALL TO SERVE

"Servant leadership" is a relatively new term in Scouting. It's the concept that someone wants to serve first rather than be a leader first.

When Gates was a Scout, director of the CIA and defense secretary, he simply called it "leadership."

At the 2010 National Scout Jamboree (below), Gates told the crowd that his Eagle badge "was the only thing that distinguished me from most high school kids."



Leadership means "subordinating one's ego to get the job done," he says. It means "looking out for the people who either work for you or with whom you are working."

Those parallel attitudes explain why Gates agreed to become the Pentagon's top official in 2006.

"I said, 'As long as those kids out there are doing their duty, I have to do mine,'" he says. "I became secretary at a time when we were losing two wars and we were taking a lot of casualties, so I had to deal with both of those. I suppose people call that servant leadership, but I just call that getting the job done and taking care of people."

Getting the job done meant orchestrating compromises — not easy when too many politicians see compromising as "selling out," he wrote in *Duty*.

Nearly a decade later, Gates was at it again — this time as the BSA's national president. Gates, who oversaw the end of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy barring openly gay people from serving in the U.S. military, was confronted with a similar scenario involving gay adults in Scouting.

In 2015, the BSA removed its national restriction on openly gay adult leaders and



employees. (The restriction on gay Scouts was removed in 2013.) The 2015 decision required thoughtful discussions with religious-based chartered organizations, volunteer adult leaders, BSA professionals and, of course, the Scouts themselves.

Gates says the process worked because it was transparent — and because the stakeholders weren't congressmen "in it for their own self-aggrandizement."

"I think a big part of a successful transition or the successful change was respecting everybody's point of view, having a regular process where everybody was heard," Gates says. "A very democratic process where everybody knew what was coming."

With that hurdle cleared, Gates spent his second year as BSA president spreading stories about Scouting service, heroism and adventure.

"When you have a couple of million young people out there doing good things and we can focus the message on what they're doing, what they're accomplishing and the kind of people they're becoming," he says, "that's the message that the country needs." 

THE SAME BADGE, ONLY TOUGHER

Gates received the Eagle Scout rank Aug. 16, 1958. Does the award still mean as much nearly six decades later?

"First of all, they're not getting the same Eagle Scout award that I got," Gates says. "In contrast to so many things in life today, getting your Eagle today is a lot harder than it was when I became an Eagle."

He says the requirements were easier in 1958. For one thing, there was no Eagle Scout service project — a daunting obstacle on the modern Eagle trail. Still, he says, the award's significance hasn't changed.

"Whether you're 15 or whether you're 75, you still have the same Eagle badge and you still have the same values," he says.

And that means something in the job market and at universities.

"College admissions officers are now looking at the Eagle award as a leading indicator — as perhaps the most significant indicator — of likely success in college," he says. "It shows that at age 12 or 13 or 14, this young man has the discipline and the long-term perspective of accomplishing a goal that is two or three years off. They look at that and say, 'That kid is likely to be successful.'"