



All the Best Podcast

Episode 86. Global Leadership: A New Path Forward

86. Featuring Dr. Robert M. Gates, Former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director

Dr. Gates: President Bush wrote me this letter on August 14th, 1999 from Kennebunkport, "Dear Bob, it is a rainy day as I type away here in my wonderful little office, overlooking a now troubled sea, a good day to think, which is dangerous, and to count blessings. One of my key blessings has to do with you. The very fact that you have undertaken this new job with our little school means so much to me. I talked this morning to Arnie Vedlitz. I had called hoping to catch you, but you had just left. Anyway, Arnie told me that your visit to the campus had gone well, that you took the place by storm, deans, provost, faculty, all succumbed to the Gates' charm. Thanks, Bob, for what you're doing for our little school that means so much to me. Lastly, your presentation up here wowed them all, including me for one. We all left with a feeling that our problems can and will be solved, and that we can make a real contribution to government and public service. With gratitude and friendship, George."

George: In the first place, I believe that character is a part of being president.

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

Sam: This is "All the Best," the official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here,

we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All the Best".

George: I remember something my dad told me. He said, "Write your mother, serve your country." And he said, "Tell the truth." And I've tried to do that in public life, all through it.

Barbara: You are a human being first, and those human connections with children, with friends are the most important investment you will ever make.

George: We stand tonight before a new world of hope possibilities for our children. A world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is "All the Best."

A native of Kansas, Robert M. Gates received his bachelor's degree from William & Mary, his master's degree in history from Indiana University, and his doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from Georgetown University. Gates joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1966 and spent nearly 27 years as an intelligence professional. During that period, he spent nearly nine years on the National Security Council at the White House, serving four presidents of both political parties. Gates served as director of Central Intelligence from 1991 until 1993. Robert Gates served as the 22nd Secretary of Defense from 2006 until 2011. He is the only Secretary of Defense in U.S. history to be asked to remain in office by a newly elected president. Dr. Gates served eight U.S. presidents across both parties.

On Gates' last day in office, President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor. Gates has been awarded the National Security Medal, the Presidential Citizens Medal, has three times received the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and has three times received CIA's highest award, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal. Gates currently is a principal in the consulting firm, Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel LLC with former Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and former National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley. We're so excited to have Secretary Gates with us today. Secretary, welcome to the show. Thank you for doing this.

Dr. Gates: You bet, Sam. My pleasure.

Sam: Secretary Gates, this podcast is based on the legacy of service left behind by my grandparents, George and Barbara Bush. And we often talk about my grandfather's path to service on "All the Best." And I would love it if you could

share your path with our listeners because I know you had a lot of similar stops that 41 had along his way to the presidency.

Dr. Gates: I think it really started when I was growing up in Wichita, Kansas, and very involved in our church and also in Boy Scouts and I was an Eagle Scout. And so, a lot of that has to do with public service and service projects and so on. And then when I went to the college of William & Mary in Williamsburg, among the college's alumni are Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe, and John Marshall, and a variety of others. And just being in the same location as them and restored Williamsburg and sort of walking the sidewalks these founding fathers walked really instilled a sense in me that public service was really important. And frankly, when I was a senior in high school getting ready to go to college, President Kennedy's inaugural address in which he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," that was 60 years ago. And in my service under eight presidents, there have only been two that actually encouraged people to go into public service and admired people who were in the public service. And that was President Kennedy and your grandfather, Bush 41. So Kennedy had a big impact on me.

And when I was in grad school at the Russian and East European Institute at Indiana University, a CIA recruiter came to campus. I decided that would be kind of fun. I'd wanted to teach actually, but I told my wife, "Well, I'll do that for a couple of years, and then I'll go teach." Well, I never ended up teaching, at least in a classroom, but that really set me on the path. So I think the first place where your grandfather's legacy or history and mine intersected was military service. He was in the Navy. I was in the Air Force. I was no hero, he was. But I did serve. And then, of course, we both had the CIA experience. I was there a number of years longer than he was, I'm not sure I had the same impact that he did.

Sam: Well, I would beg to differ, sir. And I want to talk a little bit more about the CIA because it played such a big role in shaping my grandfather's career and his relationship with the intelligence community at large. Secretary Gates, as the first career officer in CIA history to move from entry-level employee to the head of the agency, what makes the CIA such a special place, and why did you keep making your way back to the agency throughout your entire career?

Dr. Gates: Well, I think one of the things that makes it different than most places in Washington, in particular, is that people join CIA knowing that they will not get their names in the newspaper, or at least they don't want their names in the newspaper. And they prefer to do their public service behind the scenes and to

protect the country in a different way than the military, but in some ways just as importantly. Folks in CIA have just as big of egos as anybody else, but they satisfy their egos in a very different way. They're willing to satisfy their ego through quiet public service or covert public service. I think the reason that I kept going back to CIA, and I had different opportunities, I think I was on the NSC staff under four different presidents, including your grandfather, but I started under President Nixon. I joined the Nixon NSC in the spring of 1974, just a few months before he resigned. I always have joked that it was like signing up as a deckhand on the Titanic after it hit the iceberg, but I've worked there for Nixon, and Ford, and President Carter, and then your grandfather.

And the reason I kept going back to CIA after those assignments was that I felt that CIA, as big a bureaucracy as it was and as frustrating as that could be, it was still the most entrepreneurial of all of the federal agencies. It was a place where no matter what your age, if you made a significant contribution, you could rise very quickly. While it was hierarchical in administration, it was a very flat organization in terms of operations. So if the expert on a particular country or a particular problem was a very junior officer, either in the clandestine service or an analyst, that person would be in the meeting with the director of Central Intelligence, not some middle-level manager or senior-level manager, they might be included, but the director was looking to that young expert to be the one in the room.

There were kind of no limits on how fast you could progress. When I headed the analytical side of the agency, we had a brilliant young analyst working on Germany. And he was the junior analyst. This was in the early '80s. And there were big issues about the election of Helmut Kohl, whether Helmut Kohl could become chancellor, whether the Germans would agree to deploy ground-based cruise missiles. There were a variety of really big issues. And this young man got everything right. He actually moved into the senior analytical position, displacing somebody who was 60 years old because he was good. And CIA was a place where you could do that.

Sam: Secretary Gates, my grandfather was only at the CIA for 357 days, yet it seems he made a big impact. In 1999, they named the headquarters after him. How was that possible?

Dr. Gates: Sam, I think you need to go back in time to the mid-'70s. And it was a very bad time for CIA. You'd had the congressional investigations, the Church Committee in the Senate, the Pike Committee in the House. They really raked the agency over the coals. And several years of intense investigations, really wrecked

morale at the agency. And it was in pretty sad shape when George H. W. Bush was appointed director. The thing that matters most to CIA people, I mean, there are always scandals going on and all the problems in Washington, but what really matters to CIA people is whether what they're doing is valued and whether it's being used. George H. W. Bush just played an absolutely critical role in restoring morale and a sense of mission to the agency. Long before he became vice president, much less president, he probably was by far the most popular director in the history of the agency just because of what he had done in terms of sort of rebuilding morale, and as I said, and restoring a sense of mission that what you do is important, what you do is valued, and the country needs you and so on. And I think it was that role that he played in 1976 that really led to that popularity and the decision to name the intelligence complex at the agency for him.

Sam: Well, sir, another stop along your journey that you made that holds a dear place to our family's hearts is Texas A&M in College Station. What led you to Texas A&M in 1999?

Dr. Gates: Well, Sam, I have to be honest and say that it really began with a scam on the part of your grandfather, a classic bait and switch. He and Brent Scowcroft called me up in the spring of 1999, say, "We've got this school, it's just become an independent degree-conferring school," and they tell me that I've got to have a dean. "And while we search for a permanent dean, would you be willing to be the interim dean?" And he said, "You know, it'll just be a day or two a month for nine months until we get somebody in place." Well, because it was gonna just be a day or two a month, of course, I kept doing everything else. I was doing boards and writing and speaking and so on. Well, it ended up being two weeks a month for two years. And in all honesty, it was one of those things where, as put upon as I felt at the time, it really made a big difference because, during that time, I got to know a lot of people on campus. I got to know the deans and I got to know a lot of the faculty and the students and so on.

And so, when the incumbent president announced he was retiring, I was asked if I would be a candidate by the then chairman of the board of regions, if I'd be a candidate for president, and I looked at this guy and I said, "You must be on a bad drug." And I said, "No, living in Texas was not part of my agenda. I live in the Pacific Northwest, 70 miles north of Seattle, up on a lake, up in the mountains. Texas is not the climate people who choose to live where I live want." Anyway, 9/11 came and went. So I was interim dean for two years. And I left in the summer of 2001. On the 1st of December, 2001, I was called again and asked if I would be a candidate for president. And I told my wife, I said, "You know, after 9/11, I feel

like I have to do one more public service, but I don't wanna do it in Washington, D.C. So, how about this?" And it turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made because it was actually the most fun job I think I ever had. And I came to love Texas A&M and the students and the faculty. And I had a great time down there and I owe it all to your grandfather.

And I've used it as an object lesson for young people along the way, Sam, that just kind of out of the blue, I did what I considered a tiny favor for a friend, becoming the interim dean, which didn't seem like that big a deal to me. But if I had not been interim dean, I would have never become president of Texas A&M, and I believe had I not been president of Texas A&M, I would never have become Secretary of Defense. And it all started with doing a little favor for your grandfather.

Sam: Yeah, that little piece of service turned into a big one when you became defense secretary shortly thereafter. Well, sir, I want to talk about an important issue today in the United States, and especially in Texas. We've got my cousin George P. running for attorney general, and this is a big, hot-button issue for him. And that's enforcing our borders and protecting our homeland. Sir, I was wondering how important you think this issue is today and what role, if any, should the military play in securing our borders?

Dr. Gates: Well, it is an important issue. I think immigration has always been a part of American history, many of our most valuable citizens in science and business, and so many areas, the arts, and so on, so many are immigrants or the children of immigrants. And, in fact, most of us are children of immigrants. But, at the same time, we do need to control our borders. The United States, I think, is the only country in the world that builds walls to keep people out as opposed to keeping people in. But I think the responsibility for enforcing those laws and for maintaining that security really properly belongs with the border patrol and the immigration people. It's not a military function. The military, just to cut to the chase, the role of the military is to be trained to kill people. That's what they do at the end of the day. We hope that their ability to do that will actually deter conflict. Nobody wants conflict, but that's what they're trained for. So if we need to even further expand the border patrol or whatever is required to secure our borders, I think that needs to be done, but it's not a proper role for the military. And I would add, it's not a proper role for the National Guard.

Sam: Well, sir, in your book, "Exercise of Power," which I just finished yesterday before I knew our conversation was happening today, one of the things that I thought stood out is that you reflect on the successes and shortcomings on the

global stage that the U.S has had over the years, but you offer a new path forward. And part of that is a theme that I saw come through, and that's the civilian toolkit. And I was wondering where that toolkit, in your opinion, stands today for the American people. And if it's not full yet, what do we need to do to strengthen it?

Dr. Gates: You know, in a way, the path forward is, in some respects, a path informed by the past. You know, the Cold War took place against the backdrop of the biggest arms race in the history of the world. But because a military conflict would have been cataclysmic for the world, the conflict was actually fought out through surrogates when it was military, but mainly in non-military ways, an economic competition, a science and technology competition, the strategic communications competition, the economic competition in all of its dimensions. And after the end of the Cold War, we basically either diminished or even abolished the institutions that played such a role in our success in the Cold War. So the Congress abolished USIA, the United States Information Agency, in 1998. And that function was put into a corner of the State Department, and the head of it doesn't even report to the Secretary of State.

When I left government in 1993 at the end of your grandfather's administration, or at the beginning of 1993, the Agency for International Development had 15,000 dedicated professionals living and working in hospitable places around the world and really dedicated people. When I came back as Secretary of Defense 13 years later, AID had 3,000 people, mainly managing contractors. Many of the institutions that were so critical for success in the Cold War have been dramatically weakened. Now, we have China that is investing huge sums of money in things like strategic communications, Hu Jintao set aside \$7 billion to create that kind of capability even before Xi Jinping to power. Belt and Road, in terms of economic assistance and development assistance, is gigantic. And so they actually have built these extraordinary non-military capabilities to project their influence and increase their influence and even control in places around the world. We still are at the starting gate.

We have hardly done anything to improve our strategic communications capabilities since the abolition of USIA. The economic competition, we're getting organized and we're just beginning to have the same kind of approach to China that we had for a long time with the Soviet Union. How do you deny them access to technologies in the United States that we've developed, that they just steal and use to improve their own capabilities? The sanctions that we've placed and some of those other things. The Trump administration abolished the overseas private investment corporation, and replaced it with an international development

assistance program, doubled the capital to \$60 billion. So that's a good start, but we still have a long way to go to develop a strategy to deal with Belt and Road. So I would say in a few areas, we've made a start, such as in development assistance, but for the most part, we're way behind the power curve. Another big element is diplomacy, which your grandfather was very deeply involved in in a number of different roles.

And the truth is that over the years, the Congress and I have to say administrations have been willing basically to gut the State Department of resources. And when a big cut was under consideration in the State Department in the Trump administration, Secretary Jim Mattis was asked about the consequences. And he said, "Well, if you weaken diplomacy, I'll just have to buy more bullets." Well, that kind of encapsulates it. We really have to have a very strong State Department, and that's been neglected for actually a very long time at this point. So I would say given where China is in developing these non-military capabilities, we have a long way to go to catch up. And that's a real problem. We are mindful of the military competition and the need for sophisticated weapons, and we're in a real race in that regard with the Chinese, but these non-military capabilities, we're behind the power curve, for sure.

Sam: My grandfather once said, "I worry about international terror as a method for bringing about political change or sociological change in different countries. And this concerns me because our homeland is not immune from this kind of dastardly attack. And so, I worry about that a lot." Secretary Gates, you've been at the forefront of these issues your entire career. How can we prepare the next generation of Americans to deal with these issues? And what advice do you have for young leaders of today?

Dr. Gates: I think I would share George H. W. Bush's view that the United States cannot, in the 21st century, isolate itself from the rest of the world. We cannot tell ourselves, "Well, we'll just take of business here at home and not pay attention to the rest of the world." We've suffered the consequences of that repeatedly in our history. You know, who thought in the late 1930s that the German occupation of a little patch of ground called the Sudetenland would ever have an impact on us, or the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, or a host of other occasions, when we were sure that we weren't going to be affected by events around the world? But we always are. And we learned that lesson, for sure, on 9/11. We're about to have the 20th anniversary of that terrible attack on our country. And so, the message is we have to remain engaged in the world for our own national security reasons. It's not just altruism. Our own national interest and our own national security depends on

remaining engaged in the world and, frankly, remaining committed to exercising global leadership.

Now, that doesn't mean you have to send armies all over the world. Far from it. We don't want to be the world's policemen, but we are the only country that actually has what I would call convening power, that actually can gather other nations for a common purpose. Nobody trusts the Chinese to do that, or the Russians, or really anybody else. And so, if we lay down that burden, nobody else is going to pick it up, and it creates the opportunities for troublemakers all over the world. And I would just conclude by saying, we've declared the war on terrorism. We've now pulled out of Afghanistan, but the war on terror is going to be with us for a very long time. Terror is always the weapon of the weak against the strong. And there are a lot of people around the world who are determined to inflict further harm on the United States. So we have to be vigilant and we have to continue to devote the resources necessary. Even as we engage in the competition with China, and Russia, and so on, we have to be mindful that these other threats continue to face us as well.

Sam: Well, Secretary Gates, thank you for your time today. Thank you for your service to this country. And thanks for being a part of "All the Best."

Dr. Gates: Happy to do it. Good to see you again, Sam.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate "All the Best."

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house, every house, all over America.

George: Preparedness, strength, decency, and honor. Courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America, the greatest country on the face of the Earth.