



**A Passion for Leadership:
Lessons on Change and
Reform from Fifty Years
of Public Service**

By Robert M. Gates
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Reviewed by Christopher J. Lamb

Robert Gates’s previous memoirs on his time at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and on the National Security Council staff as well as his tenure as Secretary of Defense were well received as “ultimate insider” accounts. Gates’s latest book, *A Passion for Leadership*, is different but should prove just as popular for different reasons. Gates distills his government experience, along with his service as president of Texas A&M (the Nation’s fifth largest university), into a treatise on leadership. It is a fitting capstone to an illustrious career, during which he “worked for eight U.S. presidents . . . and observed or worked with fourteen secretaries of state, thirteen secretaries of defense, nine chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, fourteen national secu-

rity advisers, ten directors of the CIA,” and innumerable senior military officers and diplomats. He has observed and exercised a lot of leadership and believes he has something important to say about the topic. He is right.

Gates wrote the book to convince rising leaders that the quest for reform is worthwhile and to suggest some tools and personal attributes helpful for leading change. The book is structured accordingly. It begins with the frank acknowledgment that U.S. institutions “are failing us.” Gates surveys a litany of “disasters and embarrassments” and concludes that reform is “not a luxury but a necessity.” Rejecting the indifference of the political left about the need for reform and the cynicism of the political right about feasibility, Gates sets out to convince readers that “bureaucracies can be fixed; changed, made more cost-effective, user-friendly, efficient and responsive, and shaped to meet new problems and challenges even in an age of austerity.” The rest of the book backs up this assertion with numerous examples from his experiences leading three very different institutions.

In a chapter on how to determine the kind of change an organization needs, Gates underscores the value of listening to the organization’s rank and file—one of the major reasons he was a popular leader. He makes a strong case for pursuing change with a deliberate strategy, which sounds like common sense but often is overlooked, as Gates points out. The next chapter, on “techniques for implementing change,” is perhaps the most intriguing and useful. Gates offers many “how to” insights well illustrated by his long career. For example, he elaborates on his distinction between micro-knowledge and micromanagement, an important subject he raised in *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, his Pentagon memoir.

Gates’s prescriptions are too numerous to list, but several of the more important ones deserve emphasis. With characteristic candor, Gates notes that “any fool can (and all too often does) dictate change from the top,” but such reform by diktat is seldom successful. He

argues that the ground has to be prepared and that involvement by as many people as possible, especially career professionals, is necessary. But leaders must then take bold action that runs counter to institutional preferences because, he argues, bureaucracies inevitably believe things are fine just as they are.

A “leader focused on bringing significant change must find a way to break up the bureaucratic concrete and create the opportunity to develop new thinking and approaches,” Gates states. His preferred mechanism for doing this was cross-cutting task forces:

Task forces and similar ad hoc groups are silo busters. Most bureaucracies—both private and public—are rigid, pyramid-like structures in which information is shared with those in ever-higher boxes in the structure but rarely laterally. Properly designed task forces make diverse elements within an institution communicate and coordinate with one another at a level not achievable within the daily routine.

Gates warns that task forces cannot be allowed to make consensus decisionmaking their priority, in which case they will end up producing mere “pap.” To avoid this trap, leaders must carefully structure the task forces. They must choose the right leaders, prepare strong and detailed charters, and monitor the task force’s work carefully and repeatedly, both to protect and empower them. They need protection “to keep the bureaucracy from smothering their efforts.” They need empowerment to “carry out the task” and “space to show what they can do.” He believes in empowering subordinates and “staying out of their hair.” The leader must point to the change needed but must recognize the task force may “come up with a different way of implementing it.” Gates considers task forces “immensely useful, indeed crucial for developing specific proposals, for implementation of reforms and for tracking progress,” and observes that “with only a couple of exceptions, virtually every task force I appointed improved on and enriched my ideas and often expanded the scope of the change.”

Toward the end of the book, Gates turns to the importance of building relationships and acting with integrity. His conviction that we need leaders who will engage all stakeholders civilly and act honorably in all matters large and small may seem like boilerplate to some readers, but he communicates these traditional values with verve. For example, he asks bluntly: Why we should trust a leader if his or her spouse cannot? Gates also offers many positive examples of leadership probity. Indeed, all the leadership virtues and vices Gates catalogues are illustrated with telling examples from his personal experience.

As well-written and full of practical wisdom as this book is, it left this reader disquieted. Gates's solution for rampant poor organizational performance is stellar leaders. Yet he also believes "Americans have, at every level, the most dedicated, capable, and honest public servants anywhere." He notes that it has been his privilege to work with leaders of impeccable character—and he names many. He also argues that contrary to public perceptions, and especially in the national security bureaucracy, civil servants work extremely hard, putting in 70-hour weeks and foregoing vacations.

With so many hard-working civil servants led by men and women of impeccable character, why are our institutions failing? Could better leadership alone carry off the kind of transformation change Gates claims is imperative? At the outset of the book, Gates lists a number of reasons why reform is hard, but he never really offers a compelling explanation for the poor organizational performances he lambasts. The closest he comes is singling out "the same pyramidal, hierarchical structures, and lack of lateral communication, that pervade the public sector" and "also negatively affect the private sector." Gates does not say so, but many other observers have concluded these kinds of structures are ill suited to the 21st-century environment. Relying on great leaders alone to correct the poor performance of these antiquated structures is problematic for two reasons.

First, stellar leaders do not come along often. Gates quotes Jacques

Barzun's observation that governing well requires both the political skills to discern what can and needs to be done and how to mobilize support for the undertaking, and the administrative skills with which one imposes order when everything continually tends toward disorder. Truly gifted leaders with these skills are the exception. In fact, as Gates acknowledges, "real leadership" in general "is a rare commodity." So relying on the great leader to lift institutional performance to new levels when so much of the government is headed in the opposite direction seems like a long shot.

Second, transforming organizations requires more than good leadership. Washington, DC, is full of self-confident people, so the emphasis on great leaders and boiling organizational reform down to "just good leadership" is not surprising. But leading transformational change requires engaging elements of organizational performance other than leadership, including organizational structure, culture, processes, and so forth. This may explain why the only thing rarer than good leadership in Washington is success at transformational organizational reform. As Gates confesses, "The truth is that dramatic reform efforts in public institutions, certainly at the federal level, are so rare that examples are hard to come by."

According to Greg Jaffe in his *Washington Post* book review of *Duty*, Gates is "widely considered the best defense secretary of the post-World War II era." Anyone reading his book on leadership will profit. But are his prescriptions sufficient for transformational change? More pointedly, did he transform the Department of Defense rather than just lead it exceptionally well? His two main goals were getting the department to take irregular security challenges seriously and delivering more capability on a tighter budget. Most observers would argue the department's performance has not been transformed for lasting effect in either respect.

Gates acknowledges there is more to be done. In fact, that is how he concludes: by arguing that organizational reform is a never-ending challenge. But

it is not clear he accepts the ephemeral nature of his own leadership interventions and the depth of change required to transform "pyramidal, hierarchical structures." Consequently, the book Gates intended to be uplifting may instead leave aspiring leaders with some worrisome thoughts—namely, that the Robert M. Gateses of this world are few and far between and that the organizations failing us are more recalcitrant than Gates appreciates. For these rising leaders, who Gates states he knows are "often frustrated by the shortcomings of their institutions" and who want "to be proud of the organizations they work for," the wait for truly transformational prescriptions continues. JFQ

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