

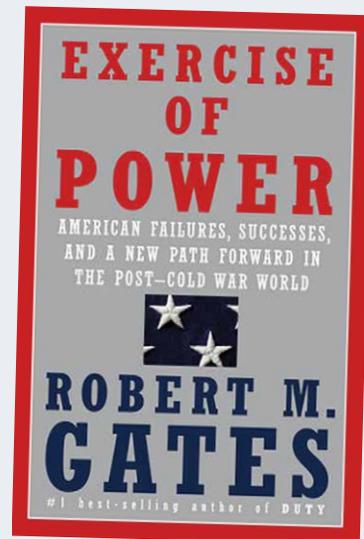
**Exercise of Power:  
American Failures, Successes, and a  
New Path Forward in the Post-Cold  
War World**

By Robert Gates  
Knopf Double Day Publishing Group, 2020  
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Reviewed By Admiral James Stavridis, USN  
(Ret)

I first met Secretary Gates in the summer of 2006, when he was President of Texas A&M and had been invited to the Pentagon to meet with my boss, Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld. I was a newly selected 3-star Vice Admiral, and knew all about him, of course, as a career CIA officer who went on to lead the Agency before retiring and heading into academe, first as Dean of the Bush School and then as President at Texas A&M. When he came into my small office outside the vast Secretary of Defense office, I started to usher him in immediately, but he spent several minutes asking me about myself, how long I had been with Secretary Rumsfeld, where I had been before my current job. It was friendly and engaging conversation, but you could feel that spymaster's gaze sizing you up and filing the conversation away. I thought to myself, I would like to work for him someday—never considering it would happen. I sure wasn't going to get out of the Navy and move to Texas.

Little did I know that in a matter of months Secretary Rumsfeld would depart and I would find myself working directly for Secretary of Defense



Bob Gates for the next seven years. Indeed, just before Gates took over, I headed down to Miami to be Commander of the United States Southern Command. Three years later, after considering sending me to the Pacific, Gates chose me to be the first (and, so far, only) Navy Admiral to serve as Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. My four years there were consumed with Afghanistan, Libya, the Balkans, piracy off the coast of Africa, the gradual destruction of Syria, and NATO reform. Gates was the best of bosses, demanding but sensible, good humored even in tense situations, and always quick with a quip or a word of encouragement over a Grey Goose vodka as the day wound down. There is no one in whose judgment I repose more trust, nor anyone whose character I more admire.

None of that would surprise any reader who has paid attention to the career of Bob Gates, especially if they have read his excellent memoir of those days, "Duty," or his subsequent book on leadership, "A Passion for Leadership." But in his new book, "Exercise of Power," we see a new and sweeping vision that is only hinted at in his earlier writings,

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as good as they were. In his new book, he presents a complex yet unified theory of how America can best conduct itself in the world, drawing smoothly on the many crises in which Gates found himself engaged—in multiple tours not only at the CIA but on the National Security Council staff as well. No one but Bob Gates could write this book, and it comes at a particularly timely moment as Americans broadly question our role in the world.

He begins with a short but compelling overview of the tools of power, typically providing anecdotes from his experiences as to how they can best be used; military, economic, diplomatic, cyber (good to see this as a “stand-alone” tool, which it is most assuredly), development, communications, intelligence, cultural, ideological, private sector, religion, etc. I think of these as almost Clausewitzian-style “principles of power” for the 21st century. Of particular power is his idea that the sum is truly greater than the parts—as is the music of a symphony far greater than any single instrument. And Gates is quick to acknowledge that as a nation we are vastly overweight in our reliance on the military instrument, and underweight on all the others, and in their integration. If the U.S. government were in fact a symphony, you could think of a stage with a massive, amplified, and pounding set of drums taking up nearly three quarters of the stage—that would be the military. In the corner, a tiny group of other instruments squeak along, barely discernible—that would be the rest of the interagency.

To back up his thesis, the bulk of the book is essentially a collection of set pieces that lay out the good, the bad, and the really ugly international scenarios in which America has engaged in the post-Cold War world. The very few “good” outcomes are the first Gulf War pushing back Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, then leaving; Colombia and the suppression of the Marxist-narco terrorist group, the FARC; and (somewhat) the Balkans, where two interventions have created at least a modest level of

peace (compared to the raging wars that followed the dissolution of the old Yugoslavia). The long list of “bad” and “really ugly” outcomes are well known at this point; Somalia, where Black Hawk Down pushed us out; Haiti, where the bad luck always seems to overcome our best of intentions; Iraq, especially the poorly executed attempt to completely democratize it and dispense with the armed forces; Afghanistan and the over extension and failed adventure with nation building; Syria and the failure to enforce a red-line; and Libya, where a NATO “success” turned to ashes as all the intervening states sprinted for the exits after Qaddafi’s death and the resulting chaos that continues to reign. I lived Libya (and several others) with Secretary Gates and everything he consistently advocated—moderation of ambition, realistic expectations, recognition of the limitation of our military power, a desire for sensible long-term engagement—is on display in this volume as a cautionary tale.

One of the “money” chapters in the book is toward the end, and it deals with how the United States should approach the challenges of our relationship with China. We need to be neither foolish about where China is headed (and in a devastating list of quotes, Secretary Gates lays out just how wrong every previous administration has been in its optimism), nor unnecessarily confrontational. I would say the approach Bob Gates lays out is about right; confront where we must, but cooperate where we can. Finding the balance will be challenging, but this book helps lay out guide posts to doing so. Taken with the rest of the volume, it affords policymakers a powerful guide to how to approach the conundrum that is China.

No book is perfect, and there is to my eye a very surprising omission; any commentary on the now three-year old Trump administration and its growing tendency to simply withdraw from the world. While I would not expect Secretary Gates to drag his arguments down into the morass of

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day-to-day politics, we could have hoped for a clear rejection of the Trumpian worldview, which can ultimately be boiled down to two words; “get out.” Rejecting international engagement is different than buying into a money pit of commitment to fixing broken states. The Trump Doctrine, such as it is, seems to consist of; rejecting alliances, cutting international aid, building economic and physical borders around our nation, reducing the budgets of our international tools other than the military, and pulling out of international treaties (Trans-Pacific Partnership, Paris Climate Accords, INF, Open Skies, WHO, on and on).

The tragedy is that we’ve tried that already—in the 1920s and 1930s. We rejected the League of Nations, built trade barriers (the Hawley-Smoot Tariffs), and spurned any sort of engagement in the world. How did that turn out? We broke the global economy (the Great Depression) and you can drop a plumb line to the rise of fascism and the Second

World War. Secretary Gates effectively lays out the right course for the nation to steer; an effective inter-agency process (a symphony of action far greater than the sum of the parts), international engagement, but with a clear-eyed view of the advantages and limitations of our partners, and an increasing reliance on communication, culture, and the private sector—our super powers in the USA—but only when we choose to use them, and can effectively “live them” in front of the unblinking glare of international media.

This is a powerful, clearly written and ultimately woken book on how America must approach the world. We are far from becoming a defeated or a declining power—but without the prescription that Secretary Gates lays out in “Exercise of Power,” we might become one. The good news is that we can continue to be a force for good in the world, and ensure our nation prospers as well—if we heed good advice like this.