

Former Defense Secretary critiques over-militarization

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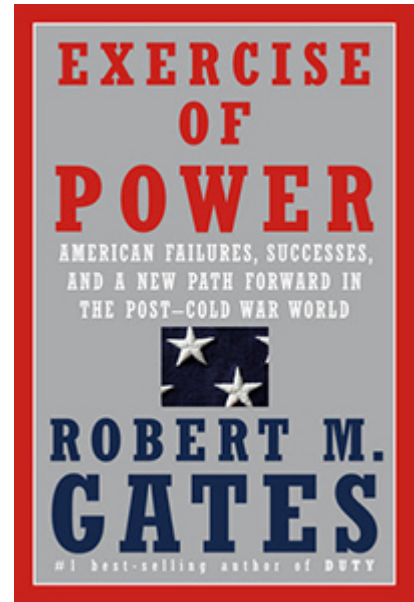
A former Secretary of Defense believes U.S. foreign policy has become over-militarized, and he sees parallels to domestic policing policies.

Robert Gates, who served as Secretary of Defense under both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, participated in a June 18 webinar. The World Affairs Council of Dallas and the Institute for Global Engagement at Dallas Baptist University jointly sponsored the teleconference.

After the Cold War ended, instruments of persuasion—particularly the U.S. Information Agency and the U.S. Agency for International Development—took a backseat to military force in foreign policy, Gates asserted.

At the same time, diplomacy—particularly the State Department—was underfunded, and efforts to streamline its bureaucracy and reform its structure lacked executive and congressional support, he said.

“The over-militarization of foreign policy” contributed to 20 years of war and left the United States weakened in its competition with China as a world power, he said, echoing a theme of his new book, *Exercise of Power: American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World*.



Too many American presidents have treated military force as “the first option rather than the last resort,” he said.

“Many Americans came to equate global leadership with being the world’s policemen,” Gates insisted, and they have lost patience with unending wars and foreign intervention.

While he criticized over-reliance on military force, Gates did not advocate isolationism. Rather, he insisted the United States should use nonmilitary power to promote freedom and encourage reform—not only for humanitarian reasons, but also because of national self-interest, he said.

“We cannot isolate ourselves from the rest of the world in the 21st century,” Gates said.

For example, he asserted the United States should use its “moral voice” to defend the rights of protesters in Hong Kong, making sure any economic sanctions are directed toward China and not against citizens of Hong Kong.

“It’s a place where having allies and friends would help,” he said.

‘Build up community institutions’

In response to a question about racial unrest and protests against police brutality in the United States, Gates said the domestic situation regarding policing “parallels the over-militarization of foreign policy.”

“We have funded police pretty generously but have not well funded our community organizations” that address the root causes of many societal problems, he said.

Just as troops for two decades were asked to carry on duties of nation-building, community development and other tasks for which they were not equipped, police have been thrust into the role of dealing with homelessness, mental health issues and other issues, Gates asserted.

“Better training for police is important,” he said, noting a family member who spent his career in law enforcement rarely had to draw a weapon because he learned to “talk his way out” of tense situations and de-escalate them.

The answer is not to “defund police” as some have suggested, but to increase resources that “build up community institutions” that address underlying problems, he continued.

Gates was asked about the recent incident in which Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Gen. Mark Milley, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, accompanied Trump on his walk across Lafayette Square for a photo-op outside a church. Milley later apologized, saying it was “a mistake” and he “should not have been there.”

Gates noted the challenge any military officer or member of the Cabinet faces in confronting the president. However, he agreed with Milley that his involvement was “not appropriate” and emphasized the importance of the

military remaining apolitical.