

## International Education and National Security

Interview with Robert M. Gates

**R**OBERT M. GATES served as the 22nd secretary of defense of the United States (2006–2011) and is the only secretary of defense to be asked to remain in that office by a newly elected president. Barack Obama awarded Gates the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor.

*Before becoming secretary of defense, Gates was the president of Texas A&M University, the nation's seventh largest university. While there he pushed for international diversity on campus and was recognized as a proponent of international student-friendly visa policies. Prior to assuming the Texas A&M presidency he served as interim dean of the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M.*

*Gates joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1966 and spent nearly 27 years as an intelligence professional. During that period, he spent nearly nine years at the National Security Council, serving four presidents of both major political parties and was director of the CIA from 1991 until 1993.*

*Gates has also served on the board of directors of the American Council on Education and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (now the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities).*

*A native of Kansas, Gates received his bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary, his master's degree in history from Indiana University, and his doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from Georgetown University. Gates was appointed chancellor of the College of William and Mary in February 2012.*

**IE: What is international education's role in our nation's security? Why is it important for future leaders to study abroad?**

**GATES:** We cannot begin to understand other countries and deal with security challenges around the world if we don't have leaders—not just in government but in other sectors as well—who understand those cultures and the history and something about those nations' interests. And the best way that people can get a foundation for that is by having both direct experience and studying it in school.

And I think it works both ways: we have had enormous success over the years with students coming to this country, including as adults to professional

schools and professional military schools and learning about us. One extraordinary example is that of Anwar Sadat who had come to this country in the 1950s. He was so impressed that when he replaced Nasser as the president of Egypt, he began a historic turn away from the Soviet Union toward the United States. We've had that experience with Pakistani leaders; we've had it with a number of others such as Giscard d'Estaing, Helmut Kohl, and several others.

**IE: You were the first secretary of defense who advocated for greater spending for the U.S. Department of State. Why did you feel this was important then and remains so, today?**



Robert M. Gates spoke at the 2012 NAFSA Annual Conference in Houston, Texas.

**GATES:** We have not devoted sufficient resources to the civilian side of our foreign affairs or national security “tool box.” We’re always willing to buy more hammers but we’re not willing to invest in other tools, and if we’ve learned one lesson in our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is that a strong civilian component with civilian experts is absolutely critical to the success of our endeavors. And that’s just not true of these wars, it’s true in our engagement all over the world. What you are seeing is a growing partnership between the American military and American civilian experts as we develop partnerships and relationships with other countries. Fundamentally, the State Department has been undermanned for too long a time and I want to see that change.

**IE:** **You’ve been an advocate for the study of critical foreign languages for U.S. servicemen and women with the implementation of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) Skill Proficiency Bonus, which pays a stipend for taking foreign language or culture classes. Why is foreign language proficiency in critical**

**languages so important both for members of the U.S. military and for college students?**

**GATES:** You always lose something when you are dependent on interpreters. There is a big difference when our officers who are out there in the countryside can speak the language, whether Arabic or Pashtu or whatever language, in terms of their effectiveness and the respect with which they are received by the local people. As we partner with other nations, it is critically important that those we send out to lead that effort, regardless of their rank, know something about the local culture and know something about the language. I don’t think you can learn a foreign language without learning about the culture and history of a country; I think that it’s just incredibly important.

The same thing is true of college students. They are growing up and going out into a very globally interconnected world. If they don’t have any experience in the international arena, if they can’t speak a foreign language, then they are at a serious disadvantage regardless what field they’re in. Students who are graduating from colleges in virtually every other developed country speak at least one language in addition to their own. If we do not attach the same kind of importance to teaching foreign languages then I think, in this global competition, we’re going to be at the disadvantage.

**IE:** **Are there any U.S. policies that you think need to be changed to be more inviting to international students and scholars?**

**GATES:** Yes, I think there are actually two policies that could be more welcoming. One is the deemed export issue. [If a foreign national is given access to controlled technology while in the United States, an “export” requiring an export license is “deemed” to have occurred.] I had hoped that we would make progress in getting this issue resolved in terms of making American campuses more welcoming to international students, particularly those studying the science and math and technology.

Trying to put the burden on U.S. universities to monitor the access foreign students have, the lab equipment, test equipment, and things like that is literally unmanageable. And I also think that it discourages people from coming here. I think we can figure out what kind of major people are pursuing and what they are working on and keep track of that a lot easier than we can monitor physical access. I think that changes should be made.

The Department of Commerce sponsored a working group on this several years ago, which I co-chaired until I became secretary of defense with a view to simplifying these rules and making them more manageable. I think that that effort was not ultimately successful, and we need to return to it.

The other issue is that we should be making it easier for international students who graduate from our universities particularly those with a background in finance and math to remain here and work rather than essentially forcing them to go home. There are a limited number of visas available for people to do this, but clearly

“

Students who are graduating from colleges in virtually every other developed country speak at least one language in addition to their own. If we do not attach the same kind of importance to teaching foreign languages then I think, in this global competition, we're going to be at the disadvantage.

”

the demand for such skills far outstrip what the visas provide for, so I think that's another area we need to look at.

**IE:** During your tenure as president of Texas A&M University, how did you implement internationalization on your campus? Were there any particular accomplishments of which you are especially proud?

**GATES:** One of the things that I'm proudest of is making the decision for A&M to participate in Education City in Qatar and take our engineering program into the Middle East where we have had great success. I

think we have the opportunity to present a face of America that most Arab students, particularly those who don't come to this country, would never otherwise see. In a way, we are able to take the very best of our culture there.

All of these programs require that the students from the Middle East take the core curriculum for each of our universities, which is a very broad set of courses in addition to their technical education that they get in a specific field.

I think this is a huge opportunity to have our student leaders visit Qatar and have Qatari students come to the United States and

visit the home campuses and so on. It's been going on now for close to 10 years, and I think that it has been a huge success. I was very pleased that Texas A&M could be one of the first schools to participate.

Texas A&M has a substantial number of international students; the largest group is from China, India, and South Korea. One of the things that most American campuses need to work on, and certainly Texas A&M did, is trying to get these students engaged in campus activities and make them feel a part of the university community and university family. I think that too often there's a tendency for them to sort of self-select and stay within their own group. I think part of the benefit for us and for them is to expand their contacts while on campus and their engagement with the rest of the campus.

**IE:** You've recently returned to your alma mater, the College of William and Mary, as chancellor. How has this homecoming been personally significant to you and what do you envision your contribution will be for the future of the college?

**GATES:** I'm the first alumna in more than a hundred years to be the chancellor so that's very flattering and gratifying to me. Having been a president of a large public university I may be able to help them more than most of my predecessors, in terms of fundraising and my ideas along those lines. They have a good international students program and I'd like to encourage that. In addition, my wife and I have focused our private giving to the university on providing scholarship money for students who want to study abroad or who want to pursue international affairs. **IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is editor-in-chief of *IE*.

**PALACE TRAVEL**

The Leader In Educational Travel To Africa

Faculty-led educational tours to Africa including Ghana, Mali, Senegal and South Africa. Programs include specially arranged Community Engagements.

Tel: 215.471.8555 • e-mail: info@palacetravel.com  
www.PalaceTravel.com