

# US Defense Secretary warns new naval officers on civilian control of military

**Bill Van Auken**  
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In a speech before the US Naval Academy's graduating class May 25, Defense Secretary Robert Gates issued pointed advice to the newly minted officers that they must respect the Constitution and not view the Congress and the media as their enemies.

The remarks were widely reported as part of the round-up of Memorial Day weekend exercises in flag-waving hoopla and the hypocritical tributes of politicians to the American troops whose lives have been sacrificed in the criminal war of aggression in Iraq.

Gates's speech in Annapolis, however, deserves more serious consideration. That an American secretary of defense feels obliged to make such a pitch to the latest crop of professional naval officers has serious political implications.

The defense secretary began by reminding the graduating midshipmen that to receive their commissions as Navy ensigns or Marine Corps second lieutenants they must swear an oath "to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

"Today, I want to encourage you always to remember the importance of two pillars of our freedom under the Constitution—the Congress and the press," Gates continued. "Both surely try our patience from time to time, but they are the surest guarantees of the liberty of the American people."

He described Congress as "a co-equal branch of government that under the Constitution raises armies and provides for navies," while insisting that "the American military must be non-political and recognize the obligation we owe the Congress to be honest and true in our reporting to them. Especially when it involves admitting mistakes or problems."

Turning to the media, Gates cited the recent exposure of the abominable conditions facing maimed veterans of the Iraq war at Walter Reed army hospital. "The press is not the enemy," he said, "and to treat it as such is self-defeating."

Gates summed up: "As the Founding Fathers wisely understood, the Congress and a free press, as with a non-political military, assure a free country. A point underscored by a French observer writing about George Washington in

1782. He wrote: 'This is the seventh year that he has commanded the army and that he has obeyed the Congress; more need not be said.'"

The constitutional issues that Gates touched upon in his commencement remarks are profound and their political evolution over a protracted period in American political life deeply troubling.

The Declaration of Independence includes as one of its charges against the British monarch was that "He affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power."

The Constitution placed all of the powers of war in the hands of Congress while giving it the responsibility for organizing and regulating the armed forces, as well as determining their funding and rules of conduct. The decision to wage war, how that war is conducted and when to call a halt to it were all envisioned as the province of the Congress.

The president was declared to be the commander in chief of the army and navy, a title that the framers of the Constitution saw as assuring civilian control of the military, not as elevating the president above the state and the people as the sole wartime decision-maker.

Subordination of the military to civilian control, the maintenance of an apolitical officer corps and the effective power of Congress over war making have all been under sustained attack for an entire historical period. The growth of US militarism and the malignant power that it exerts over every facet of American life has been widely recognized since the only military commander to become president in the 20th century, Dwight D. Eisenhower, warned against the threat to American democracy posed by the growth of a "military industrial complex."

The growth of that complex has gone far beyond anything that Eisenhower could have imagined, with the US militarism—counting the Pentagon budget, "emergency funding" for the Iraq war, the Department of Energy's spending on nuclear weapons and other military related allocations—easily consuming close to a trillion dollars annually.

Moreover, the officer corps of the all-volunteer military has become increasingly politicized, heavily Republican and drawn from the most conservative layers of the American population. This politicization within the commissioned ranks bubbled to the surface repeatedly under the Clinton administration, with open denunciations of the president by senior officers and a wholesale rebellion over its attempts to drop the reactionary ban on gays in the military.

The escalation of militarism and the open challenge to constitutional principles of congressional and civilian control have reached an unprecedented and explosive level, however, in the context of the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism."

Indeed, given the present toxic political environment in Washington and the record of the Bush administration over the past six years, it is hard to review the transcript of Gates's remarks at Annapolis without hearing an implicit indictment of the current "commander-in-chief."

Bush has transformed this title from a guarantee of civilian control over the military into an instrument for claiming unfettered and near-dictatorial powers for himself, based upon his supposed association with the military.

This has included the power to order the military into illegal wars of aggression, the power to detain so-called "enemy combatants" in military prisons like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib without charges or trials and the power to order military interrogators to carry out acts of torture.

The entire one-sided battle over the Iraq war funding legislation—ending in the inevitable Democratic capitulation last week—was waged by the Bush administration based on the argument that Congress has no business sticking its nose into questions of war, which are best left to the "professionals," the military commanders.

Thus, speaking before an audience of construction contractors early this month, Bush denounced the Democrats in Congress for daring to propose a timetable for even a partial withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. "The question is, who ought to make that decision?" he asked. "The Congress or the commanders?" He went on to declare, idiotically: "I'm the commander guy."

Similarly, in a May 24 press conference called after the Democrats had formally agreed to grant Bush all the money he asked for to continue and escalate the Iraq war, with no strings attached, Bush answered a question about Congressional criticism of his policies. "Look you want politicians making those decisions, or do you want commanders on the ground making the decisions? My point is, is that I would trust [General] David Petraeus to make an assessment and a recommendation a lot better than people in the United States Congress. And that's precisely the difference."

Of course this claim of unwavering trust in the "commanders on the ground" is all nonsense. The administration had to sack those who were in charge of the Iraq war—Generals John Abizaid, the head of Central Command, and George Casey, the commander of forces in Iraq—and find senior officers who did not oppose the White House proposal for a "surge" of tens of thousands more troops into the war.

The real relations between the White House and the civilian leadership in the Pentagon, on the one hand, and the armed forces general staff, on the other, have never been more acrimonious than during the tenure of Bush's previous Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Nonetheless, even rhetorically endowing uniformed commanders with a supposedly unquestionable authority to determine how a war is conducted and whether or not it should be ended represents a direct assault on the principle of civilian control of the military.

Before replacing Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, Gates—a former CIA director implicated in bloody covert US operations from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—was a member of the Iraq Study Group, which proposed a tactical shift aimed at salvaging something from the catastrophe that US imperialism has created in Iraq. This included proposals for scaling down and reconfiguring American occupation forces and seeking diplomatic openings to Iran and Syria.

Also included in the ISG report was a pointed recommendation that, with Rumsfeld's ouster, "the new Secretary of Defense should make every effort to build healthy civil-military relations..."

Gates's advice to the graduating midshipmen appears to be part of an attempt to fulfill this mandate. It also may well reflect growing concern within sections of the American ruling elite that the Bush administration's unrestrained embrace of global militarism, its promotion of lawlessness by the military and its insistence that it is the commanders—not the elected members of Congress—who should determine the course of the Iraq war pose real dangers to the political and social order in the US itself.

To the extent that the principle of civilian control of the military is denigrated and undermined, the threat of its opposite grows, i.e., military control over the civilian population, in a word, dictatorship.



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