

NOTE: The President spoke at 6 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month

proclamation of May 31 is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks at an Armed Forces Farewell Tribute Honoring Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates in Arlington, Virginia June 30, 2011

Thank you very much. Admiral Mullen, thank you for your eloquent words, but also for your extraordinary service, as you near a well-deserved retirement. And thank you for four decades of incredible service, to you and Deborah.

Members of Congress, Vice President Biden, Deputy Secretary Lynn, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Service Secretaries and distinguished guests, men and women of the finest military in the world, and most of all, Secretary Gates, Becky, Brad, and although she could not be here, I also want to acknowledge your daughter Eleanor.

When I took office, Bob Gates had already served under seven Presidents during an illustrious career that spanned four decades. He would have been forgiven if he had opted for a private life of comfort and ease. He had earned it. And when asked by a reporter whether he might stay on to serve an eighth President, he offered the answer, "Inconceivable." [Laughter]

Why did he stay? I know there are days when Bob asks that himself. I'm sure Becky asked that also. But I believe I know the answer, because I've seen this man in those moments of debate and decision when a person's character is revealed: in the Oval Office, in the Situation Room, in the theaters of war.

You see, if you look past all of Bob's flashiness and bravado—[laughter]—and his sharp attire, his love for the Washington lime-light—[laughter]—then what you see is a man that I've come to know and respect, a humble American patriot, a man of common sense and decency, quite simply, one of our Nation's finest public servants.

Bob, today you're not only one of the longest serving Secretaries of Defense in American history, but it is also clear that you've been one of the best.

Why did Bob Gates serve? Our Nation is at war, and to know Bob is to know his profound sense of duty: to country, to our security, and most of all, to our men and women who get up every day and put on America's uniform and put their lives on the line to keep us safe and to keep us free.

When the outcome of the war in Iraq was in doubt, Bob Gates presided over the extraordinary efforts that helped restore order. Over the past 2½ years, we've removed more than 100,000 troops from Iraq, ended our combat mission, and are responsibly ending that war.

When the fight against Al Qaida and our efforts in Afghanistan needed new focus, Bob Gates helped us devise the strategy that has finally put Al Qaida on a path to defeat and ensures that Afghanistan never again becomes a source for attacks against our Nation.

When institutional inertia kept funding systems our troops didn't need, Bob Gates launched a war on waste, challenging conventional wisdom with courage and conviction, speaking hard truths, and saving hundreds of billions of dollars that can be invested in a 21st-century military.

Bob Gates made it his mission to make sure this Department is serving our troops in the field as well as they serve us. And today, we see the lifesaving difference he made in the mine-resistant vehicles and the unmanned aircraft, the shorter medevac times in Afghanistan, in our determination to give our wounded warriors the world-class care they deserve.

Bob, this may be your greatest legacy of all: the lives you saved and the confidence you gave our men and woman in battle, who knew that there was a Secretary of Defense who had their backs and who loved them and who

fought for them and who did everything in his power to bring them home safely.

Let me also thank Becky for her extraordinary support of our extraordinary military families. She's been there day in and day out. And in many ways, I know both Bob and Becky consider our troops to be like their own sons and daughters. And, Bob, your sense of responsibility to them is profound.

It's a responsibility we've shared as leaders who have served every day in a time of war. We're the ones who send them into harm's way. We visit them in the field, knowing that we are the reason they're there. We've stood in solemn respect at Dover when our fallen heroes have made their final journey home. We've held their families in our arms as they grieve the loved ones they gave to America so that our loved ones can be secure. We know the heavy wages of war, and we know America's shared obligations to all who serve.

So today we not only pay tribute to a remarkable public servant, we celebrate the principles for which he served and for which our Nation stands. I believe the life of Bob Gates is a lesson, especially to young Americans, a lesson that public service is an honorable calling, that we can pass our country, better and stronger, to those who follow.

Our next Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, has subscribed to this same life of service, and I'm confident that he too will lead this Department with clear vision and a steady hand.

In his willingness to become the first Secretary of Defense to serve under Presidents of both parties, the integrity of Bob Gates is also a reminder, especially to folks here in Washington, that civility and respectful discourse and citizenship over partisanship are not quaint relics of a bygone era, they are the timeless virtues that we need now more than ever. For whatever differences of party or ideology we may have, we can only keep America strong if we remember what keeps America great: our ability to come together and work together, as Americans, for a common purpose.

Finally, as we face difficult challenges around the world and here at home, let today

be a reminder that the United States will meet the tests of our time. We remain at war, but today, fewer Americans are in harm's way, and we will bring the wars we're in to a responsible end. We will make hard fiscal choices, but we'll do so responsibly. And as Commander in Chief, I am determined that our Armed Forces will always, always, remain the best trained, the best led, the best equipped fighting force in history. And in an uncertain world that demands our leadership, the United States of America and our Armed Forces will remain the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known.

This is the America, strong and confident, to which Bob Gates has devoted his life. And this is the America to which we rededicate ourselves.

I can think of no better way to express my appreciation to someone who I have come to admire and whom I consider a friend; I can think of no better way to express the gratitude of the Nation for Bob Gates than with a very special recognition.

Bob, this is not in the program, but I would ask you to please stand.

As President, the highest honor that I can bestow on a civilian is the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It speaks to the values we cherish as a people and the ideals we strive for as a nation. And today it is my great privilege to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to America's 22d Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates.

Will the military aide please read the citation?

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. John F. McCarthy, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:09 a.m. at the Pentagon. In his remarks, he referred to Becky Gates, wife of Secretary Gates, and their son Bradley; and Deborah Mullen, wife of Adm. Michael G. Mullen, USN, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Gates.