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Gates Tells West Point Graduates to Question Authority

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WEST POINT, N.Y. -- Defense Secretary Robert Gates urged the nation's future Army officers to question authority, challenge conventional wisdom and work to avoid the dangerous "groupthink" that often takes root in military circles.

In a commencement speech Saturday to a packed football stadium at this storied military academy, Mr. Gates told hundreds of West Point graduates that the Army's traditional consensus-driven culture was ill-suited to the complex challenges of modern warfare in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

The defense chief encouraged the cadets, who will soon be commissioned into the Army, to tell higher-ranking officers what they needed to hear, as opposed to what they wanted to hear.

"The higher up you go, the stronger the pressure to smooth off the rough edges, paper over problems, close the proverbial ranks and stay on message," he told the cadets and their families. "The hardest thing you may ever be called upon to do is stand alone among your peers and superior officers."

Mr. Gates said he would not "pretend that there is not risk" to standing up to higher-ranking officers. "But that does not make taking that stand any less necessary for the sake of our Army and our country," he said.

The speech was Mr. Gates's latest attempt to shake up how the military prepares for and fights its wars, his top priority. A holdover from the Bush administration, Mr. Gates has stepped up his efforts under President Barack Obama to reorient the Pentagon and the broader defense establishment in Washington.

Earlier this month, Mr. Gates fired the top American commander in Afghanistan and replaced him with a general who has extensive experience in special operations and other forms of irregular warfare. Many troops took the move as a sign that Mr. Gates plans to promote more officers with less traditional backgrounds and worldviews.

He has also recently unveiled some of the most far-reaching changes in Pentagon weapons-buying in decades. Mr. Gates said he would wind down the Air Force's F-22 Raptor fighter-jet program and make extensive cuts to the Army's \$200 billion Future Combat Systems program, arguing that such high-tech weapons are largely unnecessary in grinding counterinsurgencies like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Instead, Mr. Gates proposed spending billions of dollars on unmanned aircraft, armored trucks and other weapons systems that are of immediate use in the two war zones.

In his public remarks here, Mr. Gates said that junior officers in Iraq and Afghanistan are routinely being asked to make "tactical, strategic, cultural and ethical" decisions that senior commanders would have been responsible for making just a few years ago.

Mr. Gates encouraged the West Point cadets to venture outside the normal confines of a military career and "consider, and in fact embrace, opportunities that in the past were considered off the beaten path, if not a career dead end."

Instead of spending their entire professional lives in the armed forces, the defense chief said that today's young officers should spend time attending graduate school at civilian universities, teaching, working at think tanks or temporarily joining the State Department and other branches of the government.

Mr. Gates hailed the graduates for choosing to begin their military careers during a time of war. He noted that the cadets had filled out their West Point applications in the fall of 2004, during a particularly violent phase of the Iraq war that included the military's block-by-block conquest of the insurgent stronghold of Fallujah.

"As the class of 2009, you made your decision to serve knowing not only that America was at war...but that this war would be bloody and difficult, of indefinite length and uncertain outcome," he said.

The defense chief told the cadets that he thought of each of them like his "own son or daughter," and said he would do everything in his power to get them the proper training, equipment and supplies.

Still, Mr. Gates acknowledged that the graduates were entering a dangerous world and should have no expectations that circumstances would change anytime soon.

"After each war, we always hope we have fought the final war, the war to end all wars," he said. "I believe that such hopes ignore all of human history."

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