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Gates Defends Policy on Afghanistan and the Debate That Shaped It

By **THOM SHANKER**

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary **Robert M. Gates** on Thursday rejected assertions that a fractious internal debate had hobbled policy for Afghanistan, expressing full confidence in the strategy and saying that he expected no major shift in direction when the Obama administration completed a review of the war effort in December.

“I suspect that we will find some areas where we can make some adjustments and tweaks to try and enhance what’s going on,” Mr. Gates said. “I have not gotten the sense from my conversations with people that any basic changes are likely to occur.”

Mr. Gates and Adm. **Mike Mullen**, the chairman of the **Joint Chiefs of Staff**, defended the contentious, administration-wide debate last year that produced a new strategy for Afghanistan approved by **President Obama**. It called for a substantial buildup of forces, to be followed by a withdrawal beginning next July. The pace of the withdrawal is expected to depend on the ability of Afghan forces to start taking over security responsibilities.

During a Pentagon news conference, Mr. Gates said he thought the strategy was the right one and could succeed. “I wouldn’t sign the deployment orders if I didn’t believe that,” he said.

The release of a new book, “Obama’s Wars,” by Bob Woodward of The Washington Post, **has again raised questions about whether the compromises that resulted from the lengthy debate over the policy** last year ultimately undermined the counterinsurgency strategy, which required large additional commitments of troops, money and patience.

Mr. Gates said that after several years in which the war in Afghanistan had not received enough resources, the force supplied by the United States, allies and the Afghans themselves finally should be sufficient.

He said it had been important to narrow the focus of the military mission “to those key districts that mattered in terms of reversing the momentum of the **Taliban**, denying them control of territory where there was population, degrading their capabilities at the same time we were enhancing the capabilities of the Afghan security forces.” While acknowledging “this is a very, very difficult year,” Admiral Mullen said, “We’ve got the inputs right” and “We’re starting to move forward.”

Mr. Gates, who has worked for eight presidents of both parties, also said that “presidents are always well served when there is a vigorous and spirited debate over important issues.”