

**The New York Times** Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY

FROM  
ACADEMY AWARD®  
WINNER  
DANNY BOYLE

September 29, 2010

# Gates Fears Wider Gap Between Country and Military

By **ELISABETH BUMILLER**

DURHAM, N.C. — The United States is at risk of developing a cadre of military leaders who are cut off politically, culturally and geographically from the population they are sworn to protect, Defense Secretary **Robert M. Gates** told an audience at **Duke University** on Wednesday night.

In a speech aimed at addressing what he sees as a growing disconnect between the country as a whole and the relatively few who fight its wars, Mr. Gates said that although veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan were embraced when they came home, “for most Americans the wars remain an abstraction — a distant and unpleasant series of news items that do not affect them personally.”

Even after Sept. 11, 2001, Mr. Gates said, “in the absence of a draft, for a growing number of Americans, service in the military, no matter how laudable, has become something for other people to do.”

The defense secretary said that military recruits came increasingly from the South, the mountain West and small towns, and less often from the Northeast, West Coast and big cities. The military’s own basing decisions have reinforced the trend, he said, with a significant percentage of Army posts moved in recent years to just five states: Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas and Washington.

The speech reflected the issues within the military about the merits and costs of an all-volunteer force fighting two wars for nearly a decade, the longest sustained combat in American history. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mr. Gates said, are the first protracted large-scale conflicts since the American Revolution fought entirely by volunteers, but with a force of 2.4 million of active and reserve members that is less than 1 percent — the smallest proportion ever — of the population it serves.

He said that it was junior and mid-level officers and sergeants in ground combat and support who had borne the brunt of repeat deployments and exposure to fire. While they are “the most battle-tested, innovative and impressive generation of military leaders this country has produced in a very long time,” he said he had to ask the question: “How long can these brave and broad young shoulders carry the burden that we — as a military, as a government, as a society — continue to place on them?”

Mr. Gates dismissed any notion of reinstating the draft, terming the all-volunteer force that began in the 1970s a “remarkable success.” But he called for the return of R.O.T.C. to elite campuses across the country — Duke is unusual in that it has three programs — and for the academically gifted to consider military service.

“In short, students like you,” Mr. Gates told the group of 1,200 in the Page Auditorium at the university.

Mr. Gates said he was encouraged that a number of prominent universities were reconsidering having R.O.T.C. return to their campuses. He said some were doing so at the urging of well-known graduates, among them [President Obama](#).

That was an indirect reference to Harvard, Mr. Obama’s alma mater, which expelled the R.O.T.C. program from its campus in 1969 during protests against the Vietnam War. Drew Faust, Harvard’s president, has since said she would welcome R.O.T.C. back to campus on repeal of the “[don’t ask, don’t tell](#)” policy that bars gay soldiers from serving openly in the armed forces.

In his comments to the students, Mr. Gates said that beyond the hardship and heartbreak of seeing friends die in war, there is another side to military service — “the opportunity to be given extraordinary responsibility” at a young age.

“Our young military leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan have to one degree or another found themselves dealing with development, governance, agriculture, health and diplomacy,” he said. “And they’ve done all this at an age when many of their peers are reading spreadsheets and making photocopies.”

