

# Gates Says, "I Want YOU"

*It had been nine years since the 9/11 attacks. For all that time, US military men and women had been grinding it out in Afghanistan and Iraq. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, lecturing at Duke, devoted most of his words to triumphs and tribulations of the all-volunteer force, but he ended with a bang. Gates challenged the students sitting before him and at other elite US colleges to give serious thought to military service, to "take a risk in every sense of the word." The 1,200 young people in the Duke audience received his words in stunned but respectful silence.*

**T**he Iraq and Afghan campaigns represent the first protracted, large-scale conflicts since our Revolutionary War fought entirely by volunteers. Indeed, no major war in our history has been fought with a smaller percentage of this country's citizens in uniform full-time—roughly 2.4 million active and reserve service members out of a country of over 300 million, less than one percent. This tiny sliver of America has achieved extraordinary things under the most trying circumstances. ...

I'd like to ... speak ... about another narrow sliver of our population—those attending and graduating from our nation's most selective and academically demanding universities, such as Duke. In short, students like many of you.

Over the past generation, many commentators have lamented the absence of ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] from the Ivy League and other selective universities. ... University faculty and administrators banned ROTC from many elite campuses during the Vietnam War and continued to bar the military based on the Don't Ask, Don't Tell law, with Duke being a notable and admirable exception with your three host programs.

I am encouraged that several other comparable universities ... are at least reconsidering their position on military recruiting and officer training, ... but a return of ROTC back to some of



## "The All-Volunteer Force"

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates  
Lecture at Duke University  
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Find the full text on the  
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[airforcemag.com](http://airforcemag.com)  
"Keeper File"

these campuses will not do much good without the willingness of our nation's most gifted students to step forward. Men and women such as you.

One does not need to look too hard to find Duke exemplars of selflessness and sacrifice. Consider the story of Jonathan Kuniholm, currently a Duke graduate student in biomedical engineering, who lost part of his arm as a Marine reservist in Iraq. Now he is putting his experience and expertise to work designing new prosthetics—work that will help other amputees in and out of uniform. There is Eric Greitens, class of 1996, Rhodes Scholar, Navy SEAL. After narrowly missing injury himself during a mission in Iraq, he came back home and founded the nonprofit The Mission Continues to help wounded troops and veterans continue serving in some capacity. ...

No doubt, when it comes to military service, one can't hide from the downsides: The frustration of grappling with a huge and frequently obtuse bureaucracy. Frequent moves to places that aren't exactly tourist destinations or cultural hubs. Separation from loved ones. The fatigue, loneliness, and fear on a distant dusty outpost thousands of miles from home. And then there is the danger and the risk.

Next to the sidewalk between your chapel and the divinity school there is an unobtrusive stone wall. For decades, the only names on it were your alumni killed in World War II. Last October, 54 names were added to the wall—for those Duke men and women who died in the wars since then, including two who made the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq: Matthew Lynch, class of 2001, champion swimmer, following in his father's footsteps as a United States Marine; and James Regan, class of 2002, son of an investment banker who turned down offers from a financial services firm and a law [school] to join the Army Rangers.

But beyond the hardship and heartbreak—and they are real—there is another side to military service. That is the opportunity to be given extraordinary responsibility at a young age—not just for the lives of your troops but [also] for missions and decisions that may change the course of history. In addition to being in the fight, our young military leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan have, to one degree or another, found themselves dealing with development, governance, agriculture, health, and diplomacy. They've done all this at an age when many of their peers are reading spreadsheets and making photocopies. ...

So I would encourage you and all young Americans, especially those at the most selective universities who may not have considered the military, to do so. To go outside your comfort zone and take a risk in every sense of the word. To expand what you thought you were capable of doing when it comes to leadership, responsibility, agility, selflessness, and—above all—courage. 🇺🇸