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Warning Against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan

By **THOM SHANKER**

WEST POINT, N.Y. — Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) bluntly told an audience of [West Point](#) cadets on Friday that it would be unwise for the United States to ever fight another war like Iraq or Afghanistan, and that the chances of carrying out a change of government in that fashion again were slim.

“In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it,” Mr. Gates told an assembly of [Army](#) cadets here.

That reality, he said, meant that the Army would have to reshape its budget, since potential conflicts in places like Asia or the Persian Gulf were more likely to be fought with air and sea power, rather than with conventional ground forces.

“As the prospects for another head-on clash of large mechanized land armies seem less likely, the Army will be increasingly challenged to justify the number, size, and cost of its heavy formations,” Mr. Gates warned.

“The odds of repeating another Afghanistan or Iraq — invading, pacifying, and administering a large third-world country — may be low,” Mr. Gates said, but the Army and the rest of the government must focus on capabilities that can “prevent festering problems from growing into full-blown crises which require costly — and controversial — large-scale American military intervention.”

Mr. Gates was brought into the Bush cabinet in late 2006 to repair the war effort in Iraq that was begun [under his predecessor, Donald H. Rumsfeld](#), and then was kept in office by [President Obama](#). He did not directly criticize the Bush administration’s decisions to go to war. Even so, his never-again formulation was unusually pointed, especially at a time of

upheaval across the Arab world and beyond. Mr. Gates has said that he would leave office this year, and the speech at West Point could be heard as his farewell to the Army.

A decade of constant conflict has trained a junior officer corps with exceptional leadership skills, he told the cadets, but the Army may find it difficult in the future to find inspiring work to retain its rising commanders as it fights for the money to keep large, heavy combat units in the field.

“Men and women in the prime of their professional lives, who may have been responsible for the lives of scores or hundreds of troops, or millions of dollars in assistance, or engaging or reconciling warring tribes, may find themselves in a cube all day re-formatting PowerPoint slides, preparing quarterly training briefs, or assigned an ever-expanding array of clerical duties,” Mr. Gates said. “The consequences of this terrify me.”

He said Iraq and Afghanistan had become known as “the captains’ wars” because “officers of lower and lower rank were put in the position of making decisions of higher and higher degrees of consequence and complexity.”

To find inspiring work for its young officers after combat deployments, the Army must encourage unusual career detours, Mr. Gates said, endorsing graduate study, teaching, or duty in a policy research institute or Congressional office.

Mr. Gates said his main worry was that the Army might not overcome the institutional bias that favored traditional career paths. He urged the service to “break up the institutional concrete, its bureaucratic rigidity in its assignments and promotion processes, in order to retain, challenge, and inspire its best, brightest, and most battle-tested young officers to lead the service in the future.”

There will be one specific benefit to the fighting force as the pressures of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan decrease, Mr. Gates said: “The opportunity to conduct the kind of full-spectrum training — including mechanized combined arms exercises — that was neglected to meet the demands of the current wars.”

