

U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES QUESTIONS MILITARY'S FOCUS

Speaking in the Springs, he urges tough scrutiny

BY TOM ROEDER THE GAZETTE

Generals need to stop worrying about the next war and fight the one they've already got, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said at The Broadmoor hotel Tuesday.

Gates lamented military policies that have left barracks rotting while investing lavishly on high-tech weapons that aren't useful in Iraq and Afghanistan. Speaking at a forum sponsored by the conservative Heritage Foundation, the secretary said Cold Warstyle conflicts are firmly a thing of the past and the military must focus on fighting insurgencies.

"It's hard to conceive of any country confronting the U.S. in conventional terms," he said.

"Overall, the kind of capabilities we need in the years ahead will resemble the kind of capabilities we need today."

Gates specifically questioned the Army's \$200 billion plan for the "future combat system," a hightech set of weapons from tanks to artillery that could be used to fight an armored enemy. He said it should be scrutinized to see if it would prove useful in an Iraq-style war.

"First, I believe that any major weapons program, in order to remain viable, will have to show some utility and relevance to the kind of irregular campaigns that, as I mentioned, are most likely to engage America's military in the coming decades," he said.

Gates said the U.S. cannot let down its guard against future conflicts with major world powers. He said the Air Force and Navy, not the Army's ground forces, can deter those threats and are capable on their own of destroying a future enemy.

"Nonetheless, I have noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called next-war-itis - the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict," Gates said.

Gates also expressed worry over the crushing pace of Army deployments. That doesn't mean troops will get a break, though.

"The risk of overextending the Army is real," he said. "But I believe the risk is far greater - to that institution, as well as to our country - if we were to fail in Iraq."

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies with the Cato Institute, who watched the speech, praised Gates' remarks, agreeing that the Defense Department needs to more fully focus on its obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bernard Finel, a senior fellow with the American Security Project, though, said the Pentagon will also need to stay flexible to meet the demands of the next president, who may not want to continue fighting insurgent wars.