

## US admits to mistakes in Afghanistan

NEW YORK: In a candid admission of flawed US policies after the Soviets left Afghanistan, Defence Secretary Robert Gates said that Washington remained at war in the conflict-devastated country because of the mistake it made.

"We are at war in Afghanistan today because of mistakes we made -- I, among others, made -- in the end game of the anti-Soviet war there in the late 1980s," Gates said while addressing the second Special Operations Forces International Conference at Tampa, Florida. "If we get the end game wrong in Iraq, I predict the consequences will be significantly worse," he warned, believing America's strategic objectives were within reach but a lack of patience could doom those prospects. Afghanistan and Iraq were the most important battlefields in the fight today, noted the secretary, whose priority has been getting the US to a point where its strategic objectives were attainable in both the countries. "Just as the hollowness of communism was laid bare by the collapse of the Soviet Union, so too would success in those countries strike a decisive blow against the ideological underpinnings of extremist movements," he observed.

Identifying Al Qaeda as a cancer, Gates said it was always looking to regenerate. "I fear that frustration over slow progress and dismay over sacrifices already made may result in decisions that are gratifying in the short term but very costly to us in the long term," he argued. About long-term prospects in the two countries, the secretary said the number of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan would gradually decline but that did not mean an end to special operations missions. "Even as our regular troops reduce their presence and are replaced by Iraqis, special operations force levels will remain fairly constant and be the connective tissue of the overall mission. They will be in Iraq and Afghanistan for an extended period of time -- as a force to hunt and kill terrorists, and also as a force to help train Iraqis and Afghans," Gates concluded.

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