

How Bush Holdovers Trapped Obama

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President Barack Obama trapped himself in the morass of Afghanistan by his post-election decision to show bipartisan continuity and to keep in place George W. Bush's military command structure, particularly Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David Petraeus.

After his solid victory in November 2008, Obama rebuffed recommendations from some national security experts that he clean house by installing a team more in line with his campaign pledge of "change you can believe in." He accepted instead the counsel of Establishment Democrats who warned against any disruption to the war-fighting hierarchy and who were especially supportive of keeping Gates.

The results are now in. Bob Woodward's new book, *Obama's Wars*, makes clear that it was Bush's old team that made sure Obama was given no option other than to escalate troop levels in Afghanistan. The Bush holdovers also lobbied for the troop increase behind Obama's back.

According to Woodward's book, Gates, Petraeus and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, refused last year to even prepare an early-exit option that Obama had requested. Instead, they offered up only plans for their desired escalation of about 40,000 troops.

Woodward wrote: "For two exhausting months, [Obama] had been asking military advisers to give him a range of options for the war in Afghanistan. Instead, he felt that they were steering him toward one outcome and thwarting his search for an exit plan.

"He would later tell his White House aides that military leaders were 'really cooking this thing in the direction they wanted.'"

Woodward identified Gates, Petraeus and Mullen as "unrelenting advocates for 40,000 more troops and an expanded mission that seemed to have no clear end."

The effort to box Obama in reached a crisis point on Nov. 11, 2009, in the White House Situation Room when Obama confronted the three and complained, "You have given me one option [for the escalation]. We were going to meet here today to talk about three options. ... You agreed to go back and work those up."

Mullen protested. "I think what we've tried to do here is present a range of options." But Obama shot back that two options were clearly unfeasible and the other two were variations of the 40,000-troop increase request.

The Bush holdovers even resisted passing along a "hybrid" plan that came from outside their group, from Vice President Joe Biden who had worked with JCS vice chairman, Gen.

James Cartwright. The plan envisioned a 20,000 troop increase and a more limited mission of hunting Taliban insurgents and training Afghan government forces.

Woodward reported, "When Mullen learned of the hybrid option, he didn't want to take it to Obama. 'We're not providing that,' he told Cartwright, a Marine known around the White House as Obama's favorite general.

"Cartwright objected. 'I'm just not in the business of withholding options,' he told Mullen. 'I have an oath, and when asked for advice I'm going to provide it.'"

A Rigged War Game

Later, Obama told Gates and Mullen to present the hybrid option as one possibility, but instead the Bush holdovers sabotaged the idea by organizing a classified war game, code-named Poignant Vision, that some military insiders felt was rigged to discredit the hybrid option, Woodward reported.

According to Woodward's book, Petraeus cited the results of the war game to Obama at the Nov. 11 meeting as proof the hybrid option would fail, prompting a plaintive question from a disappointed President, "so, 20,000 is not really a viable option?"

Without telling Obama about the limits of the war game, Mullen, Petraeus, Gates, and then-field commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, asserted that the hybrid option would lead to mission failure.

"Okay," Obama said, "if you tell me that we can't do that, and you war-gamed it, I'll accept that," according to Woodward's book.

Obama turned to Gates at one point with the complaint: "You have essentially given me one option," he said. "It's unacceptable."

Gates replied, "Well, Mr. President, I think we owe you" another option. But Woodward wrote, "It never came."

According to Woodward's book, "At critical points in the review, the ghosts of Vietnam hovered. Some participants openly worried that they were on the verge of replaying that history, allowing the military to dictate the force levels.

"While Obama sought to build an exit plan into the strategy, the military leadership stuck to its open-ended proposal, which the Office of Management and Budget estimated would cost \$889 billion over a decade. Obama brought the OMB memo to one meeting and said the expense was 'not in the national interest.'"

Faced with this resistance from the Bush holdovers - and unaware that their war game may have been fixed - Obama finally devised his own option that gave Gates, Petraeus and Mullen most of what they wanted - 30,000 additional troops on top of the 21,000 that Obama had dispatched shortly after taking office.

Obama did try to bind the Pentagon to a more limited commitment to Afghanistan, including setting a date of July 2011 for the beginning of a U.S. drawdown. Though Obama required all the key participants to sign off on his compromise, it soon became clear that the Bush holdovers had no intention to comply.

'Wiggle Room'

Even after Obama consented to the 30,000 additional troops, Woodward reported that the Pentagon continued to push for 4,500 more, called "enablers" who would handle logistics, communications and other non-combat functions.

Woodward cited a "clearly annoyed" Obama responding "I'm done doing this!"

According to Woodward's book, Obama insisted that the 30,000 was a "hard cap" and that there would be no further "wiggle room."

Obama added, "It'd be a lot easier for me to go out and give a speech saying, 'You know what? The American people are sick of this war, and we're going to put in 10,000 trainers because that's how we're going to get out of there,' " Woodward reported.

However, when Obama's deputy national security adviser Thomas Donilon noted that Gates might resign if Obama pressed for the 10,000 trainer option, Obama backed off, saying "that would be the difficult part."

Obama later explained to Gates that the 30,000 was the most that "I'm willing to take on, politically," according to Woodward. Gates continued to press for the "enablers."

"I've got a request for 4,500 enablers sitting on my desk," Gates said. "And I'd like to have another 10 percent that I can send in, enablers or forces, if I need them."

"Bob," Obama responded, "30,000 plus 4,500 plus 10 percent of 30,000 is ... 37,500. ... I'm at 30,000." Obama offered Gates "some latitude within your 10 percentage points" but only under exceptional circumstances.

While drawing this slightly squiggly line in the sand, Obama made clear to Gates that the only other option would be to go with the 10,000 trainers.

"Can you support this?" Obama asked about the 30,000-troop figure. "Because if the answer is no, I understand it and I'll be happy to just authorize another 10,000 troops, and we can continue to go as we are and train the Afghan national force and just hope for the best."

Before Obama's decision to dispatch the 30,000 troops, the Bush holdovers also sought to hem in the President's choices by working with allies in the Washington news media and in think tanks.

As we've reported at Consortiumnews.com, Petraeus, Mullen and McChrystal were essentially campaigning for their desired escalation through interviews, speeches, and propaganda visits to the war zone by influential neoconservatives.

For instance, early in 2009, Petraeus personally arranged for Max Boot, Frederick Kagan and Kimberly Kagan to get extraordinary access during a trip to Afghanistan .

"Fears of impending disaster are hard to sustain, however, if you actually spend some time in Afghanistan , as we did recently at the invitation of General David Petraeus, chief of U.S. Central Command," they wrote upon their return.

"Using helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and bone-jarring armored vehicles, we spent eight

days traveling from the snow-capped peaks of Kunar province near the border with Pakistan in the east to the wind-blown deserts of Farah province in the west near the border with Iran . Along the way we talked with countless coalition soldiers, ranging from privates to a four-star general," the trio said.

Their access paid dividends for Petraeus when they penned a glowing report in the Weekly Standard about the prospects for success in Afghanistan – if only President Obama sent more troops and committed the United States to stay in the war for the long haul.

Making a Call

Woodward's book adds that "in September 2009, Petraeus called a Washington Post columnist to say that the war would be unsuccessful if the president held back on troops. Later that month, Mullen repeated much the same sentiment in Senate testimony, and in October, McChrystal asserted in a speech in London that a scaled-back effort against Afghan terrorists would not work."

This back-door campaign infuriated Obama's aides, including White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, Woodward reported.

"Filling his rant with expletives, Emanuel said, 'Between the chairman [Mullen] and Petraeus, everyone's come out and publicly endorsed the notion of more troops. The president hasn't even had a chance!'" Woodward reported.

However, the incoming Obama administration was warned of this possibility of backstabbing by Gates and other Bush appointees when it was lining up personnel for national security jobs. Instead, Obama's team listened to Establishment Democrats like former Rep. Lee Hamilton and former Sen. David Boren, who were big fans of Gates.

As I wrote in November 2008, "if Obama does keep Gates on, the new President will be employing someone who embodies many of the worst elements of U.S. national security policy over the past three decades, including responsibility for what Obama himself has fingered as a chief concern, 'politicized intelligence.' ...

"It was Gates – as a senior CIA official in the 1980s – who broke the back of the CIA analytical division's commitment to objective intelligence."

More than any CIA official, Gates was responsible for the agency's failure to detect the collapse of the Soviet Union, in large part because Gates had ridden roughshod over the CIA analysts on behalf of the Reagan administration's desire to justify a massive military buildup by stressing Soviet ascendance and ignoring evidence of its disintegration.

As chief of the CIA's analytical division and then deputy CIA director, Gates promoted pliable CIA careerists to top positions, while analysts with an independent streak were sidelined or pushed out of the agency.

"In the mid-1980s, the three senior [Soviet division] office managers who actually anticipated the decline of the Soviet Union and Moscow's interest in closer relations with the United States were demoted," wrote longtime CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman in his book, *Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA*.

Misleading Congress

Inside the CIA, there also were concerns about Gates's role in misleading Congress regarding the secret Iran-Contra operations in the mid-1980s, an obstacle that had prevented Gates from getting the top CIA job when Reagan's CIA Director William Casey died in 1987.

Plus, in 1991, Gates faced accusations that he had greased his rapid bureaucratic rise by participating in illicit or dubious clandestine operations, including helping Republicans sabotage President Jimmy Carter's Iran hostage negotiations in 1980 (the so-called October Surprise case) and collaborating on a secret plan to aid Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein (the Iraqgate scandal).

Despite significant evidence implicating Gates in these scandals, he always managed to evade accountability by relying on his personal charm and Boy Scout looks. For his 1991 confirmation to be CIA director, influential friends like Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Boren of Oklahoma, and Boren's chief of staff George Tenet made sure Gates got the votes he needed.

In his memoir, *From the Shadows*, Gates credited his friend, Boren, with clearing away the obstacles. "David took it as a personal challenge to get me confirmed," Gates wrote.

(Tenet's help on Gates also earned him some chits with the Bush Family, which paid off in 2001 when Tenet was Bill Clinton's last CIA director and was kept on by George W. Bush, whom he served loyally, if incompetently.)

After getting confirmed in 1991, Gates remained CIA director until the end of George H.W. Bush's presidency. However, after Bill Clinton removed him in 1993, Gates never wandered far from the Bush Family orbit, getting help from George H.W. Bush in landing a job as president of Texas A&M.

During the Clinton years, documents surfaced implicating Gates in questionable actions from the 1980s, but the new evidence got little notice.

For instance, the Russian government sent an extraordinary intelligence report to a House investigative task force in early 1993 stating that Gates had participated in secret contacts with Iranian officials in 1980 to delay release of 52 U.S. hostages then held in Iran, a move that undercut President Carter's reelection effort.

"R[obert] Gates, at that time a staffer of the National Security Council in the administration of Jimmy Carter, and former CIA Director George Bush also took part" in a meeting in Paris in October 1980, the Russian report said.

The Russian allegation about Gates and the Paris meeting in October 1980 also didn't stand alone. The House task force had other evidence from French and Israeli intelligence officials, as well as witnesses from the arms-trafficking field, corroborating reports of Reagan-Bush contacts with Iranian officials in Europe during Campaign 1980.

However, the House task force never followed up on the Russian report because when it arrived - on Jan. 11, 1993 - the task force chairman, Rep. Lee Hamilton, had already decided to get rid of the October Surprise case along with other allegations of Reagan-Bush wrongdoing.

Years later, Lawrence Barcella, the task force's chief counsel, told me that in late 1992

evidence implicating the Republicans in the October Surprise caper had begun pouring in, so much so that he urged Hamilton to extend the investigation for three months but that Hamilton declined. (Hamilton has denied Barcella's account.)

[For details on the October Surprise case, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege*. For the text of the Russian report, [click here](#). To view the actual U.S. embassy cable that includes the Russian report, [click here](#). For the latest on this historical mystery, see Consortiumnews.com's "Key October Surprise Evidence Hidden."]

Iraqgate Scandal

Gates also was implicated in a secret operation to funnel military assistance to Iraq in the 1980s, as the Reagan administration played off Iran and Iraq battling each other in the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War.

Middle Eastern witnesses alleged that Gates worked on the secret Iraqi initiative, which included Saddam Hussein's procurement of cluster bombs and precursor chemicals used to produce chemical weapons for the war against Iran .

Gates denied all the Iran-Iraq accusations in 1991, and Boren's Senate Intelligence Committee never pressed too hard to check them out.

However, four years later - in early January 1995 - Howard Teicher, one of Reagan's National Security Council officials, added more details about Gates's alleged role in the Iraq shipments.

In a sworn affidavit submitted in a Florida criminal case, Teicher stated that the covert arming of Iraq dated back to spring 1982 when Iran had gained the upper hand in the war, leading President Reagan to authorize a U.S. tilt toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The effort to arm the Iraqis was "spearheaded" by CIA Director Casey and involved his deputy Gates, according to Teicher's affidavit.

"The CIA, including both CIA Director Casey and Deputy Director Gates, knew of, approved of, and assisted in the sale of non-U.S. origin military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to Iraq," Teicher wrote.

Ironically, this same pro-Iraq initiative involved Donald Rumsfeld, whom Gates replaced as Defense Secretary in 2006. In the 1980s, Rumsfeld was Reagan's special emissary to the Middle East . An infamous photograph from 1983 shows a smiling Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein.

Teicher described Gates's role as far more substantive than Rumsfeld's. "Under CIA Director Casey and Deputy Director Gates, the CIA authorized, approved and assisted [Chilean arms dealer Carlos] Cardoen in the manufacture and sale of cluster bombs and other munitions to Iraq ," Teicher wrote.

However, like the Russian report, the Teicher affidavit was never seriously examined or explained.

After Teicher submitted it to a federal court in Miami, the affidavit was classified a state secret and Teicher's credibility was attacked by Clinton administration prosecutors who saw

Teicher's account as disruptive to their prosecution of a private company, Teledyne Industries, and one of its salesmen, Ed Johnson.

Gates benefited, too, from Official Washington's boredom with – and even hostility toward – Reagan-Bush-41-era scandals.

Instead, the polite and personable Gates continued to enjoy influential protectors on both sides of the aisle, from Republicans around George H.W. Bush to Democrats like David Boren and Lee Hamilton.

Plus, some of Gates's CIA protégés, such as former Deputy Director John McLaughlin, were liked by Democrats as well as Republicans. (McLaughlin was a member of Obama's intelligence advisory group during Campaign 2008.)

A Comeback

Gates's connections – and his timing – served him well when he was placed on the Iraq Study Group in 2006 along with its co-chairs, Lee Hamilton and Bush Family lawyer James Baker. By fall 2006, the ISG was moving toward recommending a drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq .

Meanwhile, President George W. Bush found himself in need of a new Defense Secretary to replace Donald Rumsfeld, who had grown disillusioned with the Iraq War.

Though Rumsfeld was viewed publicly as a hardliner, privately he sided with his field commanders, Generals George Casey and John Abizaid, in favoring a smaller U.S. "footprint" in Iraq and a phased withdrawal. Rumsfeld put his views in writing on Nov. 6, 2006, the day before congressional elections.

With Rumsfeld going wobbly on the war and the Republicans doing badly in the polls, Bush turned to Gates and – after getting Gates's assurance that he would support Bush's intent to escalate the war, not wind it down – Bush offered him the job.

Rumsfeld's firing and Gates's hiring were announced the day after the Nov. 7 elections and were widely misinterpreted as signs that Bush was throwing in the towel on Iraq .

Rumsfeld's memo was disclosed by the New York Times on Dec. 3, 2006, two days before Gates was scheduled for his confirmation hearing. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Gates Hearing Has New Urgency."]

But Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee were so enthralled by the false narrative of Bush tossing over the ideologue (Rumsfeld) in favor of the realist (Gates) that they took no note of what the real sequence of events suggested, that Bush was determined to send more troops.

Gates was whisked through to confirmation with no questions about the Rumsfeld memo and with unanimous Democratic support. Sen. Hillary Clinton and other senior Democrats praised Gates for his "candor."

Within a few weeks, however, it became clear that Bush – with Gates's help – had bamboozled the Democrats.

Not only did Bush dash the Democrats' hopes for a bipartisan strategy on Iraq by junking the ISG recommendations, but he chose to escalate by adding 30,000 new troops. For his part, Gates joined in pummeling the Democrats by suggesting that their legislation opposing the "surge" was aiding and abetting the enemy.

"Any indication of flagging will in the United States gives encouragement to those folks," Gates told reporters at the Pentagon on Jan. 26, 2007. "I'm sure that that's not the intent behind the resolutions, but I think it may be the effect."

During Campaign 2008, Gates also opposed Obama's plan to set a 16-month timetable for withdrawing U.S. combat forces from Iraq .

Nevertheless, Gates remained a favorite of the Washington insiders, many of whom - like Lee Hamilton - urged the victorious Obama to keep Gates on as a signal of bipartisan continuity in the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan .

Apparently wanting to emulate Abraham Lincoln's "team of rivals," Obama took this advice, also retaining Bush's other top brass, Petraeus and Mullen, and naming a hard-line Democrat, Hillary Clinton, to be Secretary of State.

For these personnel moves, the President earned widespread praise from Washington insiders who remain especially enamored of Gates.

But Obama is now learning a hard lesson in national power politics, appointing people to key jobs who don't agree with your vision - and who have their own political power bases - can get you, your government and your country in loads of trouble.

*Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush](#), was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at www.neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there. Or go to www.Amazon.com.*

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