

How to Read Gates's Shift on the Wars

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In Establishment Washington, Defense Secretary Robert Gates enjoys a charmed life based on a charming persona. The Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) is always ready with fulsome praise for his “candor” and “leadership” – and even for his belated recognition that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were nuts.

“Certain kinds of public candor are so unexpected that they have the shock value of a gunshot at the opera,” purred [a Boston Globe editorial](#) about Gates’s admission that only a crazy person would commit U.S. ground forces to wars like those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The editorial then lamented Gates’s planned retirement later this year and urged President Barack Obama “to look hard for a successor with some of Gates’s unusual leadership qualities.” Unusual leadership qualities, indeed.

Without doubt, it was surprising when Gates inserted the following comment into the tenth paragraph of a speech last Friday at West Point:

“But 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 [Douglas] MacArthur so delicately put it.”

However, those of us who have known Gates for many years, including some of us old colleagues from his CIA days, couldn’t help but wonder what he was up to, what was the ulterior motive behind his decision to put distance between himself and these two misbegotten wars.

The Bob Gates we knew was a bright and brightly ambitious careerist whose greatest skill might have been to sense quickly where the prevailing winds of power were blowing and position himself accordingly. He was the consummate windsock.

So, having overseen the two wars for more than four years now, was Gates signaling that he knew the conflicts would come to no good end and thus was he creating a public record for himself as something of a war skeptic?

Was he preparing for his next career move, an elevation to a Washington “wise man” to be consulted by presidents and other important personages in his later years while being named to prestigious commissions?

What was Gates thinking?

I’m willing to acknowledge that Gates is bright enough to arrive at the same sensible conclusion that MacArthur derived from his hard experience in the Korean War – that the

United States must avoid future land wars in Asia.

Gates also might be following in the footsteps of other secretaries of defense, including Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld, who went wobbly on the efficacy of warfare. After all, Gates got Rumsfeld's job in 2006, in part, because Rumsfeld questioned President George W. Bush's plan to escalate in Iraq.

Maybe the wool of self-deception was finally lifted from Gates's eyes, too.

In 2006, Gates might have been understandably blinded by the allure of returning to center stage in Washington, after cooling his heels during the Clinton administration and the first six years of the second Bush presidency, working mostly at Texas A&M, including a stint as the school's president.

For someone with Gates's intense ambition, it would be hard not to jump at the prospect of running the Defense Department, especially in wartime. He has always claimed that he took the post reluctantly, saddened to leave behind the Aggies, but that claim never washed with those of us who knew Gates well.

Urges for Surges

In his first months at the Pentagon, Gates certainly didn't seem like a hesitant skeptic about the war policies. He played a key role in helping President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney escalate the war in Iraq and thus make their escape into the sunset without having lost a war on their watch.

That was 90 percent of what the celebrated "surge" of troops into Iraq was about, staving off an obvious defeat, even if it cost the lives of an additional 1,000 or so U.S. soldiers and many more Iraqis. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Afghan Lessons from the Iraq War](#)."]]

Then, after he was kept on by Obama, Gates supported a similar "surge" in Afghanistan, pushing for a 40,000-troop increase in late 2009. Obama grouched that Gates and the generals wouldn't provide a meaningful set of alternative options to the escalation, but Obama finally relented and sent 30,000 more troops.

So, it would seem an odd swing for Gates to suggest now that psychiatric care is in order for anyone loony enough to commit U.S. ground forces to places like Iraq and Afghanistan. After all, that was pretty much what Gates had done.

What's Behind the Change?

I'll acknowledge that Gates may have come to his newfound skepticism about these ground wars honestly, sincerely distraught by the continued loss of life as the bloody conflicts grind on with no real end in sight.

Yet, I would venture to suggest that – more likely – the timing of Gates's conversion can be pinned on two other factors, a typically windsock reaction to recent polling on Afghanistan and an attempt to burnish his future wise-man reputation:

–U.S. public opinion [has swung dramatically](#) against the war in Afghanistan, with some polls showing that as many as 86 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of Republicans want a

speedier U.S. pullout from the war.

-Gates has announced he will retire in the coming months. By abandoning his post on the bridge of the sinking pro-war ship now, Gates will let the next secretary of defense take the blame when the U.S. does not “prevail” in Afghanistan. Gates can point to his echoing of MacArthur’s warning.

I base this assessment, in part, on having observed Gates very closely in the early 1970s when I headed the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch at CIA and had supervisory responsibilities for Gates.

Within months of his arrival as a new analyst, his overweening careerist ambitions became all too obvious to his analyst colleagues as well as to me, and became a disruptive influence on the whole branch.

I felt it necessary to record this on his first Efficiency Report and to counsel him about his behavior. However, he didn’t change. He only became more proficient at climbing the career ladder and stepping over anyone who got in his way.

Gates made his first big jump early in the Reagan administration under CIA Director William Casey, a Cold War hardliner who disapproved of the careful, objective work on the Soviet Union done by experienced analysts of Soviet Communism.

Casey found Gates to be more pliable, willing to cook up the analytical results that Casey and the White House wanted.

The cooking was consequential, too. It facilitated not only illegal capers like the Iran-Contra Affair but also budget-breaking military spending against an exaggerated Soviet threat that, in reality, had long since passed its peak.

Talk to anyone who was there at the time (except the sycophants Gates co-opted) and they will explain that Gates’s meteoric career had mostly to do with his uncanny ability to see a Russian under every rock turned over by Casey.

To Casey, the Soviet Union could never change, and Mikhail Gorbachev was simply cleverer than his predecessors. Gates eagerly seconded these opinions.

The aging Casey may have been ideologically stuck in the most frigid days of the Cold War, but Gates - with his earlier training in our Soviet Foreign Policy branch (and a doctorate in Russian history no less) - should have known better. Yet he did Casey’s bidding and stifled all dissent.

One consequence was that the CIA as an institution missed the implosion of the Soviet Union — no small matter. Another was a complete loss of confidence in CIA analysis on the part of then-Secretary of State George Shultz and others who smelled the cooking of the intelligence.

In July 1987, Shultz told Congress: “I had come to have grave doubts about the objectivity and reliability of some of the intelligence I was getting.” And well he might.

Gates in Iran-Contra

In the fall of 1985, as Ronald Reagan's White House was looking for excuses to secretly sell arms to Iran, there was an abrupt departure from CIA's analytical line that Iran was supporting terrorism.

On Nov. 22, 1985, the agency reported that Iranian-sponsored terrorism had dropped off substantially that year, but no evidence was adduced to support that key judgment. Oddly, a few months later CIA's analysis reverted back to the pre-November 1985 line, with no further mention of any drop-off in Iranian support for terrorism.

Also in 1985, Gates commissioned and warped a National Intelligence Estimate suggesting that Soviet influence in Iran could soon grow and pose a danger to U.S. interests. This gave additional cover for the illegal arms sales to Iran.

More serious still was Gates's denial of any awareness of Oliver North's illegal activities in support of the Contra attacks in Nicaragua, despite the fact that senior CIA officials testified that they had informed Gates that they suspected North had diverted funds from the Iranian arms sales for the benefit of the Contras.

Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel for the Iran-Contra investigation (1986-93), later wrote in frustration that, despite Gates's highly touted memory, he "denied recollection of facts thirty-three times."

Gates's dubious explanations about the Iran-Contra scandal forced the withdrawal of his first nomination to be CIA director when he was supposed to replace Casey who died in May 1987. Gates's career appeared to be at a dead end, but in 1989, President George H.W. Bush gave him a spot as deputy national security adviser.

Then, in 1991, when the first President Bush was riding high from his victory in the Persian Gulf War, he decided to roll the dice on placing Gates in as CIA director. The nomination prompted a virtual insurrection among CIA analysts who had suffered under Gates's penchant for cooking intelligence.

Witness after witness explained that Gates was one of the officials most responsible for institutionalizing the politicization of intelligence analysis. He had set the example and promoted malleable managers more interested in career advancement than the ethos of speaking truth to power.

The stakes for analytical integrity were so high that both active-duty and retired officials summoned the courage to testify against the nomination. A highly respected former CIA station chief, Tom Polgar, offered the following at the Gates nomination hearings:

"His proposed appointment as director also raises moral issues. What kind of signal does his re-nomination send to the [CIA] troops? Live long enough, your sins will be forgotten? Serve faithfully the boss of the moment, never mind integrity?"

"Feel free to mislead the Senate — senators forget easily? Keep your mouth shut — if the Special Counsel does not get you, promotion will come your way?"

Despite the remarkable outpouring of protests, however, the fix for Gates was in, thanks to then-chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, David Boren, D-Oklahoma, and his staff director, George Tenet, who cut off lines of inquiries and rounded up the votes.

Still, the issue of politicization and doubts about Gates's honesty led 31 senators to vote against Gates on the Senate floor. Never before had a CIA director nominee received nearly as many nays.

Fall and Rise

After Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1993, he replaced Gates, who retreated to the Pacific Northwest to write his memoir and then look for work. Again, the Bush Family intervened to help, assisting Gates in landing jobs at Texas A&M, where he rose to be the school's president.

However, Gates with his Eagle Scout demeanor remained a favorite with much of the Washington Establishment – and he was heartily welcomed back in 2006 when he arrived to work on the blue-ribbon Iraq Study Group.

Before the panel's work was done, though, President George W. Bush decided to dump Rumsfeld, who was going wobbly on the Iraq War. Bush asked Gates to take over at the Pentagon. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Rumsfeld's Mysterious Resignation.](#)"]

In the brief Senate hearing on the Gates nomination, the troubling Iran-Contra history – and the politicization of CIA intelligence – were happily forgotten.

At the *Washington Post*, columnist David Ignatius rewrote the narrative of Gates's meteoric rise at the CIA, explaining it as a case of worthy meritocracy, that Gates simply "was the brightest Soviet analyst in the [CIA] shop, so Casey soon appointed him deputy director overseeing his fellow analysts."

Gates wasn't; and Casey had something other than analytical expertise in mind.

Now, the savvy Gates appears to have made a new calculation, that it is the right time to join the rats leaving the sinking ship of the Iraq and Afghan war policies.

As I've noted, Gates is not dumb. In his mind, there's no dishonor in doing what he must to preserve and even enhance his reputation as a Washington Establishment savant.

Still, his appeal to the West Point cadets about "duty, honor, country" was a little much for this former Army officer. Gates noted that 80 young West Point cadets had fallen in battle since 9/11 – and surely some in his audience will join them.

They will come back lifeless in what the Pentagon now calls "transfer cases" from the feckless wars that Gates only now tells us should qualify any supporter for a visit to the local shrink.

And, if the *Boston Globe* editorial is any harbinger, Gates may have calculated another smart move. He may have greased the skids for his slide into wise-man-dom. I can visualize a new chapter in Gates's second memoir, "How I Issued MacArthur-Type Warnings All Along."

Were I the parent of Casey Sheehan or one of the nearly 6,000 other U.S. soldiers killed in Bush's two wars, well, I cannot imagine how I could control my anger.

And my outrage would be heightened at hearing Gates "protest too much" as he finished his

“Farewell Address” Friday at West Point:

“As some of you have heard me say before, you need to know that I feel personally responsible for each and every one of you, as if you were my own sons and daughters; for as long as I am secretary of defense that will remain true. ... I bid you farewell and ask God to bless every one of you.”

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