

Robert Gates: As Bad As Rumsfeld?

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“As Bad As Rumsfeld?” The title jars, doesn’t it. The more so, since Defense Secretary Robert Gates found his predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld, such an easy act to follow. But the jarring part reflects how malnourished most of us are on the thin gruel served up by the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM).

Over the past few months, Defense Secretary Robert Gates has generated accolades from FCM pundits—like the Washington Post’s David Ignatius—that read like letters of recommendation to graduate school. This comes as no surprise to those of us familiar with Gates’ dexterity in orchestrating his own advancement. What DOES come as a surprise is the recurring rumor that President-elect Barack Obama may decide to put new wine in old wineskins by letting Gates stay.

What can Barack Obama be thinking?

I suspect that those in Obama’s circle who are promoting Gates may be the same advisers responsible for Obama’s most naïve comment of the recent presidential campaign: that the “surge” of U.S. troops into Iraq in 2007-08 “succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.”

Succeeded? You betcha—the surge was a great success in terms of the administration’s overriding objective. The aim was to stave off definitive defeat in Iraq until President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney could swagger from the West Wing into the western sunset on Jan. 20, 2009. As author Steve Coll has put it, “The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes. By committing to the surge [the president] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, “even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones supporting me.” Later, Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing. Suddenly, with some fancy footwork, it became Laura, Barney—and Robert Gates. And at the turn of 2006-07 the short-term fix was in.

But Please, No More Troops!

By the fall of 2006 it had become unavoidably clear that a new course had to be chosen and implemented in Iraq, and virtually every sober thinker seemed opposed to sending more troops. The senior military, especially CENTCOM commander Gen. John Abizaid and his man on the ground, Gen. George Casey, emphasized that sending still more U.S. troops to Iraq would simply reassure leading Iraqi politicians that they could relax and continue to take forever to get their act together.

Here, for example, is Gen. Abizaid's answer at the Senate Armed Services Committee, Nov. 15, 2006 to Sen. John McCain, who had long been pressing vigorously for sending 20,000 more troops to Iraq:

Senator McCain, I met with every divisional commander, General Casey, the corps commander, General Dempsey, we all talked together. And I said, in your professional opinion, if we were to bring in more American troops now, does it add considerably to our ability to achieve success in Iraq? And they all said no. And the reason is because we want the Iraqis to do more. It is easy for the Iraqis to rely upon to us do this work. I believe that more American forces prevent the Iraqis from doing more, from taking more responsibility for their own future.

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad sent a classified cable to Washington warning that "proposals to send more U.S. forces to Iraq would not produce a long-term solution and would make our policy less, not more, sustainable," according to a New York Times retrospective on the surge by Michael R. Gordon published on Aug. 31, 2008.

Khalilzad was arguing, unsuccessfully, for authority to negotiate a political solution with the Iraqis.

There was also the establishment-heavy Iraq Study Group, created by Congress and led by Republican stalwart James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton. After months of policy review during 2006—with Gates as a member—it issued a final report on Dec. 6, 2006, which began with the ominous sentence, "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating." The report called for:

"A change in the primary mission of US. Forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly... By the first quarter of 2008...all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq."

Robert Gates, who was CIA director under President George H. W. Bush and then president of Texas A&M, had returned to the Washington stage as a member of the Iraq Study Group. While on the ISG, he evidenced no disagreement with its emerging conclusions—at least not until Bush asked him in early November if he might like to become secretary of defense.

Never one to let truth derail ambition, Gates suddenly saw things quite differently. After Bush announced his nomination on Nov. 8, Gates quit the ISG, but kept his counsel about its already widely reported recommendations.

Gates to the Rescue

Gates would do what he needed to do to become defense secretary. At his confirmation hearing on Dec. 5, he obscured his opinions by telling the Senate Armed Services Committee only that "all options are on the table in terms of Iraq." Many Democrats, however, assumed that Gates would help persuade Bush and Cheney to implement the ISG's recommendation of a troop drawdown.

With unanimous Democratic support and only two conservative Republicans opposed, Gates was confirmed by the full Senate on Dec. 6, the same day the ISG report was formally released.

Yet, the little-understood story behind Bush's decision to catapult Robert Gate into his

Pentagon perch hinges on the astonishing fact that Donald Rumsfeld, of all people, was pulling a Robert McNamara; that is, he was going wobbly on a war based largely on his own hubris-laden, misguided advice. As Robert Parry of Consortiumnews.com has reported, in the fall of 2006 Rumsfeld was having a reality attack. In Rumsfeldian parlance, the man had come face to face with a “known known.”

On Nov. 6, 2006, a day before the midterm elections, Rumsfeld sent a memo to the White House (see <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/world/middleeast/03mtext.html>). In the memo Rumsfeld acknowledged, “Clearly, what U.S. forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough.” The rest of his memo sounded very much like the emerging troop-drawdown conclusions of the Iraq Study Group report.

The first 80 percent of Rumsfeld’s memo addressed “Illustrative Options,” including his preferred—or “above the line”—options like “an accelerated drawdown of U.S. bases...to five by July 2007” and withdrawal of U.S. forces “from vulnerable positions—cities, patrolling, etc....so the Iraqis know they have to pull up their socks, step up and take responsibility for their country.”

Finally, Rumsfeld had begun to listen to his generals and others who knew which end was up.

The hurdle? Bush and Cheney were not about to follow Rumsfeld’s example in going wobbly. Like Robert McNamara at a similar juncture during Vietnam, Rumsfeld had to be let go before he caused a president to “lose a war.”

Acutely sensitive to this political bugaboo, Rumsfeld included the following sentences at the end of the preferred-options section of his Nov. 6 memo:

“Announce that whatever new approach the U.S. decides on, the U.S. is doing so on a trial basis. This will give us the ability to readjust and move to another course, if necessary, and therefore not ‘lose.’” (emphasis added)

The remainder of the memo listed “Below the Line—less attractive options.” The top three in the “less attractive” category were:

- “-Continue on the current path.
- Move a large fraction of all U.S. forces into Baghdad to attempt to control it.
- Increase Brigade Combat Teams and U.S. forces substantially.”

In other words, a surge. (It is a safe bet that people loyal to Rumsfeld at the National Security Council alerted him to the surge-type of plans being hatched off line by neo-conservative strategists, and that he and his generals wanted to bury them well “below the line.”)

But in the White House’s view, Rumsfeld had outlived his usefulness. One can assume that he floated these trial balloons with Cheney and others, before he sent over the actual memo on Nov. 6, 2006. What were Bush and Cheney to do?

Exit Left

It was awkward. Right up to the week before the mid-term election on Nov. 7, 2006,

President Bush had kept insisting that he intended to keep Rumsfeld in place for the next two years. Suddenly, the president had to deal with Rumsfeld's apostasy.

The secretary of defense had strayed off the reservation and he was putting his "above-the-line" recommendations in writing, no less. Rumsfeld had let reality get to him, together with the very strong protestations of all senior uniformed officers save one—the ambitious David Petraeus, fingered to become Petraeus ex machina for the White House. With the bemedaled Petraeus in the wings, the White House just needed a new Pentagon chief who could be counted on to take Rumsfeld's place, do the White House's bidding, and trot out Petraeus as needed.

On Nov. 5, 2006, Bush had a one-on-one with Gates in Crawford and the deal was struck. Forget the torturously hammered-out recommendations of the Iraq Study Group; forget what the military commanders were saying. Gates suddenly found the surge an outstanding idea.

Well, not really. That's just what he let Bush believe. Gates is second to none—not even Petraeus—in ambition and self-promotion. He wanted to be secretary of defense, to be back at center stage in Washington after nearly 14 years in exile from the big show. And so he quickly agreed to tell Gen. Abizaid to retire; offer Gen. Casey a sinecure as Army chief of staff, providing he kept his mouth shut; and eagle-scout his way through Senate confirmation with the help of pundits like Ignatius composing panegyrics in honor of "Gates the realist."

So relieved were the Senators to be rid of the hated-but-feared Rumsfeld, that the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Dec. 5 on Gates' nomination had the aura of a pajama party (I was there). Gates told them bedtime stories. He said he thought there were no new ideas to be had in addressing the conflict in Iraq, and vowed to show "great deference to the judgment of generals." (sic)

Trying to Explain the Surge

It was hardly two years ago, but memories fade and the FCM, of course, is no help in shedding light on what actually happened. Gates did his part in getting rid of Abizaid and Casey, but the administration faltered embarrassingly in coming up with a rationale to "justify" the surge. The truth, of course, was not an option. The White House could not exactly say, "We simply cannot live with the thought of losing a war before we leave town."

On Dec. 20, 2006, President Bush told the Washington Post that he was "inclined to believe we do need to increase our troops, the Army and Marines." He added, tellingly, "There's got to be a specific mission that can be accomplished with the addition of more troops." And he said he would look to Gates, just back from a quick trip to Baghdad, to help explain.

By way of preliminary explanation for the surge, President Bush wandered back and forth between "ideological struggle" and "sectarian violence." He told the Post, "I'm going to keep repeating this over and over again, that I believe we're in an ideological struggle" and, besides, "sectarian violence [is] obviously the real problem we face." (sic)

When it became clear that those dogs wouldn't hunt, the White House justified the surge as necessary to give Iraqi government leaders "breathing space" to work out their differences. Breathing space for the leading Iraqi officials was the rationale offered by Bush in a major

address on Jan 10, 2007. Pulling out all the stops, he raised the specter of another 9/11, and spoke of the “decisive ideological struggle of our time.”

Bush dismissed those who “are concerned that the Iraqis are becoming too dependent on the United States” and those whose “solution is to scale back America’s efforts in Baghdad—or announce a phased withdrawal of our combat forces.” The president did warn that the year ahead would be “bloody and violent, even if our strategy works.”

One would be tempted to laugh at Bush’s self-absorption—and Gates’ ambition—were we not talking about the completely unnecessary killing of over 1,000 U.S. troops—a quarter of all U.S. troops killed in this godforsaken war/occupation.

In reality, by throwing 20,000-30,000 additional troops into Baghdad, Bush and Cheney were the ones who got the two-year breathing space.

But what about that? What about the thousand-plus U.S. troops killed during the surge? The tens of thousand Iraqis? The hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes in the Baghdad area?

I fear the attitude was this: Nobody important will get killed; just a bunch of Iraqis and GIs mostly from small-town and inner-city America. And, anyway, our soldiers and Marines all volunteered, didn’t they? (I almost did something violent to the last person I heard say that.)

Bush, Cheney, and Gates apparently deemed it a small price to pay for enabling them to blame a successor administration for the inevitable withdrawal from America’s first large-scale war of aggression.

And sure enough, in late 2006 a small group of “neo-conservatives,” including members of Bush’s National Security Council, came up with a plan called “Changing the Dynamics: Surge and Fight, Create Breathing Space and Then Accelerate the Transition.” It called for a substantial troop increase in Baghdad and other hot spots.

Rumsfeld Out, Gates In: Clear Sailing

The FCM missed it (surprise, surprise) but one did not have to be a crackerjack intelligence analyst to see what was happening. At the time, Col. W. Patrick Lang, USA (retired), and I wrote a piece (See <http://www.consortiumnews.com/2006/121906b.html>, Dec. 20, 2006) in which we exposed the chicanery and branded such a surge strategy “nothing short of immoral, in view of the predicable troop losses and the huge number of Iraqis who would meet violent injury and death.”

Surprisingly, we were joined by Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Oregon, who explained to ABC’s George Stephanopoulos why Smith had said on the Senate floor that U.S. policy on Iraq may be “criminal.”

“You can use any adjective you want, George. But I have long believed that in a military context, when you do the same thing over and over again without a clear strategy for victory, at the expense of your young people in arms, that is dereliction. That is deeply immoral.”

Go West, Young Man

There are a host of reasons why Robert Gates should not be asked to stay on by President-elect Obama. Robert Parry has put together much of Gates' history in Parry's 2004 book, *Secrecy & Privilege*; readers may also wish to see what former intelligence analysts and I, who knew Gates at CIA, have written by going to Consortiumnews.com's Gates archive.

For me, Gates' role in the unnecessary killing of still more Americans and Iraqis is quite enough to disqualify him. I have known him for almost 40 years; he has always been transparently ambitious, but he is also bright. He knew better; and he did it anyway.

One can only hope that, once President-elect Obama has time to focus seriously on prospective cabinet appointments, he will discount advice from those taken in by the cheerleading for Gates or from the kind of dullard who suggested Obama finesse the FCM's simplistic embrace of the surge by saying it "succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

For Gates, Rumsfeld was an extremely easy act to follow. But, at least in one sense, Gates is worse than Rumsfeld, for Rumsfeld had finally begun to listen to the right people and adjust. It now seems the height of irony that the adjustments he proposed in his memo of Nov. 6, 2006 would have had most U.S. troops out of Iraq by now.

But can one portray Gates as worse than Rumsfeld across the board? I think not. When you crank in torture, lying, and total disrespect for law, Rumsfeld has the clear edge in moral turpitude.

Still, I suspect this matters little to the thousands now dead because of the surge that Gates did so much to enable—and to the families of the fallen.

Surely, it should not be too much to expect that President-elect Obama find someone more suitable to select for secretary of defense than an unprincipled chameleon like Gates.

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