

Robert Gates-Gate

Character Counts; So Does Integrity

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[Full disclosure: I am in Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's debt for TV notoriety on May 4, when my impromptu questioning of him elicited denials easily shown to be false. I have known Robert Gates, whom the president has picked to succeed Rumsfeld, for 36 years, starting when Gates was a journeyman analyst in CIA's Soviet Foreign Policy branch which I headed.]

As the occupation of Iraq chews up a more and more of our troops, President George W. Bush has jettisoned "stay the course" in favor of "necessary adjustments." This week he showed how quickly he can adjust to the mid-term election results when he jettisoned Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, barely a week after telling reporters Rumsfeld was doing a "fantastic job" and that he wanted him to stay on for the next two years.

It had been clear for weeks that the election would be a referendum on the war in Iraq and that Republican losses would be substantial. And Rumsfeld and Bush saw a mutual need to avoid the acute political embarrassment that would inevitably attend Rumsfeld's grilling by congressional committees chaired by Democrats. Besides, who better to try to blame for the "long, hard slog" in Iraq than the fellow who not only coined the expression but made it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rumsfeld may even have been willing to acquiesce reluctantly in serving as scapegoat for the Iraq fiasco. He would have seen merit not only in avoiding another acrimonious tangle with Sen. Hillary Clinton (D, NY), but also in helping Bush project an image of flexibility and decisiveness in the face of the post-election sea change in Congress. And one cannot rule out possible pangs of conscience for the horrific human cost resulting from his supreme arrogance and his susceptibility to the illusory strategic dreams of "the crazies"-the so-called "neo-conservatives" whom President George W. Bush brought back to Washington.

Neo-Conservatives Eat Their Own

Former allies are the most prominent among the legions now denouncing Rumsfeld. The abandonment is enough to pin down even an old wrestler like Rumsfeld. Perhaps the most unkindest cut of all came from longstanding supporter "Cakewalk-Ken" Adelman who, like other neo-conservatives, have turned mercilessly on their old, now discredited friend and colleague. In an interview for David Rose's "Neo Culpa" in Vanity Fair, Adelman comes across as feeling jilted.

"We're losing in Iraq... I've worked with [Rumsfeld] three times in my life. I've been to each of his houses in Chicago, Taos, Santa Fe, Santo Domingo, and Las Vegas. I'm very, very fond of him, but I'm crushed by his performance. Did he change, or were we wrong in the past? Or is it that he was never really challenged before? I don't know. He certainly fooled me."

As the saying goes, with friends like that, who needs Hillary?...or the kind of pummeling Rumsfeld has already received from the likes of the Army-Navy-Air Force-Marine Corps Times?

I almost feel sorry for Donald Rumsfeld. And I'm not just saying that because, with the "Military Commissions Act" now signed into law, he can declare me-or anyone-an unlawful enemy combatant, "disappear" me into some black hole, and have me tortured for the rest of my days. Rather, it is a conspicuous case of betrayal by fair-weather friends-and chutzpah-laden disingenuousness. Et tu, Cakewalk-Ken! The neo-conservatives are attempting to push the blame onto Rumsfeld for the debacle of which they were the intellectual authors. Parallel attempts by administration officials to scapegoat Rumsfeld will be equally transparent and unconvincing.

The "Cheney-Rumsfeld cabal" (coined by Col. Larry Wilkerson who, as chief of staff to former Secretary of State Colin Powell, was in a position to know) is now down to one. And how much clout the vice president has lost with the election results and departure of his bosom buddy is perhaps the largest unanswered question. But if Cheney remains éminence grise and if past is precedent, Gates will defer to Cheney-probably even more than the president does. For if there is one distinctive hallmark of Eagle Scout Gates' career, it is that he has always earned what might now be called the "Colin Powell Loyalty Patch"-loyalty to the next person up, whatever the content of their character.

A Fresh Approach?

Gates will help bring, in the president's words, "a fresh perspective and new ideas on how America can achieve our goals in Iraq." How could he not? But there are distinct limits to what he can contribute, and he has never been one to adopt positions independent of what the boss thinks or says. Most important, as noted this week by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), prospective chair of the House International Affairs Committee, "You can't unscramble the omelet and the tremendous mistakes that were made after major military operations; I don't see any magical solutions."

It seems only fair at the outset to give Gates the benefit of the doubt. He could conceivably whittle away some of the influence Cheney has enjoyed over the past six years-the need for a fresh approach to Iraq being so obvious and urgent. At very least, Gates can hardly match the disaster Rumsfeld wrought with his fancy language and fanciful ideas; but this amounts to damning with faint praise. Unless Gates' years outside the Beltway have wrought major behavioral change, it is highly likely that in the end he will bend obediently to the wishes of Cheney and Bush. Those close to Gates now say he has been privately critical of the way the war has been conducted. But he is the consummate chameleon, with an extraordinary capability to change colors quickly in adapting to a new environment.

Clearly the beneficiary of the compared-to-what syndrome, Gates has been getting unduly positive press treatment since the announcement of his nomination. It is one thing to give him the benefit of the doubt; it is quite another to ignore the considerable baggage he brings with him from past service.

Character Counts; So Does Integrity

Those of us who had front-row seat to watch Gates' handling of substantive intelligence cannot overlook the manner in which he cooked it to the recipe of whomever he reported to.

A protégé of William Casey, President Ronald Reagan's CIA Director, Gates learned well from his mentor. In 1995, Gates told the *Washington Post's* Walter Pincus that he watched Casey on "issue after issue sit in meetings and present intelligence framed in terms of the policy he wanted pursued." Gates followed suit, cooking the analysis to justify policies favored by Casey and the White House.

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

I was amused to read in David Ignatius' *Washington Post* column this week that Gates "was the brightest Soviet analyst in the [CIA] shop, so Casey soon appointed him deputy director overseeing his fellow analysts." He wasn't; and Casey had something other than expertise in mind. Talk to anyone who was there at the time (except the sycophants Gates co-opted) and they will explain that Gates' meteoric career had mostly to do with his uncanny ability to see a Russian under every rock turned over by Casey. Those of Gates' subordinates willing to see two Russians became branch chiefs; three won you a division. I exaggerate only a little.

To Casey, the Communists could never change; and Gorbachev was simply cleverer than his predecessors. With his earlier training in our Soviet Foreign Policy branch (and a doctorate in Soviet affairs no less), Gates knew better. Yet he carried Casey's water, 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. In July 1987 in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair, Shultz told Congress: "I had come to have grave doubts about the objectivity and reliability of some of the intelligence I was getting."

Iran-Contra

And well he might. In the fall of 1985, for example, there was an abrupt departure from CIA's analytical line that Iran was supporting terrorism. On November 22, 1985 the agency reported that Iranian-sponsored terrorism had dropped off substantially in 1985, 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.

It could be more than coincidental that the US illegally shipped Hawk missiles to Iran in late November 1985. When questions were raised later about this zigzag in intelligence, Stephen Engelberg of the *New York Times* quoted senior CIA official Clair George saying this was "an example of a desperate attempt to try to sort of prove something was happening to make the policy [arms to Iran for hostages] look good, and it wasn't."

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 US interests. This provided additional "justification" for the illegal arms-for-hostages deal with Iran.

More serious still was Gates' denial of 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 North had diverted funds from the Iranian arms sales for the benefit of the Contras. The independent counsel for the Iran-Contra investigation (1986-93),

Lawrence Walsh, later wrote in frustration that, despite Gates' highly touted memory, he "denied recollection of facts thirty-three times."

In 1991, when President George H. W. Bush nominated Robert Gates for the post of Director of Central Intelligence, there was a virtual insurrection among CIA analysts who had suffered under his penchant for cooking intelligence. The stakes for integrity of analysis were so high that many still employed at the agency summoned the courage to testify against the nomination. But the fix was in, thanks to then-chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, David Boren and his staff director, George Tenet. The issue was considered so important and the damaging evidence so abundant, however, that thirty-one Senators voted against Gates when the committee forwarded his nomination. Never before or since has a CIA director nominee received nearly as many nays.

A highly respected former CIA station chief, Tom Polgar, offered the following at the 1991 Gates nomination hearings:

"His proposed appointment as director also raises moral issues. What kind of signal does his re-nomination send to the 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?"

"Fixing" Intelligence Can Be Career Enhancing

Gates is the one most responsible for institutionalizing the politicization of intelligence analysis. He set the example and promoted malleable managers more interested in career advancement than the ethos of speaking truth to power. In 2002, it was those managers who then-CIA Director George Tenet ordered to prepare what has become known as the "Whore of Babylon"-the October 1 National Intelligence Misestimate on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He instructed them to adhere to the guidelines set by Vice President Dick Cheney in his Aug. 26, 2002 preemptive speech and to complete it in three weeks (in order to force a congressional vote before the mid-term election). To their discredit, senior sycophants saluted and produced the most fraudulent-and consequential-NIE in the history of American intelligence.

Those commenting on the Gates nomination so far seem largely unaware of this history. The exception is Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ), who worked in the State Department's intelligence bureau and now sits on the House Intelligence Committee. Pointing out Gates' reputation for putting pressure on analysts to shape their conclusions to fit administration policies, Holt called the nomination "deeply troubling" and stressed that the confirmation hearings "should be thorough and probing." Too bad Holt is not in the Senate.

Confirming Gates Must Not Be a Slam Dunk

There are early indications that Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI), ranking Democrat on the Armed Forces Committee, intends to acquiesce in the maneuvering of the White House's cat's paw chairman of that committee, Sen. John Warner (R, VA), to rush the nomination through the lame-duck Senate before a new Congress is in place. At times in the past Levin has shown considerable courage, but so many years in the minority seem to have dulled his edge, prompting him to acquiesce in compromises to which he would have been allergic in the

past-the unsavory deal with Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC) on the rights of “detainees,” for example. Not to mention Levin’s sudden cave-in, in the aftermath of 9/11, on funding for the National Missile Defense program, which he earlier recognized as obscenely expensive, of unproven reliability, and of dubious utility given the changing nature of the threats to our security.

Whether Levin steps up to the plate on Gates will be an early indication of whether the election has implanted any spine into Democrats-whether they still have it in them to act like winners. Levin has had a running dispute with the Bush administration regarding what he calls a lack of candor (the correct word is “lies”) in sworn testimony on Iraq. If he allows the Gates nomination to sail through without a thorough investigation of Gates’ record, he will be giving a *nihil obstat* to the practice of no-fault dissembling before Congress.

In 1991, Levin joined 30 other Senators in voting against Gates’ confirmation as CIA director because Gates was a good deal less than candid about his role in Iran-Contra and unconvincing in his denials that he had politicized intelligence. But Levin said this week that he wanted to give Gates a “fair and fresh look; a lot of time has passed.”

Fair enough. If Levin wants to know what has happened in the interim, he can start with the fresh, documentary evidence adduced in award-winning investigative reporter Robert Parry’s recent article, “The Secret World of Robert Gates [1].” Parry’s article contains unique and highly damaging information on Gates’ role in the original “October Surprise”-the successful Republican effort to prevent the release of the 52 American hostages imprisoned for 14 months in the US embassy in Tehran until Ronald Reagan had won the election in 1980-and on Gates’ involvement in the illegal sale of weapons, including cluster bombs to Iraq in the early eighties.

Another excellent source of updated information on Gates’ involvement in the secret arming of Saddam Hussein (yes, the same Saddam) and the Iran-Contra scandal is the transcript of an interview of Robert Parry and former CIA analyst Mel Goodman [2] on Democracy Now, November 9th.

Gates knew about many of Oliver North’s illegal activities, but under oath, he just couldn’t remember. And Gates has been able to escape close scrutiny of his own involvement in extralegal and illegal activities largely because there are far too few journalists with the enterprise and courage of Robert Parry. While all the above-mentioned escapades are significantly damaging, the corruption of intelligence should be placed front and center, given the huge role this played in 2002 in deceiving Congress in to voting for an unnecessary war.

Whether or not Levin is fully aware of it, Gates is the archetypal intelligence fixer, employing all the tricks of that dishonorable trade-including memory loss, when caught. I find myself wondering if Levin still has it in him to stand up and say, “Never Again.” Even before he formally becomes chair of Armed Services, Levin has the power to require a serious vetting of Gates’ past behavior and to make “Never Again” stick.

At a hearing on his first (abortive) nomination to be CIA director in 1987, Gates denied that he had tailored intelligence to please his superiors, adding, “Sycophants can only rise to a certain level.” Whether that was an unintentionally prophetic observation or not now depends largely on Carl Levin and his newly empowered, but apparently not yet emboldened, fellow Democrats.

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