

The Danger of Keeping Robert Gates

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Global Research, January 04, 2009

consortiumnews.com 13 November 2008

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

Press reports say Barack Obama may retain George W. Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates as a gesture to war-time continuity, bipartisanship and respect for the Washington insider community, which has embraced Gates as something of a new Wise Man.

However, 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."

During [a campaign interview](#) with the Washington Post, Obama said, "I have been troubled by ... the politicization of intelligence in this administration." But 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.

In a recent book, [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#), former CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman identifies Gates as the chief action officer for the Reagan administration's drive to tailor intelligence reporting to White House political desires. A top "Kremlinologist," Goodman describes how Gates reversed a CIA tradition of delivering tough-minded intelligence reports with "the bark on."

That ethos began to erode in 1973 - with President Richard Nixon's appointment of James Schlesinger as CIA director and Gerald Ford's choice of George H.W. Bush in 1976 - but the principle of objectivity wasn't swept away until 1981 when Ronald Reagan put in his campaign chief, William Casey, as CIA director.

Casey then chose the young and ambitious Robert Gates to run the analytical division. Rather than respect the old mandate for "bark on" intelligence, "Bob Gates turned that approach on its head in the 1980s and tried hard to anticipate the views of policymakers in order to pander to their needs," Goodman wrote.

"Gates consistently told his analysts to make sure never to 'stick your finger in the eye of the policymaker.'"

It didn't take long for the winds of politicization to blow through the halls of CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia.

"Bill Casey and Bob Gates guided the first institutionalized 'cooking of the books' at the CIA in the 1980s, with a particular emphasis on tailoring intelligence dealing with the Soviet Union, Central America, and Southwest Asia," Goodman wrote.

"Casey's first NIE [National Intelligence Estimate] as CIA director, dealing with the Soviet

Union and international terrorism, became an exercise in politicization. Casey and Gates pushed this line in order to justify more U.S. covert action in the Third World.

“In 1985, they ordered an intelligence assessment of a supposed Soviet plot against the Pope, hoping to produce a document that would undermine Secretary of State [George] Shultz’s efforts to improve relations with Moscow. The CIA also produced an NIE in 1985 that was designed to produce an intelligence rationale for arms sales to Iran.”

Hyping Soviet Power

One of the key distortions pushed by Casey and Gates was the notion that the Soviet Union was a military behemoth with a robust economy – rather than a decaying power with a shriveling GNP. The logic of the Casey-Gates position was that exaggerating the Soviet menace justified higher U.S. military spending and U.S. support for bloody brush-fire wars – central elements of Reagan’s foreign policy.

Since the mid-1970s, the CIA’s analytical division had been noting cracks in the Soviet empire as well as signs of its economic-technological decline. But that analysis was unwelcome among Reagan’s true-believers.

So, in 1983 when CIA analysts sought to correct over-estimations of Soviet military spending – to 1 percent a year, down from 4 to 5 percent – Gates blocked the revision, according to Goodman.

From his front-row seat at CIA headquarters, Goodman watched in dismay as Gates used his bureaucratic skills to consolidate the agency’s new role underpinning favored White House policies.

“While serving as deputy director for intelligence from 1982 to 1986, Gates wrote the manual for manipulating and centralizing the intelligence process to get the desired intelligence product,” Goodman stated.

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,” Goodman wrote, noting that he was one of them.

“The Reagan administration would not accept any sign of Soviet weakness or constraint, and CIA director Casey and deputy director Gates made sure intelligence analysis presented the Russian Bear as threatening and warlike,” Goodman wrote.

These institutional blinders remained in place for the rest of the 1980s.

“As a result, the CIA missed the radical change that Mikhail Gorbachev represented to Soviet politics and Soviet-American relations, and missed the challenges to his rule and his ultimate demise in 1991,” Goodman wrote.

When the Soviet Union – the CIA’s principal intelligence target – collapsed without any timely warning to the U.S. government, the CIA analytical division was derided for “missing” this historic moment. But the CIA didn’t as much “miss” the Soviet collapse as it was blinded

by Gates and other ideological taskmasters to the reality playing out in plain sight.

Goodman was not alone in identifying Gates as the chief culprit in the politicization of the CIA's intelligence product. Indeed, Gates's 1991 confirmation hearing to be George H.W. Bush's CIA director marked an extraordinary outpouring of career CIA officers going public with inside stories about how Gates had corrupted the intelligence product.

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 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 slip past relying on his personal charm and Boy Scout looks. For his 1991 confirmation, influential friends like Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren, D-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, even 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.

Damaging Documents

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.

"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 classified Russian report said.

In the 1980s, Moscow was very interested in the U.S. dealings with the new Islamic government of Iran, a neighboring country to the Soviet Union.

In July 1981, the Soviets even shot down an Argentine-registered plane that strayed into

Soviet airspace while delivering a supply of weapons from Israel to Iran, a secret shipment that had the Reagan administration's blessing.

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 chairman, Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, had already decided to get rid of the October Surprise case as part of a sweeping clean of investigations into alleged 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 several months.

Instead, Hamilton ordered the inquiry wrapped up – and the October Surprise allegations rejected – all the better to start the new Clinton administration with a bipartisan gesture to the Republicans.

Like much of the other incriminating evidence, the Russian report was shoved into a box and stuck in a remote Capitol Hill storage room. I discovered it in late 1994 after gaining access to the task force's documents.

By then, however, there was almost no media interest in the “old” scandals of the Reagan-Bush years. Not only were those stories dated, but many of the central players were either dead or – like Gates – out of government.

[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](#).]

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 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 William Casey and involved his deputy, Robert 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, then 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 [William] 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 and then attacked by Clinton administration prosecutors. They 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-I-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.)

Great Timing

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, 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. Instead of negotiating with Iran and Syria as the ISG wanted, Bush sent aircraft carrier strike groups to the region.

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 remains a favorite of the Washington insiders, many of whom – like Lee Hamilton – have expressed warm support for the idea of keeping him on at least for the early part of the Obama presidency.

If the President-elect is serious about taking that advice, he first might want to review the extensive evidence of Gates’s devious behavior and consider whether Gates deserves the trust of the American people – and their newly elected government.

This is the third part of a series on the political realities that will face President Obama. For part one, click on “[Can the Republicans Change?](#)” For part two, click on “[Obama: Beware the Lessons of '93.](#)”

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 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 Amazon.com.

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