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SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

A CIA insider's take on Gates

BY RAY MCGOVERN

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The lame-duck Republican-led Senate Armed Services Committee seems determined to force through confirmation of Robert Gates to replace Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense. The hurry is synthetic -- and totally unnecessary.

I know, I know -- everyone but Barney the dog wants Rumsfeld out of the Pentagon *tout suite*. According to a Pentagon spokesman, however, Gates has commitments that would preclude his taking the reins at the Pentagon until January. So, senators, relax already. Let Rumsfeld spend December at one of his houses in Taos, while you do your homework. There is no exaggerating the importance of the Gates candidacy.

Even Democrats on the committee are saying Gates is a shoo-in barring an unexpected disclosure. But the likelihood of such a disclosure seems nil, with Gates the sole witness at his hearing Tuesday. Still, Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J., who was an analyst in the State Department's intelligence bureau and now sits on the House Intelligence Committee, has called Gates' nomination "deeply troubling" and appealed for hearings that are "thorough and probing."

Gates has primarily two things going for him, which hardly suffice to justify confirmation:

- **The Anyone-But-Rumsfeld syndrome**, which has understandable appeal. Just how much appeal was brought home to me last week, when a former colleague who worked closely with Gates during Iran-Contra said, "Despite my misgivings, I would support Satan himself in preference to Rumsfeld."
- **The Not-Enough-Evidence-To-Indict bromide** offered reluctantly by Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel who led the investigation of the Iran-Contra affair. Walsh was frustrated by Gates' remarkable inability to recall explosive information that his subordinates swore under oath they had told him "about Oliver North's illegal activities," for example. (Gates' supporters still brag about his "eidetic [institutional] memory.") Walsh wrote:

"The statements of Gates often seemed scripted and less than candid. Nevertheless . . . a jury could find the evidence left a reasonable doubt that Gates either obstructed official inquiries or that his two demonstrably incorrect statements were deliberate lies."

Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

The Armed Services Committee's ranking member, Carl Levin, D-Mich., who voted against Gates' nomination in 1991 to be director of the CIA, said he wanted to give Gates a "fresh look; a lot of time has passed." Well, highly damaging evidence has come to light since 1991, implicating Gates in some of the most serious national-security scandals of the 1980s. Veteran investigative reporter Robert Parry, for one, has been providing chapter and verse on Consortiumnews.com.

For example, in January 1995, Howard Teicher, who served on President Reagan's National Security Council staff, submitted a sworn affidavit detailing the activities of Gates and his then-boss, CIA Director William Casey, in secretly providing arms to Iraq. This violated the Arms Export Control Act in two ways: ignoring the requirement to notify Congress; and providing arms to a state designated as a sponsor of terrorism.

It gets worse. To grease the skids for this dubious adventure, Gates ordered his more malleable subordinates at the CIA to cook up intelligence reports to provide some comfort to Reagan in acquiescing to these activities. A National Intelligence Estimate of May 1985 predicted Soviet inroads in Iran if the United States did not reach out to "moderates" within the Iranian leadership.

In addition, Gates' analysts were pressed to publish several reports beginning in late 1985 -- as HAWK anti-aircraft missiles wended their way to Tehran -- that Iranian-sponsored terrorism had "dropped off substantially." There was no persuasive evidence to support that judgment.

As part of my official duties at the time, I took steps to make Gates aware of this a month before he wrote in articles in the Washington Post, Foreign Affairs magazine and our professional journal Studies in Intelligence that, "No CIA publication asserted these things." I then tried in vain to get him to correct the record.

Hold the nomination

Since this episode casts serious doubt on Gates' veracity, I felt a responsibility to bring it to the attention of the senators weighing Gates' nomination to become CIA director in 1991. On Oct. 7, 1991, I swore in an affidavit laying out the facts and gave it to the Senate Intelligence Committee. I heard nothing.

It is difficult to believe that senators have become so used to being diddled by administration officials and nominees that they shy away from looking seriously into such matters. After the brutal nomination hearings in 1991, then-Sen. Tom Daschle addressed the \$64,000 question -- "Whether Gates might continue to trim the truth" -- and insisted: "We cannot afford to take that chance."

Nor should we take that chance now. As Iraq goes down the drain, and "the crazies" accelerate their campaign to bomb Iran,

what is more important than a defense secretary from whom Congress can expect truthful testimony? Hold the Gates nomination over to January.

Ray McGovern was a CIA analyst from 1963 to 1990 and Robert Gates' branch chief in the early 1970s. McGovern now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

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