

Rumsfeld Out, Gates In?

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | November 10, 2006

The change in control of both houses of Congress was not the only bad news for George Bush. The day after the election, he announced the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense and the nomination of Robert Gates as his successor.

Coming just a week after the president told reporters that he wanted Rumsfeld to stay for the duration of his tenure in the White House, the change in the Pentagon's civilian head caught many by surprise. There was also a lot of relief. In the European parliament, 200 socialist deputies hailed "the beginning of the end of a six-year nightmare for the world."

Not necessarily. Changing personalities at the Pentagon does not necessarily mean that policy will change. In fact, Bush stated flatly that the goal is still "victory"—an Iraq that can defend itself from terrorists and the meddling of its neighbors, provide basic services for its people, and is fully integrated into the world economy.

So the question really is whether Robert Gates can offer a different direction—and whether Bush will listen?

Confirming Gates

First, however, the Senate will hold confirmation hearings for Gates, who currently is president of Texas A&M. Gates, no stranger to Washington, knows the process well. In 1966, after two years in the Air Force working with intercontinental ballistic missiles, he joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as a Soviet analyst. He rose rapidly through the ranks until President Reagan appointed him deputy director of the CIA in 1986. One year later, he faced confirmation hearings to replace William Casey as director of the CIA.

In the meantime, however, the Iran-Contra scandal had blown wide open. A special prosecutor was investigating grounds for criminal indictments and Congress was holding extensive hearings. Many in Congress and in the nation were skeptical of Gates' claim that, until very late in the action, he was largely "out of the loop." The sale of weapons and spare parts to Iran and the diversion of the

proceeds to the Nicaraguan Contras was a major operation. Even if directly orchestrated by Casey and Oliver North of the National Security Council staff, Gates most likely knew something of the scheme. That Casey and the CIA were directly aiding and abetting the Contras to overthrow the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega only fueled suspicions.

Facing an uphill confirmation battle, Gates withdrew his name. He remained deputy director of the CIA until 1989 when he joined the National Security Council. There he stayed through the 1991 war that ousted Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. In March 1991, President George H. W. Bush nominated Gates (for a second time) to be head of the CIA. The Senate confirmed Gates in early November of that year, and he served until 1993.

When he appears before the Senate Armed Services Committee for confirmation hearings to be secretary of defense, Gates will see some familiar faces from his past, especially if the hearings take place in the lame duck session. Among those who spoke against the nominee in 1991 are current members such as Carl Levin and Edward Kennedy.

They may well resurrect the charges lodged against Gates in 1987 and in 1991. They may ask him again whether he lied to Congress about the extent of his involvement in or knowledge of Iran-Contra. They may want to know whether the CIA, under his watch, altered national intelligence estimates on Soviet capabilities to make the threat seem worse than warranted. Their questioning might probe his involvement in providing military equipment and intelligence to Saddam Hussein during the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War, all of which helped Saddam in his battles against U.S. forces in 1991 in Operation Desert Storm. More broadly, Gates may be held to account once again for the CIA's failure to predict the demise of the



Soviet Union, the lack of monitoring of Saddam's progress toward developing a nuclear weapon in the 1980s, and the "politicizing" of intelligence to support presidential biases.

Anything but Rummy

Whether the U.S. Senate, in the upcoming lame-duck session controlled by the Republicans, will try to push through abbreviated hearings and confirm Gates as soon as possible or leave that task for the new Senate remains unclear. Regardless, even though he's been out of government service for a dozen years except to serve on special commissions such as the current Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group, Gates will most likely be confirmed – if for no other reason than the Democrats are eager to have any one other than Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense.

The real test will be whether the change at the Pentagon and the change in Congress will produce any significant alteration in U.S. strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the very least, the U.S. public has expressed its dissatisfaction with the war choices of the administration and Congress. Needed now is planning for the withdrawal of U.S. forces

from Iraq. And the United States must begin to prepare itself psychologically for the day that Iraqis actually assume the full burden of devising a political solution that will be fair and workable for all Iraqi citizens.

On this point, the public will quickly glimpse just how Gates will fit in with other administration players. There may be White House pressure to implement the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group—due out December 7—no questions asked. Gates will have to take a principled stand, if warranted, or be seen as "politicizing" the war.

Mr. Gates, should he be confirmed, has his work cut out for him—as does the new Congress. And neither has time to waste.

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