

Jim Hoagland

A Tale ^{part} Of Two ^{Two} Nominees

We have learned next to nothing about Clarence Thomas, a good deal about Robert M. Gates and even more about George Bush during this dramatic confirmation season. What we have learned—and not learned—about them is hardly reassuring.

The most important lessons, however, have to do with institutions, not individuals. The hearings revealed the mounting problems of America's intelligence community and why Gates's confirmation now would aggravate those problems. The flaws of the Senate confirmation system, "politicized" almost beyond repair, have also become more apparent.

The vote on Gates has become a Hobson's choice. The Thomas case is simpler.

Thomas has openly stonewalled the Senate Judiciary Committee. His White House handlers assume this is a sufficient strategy for an undistinguished and inexperienced jurist who grew up poor and black in the South and who is willing to abandon almost every position he has taken in public life to get to the Supreme Court. They are, alas, probably right.

The most telling criticism of this strategy comes not from the professional black "leaders" of the civil rights community or those Democratic senators such as Edward M. Kennedy who have forfeited their claim to moral authority in these matters.

The important criticism comes from black conservatives such as Brent Staples, an editorial writer for The New York Times. Staples observes that Thomas's evasive and highly suspect answers under oath "squandered . . . a black conservative's chance to make his case before an audience of millions." Thomas "let slip the chance to jettison archaic notions about race in America, among them the false impression that conservatism among blacks is novel."

Thomas emerges as a man without a guiding star, or, worse, a man without even a compass.

Bush uses Thomas as a hired gun, not as an ideological companion. The president is interested in the politics of the Thomas case, not in ideology or jurisprudence. History can only judge Bush harshly for this open trifling with the Supreme Court.

The Gates hearings bear the same decep-

tive stamp of Bushism. Superficially, Gates is portrayed as a hard-liner in trouble because he was too tough on the Soviets. The testimony by some of the CIA analysts who oppose him bolsters this image, since their words do have the ring of a revenge campaign by the "softies" at Langley.

But Gates's portrayal of himself is not that of a man willing to tie his hands to the steering wheel of that Mustang he drove into Washington and go over the cliff for a belief. He is a man who marched—ever upward—to the tempo of three very different presidents at the White House.

That is the chief quality Bush wants in his Director of Intelligence. He wants another man without much of a compass. Bush in fact wants to be his own CIA chief.

The president, it is said, loves to pore over raw intelligence cables, making his own judgments and bypassing those dense, lowest-common-denominator analyses that sparked bitter argument in the Senate Intelligence Committee hearings but which have little impact on policy makers.

In his spirited 20-point defense, which bristled with indignation, Gates trotted out an analysis he had written that almost plaintively suggested that the CIA should explore more actively the possibility that Mikhail Gorbachev was bringing real change in the Soviet Union.

The telling detail was the date of the analysis: Oct. 16, 1986. This was well after the Reagan administration had made its turn toward seeking better relations with the Soviet Union. Indeed, as "hard-liner" Gates made his own turn, President Reagan was preparing for the Geneva summit with Gorbachev the next month.

Sen. Warren Rudman's slash-and-burn defense (crowned by his ignoble resort to the accusation of McCarthyism) implicitly acknowledged that Gates has become damaged goods through these hearings. Watching Gates's angry defense, you could see and hear why he is so feared in many quarters at Langley.

He was, as Sen. Ernest F. Hollings said, "a general who was blaming his troops." Gates's protests that he has changed, and that he now has more respect for the agency's output, were not persuasive.

The partisan conflict (Rudman played Republican defense, Hollings was on Democratic offense) that inflamed the Gates hearing last week threatened to defeat the admirable attempt by David Boren, the committee chairman, to use the confirmation debate as a giant civics lesson for the nation on the uses of intelligence beyond the Cold War.

The Oklahoma Democrat has indicated that he will break party ranks and vote for Gates, whom Boren has repeatedly praised for his cooperation with the committee. That leaves Sen. Sam Nunn, whose committee vote will be

influential in a floor debate, holding Gates's fate in his hands at the moment.

Gates's spirited defense undermined his nomination in a compelling way. His impressive marshaling of dates, details and ancient analytical papers confirmed that he has an extraordinary memory and organizational abilities. Gates's statements under oath that he cannot remember key meetings in which he was told about Oliver North's most scandalous activities are simply not credible.

Seeking to defuse the charges that he slanted intelligence to please his bosses, Gates told the senators he was actually an agnostic on the controversial question of Soviet involvement in the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. His ultimate judgment, said repeatedly, was that, "Questions remain and probably always will."

That judgment applies to Gates as well after these hearings, and is the reason why the Senate should not consent to his nomination.