

Harry Rowen

Thoughts on the Gates Hearing

On returning to the United States after some weeks abroad I am surprised to a degree verging on amazement at the course taken by the Senate Intelligence Committee hearings on Bob Gates this past week. So much talk about the "politicization" of intelligence by some of my former colleagues, so little about the main problem of intelligence production—which is to my mind getting high-quality work done of use to policy makers in a timely fashion.

As one of the few people around who have served in senior jobs in both the intelligence and policy parts of the government in the past decade, I am sensitive to the question of the influence of policy on intelligence. This is always a legitimate—and complex—question. However, the intelligence estimates cited by the critics that I was responsible for or know about during this period do not support the views of the critics.

Take for instance the estimate cited by Mel Goodman on the Soviet role in the Third World, one worked on in 1982 while I was responsible for the production of such estimates. Bob Gates and others struggled with that one for some time before I concluded that we were not going to get a quality product and recommended to Bill Casey that we drop it. The core of the difficulty as I saw it was that our Kremlinologists by and large didn't know much about the Third World, and the Third World area specialists knew even less about the Soviet Union.

I don't question the sincerity of the former analysts who report their beliefs or feelings about being pressured to produce material they didn't believe in. There is a line between the legitimate interest of management, which might want to pursue a different line of argument than that held by any given analyst, and the illegitimate dictating of a line from the top. Which is not to say that the heads of the CIA or DIA or other intelligence agencies shouldn't put their own imprint on intelligence products. It is they who are responsible for the output of their agencies, not their subordinates. Thus, when Bill Casey rewrote the key judgments on an estimate on Mexico, taking a more alarmist view than that of the National Intelligence officer who had drafted it, it was proper for him to express his personal views (even though he was wrong on the substance).

While some, maybe many, analysts in the ranks felt that their views were being ignored or overridden at the top, those of us responsible for trying to help State and Defense and other departments deal with frequently difficult if not totally intractable problems often had our frustrations with what was served up from below. Bob Gates's 1982 memo to his troops, repeated in his testimony on Thursday, eloquently expressed the institution's failings.

To me a good example was the viewpoint of the analysts on the Warsaw Pact (throughout the intelli-

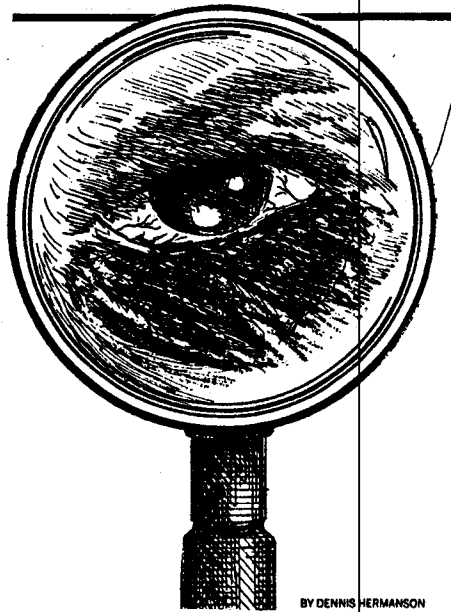
gence community not just, or especially, the CIA). In 1981, shortly after becoming chairman of the National Intelligence Council, I reviewed a draft estimate on the pact. At that time Poland was in turmoil, and there was a real possibility that the Red Army would invade. This fissure in the pact was hardly mentioned in the draft, and on being questioned the analyst's response amounted to saying that what was going on in Poland was irrelevant to the Warsaw Pact as an alliance.

This seemed, to say the least, implausible, but it couldn't be fixed in that estimate. So Bill Casey agreed that we should do a separate one on the political cohesiveness of the pact. By the time a draft on that subject appeared on my desk, the crackdown on Solidarity had occurred, and the analyst (from DIA as I recall) had written in effect that the Soviets used to have a problem with the reliability of their Polish allies but they had solved the problem! Expostulating that they hadn't solved much of anything got nowhere, and I wrote this effort off as another loser.

Bob Gates is being charged by some members with having exaggerated the strength of the Soviet Union and the scope of its activities worldwide and also being slow to recognize quickly the revolutionary changes being wrought by Gorbachev. There is clearly a lot of hindsight being applied here. But with all of the revelations from inside that country recently, the portrait of its military power presented to us by the intelligence community during the early and mid-1980s has not been seriously challenged nor the magnitude of its arms and other support throughout its empire and beyond (although those skeptical of its effectiveness in many parts of the world had a point).

As for its internal social and economic condition, there were then few indeed in the West, inside or outside government, who understood the extent of the decay. (Most were emigres, notably Vladimir Bukovsky on the general situation and Igor Birman on the economy.) It is true that those who were dealing personally with Gorbachev, such as George Shultz, had a basis for reaching conclusions about what he was about and what he might do that was different from those of the CIA. But this difference in access, and therefore perspective, hardly supports extreme charges about Gates's "hard-line" views and alleged inflexibility.

As one of its principal critics, I'm well qualified to comment on the controversy concerning the CIA's work on the Soviet economy. The agency has been far off the mark on that topic, but so have most of the American academic specialists. Indeed, the CIA analysts are an integral part of that larger community and have shared in its errors. It was Bob Gates who invited me in 1984 to head an outside group to review its work on the Soviet economy. We didn't give it the low grade that has been reported by some commen-



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tators, but this effort led to some of us (notably Charles Wolf and myself) digging into the subject more deeply and coming to a more critical assessment later on. This effort was a consequence of Gates's desire to get an outside appraisal, and he deserves credit for that. And my own experience as an intelligence insider suggests that it is often easier to discover that something is wrong with the work being done than to fix it; among other things trying to do the latter can open one to charges of imposing one's political views.

Some of the charges made by the critics verge on the ludicrous—for example, Mel Goodman's accusation that members of the Directorate of Operations communicated directly with policy makers. Like the police inspector in the movie "Casablanca," one is shocked, shocked to learn of such a thing going on. In reality it always had, and it should. Policy people need all of the help that they can get, and there is often more expertise on the operational side of the CIA than on the analytic one. Although in a more perfect world such communications would be done in a coordinated way, at bottom Mr. Goodman's complaint suggests that he wanted to have a monopoly of access to the policy makers. That is not in the public interest.

There has been much too much time spent in the past week on flimsy charges about political intrusions on the purity of the analyses and much too little about how to get better work done. I believe that Bob Gates understands the need for improvement and that he is unusually well equipped to bring it about.

The writer, a member of the faculty of Stanford University, was chairman of the National Intelligence Council from 1981 to 1983, consultant to the CIA from 1983 to 1989 and assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs from 1989 to 1991.
