

... And What Gates Got Wrong

Maybe the CIA Nominee Was Honest, But He Sure Wasn't Smart

By Richard Cohen

In at least two ways Lincoln Steffens was a pioneer. He was one of the earliest of what we now call investigative reporters and was among the first to say something stupendously stupid about the Soviet Union. Journeying there in 1919, he took a look around and, trained observer that he was, said, "I have seen the future and it works." Poor man.

That monumental lapse in judgment about the Soviet Union and things communistic was just the first of many to come. Alas, many if not most of them were made by liberals or leftists, supposedly cockamamie people with cockeyed views of the world. It's conservatives, on the other hand, who supposedly have seen things coldly, clearly and—they insist—accurately. One of them, in fact, is now before the Senate seeking confirmation as the next director of central intelligence. Robert Gates, protege to the arch-conservative William Casey and aide to the merely conservative George Bush, cannot in any way be considered anything other than a conservative. We know that in two ways: by the company he has kept and, of course, his own writing.

The issue that has preoccupied the Senate Intelligence Committee has to do with what might be called intellectual integrity—whether Gates, as is alleged, "cooked" CIA reports to please his boss (Casey) and his boss's boss, Ronald Reagan. This is hardly a trivial matter, but it is, like the question relating to what Gates knew about the Iran-contra affair, essentially unprovable. This is really an eyeball matter, a question of sizing up the man and deciding whether he or his critics are telling the truth. Opinions will be divided on that issue.

Oddly, though, when it comes to judgment, sagacity, wisdom and basic smarts, everyone agrees that Gates is just the cat's meow. Having never met the man, I have no first-hand basis to disagree. But without bothering with whether he tailored



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his writing to please his superiors, let's look at the writing itself. One report put great stock in the influence and importance of Iranian moderates. They have yet to be found. The CIA fed the conspiracy fantasies of both Casey and Reagan by linking the KGB to the attempted assassination of the Pope. What we know about that link, it now turns out, is more imaginary than real.

But those reports or findings were, to a degree, the work of others as well. The one document that is unambiguously pure Gates was a memo he wrote to Casey concerning the situation in Nicaragua. It is dated Dec. 14, 1984.

The memo is striking for a number of reasons. One of them is Gates's recommendation that the United States overthrow the Sandinista regime—a policy recommendation and hardly an intelligence finding.

But what's even more striking about the memo is its breathless, almost hyperventilated prose. Over and over again, Gates says that the United States can ill afford yet another Cuba. Over and over, he mentioned Nicaragua, Cuba and the Soviet Union as if they were Tinker to Evers to Chance: "... the existence of a Marxist-Leninist regime in Nicaragua closely allied with the Soviet

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Union and Cuba is unacceptable to the United States" At another point (paragraph six in case you're following along with the text), he mentions that in "two or three years from now we will be in considerably worse shape than we are now."

Yes, but three years from December 1984 (rounded off to 1985) is 1988. That's a mere one year from the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. How the Soviets were going to hold on to Nicaragua when they were losing Poland and Czechoslovakia is not readily apparent. Neither, for that matter, is what is meant by "a second Cuba in Central America." Was Gates referring to yet another broken down and isolated country which poses no danger to anyone and has been unable—and for good reason—to export its revolution anywhere?

In his own way, Gates is as guilty of bad timing and faulty prognosticating as almost any of the leftist intellectuals conservatives so love to quote. But Gates was no salon revolutionary, no literary lefty who thought, as Angela Davis did, that child labor was abhorrent in the United States but soul stirring in the Cuban cane fields. Gates was a very important public official, a high-ranking spook who had access to the very best information available to the U.S. government. Here was the great analytical mind at work and yet, somehow, he missed the approaching collapse of the Soviet Union, its empire and even its communist ideology. The toppling of Felix Derzhinsky's statue from in front of KGB headquarters happened swiftly but the precipitating forces had been building for some time—not that the CIA seemed to notice. "The Agency really must ask itself how it missed the collapse of world communism," Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) said last month.

It hardly seems unfair to say that no one was more deaf to the sounds of termites in the Kremlin than Robert Gates. His memo is either the work of someone trying awfully hard to tell Casey and Reagan what they wanted to hear or someone who didn't notice that the world was changing. Whatever the case, Reagan was hardly challenged in his belief that the Sandinistas represented Soviet imperialism—another Cuba, as it was so often (and mistakenly) put. In fact, just two years later, Gates could hear the words of his memo coming out of the mouth of Ronald Reagan. "Defeat for the con-

tras would mean a second Cuba on the mainland of North America," Reagan said. That was the speech in which Reagan noted that Nicaragua was only "two days driving time" from Harlingen." The commies were on the move!

But they weren't. They were rot-

ting from within, contracting in ways that the CIA either could detect or should have been able to detect—but which, for some reason, did not make much of an impression on Gates. The Soviet economy was ever worsening and while its military sector remained (and remains) formidable, only in Afghanistan was it actually doing any fighting—and not doing all that well, either. Elsewhere, the Soviet effort was mainly an economic one—including, of course, the sale or donations of weapons to the Sandinistas. Increasingly out of breath, the Soviet Union was reeling towards a finish line that came sooner than anyone thought. Why then did the United States, in effect, make war against Nicaragua? In other words, why were about 40,000 Nicaraguans killed?

The answer is somehow related to precisely the sort of man certain CIA analysts (past and present) described before the Senate last week: an arrogant Bob Gates. His memo on Nicaragua bristled with absolute assurance. Indeed, it begins like a punch to the snoot: "It is time to talk absolutely straight about Nicaragua."

This is a memo that brooks no dissent, that is contemptuous of differing opinion, that nowhere (!) mentions the possibility that the Sandinistas are not conventional Marxist-Leninists (Ultimately, they not only permitted an election, but abided by its results) or that they could have been fought—and toppled—by means other than war. All these possibilities, discussed endlessly in the newspapers and in Congress, are not even mentioned in a memo that—pay attention now—advocates the bombing of Nicaragua. Gates does concede that this suggestion is, "politically, most difficult of all" but suggests how it should be handled: "This would be accompanied by an announcement that the United States did not intend to invade Nicaragua." Phew!

Needless to say, Gates was talking

about massive loss of life—not to mention an attack on a country that had not, in any way, attacked us or our allies. This sort of Dunkirk mentality would be understandable if our backs were truly to the wall or, as in the Persian Gulf, our allies were in imminent danger—not to mention oil producers. But the Sandinistas were as bad off as the Soviets who supported them. They were in our hemisphere, on our turf, a little, impoverished country enamored of Marxism and led by men who seemed to be the last to hear that communism wasn't working anywhere. "We all but wasted the 1980s with an obsession about Central America," Moynihan said. "Communists at the gates. Harlingen, Texas. Somehow the agency had no feel for how misdirected our energies were." Bombing! It's preposterous.

Either because conservatives are better at keeping score or because liberals can really be silly sometimes, I think that conservatives have the better historical record when it comes to sizing up communism and the Soviet Union. But if conservatives erred, it was in exaggerating the power and influence of the Soviet Union and, therefore, the threat to the West. This, in turn, led to all sorts of miscalculations of which the war in Nicaragua was only one. The Gates hearings, while riveting and, of course, solemnly important, are also faintly ridiculous. The man is being proposed for the wrong job. He should be ambassador to "the second Cuba."