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The Case Against Robert Gates

Is Robert Gates the right choice for director of Central Intelligence? I, and many other former and current CIA analysts, believe that the answer is clearly no.

The strongest arguments against having Gates head the intelligence community are not to be found through a detailed reexamination of the Iran-contra affair or in the mountains of recent congressional testimony or in the reams of internal CIA memos, but rather in the character of the man himself. Ultimately, each senator must make judgments about questions surrounding Gates's integrity, his ability to effectively lead an organization and a process that many believe he corrupted and abused and his commitment to reform. Like it or not, Gates is on trial because he is the issue.

Serious concerns about Gates's integrity should not be easily dismissed. Is he willing to choose the harder right over the easier wrong? Does he have the moral resolve necessary to present unpopular news to a president? If Gates's past performance is any indicator, the answers are not very reassuring.

Analysts—both young and old—who served under Robert Gates in the 1980s know him and, more important, know him for what he really is—a man on the make, a political chameleon and a person dedicated to advancing his own career at any cost. Gates counters this characterization by claiming that he clashed with George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger on several occasions by presenting unpopular intelligence assessments. Standing up to a secretary of state or of defense by siding with the White House viewpoint, however, is hardly an act of true political courage. The most damning evidence was his inability to stand up to William Casey.

Even the best efforts of the Bush

administration and other Gates supporters to play down criticism coming from the usually quiescent corridors of Langley cannot erase the fact that opposition to Gates at the CIA is real and widespread. Gates himself acknowledged his unpopularity; not only would he lose any poll, but he would lose overwhelmingly.

Why the hostility? Rightly or wrongly, Gates is seen as the man responsible for politicizing the Directorate of Intelligence and installing a management style that makes personal ambition and pleasing one's boss the key elements of success, rather than solid intelligence analysis. The politicization issue goes beyond tailoring an intelligence estimate here and there to fit the prevailing political mood in the White House. It involves the creation of an organizational culture within the Directorate of Intelligence that not only permitted but encouraged senior CIA officials to impose their own analytical views regardless of the evidence.

Attempts by Gates's supporters to paint the critics as merely losers of intellectual debates belie the reality.

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Mandated changes and specific analytical viewpoints came down from the seventh floor, not opportunities for analysts to debate the merits of an issue. Good analysis more often than not occurred in spite of the system Gates ran rather than because of it.

Gates's central role in shaping the structure and style of intelligence analysis during the early 1980s also call into question his commitment to meaningful reform. Can he really be expected to conduct a critical examination of the system and leadership he helped create, and which many believe he abused?

Although it is unlikely there would be a massive wave of resignations if Gates were confirmed, there would almost certainly be a decline in morale and effectiveness. Gates's reaction to these legitimate concerns has been disdainful and pompous: “I am

the president's choice, and he has full faith in me.” The issue here, though, is not how much faith President Bush has in Robert Gates, but rather how much faith CIA employees have in Robert Gates. Leadership is not imposed, it is earned—from the people you seek to lead. It is based on mutual trust and respect, a sense of obligation and a willingness to stand up for your people. Robert Gates repeatedly violated that covenant during his earlier tenure, and he is unlikely to repair the damage anytime soon.

The true mettle of Gates's character was tested during his years at the CIA from 1982 to 1989, and he failed. CIA analysts, who know the real Bob Gates, are not convinced that he has undergone some radical behavioral and philosophical transformation since then. His time is past; the future belongs to another person and another era.

The writer was a CIA analyst from 1983 to 1991.