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The Gates Confirmation

IT IS HARD to recall a presidential nominee of any sort whose work performance and style was ever dissected so closely as Robert Gates's—and this in a supposedly secret agency. Yet it seems unfair to judge him strictly on the basis that he acted wisely in one instance, unwisely in another. Whose work product could stand up under that sort of scrutiny? Once demystified, as Sen. William Cohen observed on the op-ed page yesterday, intelligence analysis turns out to be not nearly so much a quest for absolute truth as a struggle to prevail within a thoroughly human, bureaucratic and, yes, necessarily political environment. The CIA itself turns out to be much more a part of Washington and the larger political society than many understood.

In a thousand battles, sometimes Mr. Gates showed good sense and maturity and sometimes not. There is no question but that, promoted early, he often stepped on toes. The latter-day politicization sometimes less of analysis than of the analysis of analysis complicates scoring. But our judgment is that he was battling and learning at the same time. In his several White House assignments, he was learning some more.

Even those who feel he did not learn enough, however, have tended to move to a second front. Do not the scars that Mr. Gates inflicted and

incurred at CIA disable him from leading American intelligence into a new era? Attentive outsiders and some brave insiders who took their careers into their hands testified that in this crucial category of leadership he falls short.

It seems to us, however, that the scars are a mark not only of a formidable experience but of a visible chastening. Mr. Gates is now publicly committed to reform. He means to manage the CIA to meet the changing requirements of the post-Cold War era. Unquestionably he has the knowledge of the machinery and the confidence of the president to do that job. He also promises to be faithful to the imperatives of honest consultation with Congress. Such consultation is designed precisely to diminish the chances that abuses of secret power, in operations or analysis, could recur.

Grave questions have been raised about Mr. Gates. He has made his own confessions of error and misjudgment. But these do not amount in our view to a showing that he is unqualified. On the contrary, there is much evidence that—as an analyst, as a manager, as one who knows the ways of the consumers of intelligence as well as the producers—he is qualified. He seems to us a reasonable choice to be George Bush's director of intelligence.