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Gates: Right On Moscow

Back in 1973, Adm. Bobby Inman, then a top ranking Navy official, virtually discovered Robert M. Gates, a young CIA analyst who had written an article in an in-house journal attacking the quality of the agency's analytic process.

Inman thought to himself: "That's either foolhardy or he is right on target." He decided, after looking into the matter, that Gates had a case. The young analyst was quickly promoted over the heads of many of his seniors.

Now, after a long career at the CIA as an intelligence analyst, deputy director and chairman of the National Intelligence Council, Gates—currently deputy national security adviser—is President Bush's nominee for director of Central Intelligence. Next week he will appear before the Senate Intelligence Committee for confirmation hearings.

In all likelihood, two issues will dominate the hearings: What did Gates know about Iran-contra, and what should he have known? And did he, during his years in the agency, ever knowingly slant intelligence to support his own views or those of his superiors?

Gates is expected to open the hearings with a confession. He will acknowledge that, in hindsight, he should have probed deeper and asked more questions about aid to the contras, about the arms sales to Iran and about possible violations of the Boland amendment prohibiting U.S. aid to the contras.

The nominee will then be compelled to withstand not only the committee's questioning but also the likely testimony of Alan Fiers, a former CIA operative who is cooperating with Iran-contra independent Prosecutor Lawrence Walsh.

The committee staff has pored over Gates's speeches, public statements and previous testimony and found different instances where they allege Gates slanted intelligence to ingratiate himself with officials of past and present administrations. Gates, for example, will be asked to defend his personal view that the preponderance of evidence concerning the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II points to Soviet complicity. Committee members will, in all likelihood, dispute this analysis and argue that Gates's stance was informed by his hard-line, even simplistic, view of the Soviet Union and its intelligence organs.

Another case in point will turn on Soviet intentions in Iran. Critics will argue that an intelligence assessment for which Gates was responsible exaggerated Soviet interest in Iran in order to strengthen the case for giving arms to Tehran. Gates will also likely be attacked for a speech he made in 1986 favoring the Strategic Defense Initiative; some committee members will assert that the speech represented political propaganda rather than an intelligence assessment.

Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey, who appears ready to assume the role of key opponent in the campaign against Gates, will charge that Bush's nominee—like the administration itself—has been too soft on Gorbachev and too sympathetic to preserving the Soviet Union as such. Bradley may well ask why the administration in which Gates now serves failed to extend greater support to reformist elements and to the national independence movements in the former U.S.S.R.

Inevitably, there will be questions about the way the agency works—some will note that the agency is top-heavy (there are 850 so-called "supergrades") and inefficient. Moreover, there will be questions as to whether the analytic process is effective; some senators will undoubtedly contend that the analysis review process—said to be the creation of Bob Gates himself—actually bogs down analysis and keeps important studies from reaching policy makers quickly.

In the end, all these issues are interesting to explore—in academic seminars. But the Senate committee would be highly unwise to reject the nomination of Bob Gates.

In fact, Democratic committee members and staffers anxious to bring him down will have to explain why Gates was so eager to get ahead—at all costs—he tried last October to make a speech on the Soviet Union that so infuriated Secretary of State James A. Baker that the latter ordered Gates not to deliver it. Why, too, if he was a mere opportunist, did Gates incur the wrath of Secretary of State George P. Shultz for adopting a view of the Soviet Union more hard-line than that of Ronald Reagan's secretary of state?

Recent events in Russia, the Baltics and Eastern Europe make it all the more necessary to have a director of Central Intelligence with a clear view and deep knowledge of this turbulent region. The end of the Cold War also requires a DCI capable of diverting agency assets and resources to new concerns: narcotics and industrial espionage, to name just two. This is scarcely the time—notwithstanding the arguments of some key Capitol Hill personalities—to "dismantle" the CIA. Nor, as Inman points out, is it a moment to appoint a director who needs to "learn how the intelligence community functions." Gates, says Inman, understands how the community works and is therefore in a good position to redirect its energies.

One former Senate Intelligence Committee staffer describes the impending confirmation hearings as a moment of truth for the committee, an opportunity to choose between "high politics and low politics." The former staffer contends that the intelligence committee must decide whether to focus on recognizing that Bob Gates was essentially right about the most important issue of our time—the Soviet Union—or to draw partisan advantage by dwelling on a peripheral, outdated political scandal.