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The Gates Nomination

THE ROBERT GATES confirmation hearings have been pretty bloodless. There has been no hot new information about Iran-contra, no very revealing exchanges with the Senate Intelligence Committee, which is weighing his nomination as director of Central Intelligence, no particularly compelling testimony from the nominee or anyone else either about his qualifications or about the much-anticipated matter of the role of intelligence in a post-Cold War world. As a result, not much more is known about Mr. Gates than before hearings began.

A chastened witness confirmed most of what had been suspected about his conduct in Iran-contra. He hadn't been very attentive to what was unfolding around him, he confessed, insisting that he'd drawn the proper lesson of vigilance. He expressed the same kind of modest remorse in response to suggestions that, for someone who'd come up in the CIA as a Soviet-affairs analyst, he had failed either to track the dismal performance of the Soviet economy or to foresee the Kremlin's subsequent political convulsions.

Still, these were not necessarily fatal confessions. The Iran-contra affair marked a woeful lapse in congressional oversight as well as in executive policy. The collapse of Soviet Communism was little anticipated anywhere in Washington, where, anyway, the prevailing culture has made it less important to be out front on Soviet change than to be skeptical about Soviet intentions. Perhaps this explains why most senators

seemed at ease with Mr. Gates's responses on both Iran-contra and Moscow.

The argument for confirming what committee chairman David Boren, a supporter, calls this "quintessential staff person" is the flip side of the argument for rejecting him. He is a Washington hand who knows the Langley machinery and has worked in the White House for eight years, the last three as deputy national security adviser. While this experience has produced some wear and tear, it has also induced some toughness and, it is apparent, some change of perspective and broadening of experience. Here is a man who knows how the machine works and, from his White House time, what it is supposed to provide. One of the vital things he has learned was reflected in Mr. Gates's pledge to respect the law and, specifically, the law compelling consultation with Congress. For the Senate committee, this was obviously a telling factor.

The hearings have made evident that discussion of a new role for intelligence is still in an early stage. People have ideas, but not much systematic study has been undertaken. Mr. Gates seems an unlikely source of energy for exploring new directions. But he is the familiar adviser and clear choice of a president who has been at the CIA himself and will have his own thoughts on reform, and the disqualifying revelations that were rumored to be imminent at the hearings have not materialized.