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Sobering Thoughts For Gates

The hearings on Robert M. Gates's nomination to be the world's most powerful spymaster opened this week as Serbia went for broke in its war to forge Yugoslavia's remnants into a Serbian mini-empire. Distant and immediately unrelated, these events echo off each other and etch the outlines of the definitional crisis America's intelligence establishment faces today.

In the looking-glass world of espionage, the Yugoslav tragedy is one of the CIA's finest analytical successes. Nearly a year ago, the agency concluded that the breakup was inevitable. Analysts wrote that the United States should exert energy and influence to encourage a bloodless coming apart of a decaying totalitarian regime.

That position was argued at length in interagency meetings. As a result the U.S. government did, well, absolutely nothing. The State Department insisted that a Yugoslav breakup was against U.S. interests. It therefore could not be allowed to happen. When it happened anyway, the Bush administration retreated into a policy of letting Europe take care of a tragedy that Europe is incapable of resolving.

In considering Gates to be director of Central Intelligence, the Senate Intelligence Committee should look not only at the known failures of the CIA. The committee must also look at why intelligence successes have produced no measurable outcome in recent important foreign-policy challenges.

By connecting the threads of successes and failures that leave American policy equally adrift, the committee can identify what has gone wrong with a government that seems frozen in a constant state of surprise.

The senators can then determine if Gates is the man to re-animate the intelligence component of a policy-making system that has stood like a deer caught in headlights as German unification, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Yugoslav fratricide and Soviet collapse hurtled headlong down the road.

There is something fundamentally wrong with a system that provides the administration with the essential facts but consistently produces the wrong policy conclusions. That happened in Yugoslavia, in Iraq and to some extent in the Soviet Union.

This administration's inability or willful refusal to think the unthinkable is a major part of the problem. If the senators dig, they will find that some intelligence officials have been trying unsuccessfully since the beginning of the year to get Gates, his boss at the National Security Council, Brent Scowcroft, and others to modify their collective "together is better" view of the Soviet Union.

We know less about the CIA's reporting on the Soviet coup and the continuing transformation of that country into Russia and Associated Republics than we do about the intelligence community's performance on Iraq last year. But something similar seems to have happened in both cases.

The agency was fully aware of Iraq's buildup on Kuwait's border just as it was aware of the open threats by the Kremlin's Old Guard against Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. It monitored both crises as they came to the boiling point, and said, in effect, it won't happen. Neither Saddam Hussein nor the Soviet Old Guard would be crazy enough to take such chances.

That reinforced, I suspect, what Bush and his men wanted to hear. (Gates's role as chairman of the Deputies' Committee interagency process and as the effective director of the NSC staff was crucial in screening out the unthinkable.) We had the facts; but we also had heavy policy investments in Saddam and in Gorbachev. The investments operated as blinkers on our vision.

Still unreported is the story of the intelligence failure at the end of the war with Iraq that left far more Iraqi Republican Guard tanks and troops operating as combat units in southern Iraq than Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell realized or reported to the White House. Again the White House was told what it wanted to hear as the gimmicky 100-hour finish to the war approached. Iraq's Shiites paid the price of that failure.

Sen. David Boren, the thoughtful and deliberate Oklahoma Democrat who chairs the intelligence committee, suggested that the outcome in Iraq shows the need for greater reliance on "human intelligence"—jargon for old-fashioned spies—rather than on communications and satellite technology. Boren implied that if we could have gotten closer to Saddam and learned his intentions we would have done the right thing.

Maybe. Somehow I think this system would still have managed to discount warnings from an agent on Saddam's secret intentions (which were not in fact that secret). The pressure from the top to treat Saddam as a difficult but necessary bulwark against Iran was so strong that a mere field agent's flash would probably not have turned Washington around.

In a brilliant disquisition, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) warned Gates that the CIA would be less important to future presidents than the Small Business Administration if it does not change its ways and mindsets. That must be a sobering thought for Gates and for the senators who have to decide if he is the man to make those changes.