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## The Secret World of Robert Gates

By Robert Parry  
November 9, 2006

Robert Gates, George W. Bush's choice to replace Donald Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary, is a trusted figure within the Bush Family's inner circle, but there are lingering questions about whether Gates is a trustworthy public official.

The 63-year-old Gates has long faced accusations of collaborating with Islamic extremists in Iran, arming Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq, and politicizing U.S. intelligence to conform with the desires of policymakers – three key areas that relate to his future job.

Gates skated past some of these controversies during his 1991 confirmation hearings to be CIA director – and the current Bush administration is seeking to slip Gates through the congressional approval process again, this time by pressing for a quick confirmation by the end of the year, before the new Democratic-controlled Senate is seated.

If Bush's timetable is met, there will be no time for a serious investigation into Gates's past.

Fifteen years ago, Gates got a similar pass when leading Democrats agreed to put "bipartisanship" ahead of careful oversight when Gates was nominated for the CIA job by President George H.W. Bush.

In 1991, despite doubts about Gates's honesty over Iran-Contra and other scandals, the career intelligence officer brushed aside accusations that he played secret roles in arming both sides of the Iran-Iraq War. Since then, however, documents have surfaced that raise new questions about Gates's sweeping denials.

For instance, the Russian government sent an intelligence report to a House investigative task force in early 1993 stating that Gates participated in secret contacts with Iranian officials in 1980 to delay release of 52 U.S. hostages then held in Iran, a move to benefit the presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

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“R[obert] Gates, at that time a staffer of the National Security Council in the administration of Jimmy Carter, and former CIA Director George Bush also took part” in a meeting in Paris in October 1980, according to the Russian report, which meshed with information from witnesses who have alleged Gates’s involvement in the Iranian gambit.

Once in office, the Reagan administration did permit weapons to flow to Iran via Israel. One of the planes carrying an arms shipment was shot down over the Soviet Union on July 18, 1981, after straying off course, but the incident drew little attention at the time.

The arms flow continued, on and off, until 1986 when the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal broke. [For details, see Robert Parry’s [Secrecy & Privilege](#). For text of the Russian report, click [here](#). To view the actual U.S. embassy cable that includes the Russian report, click [here](#).]

## **Iraqgate Scandal**

Gates also was implicated in a secret operation to funnel military assistance to Iraq in the 1980s, as the Reagan administration played off the two countries battling each other in the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War.

Middle Eastern witnesses alleged that Gates worked on the secret Iraqi initiative, which included Saddam Hussein’s procurement of cluster bombs and chemicals used to produce chemical weapons for the war against Iran.

Gates denied those Iran-Iraq accusations in 1991 and the Senate Intelligence Committee – then headed by Gates’s personal friend, Sen. David Boren, D-Oklahoma – failed to fully check out the claims before recommending Gates for confirmation.

However, four years later – in early January 1995 – Howard Teicher, one of Reagan’s National Security Council officials, added more details about Gates’s alleged role in the Iraq shipments.

In a sworn affidavit submitted in a Florida criminal case, Teicher stated that the covert arming of Iraq dated back to spring 1982 when Iran had gained the upper hand in the war, leading President Reagan to authorize a U.S. tilt toward Saddam Hussein.

The effort to arm the Iraqis was “spearheaded” by CIA Director William Casey and involved his deputy, Robert Gates, according to Teicher’s affidavit. “The CIA, including both CIA Director Casey and Deputy Director Gates, knew of, approved of, and assisted in the sale of non-U.S. origin military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to Iraq,” Teicher wrote.

Ironically, that same pro-Iraq initiative involved Donald Rumsfeld, then Reagan’s special emissary to the Middle East. An infamous photograph

from 1983 shows a smiling Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein.

Teicher described Gates's role as far more substantive than Rumsfeld's. "Under CIA Director [William] Casey and Deputy Director Gates, the CIA authorized, approved and assisted [Chilean arms dealer Carlos] Cardoen in the manufacture and sale of cluster bombs and other munitions to Iraq," Teicher wrote.

Like the Russian report, the Teicher affidavit has never been seriously examined. After Teicher submitted it to a federal court in Miami, the affidavit was classified and then attacked by Clinton administration prosecutors. They saw Teicher's account as disruptive to their prosecution of a private company, Teledyne Industries, and one of its salesmen, Ed Johnson.

But the questions about Gates's participation in dubious schemes involving hotspots such as Iran and Iraq are relevant again today because they reflect on Gates's judgment, his honesty and his relationship with two countries at the top of U.S. military concerns.

About 140,000 U.S. troops are now bogged down in Iraq, 3 ½ years after President George W. Bush ordered an invasion to remove Saddam Hussein from power and eliminate his supposed WMD stockpiles. One reason the United States knew that Hussein once had those stockpiles was because the Reagan administration helped him procure the material needed for the WMD production in the 1980s.

The United States also is facing down Iran's Islamic government over its nuclear ambitions. Though Bush has so far emphasized diplomatic pressure on Iran, he has pointedly left open the possibility of a military option.

## **Political Intelligence**

Beyond the secret schemes to aid Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, Gates also stands accused of playing a central role in politicizing the CIA intelligence product, tailoring it to fit the interests of his political superiors, a legacy that some Gates critics say contributed to the botched CIA's analysis of Iraqi WMD in 2002.

Before Gates's rapid rise through the CIA's ranks in the 1980s, the CIA's tradition was to zealously protect the objectivity and scholarship of the intelligence. However, during the Reagan administration, that ethos collapsed.

At Gates's confirmation hearings in 1991, former CIA analysts, including renowned Kremlinologist Mel Goodman, took the extraordinary step of coming out of the shadows to accuse Gates of politicizing the intelligence while he was chief of the analytical division and then deputy director.

The former intelligence officers said the ambitious Gates pressured the CIA's analytical division to exaggerate the Soviet menace to fit the ideological perspective of the Reagan administration. Analysts who took a more nuanced view of Soviet power and Moscow's behavior in the world faced pressure and career reprisals.

In 1981, Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl of the CIA's Soviet office was the unfortunate analyst who was handed the assignment to prepare an analysis on the Soviet Union's alleged support and direction of international terrorism.

Contrary to the desired White House take on Soviet-backed terrorism, Ekedahl said the consensus of the intelligence community was that the Soviets discouraged acts of terrorism by groups getting support from Moscow for practical, not moral, reasons.

“We agreed that the Soviets consistently stated, publicly and privately, that they considered international terrorist activities counterproductive and advised groups they supported not to use such tactics,” Ekedahl said. “We had hard evidence to support this conclusion.”

But Gates took the analysts to task, accusing them of trying to “stick our finger in the policy maker’s eye,” Ekedahl testified

Ekedahl said Gates, dissatisfied with the terrorism assessment, joined in rewriting the draft “to suggest greater Soviet support for terrorism and the text was altered by pulling up from the annex reports that overstated Soviet involvement.”

In his memoirs, *From the Shadows*, Gates denied politicizing the CIA’s intelligence product, though acknowledging that he was aware of Casey’s hostile reaction to the analysts’ disagreement with right-wing theories about Soviet-directed terrorism.

Soon, the hammer fell on the analysts who had prepared the Soviet-terrorism report. Ekedahl said many analysts were “replaced by people new to the subject who insisted on language emphasizing Soviet control of international terrorist activities.”

A donnybrook ensued inside the U.S. intelligence community. Some senior officials responsible for analysis pushed back against Casey’s dictates, warning that acts of politicization would undermine the integrity of the process and risk policy disasters in the future.

Working with Gates, Casey also undertook a series of institutional changes that gave him fuller control of the analytical process. Casey required that drafts needed clearance from his office before they could go out to other intelligence agencies.

Casey appointed Gates to be director of the Directorate of Intelligence [DI] and consolidated Gates’s control over analysis by also making him chairman of the National Intelligence Council, another key analytical body.

“Casey and Gates used various management tactics to get the line of intelligence they desired and to suppress unwanted intelligence,” Ekedahl said.

### **Career Reprisals**

With Gates using top-down management techniques, CIA analysts sensitive to their career paths intuitively grasped that they could rarely go wrong by backing the “company line” and presenting the worst-case scenario about Soviet capabilities and intentions, Ekedahl and other CIA analysts said.

Largely outside public view, the CIA's proud Soviet analytical office underwent a purge of its most senior people. "Nearly every senior analyst on Soviet foreign policy eventually left the Office of Soviet Analysis," Goodman said.

Gates made clear he intended to shake up the DI's culture, demanding greater responsiveness to the needs of the White House and other policymakers.

In a speech to the DI's analysts and managers on Jan. 7, 1982, Gates berated the division for producing shoddy analysis that administration officials didn't find helpful.

Gates unveiled an 11-point management plan to whip the DI into shape. His plan included rotating division chiefs through one-year stints in policy agencies and requiring CIA analysts to "refresh their substantive knowledge and broaden their perspective" by taking courses at Washington-area think tanks and universities.

Gates declared that a new Production Evaluation Staff would aggressively review their analytical products and serve as his "junkyard dog."

Gates's message was that the DI, which had long operated as an "ivory tower" for academically oriented analysts committed to an ethos of objectivity, would take on more of a corporate culture with a product designed to fit the needs of those up the ladder both inside and outside the CIA.

"It was a kind of chilling speech," recalled Peter Dickson, an analyst who concentrated on proliferation issues. "One of the things he wanted to do, he was going to shake up the DI. He was going to read every paper that came out. What that did was that everybody between the analyst and him had to get involved in the paper to a greater extent because their careers were going to be at stake."

A chief Casey-Gates tactic for exerting tighter control over the analysis was to express concern about "the editorial process," Dickson said.

"You can jerk people around in the editorial process and hide behind your editorial mandate to intimidate people," Dickson said.

Gates soon was salting the analytical division with his allies, a group of managers who became known as the "Gates clones." Some of those who rose with Gates were David Cohen, David Carey, George Kolt, Jim Lynch, Winston Wiley, John Gannon and John McLaughlin.

Though Dickson's area of expertise – nuclear proliferation – was on the fringes of the Reagan-Bush primary concerns, it ended up getting him into trouble anyway. In 1983, he

clashed with his superiors over his conclusion that the Soviet Union was more committed to controlling proliferation of nuclear weapons than the administration wanted to hear.

When Dickson stood by his evidence, he soon found himself facing accusations about his psychological fitness and other pressures that eventually caused him to leave the CIA.

Dickson also was among the analysts who raised alarms about Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons, another sore point because the Reagan-Bush administration wanted Pakistan's assistance in funneling weapons to Islamic fundamentalists fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.

One of the effects from the exaggerated intelligence about Soviet power and intentions was to make other potential risks – such as allowing development of a nuclear bomb in the Islamic world or training Islamic fundamentalists in techniques of sabotage – paled in comparison.

While worst-case scenarios were in order for the Soviet Union and other communist enemies, best-case scenarios were the order of the day for Reagan-Bush allies, including Osama bin Laden and other Arab extremists rushing to Afghanistan to wage a holy war against European invaders, in this case, the Russians.

As for the Pakistani drive to get a nuclear bomb, the Reagan-Bush administration turned to word games to avoid triggering anti-proliferation penalties that otherwise would be imposed on Pakistan.

“There was a distinction made to say that the possession of the device is not the same as developing it,” Dickson told me. “They got into the argument that they don't quite possess it yet because they haven't turned the last screw into the warhead.”

Finally, the intelligence on the Pakistan Bomb grew too strong to continue denying the reality. But the delay in confronting Pakistan ultimately allowed the Muslim government in Islamabad to produce nuclear weapons. Pakistani scientists also shared their know-how with “rogue” states, such as North Korea and Libya.

“The politicization that took place during the Casey-Gates era is directly responsible for the CIA's loss of its ethical compass and the erosion of its credibility,” Goodman told the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1991. “The fact that the CIA missed the most important historical development in its history – the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the Soviet Union itself – is due in large measure to the culture and process that Gates established in his directorate.”

## **Confirmation Battle**

To push through Gates's nomination to be CIA director in 1991, the elder George Bush lined up solid Republican backing for Gates and enough accommodating Democrats – particularly Sen. Boren, the Senate Intelligence Committee chairman.

In his memoirs, Gates credited his friend, Boren, for clearing away any obstacles. "David took it as a personal challenge to get me confirmed," Gates wrote.

Part of running interference for Gates included rejecting the testimony of witnesses who implicated Gates in scandals beginning with the alleged back-channel negotiations with Iran in 1980 through the arming of Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the mid-1980s.

Boren's Intelligence Committee brushed aside two witnesses connecting Gates to the alleged schemes, former Israeli intelligence official Ari Ben-Menashe and Iranian businessman Richard Babayan. Both offered detailed accounts about Gates's alleged connections to the schemes.

Ben-Menashe, who worked for Israeli military intelligence from 1977-87, first fingered Gates as an operative in the secret Iraq arms pipeline in August 1990 during an interview that I conducted with him for PBS *Frontline*.

At the time, Ben-Menashe was in jail in New York on charges of trying to sell cargo planes to Iran (charges which were later dismissed). When the interview took place, Gates was in a relatively obscure position, as deputy national security adviser to President George H.W. Bush and not yet a candidate for the top CIA job.

In that interview and later under oath to Congress, Ben-Menashe said Gates joined in meetings between Republicans and senior Iranians in October 1980. Ben-Menashe said he also arranged Gates's personal help in bringing a suitcase full of cash into Miami in early 1981 to pay off some of the participants in the hostage gambit.

Ben-Menashe also placed Gates in a 1986 meeting with Chilean arms manufacturer Cardoen, who allegedly was supplying cluster bombs and chemical weapons to Saddam Hussein's army. Babayan, an Iranian exile working with Iraq, also connected Gates to the Iraqi supply lines and to Cardoen.

Gates has steadfastly denied involvement in either the Iran-hostage caper or the Iraqgate arms deals.

"I was accused on television and in the print media by people I had never spoken to or met of selling weapons to Iraq, or walking through Miami airport with suitcases full of cash, of being with Bush in Paris in October 1980 to meet with Iranians, and on and on," Gates wrote in his memoirs. "The allegations of meetings with me around the world were easily disproved for the committee by my travel records, calendars, and countless witnesses."

But none of Gates's supposedly supportive evidence was ever made public by either the Senate Intelligence Committee or the later inquiries into either the Iran hostage initiative or Iraqgate.

Not one of Gates's "countless witnesses" who could vouch for Gates's whereabouts was identified. Though Boren pledged publicly to have his

investigators question Babayan, they never did.

Perhaps most galling for those of us who tried to assess Ben-Menashe's credibility was the Intelligence Committee's failure to test Ben-Menashe's claim that he met with Gates in Paramus, New Jersey, on the afternoon of April 20, 1989.

The date was pinned down by the fact that Ben-Menashe had been under Customs surveillance in the morning. So it was a perfect test for whether Ben-Menashe – or Gates – was lying.

When I first asked about this claim, congressional investigators told me that Gates had a perfect alibi for that day. They said Gates had been with Senator Boren at a speech in Oklahoma. But when we checked that out, we discovered that Gates's Oklahoma speech had been on April 19, a day earlier. Gates also had not been with Boren and had returned to Washington by that evening.

So where was Gates the next day? Could he have taken a quick trip to northern New Jersey? Since senior White House national security advisers keep detailed notes on their daily meetings, it should have been easy for Boren's investigators to interview someone who could vouch for Gates's whereabouts on the afternoon of April 20.

But the committee chose not to nail down an alibi for Gates. The committee said further investigation wasn't needed because Gates denied going to New Jersey and his personal calendar made no reference to the trip.

But the investigators couldn't tell me where Gates was that afternoon or with whom he may have met. Essentially, the alibi came down to Gates's word.

Ironically, Boren's key aide who helped limit the investigation of Gates was George Tenet, whose behind-the-scenes maneuvering on Gates's behalf won the personal appreciation of the senior George Bush. Tenet later became President Bill Clinton's last CIA director and was kept on in 2001 by the younger George Bush partly on his father's advice.

Now, as the Bush Family grapples with the disaster in Iraq, it is turning to an even more trusted hand to run the Defense Department. The appointment of Robert Gates suggests that the Bush Family is circling the wagons to save the embattled presidency of George W. Bush.

To determine whether Gates can be counted on to do what's in the interest of the larger American public is another question altogether.

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Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at [secrecyandprivilege.com](http://secrecyandprivilege.com). It's also available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'*

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