

The Reality of Robert Gates

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is leaving government with accolades from all over Official Washington. Only a few dissenting voices note that the reality of Gates's four-plus years at the Pentagon's helm doesn't match the image, as former CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar observes in this guest essay.

By Paul R. Pillar

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Lawrence Korb's [unflattering review](#) of Robert Gates's tenure as secretary of defense addresses one of the greater discrepancies between reputation and reality in the record of a prominent public servant.

Given the extremely favorable reputation that Gates enjoys as he is about to leave office, such a discrepancy still leaves room for a good amount of the positive to go along with the negative.

Gates unquestionably is a very smart and talented bureaucrat. But part of his being smart has always been to have a good feel for what sells well, either to his superiors in government or to the public.

Much of what Korb describes from Gates's tenure at the Department of Defense reflects Gates's career-long emphasis on saying and doing the sorts of things that tend to win applause as tough-minded management, whether or not those things really improved how well the organization he was managing performed its mission.

Early in his career, when the audience Gates needed to impress was not the public but instead his immediate superior, the key superior was William J. Casey, who was Ronald Reagan's director of central intelligence in the 1980s.

Casey catapulted the young Gates into senior positions, including eventually that of deputy director of central intelligence. Casey also was, as aptly described in Gates's own memoir, *From the Shadows*, an ideologically driven Cold Warrior who largely obliterated the distinction between policy advocacy and objective intelligence.

What Gates did not describe is how much he himself, a protege who owed his meteoric rise largely to Casey's patronage, was involved in the politicization.

Gates was twice nominated to be director of central intelligence. On the first occasion, he withdrew when it became clear he would not be confirmed. His second nomination made it through the Senate, but with 31 negative votes.

The opposition was based partly on the politicization but even more so on continued uncertainties about Gates's role in the Iran-Contra affair.

Many senators found it hard to believe that he did not have a significant part in a scandal in which officials directly above and below him had been implicated, and in which he was especially close to the person above him.

Remarkably, when George W. Bush nominated Gates to become secretary of defense in 2006, almost none of this background was mentioned, and Gates was easily confirmed.

This was in part because Gates was not Donald Rumsfeld, which at the time would have been the biggest qualification for almost anyone nominated to be secretary of defense. But it also was a tribute to Gates's superlative ability to preserve and nurture his own reputation.

The single biggest theme in that nurturing, the chapter that Gates could expertly write in any how-to-get-ahead book, is that he has always posed as a reformer who has been above whatever organization he has been charged with running, rather than ever being of the organization, no matter how long he has been running it.

He has always bragged of being, in his words, an "agent of change" who would come in to whack away ruthlessly at the stodginess and ineptitude of whatever organization he was appointed to head.

This posture has served two purposes for Gates. First, it involves themes that always win applause, especially when applied to government bureaucracies that are routinely and automatically assumed to be stodgy and inept.

Second, it enables him to present himself, no matter what failures occur on his watch, more as part of the solution than as part of the problem.

By quickly assuming the role of one who cracks heads, or rolls them, he protects his own head. In brief, it enables him to shift responsibility for failure or misjudgment downward.

This pattern was in evidence in one of the subjects Korb addresses: the war in Afghanistan, and Gates's handling of the field commanders he assigned to the war.

One of those commanders, David McKiernan, requested more troops, had his request quashed by Gates, and then after the president subsequently decided to send more troops, was fired by Gates and replaced by Stanley McChrystal.

Another episode that Korb does not mention was the mistaken loading of nuclear

warheads on a B-52 that flew from North Dakota to Louisiana in 2007. Gates's principal response was to fire the Secretary of the Air Force and the Air Force Chief of Staff, citing "cultural" problems in the service.

The incident certainly raised serious questions about procedures for handling nuclear weapons, but where exactly should the responsibility lie?

The service secretary and chief of staff were several levels removed from the faulty inventory of ordnance on the flight line in North Dakota. To fire them requires a concept of accountability for senior officials that holds them responsible for everything that takes place under their command, regardless of what they did or what they knew.

And if that is the concept, why should the responsibility stop at their level? The Air Force is, after all, part of the Department of Defense.

Gates's posture of the tough-minded, crusading reformist whipping into shape an organization that supposedly was in sad shape when he took it over was in full bloom in a speech he gave a few days ago at the American Enterprise Institute.

In remarkably self-serving language, Gates talked of how "in the course of doing everything I [note the first person singular] could to turn things around first in Iraq and then in Afghanistan, from the early months I ran up against institutional obstacles in the Pentagon – cultural, procedural, ideological – to getting done what needed to get done."

He went on to talk about the requirement for "fundamentally reshaping the priorities of the Pentagon and the uniformed services and reforming the way they did business."

Four and a half years on the job, and the divide between the reformer with the whip and the whipped organization was as deep as ever.

Everything good in the Pentagon was depicted as a result of what "I" accomplished; everything that was still bad in the department which he has been running was supposedly due to cultural, procedural, and ideological obstacles of the institution.

Awareness of the gap between reputation and reality matters not just to make an accurate historical judgment on one official. It is also partly a matter of fairness to those, such as David McKiernan, whose careers or reputations may have suffered as Gates strove to protect his own.

Most important is that it is the reality of how departments are run and operate that counts, not whatever image the person at the top of it has managed to

cultivate.

What best serves the image is not necessarily what best serves the organizational mission and the national interest. Korb cites some very important matters for which this is true, such as defense spending.

There are many others, including effects on morale and cohesion in an organization whose head never really joins the organization but instead lords over it.

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Deadly Mix: Hubris and Cowardice

Admitting failure in Iraq and Afghanistan is anathema to Official Washington, especially to the still-influential neocons whose status depends on maintaining the illusion of "victory" or at least limited success, even at the cost of more blood and treasure. But Daniel N. White says only a frank acknowledgement of failure can free America from even worse calamities ahead.

By Daniel N. White

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There's an important but little known story from World War II that comes to mind these days. It's from the days before Hitler's invasion of Russia in 1941.

It needs telling with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in their current state of failure and with a war against Iran waiting in the wings.

The German Army, the Wehrmacht, was on a roll in late 1940. It had defeated and conquered Poland and France, and had thoroughly whipped the British Army in the process.

Adolf Hitler, a knowledgeable self-taught amateur historian and the most successful German politician ever in both domestic and foreign affairs, gave orders to the German General Staff to study and make plans for an invasion of Russia.

The staff officers, the bright young captains and majors, the older lieutenant

colonels with gray hair and experience, went to work, and came up with plans for an invasion for the Wehrmacht General Staff to evaluate and present to Hitler.

Plans for an invasion of Russia were based upon the best intelligence the Wehrmacht had about the Russian armed forces and the Russian terrain and their industrial base's capabilities. But they were badly wrong on their estimates of all of these.

They were off by about 100 percent on the size of the Russian army, an incredible mistake.

Their maps had the cities, mountains, and rivers where they were supposed to be, but the roads weren't, and they weren't the paved all-weather heavy-duty highways the red lines on the maps said they were. They were mostly dirt tracks that turned into impassable mud pits in rain or spring thaw.

Estimates on war materiel production were way off, too. Yet, none of these errors were necessarily fatal to the chances of German war of conquest succeeding.

The fatal fact was discovered early on by the logistics staff officers, who did the calculations on how to supply all the German divisions that were required to defeat the (vastly underestimated) Russian opponent.

Their calculations showed that it wasn't possible to supply an army the size needed over the distances required. There weren't enough trains, trucks and horses available to move the amount of supplies required.

The logistics calculations were fairly straightforward and were known and accepted by everyone in all the world's militaries and were irrefutable. Germany could not invade and defeat Russia. It simply wasn't possible.

The logisticians made their report to the Wehrmacht senior generals, who proceeded to ignore it. The senior generals knew which way the political winds were blowing, and knew Hitler had his mind made up on invading Russia.

Additionally, Hitler had done a good job on the senior generals over the preceding several years, with a clever mixture of cash and career-reward carrots given to many officers, and by getting rid of the officers he could not browbeat into submission to his own opinions.

Several officers had been purged/retired, and the remainder knew it was career suicide to oppose Hitler on something he really wanted. So they didn't.

And there was also the question of how much good any individual could do standing up to a huge bureaucracy, which always makes it easier to do or say

nothing.

The invasion went on, and sure enough, the Wehrmacht failed in defeating Russia, despite the most horrendous mistakes and lack of professional skill by the Russian army.

Anyone who thinks that the Germans could have defeated the Russians that first year, when the Wehrmacht was at its peak and the Russian army at its nadir, needs to look again at the campaign from the logistics side.

Note how often the Wehrmacht had to stop and wait for supplies to catch up, and how weak and undersupplied it was when the army finally got within striking distance to Moscow, pure logistics problems.

Much the same thing has happened in the United States regarding the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan. American generals were confident in their battlefield military prowess, but key war questions were never asked or answered, or were willfully ignored.

All the questions of how the U.S. would govern the two conquered countries were punted by the senior officer corps who followed the political winds blowing from the White House on the key governing issue: "We don't do nation-building" was the refrain, despite obligations under the Geneva Conventions.

Reconstruction issues were ignored, despite the crying need for rebuilding and the strategic/operational need for reconstruction at least to quell anti-American discontent.

Nobody wanted to look at the how vulnerable we Americans, in our vehicular army, are should the locals in these countries be sufficiently dissatisfied with our occupying their countries and running their affairs for them to take up arms against us and dispute the issue.

Everyone who asked how we could run both these countries much less contend with an insurgency without having adequate manpower was told in so many words to shut up and get with the program.

All of these problems were foreseeable, and most probably were foreseen at various levels of the command chain, but nobody in the senior U.S. military fought personally hard enough to risk losing their careers in challenging the White House on its horrendous and obvious mistakes, either before or during the war.

At the most senior levels of command, questions also should have been raised about war objectives, which one assumes, perhaps wrongly, were discussed openly

and honestly with the senior generals in a way that never occurred with the U.S. public.

The staggeringly infantile Bush-II goal of transforming the Middle East into some sort of democratic wonderland via wars of invasion is one so obviously at odds with the entire of military history that someone in stars should have said something to the White House, though I'm sure no one did.

Beyond a few questions about cost and force levels, no one went outside channels to inform Congress or the news media of the impending catastrophes.

Nor, once the failures of political policy and military implementation became obvious, have any officers put their careers on the line to take issue with the Bush administration over its attempts to call its vile failures a success, or an impending success if we just keep doing what we've been doing.

And it is much the same with the threatening war with Iran. If that war comes and the Iranians play their cards right, the conflict could well lead to the biggest military defeat of the U.S. Army in its history.

(Again, it's a question of logistics U.S. lines of supply are too long, weak and vulnerable to a well-executed Iranian riposte and any remaining U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan would be susceptible to isolation, starvation or surrender.)

The judgment of history is in on the Wehrmacht general staff, and it is harsh but fair.

They failed in preventing a madman from starting a war they knew they could not win, and once the war started, they continued it knowing that German defeat was certain. They also knew that a political solution should be made as soon as possible on the best terms available.

Fundamentally, they were moral and professional cowards, whose careerism, dishonesty and greed caused the largest and most entirely preventable death and destruction in history.

Much the same must be said of the U.S. military, particularly the Army, for doing the exact same things, under similar circumstances, sixty-some years later.

In defense of the U.S. military officer corps against these well-founded accusations of professional and personal failure and cowardice it is worth looking at what their opposition could have accomplished.

I don't see how any leaks to Congress or the news media, or public resignations

and denunciations by outraged officers could have gotten any real attention or traction. Both Congress and the press had signed off on the war, or had made it clear that they didn't have it in them to oppose it.

It is arguably unfair to blame the senior officer corps too harshly for their unwillingness to end their careers in the military when it would have done little to stop the mad stampede to war managed by George W. Bush and company.

Professional integrity and the long-term health and good reputation of the service would have been well served by their doing so, but that isn't motive enough for most any senior member of the U.S. military these days, which is another indictment of them and their institution.

The American political system, including Congress and the Fourth Estate, deserves an even more severe indictment because it's clear that even if U.S. military officers had issued a direct warning of imminent military failure, Congress and the U.S. press corps would have turned a deaf ear.

Nazi Germany is nowadays a poly-sci case study of a broken political system, a madman's dictatorship floating in a cesspool of corruption as Hitler's lieutenants' jockeyed and backstabbed to succeed him.

How completely politically broken it was is shown by its starting and continuing its doomed and suicidal war with Russia.

Stalin was interested in a settlement. After the battles of Moscow and Stalingrad, there were diplomatic feelers put out by the Russians for a negotiated peace, which the Germans ignored.

Future poly-sci students are going to do well studying the U.S. government's similarly ineptly planned and executed wars and the decision to continue them in the face of clear evidence of their being doomed and lost.

The current political system in the United States, and in Great Britain, will be regarded in the future as another case study in institutional failure.

There was a silver lining in the German defeat. Hitler and his criminal Nazi apparatchiks were consigned to history's trashcan. The German people learned a hard lesson about dramatically reducing the influence and power of their military in their country and their political system.

The political power and influence of the German military has been sharply curtailed, both by law and by custom, since 1945. Germans also learned about the futility of war and military imperialism.

There's almost no chance of some newfangled Hitler coming to power, nor of any

German war of choice or aggression happening anytime soon.

The question is whether the American people can learn such necessary lessons from our current military failures, or will we require, like the Germans, a bigger defeat than our current ones to make us honestly face and address our political and institutional failures.

The U.S. press corps may not be shilling for war the way it did during the Bush-II administration, but it isn't facing up to the wars' obvious failures either.

Congress, too, isn't doing anything useful to stop these failed wars, nor is it showing signs of having learned any lessons.

No, it appears any significant change in behavior will have to await more hurt, both physically and financially, from our imperialistic stupidities and bungling.

There's certainly no sign of anyone in authority changing course dramatically from the one that is leading the ship of state toward a shipwreck.

Best keep a life preserver handy, folks, that's my advice.
