

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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