

Hailing Gates for Pentagon 'Savings'

Since becoming Defense Secretary in December 2006, Robert Gates has wallowed in flattering press clippings, most recently hailed as the heroic Pentagon budget cutter eliminating wasteful weapons systems. However, the reality is quite different as Gates ends his tenure at the Pentagon with more and more costly weapons systems than before his much-touted "savings," Winslow T. Wheeler notes.

By Winslow T. Wheeler

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For months I have been reading in the press about Defense Secretary Robert Gates "cancelling more than 30 [defense hardware] programs."

A May 24 Bloomberg News article by Viole Gienger ("Gates Says Military Cuts May Protect F-35, Submarines") came up quick on a Google search. Other articles credit Gates with "saving more than \$300 billion" with these – presumably tough – decisions.

In case you are wondering where this image of Robert Gates as a tough taskmaster reining in out-of-control DOD procurement is coming from, you need look no further than Robert Gates.

At a May 24 farewell speech to the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, Gates repeated his own claim, made frequently earlier, that "All told, over the past two years, more than 30 programs were cancelled, capped, or ended that, if pursued to completion, would have cost more than \$300 billion."

A bit later, he hammered home the point in case any of the press corps present missed the legacy that Gates seeks for himself:

"When it comes to our military modernization accounts, the proverbial 'low hanging fruit' – those weapons and other programs considered most questionable – have not only been plucked, they have been stomped on and crushed."

However, over those two years, Robert Gates did not reduce the number of hardware programs in the Department of Defense; he increased them.

A term he has repeatedly expressed distaste for ("math") proves him wrong. DOD keeps periodic records on these sorts of things: DOD's Selected Acquisition Reports (SARs) track the number of major hardware programs and their acquisition costs. (Find them at <http://www.acq.osd.mil/ara/am/sar/>.)

The records show the following:

–In September 2008, just before Barack Obama was elected and chose to retain Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, there were 91 Major Defense Acquisition Programs (MDAPs). They were projected to cost \$1,648 billion.

–In April 2009, Gates announced the termination of various defense programs. The SAR that next came out, in December 2009, showed the number of MDAPs had indeed declined: to 87 programs, costing a little less, \$1,616 billion (a drop of \$32 billion).

–Nine months later, after Gates took some more whacks at the defense budget – if that’s what you want to call them – the SAR in September 2010 showed the number of MDAPs had actually risen to 94 with a cost of \$1,679 billion, an increase from September 2008, before Gates began his “savings.” In that two-year span, the total projected cost of MDAPs rose \$31 billion.

–The most recent SAR, for December 2010, shows another increase, both in programs (to 95) and money (to \$1,720 billion).

So, despite Secretary Gates’s “termination” of more than 30 programs “saving” us \$300 billion since September 2008, we now have a total of four more programs costing an additional \$72 billion.

I have two questions:

- 1) Just what legacy should we be giving Mr. Gates?
- 2) What type of “math” will Leon Panetta use when he is made Secretary of Defense later this year?

Winslow T. Wheeler is Director of the Straus Military Reform Project at the Center for Defense Information.

The Scandal of Secret Campaign Cash

Secret political donations threaten to inundate Campaign 2012 to flood levels that would make the Watergate slush funds look like kiddie pools. In this guest essay, Michael Winship explains how political scandals big and small trace back to money in politics.

By Michael Winship

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Sometimes I feel like Gus, the father in “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” – you know, the guy who thinks you can cure all maladies with a spritz of Windex and declares, “Give me a word, any word, and I show you that the root of that word is Greek.”

Only in my case, it's give me a scandal, any scandal, and I'll show you how the corrosive influence of money on politics is at its root and makes what's bad even worse (okay, maybe not in the case of Anthony Weiner – yet).

It's not an especially effective party trick, I know, unless you're at a really dreary policy wonk picnic, but you work with what you've got.

John Edwards's illegitimate child?

The legal case being built against the freshly indicted, former presidential candidate isn't about paternity or custody or any of that kind of stuff, but revolves around felony campaign finance charges; whether or not two wealthy backers – his now deceased fundraising chair Frederick Baron and 100-year-old heiress Rachel “Bunny” Mellon – provided hundreds of thousands in contributions that in reality paid for the hiding of Edwards' mistress, Rielle Hunter, and their baby.

Newt Gingrich and his wife Callista's big fat, revolving, no interest credit account at Tiffany's?

It might be tin-eared and wrong for someone who purports to be a fiscal conservative and a man of the people to throw around big bucks for expensive bling, but that ain't necessarily the scandal. Look a little deeper.

On May 24, Jeff Stein of *The Washington Post* blog “Spy Talk” reported, “At the same time Tiffany & Co. was extending Callista (Bisek) Gingrich a virtual interest-free loan of tens of thousands of dollars, the diamond and silverware firm was spending big bucks to influence mining policy in Congress and in agencies over which the House Agriculture Committee – where she worked – had jurisdiction, official records show.”

Until 2006, Ms. Gingrich was chief clerk at the committee. During the years between 2005 and 2009, Tiffany's annual lobbying costs shot up from around \$100,000 to \$360,000, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

The jewelry giant strongly denies any connection: “We had no reason to lobby the Agriculture Committee and we did not... Our focus has been on the Natural Resources Committee.” The company also said it had never spoken with Newt or Callista Gingrich about federal mining policy.

But hang on, there's more. Tim Carney of *The Washington Examiner* reports, “Christy Evans, formerly a top staffer to then-whip Newt Gingrich, is a registered lobbyist for Tiffany's, the high-end jeweler where Gingrich and his wife enjoy an extraordinary line of credit.

Evans, former floor assistant to Gingrich and now a lobbyist at the legendary K Street firm Cassidy & Associates, has represented Tiffany's on mining issues since 2000, according to lobbying filings.”

The revolving door between government and corporate interests, revolving credit... the saga of Newt "Holly Golightly" Gingrich spins on.

The whole affair is reminiscent of the preferential loan treatment now-collapsed subprime mortgage giant Countrywide Financial Corporation reportedly gave a few years ago to Fannie Mae CEO Jim Johnson (he resigned as a result), North Dakota Senator Kent Conrad (chair of the Senate Budget Committee), former Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd (who served as chair of the Senate Banking Committee), and former cabinet secretaries Alphonso Jackson and Donna Shalala.

Yet all this greed and venality pales against the dark heart of the worst political scandal of all, the continuing nightmare caused by *Citizens United* and other court decisions that have unleashed a monster of unlimited and frequently anonymous private and corporate campaign cash against a nearly defenseless citizenry.

The recent disclosure that the conservative, "grass roots" advocacy organization American Action Network received first year revenues of \$2.75 million from fewer than a dozen unnamed, wealthy donors (and 82% of the money from only three of them) led Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethic in Washington, to cite AAN as just one example of how "very few people are having a disproportionate impact on our country's elections."

(The group, affiliated with Karl Rove's American Crossroads political action committee, raised another \$24 million in the four months before the 2010 midterms, funding attack ads against Democratic Senate candidates in Wisconsin, Florida, Washington State and Florida described by progressive watchdog Media Matters as "bogus," "deceptive" and "stripped of the facts.")

This revelation follows superb investigative reporting by a Bloomberg News team last month headlined "Secret Donors Multiply in U.S. Election Spending."

They found that outside, or non-party organizations, including "trade groups, unions and non-profits started by political operatives that raise and spend money for advertising" spent \$305 million on the 2010 elections, four times more than similar groups spent four years ago. They plan to raise even more money for the 2012 campaign. Contrary to law, five of those groups have failed to report to the Federal Election Commission (FEC) more than \$4 million spent on attack ads in last year's races.

"The organizations face little scrutiny from the FEC, where split votes between Republican and Democratic commissioners have stymied enforcement in case after case for almost three years," Bloomberg reported. "

As a result, voters may find themselves choosing the next U.S. president knowing less about those trying to shape their views of the candidates than they have since secret money helped finance the Watergate burglary and re-elect President Richard Nixon in 1972."

The journalists quoted Donald Simon, a director of pro-disclosure organization

Democracy 21: “The amounts of corporate money involved in Watergate will look quaint by the standards of secret corporate funding that will take place in 2012.”

Republicans and many Democrats oppose all new attempts at campaign finance reform, including a proposed White House executive order requiring corporations seeking government contracts to reveal their political contributions.

On May 26, a federal district court in Alexandria, Virginia, ruled that a long-standing ban on corporate contributions to federal candidates is unconstitutional.

Unless the composition of the Supreme Court shifts in a new direction, a constitutional amendment that reverses *Citizens United* and other federal rulings may be our only prayer, the solitary hope we have to prevent the total usurpation of representative government by big businesses with bottomless pockets.

The Greeks had a word for it – “oligarchy” – political clout based on economic dominance. It is, in the words of economist Simon Johnson, “an antithesis to democracy... a small group with a lot of wealth and a lot of power. They pull the strings. They have the influence. They call the shots.”

No accountability, no scruples, no shame. It’s the biggest scandal of all: a republic struck down by a possibly fatal malady that even Gus the Greek’s magic bottle of Windex can’t cure.

Michael Winship, senior writing fellow at Demos and president of the Writers Guild of America, East, is the former senior writer of “Bill Moyers Journal” on PBS.

Targeting Cuba’s Health-Care System

The U.S. government’s half-century campaign to discredit and destroy Cuba’s experiment with socialism has had many ruthless aspects, but perhaps none more so than efforts to disparage and damage the Caribbean island’s widely admired health-care system, as William Blum describes in this guest essay.

By William Blum

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In January, the government of the United States of America saw fit to seize \$4.207 million in funds allocated to Cuba by the United Nations Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for the first quarter of 2011, Cuba has charged.

The UN Fund is a \$22 billion a year program that works to combat the three deadly pandemics

in 150 countries. [*Prensa Latina* (Cuba), March 12, 2011]

"This mean-spirited policy," the Cuban government said, "aims to undermine the quality of service provided to the Cuban population and to obstruct the provision of medical assistance in over 100 countries by 40,000 Cuban health workers."

Most of the funds are used to import expensive AIDS medication to Cuba, where antiretroviral treatment is provided free of charge to some 5,000 HIV patients. [*The Militant* (US, Socialist Workers Party), April 4, 2011]

The United States sees the Cuban health system and Havana's sharing of such as a means of Cuba winning friends and allies in the Third World, particularly Latin America; a situation sharply in conflict with long-standing US policy to isolate Cuba.

The United States in recent years has attempted to counter the Cuban international success by dispatching the U.S. Naval Ship "Comfort" to the region.

With 12 operating rooms and a 1,000-bed hospital, the converted oil tanker has performed hundreds of thousands of free surgeries in places such as Belize, Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Nicaragua and Haiti.

However, the Comfort's port calls likely will not substantially enhance America's influence in the hemisphere.

"It's hard for the U.S. to compete with Cuba and Venezuela in this way," said Peter Hakim, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a pro-U.S. policy-research group in Washington. "It makes us look like we're trying to imitate them. Cuba's doctors aren't docked at port for a couple days, but are in the country for years." [Bloomberg News, Sept. 19, 2007]

The recent disclosure by WikiLeaks of U.S. State Department documents included this little item: A cable was sent by Michael Parmly from the U.S. Interests Section in Havana in July 2006, during the run-up to the Non-Aligned Movement conference.

Parmly notes that he is actively looking for "human interest stories and other news that shatters the myth of Cuban medical prowess."

Michael Moore refers to another WikiLeaks State Department cable: "On Jan. 31, 2008, a State Department official stationed in Havana took a made-up story and sent it back to his headquarters in Washington. Here's what they came up with: [The official] stated that Cuban authorities have banned Michael Moore's documentary, 'Sicko,' as being subversive.

"Although the film's intent is to discredit the U.S. healthcare system by highlighting the excellence of the Cuban system, the official said the regime knows the film is a myth and does not want to risk a popular backlash by showing to Cubans facilities that are clearly not available to the vast majority of them."

Moore points out an Associated Press story of June 16, 2007 (seven months prior to the cable) with the headline: "Cuban health minister says Moore's 'Sicko' shows 'human values' of communist system."

Moore adds that the people of Cuba were shown the film on national television on April 25, 2008. "The Cubans embraced the film so much it became one of those rare American movies that

received a theatrical distribution in Cuba. I personally ensured that a 35mm print got to the Film Institute in Havana. Screenings of *Sicko* were set up in towns all across the country.” [Huffington Post, Dec. 18, 2010]

The United States also bans the sale to Cuba of vital medical drugs and devices, such as the inhalant agent Sevoflurane which has become the pharmaceutical of excellence for applying general anesthesia to children; and the pharmaceutical Dexmetomidine, of particular usefulness in elderly patients who often must be subjected to extended surgical procedures.

Both of these are produced by the U.S. firm Abbot Laboratories.

Cuban children suffering from lymphoblastic leukemia cannot use Erwinia L-asparaginasa, a medicine commercially known as Elspar, since the U.S. pharmaceutical company Merck and Co. refuses to sell this product to Cuba. Washington has also prohibited the U.S.-based Pastors for Peace Caravan from donating three Ford ambulances to Cuba.

Cubans are moreover upset by the denial of visas requested to attend conferences in the field of Anesthesiology and Reanimation that take place in the United States. This creates further barriers for Cuba’s anesthesiologists to update themselves on state of the art anesthesiology, the care of severely ill patients, and the advances achieved in the treatment of pain.

Some of the foregoing are but a small sample of American warfare against the Cuban medical system presented in a Cuban report to the United Nations General Assembly on Oct. 28, 2009.

Finally, we have the Cuban Medical Professional Parole (CMPP) immigration program, which encourages Cuban doctors who are serving their government overseas to defect and enter the U.S. immediately as refugees.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported in January of this year that through Dec. 16, 2010, CMPP visas had been issued by U.S. consulates in 65 countries to 1,574 Cuban doctors whose education had been paid for by the financially-struggling Cuban government. [Wall Street Journal, “Cuban Doctors Come In From the Cold” (video), Jan. 14, 2011]

This program, oddly enough, was initiated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Another victory over terrorism? Or socialism? Or same thing?

Wait until the American conservatives hear that Cuba is the only country in Latin America offering abortion on demand, and free.

William Blum is the author of *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War 2*; *Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower*; *West-Bloc Dissident: A Cold War Memoir*; *Freeing the World to Death: Essays on the American Empire*. Portions of the books can be read, and signed copies purchased, at www.killinghope.org. This article was originally published in Blum’s Anti-Empire Report.
