

# Robert Gates Double-Crosses Obama

**Special Report:** Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates is slamming President Obama in a new memoir, accusing him of lacking enthusiasm for the Afghan War. But perhaps Obama's bigger mistake was trusting Gates, a Bush Family operative with a history of dirty dealing, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As Barack Obama is staggered by a back-stabbing memoir from former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the President can't say that some people didn't warn him about the risk of bringing a political opportunist like Gates into his inner circle on national security.

Those warnings date back to just days after Obama's election in 2008 when word began to spread that some of his advisers were urging Obama to keep Gates on as Defense Secretary as part of a "Team of Rivals" and a show of bipartisanship. On Nov. 13, 2008, I posted a story at Consortiumnews.com entitled "The Danger of Keeping Robert Gates," which said:

"If Obama does keep Gates on, the new President will be employing someone who embodies many of the worst elements of U.S. national security policy over the past three decades, including responsibility for what Obama himself has fingered as a chief concern, 'politicized intelligence.' It was Gates as a senior CIA official in the 1980s who broke the back of the CIA analytical division's commitment to objective intelligence."

I cited a book by former CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman, Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA, which identified Gates as the chief action officer for the Reagan administration's drive to tailor intelligence reporting to fit White House political desires.

But Gates's nefarious roles in national security scandals went much deeper than that, despite his undeniable PR skills in shaping his image as a dedicated public servant who has earned Official Washington's near-universal regard as a modern-day Wise Man.

In reality, Gates has been more a careerist who had a chameleon-like skill to adapt to the ideological hues of the powerful people around him. But at his core he seemed most comfortable in a Cold War setting of tough-talking belligerence which led him to repeated policy miscalculations, including dismissing Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 as a phony and missing the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later.

But it's how Gates began his meteoric rise in the U.S. intelligence community during the Reagan years that has remained most cloaked in mystery. As a young CIA official in 1980, Gates was implicated in secret maneuvers to sabotage President Jimmy Carter's negotiations to free 52 U.S. hostages then held in Iran, a failure by Carter that doomed his reelection.

Gates was identified as one of the participants in a key October 1980 meeting in Paris allegedly also involving William Casey, who was then Reagan's campaign director; George H.W. Bush, a former CIA director and then-Reagan's vice presidential running mate; Iranian emissary Mehdi Karrubi; and Israeli intelligence officers, including Ari Ben-Menashe who later testified under oath about what he witnessed.

The Paris meeting and Gates's alleged involvement was also cited by a Russian government report given to U.S. congressional investigators in early 1993. The Russian Report prepared by a national security committee of the Russian Duma stated that "William Casey, in 1980, met three times with representatives of the Iranian leadership in Madrid and Paris."

At the Paris meeting in October 1980, "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," the Russian Report said. "In Madrid and Paris, the representatives of Ronald Reagan and the Iranian leadership discussed the question of possibly delaying the release of 52 hostages from the staff of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran."

According to the Russian Report, the Republicans succeeded in wooing the Iranians who rebuffed Carter's appeals. "After the victory of R. Reagan in the election, in early 1981, a secret agreement was reached in London in accord with which Iran released the American hostages, and the U.S. continued to supply arms, spares and military supplies for the Iranian army," the Russian Report said.

The Iranians only released the hostages after Reagan was sworn in as President on Jan. 20, 1981. U.S.-approved arms deliveries followed, carried out by Israel, the Russian Report said. As a young Israeli intelligence officer, Ben-Menashe testified that he took part in the weapons shipments, sometimes coordinating his work with Gates at the CIA. Gates has denied the allegations but he has been less than forthcoming with investigators.

The Russian Report came in response to an Oct. 21, 1992, query from Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, who was then heading a task force examining this so-called October Surprise case. But Hamilton later told me that the Russian Report never reached him, ending up in a box of unpublished files that I discovered a couple

of years later. [For the text of the Russian report, click [here](#). To view the U.S. embassy cable that contains the Russian report, click [here](#).]

Hamilton's investigation also faced frustrations when it tried to secure information about the 1980 whereabouts of Gates and Donald Gregg, another CIA officer linked to the October Surprise allegations. Documents released by the National Archives have revealed that the CIA in 1991 and 1992 dragged its heels on complying with Hamilton's information requests on Gates and Gregg, both of whom were close to then-President George H.W. Bush.

As Hamilton's investigation was starting in fall 1991, President Bush went to extraordinary lengths to install Gates as CIA director, facing down stiff congressional resistance because of suspicions that Gates had lied about his role in the Iran-Contra scandal, which also involved secret Reagan-approved arms shipment to Iran.

So it was Gates's agency in 1991-92 that stonewalled the congressional investigators seeking information on Gates's possible collaboration with enemies of the United States in 1980. [For more details on this October Surprise mystery, see Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#) and [America's Stolen Narrative](#). For Hamilton's latest assessment of the case, see Consortiumnews.com's ["Second Thoughts on October Surprise."](#)]

### **Evading Accountability**

In the end, Gates was able to skate away from the October Surprise suspicions just as he had evaded concerns about his role in other CIA-related scandals. Gates had been implicated, too, in misleading Congress about the Iran-Contra scandal and Iraq-gate, a parallel program of secretly aiding Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Though Gates also denied any wrongdoing in those scandals and disparaged Ben-Menashe and another witness who linked him to the Iraqi arms deals the allegations about Gates and Iraq were bolstered by a January 1995 [affidavit](#) from Howard Teicher, who had been a staffer on Ronald Reagan's National Security Council.

"Under CIA Director 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 declared.

So, it appears that Robert Gates made his bones in George H.W. Bush's covert world by undertaking secretive projects that skirted American law, such as evading arms export controls against shipments to Iran and Iraq, and even may have engaged in actions bordering on treason if the October Surprise allegations

are true.

If Gates did indeed perform these sensitive missions, his swift rise in the early 1980s from a relatively obscure analyst to chief of the analytical division and then to deputy CIA director would make more sense. As he climbed the bureaucratic ladder, he further enhanced his standing with the Reagan administration by whipping the CIA analysts into line behind President Reagan's apocalyptic view of the Soviet Union.

### **Corrupting Intelligence**

Before Gates's ascent in the 1980s, the CIA's analytical division had a proud tradition of objectivity and scholarship regarding the agency's intelligence product. However, during the Reagan administration with Gates playing a key role, that ethos collapsed.

At Gates's confirmation hearings in 1991, former CIA analysts, including senior Soviet specialist Melvin 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.

These former intelligence officers said the ambitious Gates pressured the CIA's analytical division to hype the Soviet menace to fit Reagan's ideological perspective. Analysts who took a more nuanced view of Soviet power and behavior 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 testified. "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 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," Ekedahl said.

Soon, the hammer fell on the analysts who had prepared the more nuanced 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 the dictates of Gates and CIA Director Casey, warning that acts of politicization would undermine the integrity of the process and risk policy disasters in the future.

In his first memoir, *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.

But the evidence is clear that Gates used top-down management techniques to get his way. 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.

The CIA’s proud Soviet analytical office underwent a purge of its top people. “Nearly every senior analyst on Soviet foreign policy eventually left the Office of Soviet Analysis,” Goodman said. “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.”

“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.”

### **The Afghan Folly**

But Gates’s legacy at the CIA had other even more lethal consequences. Because of his insistence on overstating Soviet strength, Gates misread the opportunity presented by the emergence of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s. From Gates’s perch near the top of the U.S. national security establishment, he kept calling Gorbachev a phony who would never withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

When Gorbachev did withdraw Soviet troops in February 1989, Gates then serving as President George H.W. Bush’s deputy national security adviser joined in the decision to rebuff Gorbachev’s proposal for a cease-fire and a coalition government between the Soviet-backed regime of President Najibullah in Kabul and

the CIA-supported mujahedeen. Instead, Gates and his colleagues set their sights on a decisive victory for the CIA- and Saudi-backed forces, which included Osama bin Laden and other Islamist extremists.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom of Official Washington that America's "big mistake" in Afghanistan was to abandon the mujahedeen after the Soviets left in early 1989 a myth pushed by Gates himself the reality was that the Bush-41 administration continued funneling money and weapons to the rebels for nearly three more years as the fractious mujahedeen failed to take Kabul but busied themselves slaughtering civilians and each other.

Najibullah's regime actually outlasted the Soviet Union, which fell apart in late 1991. Ironically, after failing to detect cracks in the Soviet empire dating back at least to the 1970s, Gates and his cohorts claimed credit for its "sudden" collapse. But the chaos in Afghanistan, which might have been avoided if Gates had cooperated with Gorbachev, soon set the stage for new national security threats to the United States.

By fall 1991, President George H.W. Bush had reinstalled Gates at the CIA as director all the better to frustrate investigations into October Surprise, Iran-Contra and Iraq-gate.

After Bush's defeat in 1992, Gates had hoped to stay on, but was removed by President Bill Clinton. Gates retreated to Washington State, where he worked on his first memoir, *From the Shadows*. Afterwards, ex-President Bush arranged to get Gates a job at Texas A&M, where Gates, the ever-skillful bureaucrat, soon rose to become the school's president.

Meanwhile, in the mid-1990s, the fundamentalist Taliban emerged from Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and successfully marched on Kabul. One of the Taliban's first victims was Najibullah who was tortured, castrated and hung from a light post. Thankful for the help from Saudi-backed jihadists, the Taliban also granted refuge to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda band which had shifted its terror war from the Soviets to the Americans.

After George W. Bush's disputed election victory in 2000, many of Gates's neocon allies returned to power in Washington and after al-Qaeda carried out the 9/11 attacks U.S. forces were dispatched to Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and root out al-Qaeda, whose surviving leaders mostly fled to Pakistan.

Rather than fully stabilize Afghanistan, Bush-43 and the neocons quickly pivoted toward Iraq with an invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein. Soon, U.S. forces found themselves bogged down in two inconclusive wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq. By 2006, Iraq was descending into a sectarian civil war and Bush faced the

prospect of a humiliating military defeat. He and his neocon advisers began thinking about a U.S. military escalation, to be called a “surge.”

But Generals John Abizaid and George Casey, the Iraq field commanders, felt they had already begun tamping down the violence through a mix of alliances with Sunni tribes, reducing the American “footprint,” separating Shiite and Sunni communities, and targeted killings of al-Qaeda militants. Abizaid and Casey were supported in their strategy by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

So, as President Bush settled on the “surge” a plan to dispatch 30,000 more soldiers he also decided to replace his military command, recalling Abizaid and Casey and cashiering Rumsfeld. Bush turned to Gen. David Petraeus to implement the “surge” and recruited Gates to sell it as the new Defense Secretary.

The Democrats and the Washington press corps were easily fooled. They misinterpreted the personnel changes as a sign that Bush had decided to wind down the war. Gates was hailed as an “adult” who would lead the impetuous “war president” out of the Iraq quagmire. But the reality was the opposite. Gates became Bush’s guide for going in deeper.

Gates also proved invaluable in selling the “surge” as a great “success,” although nearly 1,000 additional U.S. soldiers died (along with countless Iraqis) and the strategic arc toward a U.S. defeat wasn’t changed. The primary “success” from the “surge” was to enable Bush and his neocon advisers to exit the scene without a clear-cut defeat wrapped around their necks.

### **The Gates Legend**

But the legend of Robert Gates and the myth of the “successful surge” shielded him from the damaged reputations that the bloody debacle in Iraq inflicted on Bush and many neocons.

After Obama was elected in 2008, his advisers persuaded the President-elect to keep Gates on as Defense Secretary, along with the media’s beloved Gen. Petraeus as a top commander. Obama ignored contrary advice from former CIA analysts who had worked with Gates and from the few journalists who understood Gates’s real history.

Obama’s decision to go with the “Team of Rivals” theme in assembling his national security team guaranteed that he surrounded himself with people like Gates who had no loyalty to the new administration, as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who usually sided with Gates and Petraeus as they pushed for an Iraq-style “surge” in Afghanistan.

In 2009, as Obama insisted on a steady withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq along

the lines of an agreement that the Iraqi government had forced on Bush the new President wanted another withdrawal plan for Afghanistan, where Bush's neglect had allowed the Taliban to make a comeback.

But Gates and Petraeus were set on guiding the inexperienced Obama into an Afghan "surge," essentially by employing the old bureaucratic trick of presenting their desired outcome as the only realistic option. Mouse-trapped by this maneuver and realizing the political damage that he would face if he spurned the recommendations of Gates-Petraeus-Clinton Obama accepted a counterinsurgency "surge" of 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan but he pushed back by trying to limit the mission and insisting on withdrawal by the end of 2014.

Gates continued to undercut the President by briefing reporters during a flight to Afghanistan that "we are in this thing to win" and presenting the war as essentially open-ended. Gates offered these credulous reporters a history lesson on Afghanistan that Gates knew to be false. He declared "that we are not going to repeat the situation in 1989" when the United States supposedly abandoned Afghanistan once the Soviet troops left.

Even Gates's much-ballyhooed Pentagon budget trimming while winning rave reviews from the news media was more P.R. than reality. As noted by military affairs expert Lawrence J. Korb, Gates's high-profile savings were mostly weapons projects, like the F-22, that were already slated for the scrap heap. Plus, Gates rejected any substantial cuts in future military spending despite having personally overseen a rise in the baseline Pentagon budget from \$450 billion in 2006 to \$550 billion when he departed in 2011.

Gates's petty vindictiveness, which had wielded against his CIA colleagues, also was apparent in his final days as Defense Secretary in 2011 when he blocked the appointment of Marine Gen. James Cartwright as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of anger over Cartwright's willingness to give President Obama's alternative options to the Afghan "surge" in 2009.

The Washington Post's Craig Whitlock reported that Cartwright's expected elevation from JCS deputy chairman to JCS chairman was nixed, in part, by Gates who "had long mistrusted Cartwright because of his independent relationship with the president and for opposing [Gates's] plan to expand the war in Afghanistan."

### **Slamming Obama**

Gates's nasty side resurfaces in his new memoir, *Duty*, according to press accounts before its release on Jan. 14. Gates reportedly lashes out at Vice President Joe Biden and other Obama administration officials who dared to



express doubts about the wisdom of the counterinsurgency “surge” in Afghanistan.

Even more damaging, Gates offers a negative depiction of President Obama and former Secretary of State Clinton, portraying them as shallow political opportunists who supposedly had opposed the Iraq War “surge” only because of cheap politics. Gates further lambastes Obama for sending troops to fight and die in Afghanistan without believing in the mission.

According to [Bob Woodward’s account](#) of *Duty*, Gates concluded by early 2010 that Obama “doesn’t believe in his own strategy, and doesn’t consider the war to be his. For him, it’s all about getting out.”

Woodward wrote that Gates was “leveling one of the more serious charges that a defense secretary could make against a commander in chief sending forces into combat [by asserting] that Obama had more than doubts about the course he had charted in Afghanistan. The president was ‘skeptical if not outright convinced it would fail.’”

Obama must now deal with the fallout of Gates having been allowed a front-row seat on national security policy and predictably turning on Obama and other Democrats who didn’t favor the wars that Bush-43 had started and that Gates had helped prosecute. It was a predictable problem and indeed it had been predicted.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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