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Special Report: Defense Secretary Robert Gates is leaving the Pentagon as a Washington “wise man,” admired by both Republicans and Democrats for his supposed judgment and integrity. But does he deserve that reputation — or is he just an especially clever manipulator of the political process? Robert Parry examines Gates’s real record.

As Robert Gates ends his four-plus years as Defense Secretary, he has accomplished one of Washington’s more notable image makeovers, shedding an earlier reputation as a sneaky ideological chameleon for new skin as a respected “wise man” hailed by Republicans, Democrats and the press.

But the transformation may underscore how great a careerist Gates is rather than mark any actual improvement in his judgment. In his early days, he was viewed as a climber who would change colors to match the political hues of those above him; now, it seems his decades of accommodating the powerful have earned him their appreciation and acclaim.

In that sense, Gates can be compared to Colin Powell. Though taking different routes, both achieved a reputation for integrity and wisdom that didn’t match their actual records, which — if examined carefully — showed them getting a lot wrong but having positioned themselves safely inside a consensus of powerful allies. So, they rose regardless of their many screw-ups.

As Secretary of State in 2003, Powell did suffer what he called a “blot” on his reputation when he gave a thoroughly dishonest speech to the United Nations justifying war with Iraq over non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

But the fact that Powell’s WMD falsehoods fit with the conventional wisdom of Official Washington spared his status any serious consequences; he remains the go-to guy when the Super Bowl honors America. [For more on Powell’s real history, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Behind Colin Powell’s Legend](#).”]

Similarly, Gates – both in his earlier incarnation as an ambitious national security bureaucrat and in his return to the national stage in 2006 as Defense Secretary – adopted positions favored by key elements of the power elite.

In his career’s first act in the 1980s, Gates ingratiated himself to Cold War hardliners, including the emerging neoconservatives, by distorting CIA analyses to exaggerate the Soviet menace (and thus justify higher military spending). Ultimately, Gates’s politicized CIA was so busy hyping Moscow’s strength that it missed the Soviet collapse.

After his Washington career’s second act began in 2006, Gates pleased much of the same constituency by supporting the troop “surges” in Iraq and Afghanistan (even as those bloody conflicts continue their slide toward slow-motion defeats for the United States). At the cost of a couple of thousand more dead U.S. soldiers, Gates staved off obvious failures until his patron, George W. Bush, and the neocons had left the scene.

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 has 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 now.

In other words, Gates continues to carry the neocons' water, demanding high levels of military spending even as important domestic programs, from energy technology to health care, face sharp cuts. And the neocons continue to reward the 67-year-old Defense Secretary with flattering press clippings.

Axing an Adversary

Despite his impending Pentagon departure in late June, Gates also showed that he can still put to use his bloated reputation and his genuine bureaucratic skills to shape the national security debate.

His anger over Marine Gen. James Cartwright's willingness to give President Barack Obama's alternative options to the Afghan "surge" in 2009 is reported to have destroyed Cartwright's prospects of getting named chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Washington Post's Craig Whitlock reported on Sunday 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."

Surrendering to Gates's animosity toward Cartwright – and the expectation that Gates's resistance would spark a nasty confirmation fight against Cartwright in the Senate – Obama instead scrambled to find another candidate and, on Monday, named Army Chief of Staff Martin Dempsey to the job.

Obama took the opportunity of Dempsey's appointment to again praise Gates as "our outstanding Secretary of Defense." But he must have been wondering about his decision to keep Gates on in 2009, which always represented a kind of deal with the devil.

By retaining Gates at the Pentagon, Obama benefited from an image of bipartisanship on national security and from Gates's credibility with Washington insiders. But the President had to acquiesce to substantial continuity with Bush's policies and he found himself boxed in on the

Afghan “surge.”

The sacrifice of Cartwright – the one senior military commander who complied with Obama’s request for other options on Afghanistan – was just the latest price that Obama paid in his Faustian bargain of keeping Secretary Gates and his establishment credentials.

That arrangement of convenience also required the avoidance of any historical investigations which might have unearthed Republican skeletons with bony fingers pointing in Gates’s direction. Those mysteries surrounding Gates have dated back to his act one, his meteoric rise at the start of the Reagan administration.

However, since 2006, and the start of Gates’s second act as a Washington bigwig, the Defense Secretary has been spared by Washington’s amnesia regarding past scandals of “the favored ones” as well as from fawning press coverage, which usually follows esteemed members of “the club” – like him.

No Dissembling

The national news media has been so in the tank for Gates that it not only ignored the lies about what he did for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush in his career’s first act but his more recent falsehoods, too.

As an example of this fawning press coverage during act two, Washington Post columnist David Broder lauded Gates on Dec. 4, 2009, for his forthrightness. Broder, who was known as “the dean of the Washington press corps,” [wrote](#) that regarding Gates’s handling of the Afghan War, the Defense Secretary is “incapable of dissembling.”

However, the real story of the Afghan escalation was that Gates had trapped Obama into a counter-insurgency “surge” of 30,000 more troops by limiting the options, in effect, giving the President only that one option.

After Obama consented to the extra troops but sought to restrict the mission to blocking the Taliban from restoring Afghanistan as a safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorists, Gates undercut the President again by briefing reporters during a flight to Afghanistan that “we are in this thing to win” and presenting the war as essentially open-ended.

Just days after Broder’s “incapable of dissembling” praise, 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 Union had withdrawn its last military units on Feb. 15, 1989.

While that story of the 1989 abandonment of Afghanistan has become a powerful conventional wisdom in Washington – popularized by the movie “Charlie Wilson’s War” – it is substantially untrue, and Gates, as a former top CIA official, knew it to be a myth.

What actually happened in 1989 was that President George H.W. Bush rebuffed overtures from Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev for a negotiated settlement of the war that envisioned a coalition government involving Soviet-backed President Najibullah and the CIA-backed mujahedeen warlords.

Instead of taking up Gorbachev’s plan, Bush escalated the purpose of the Afghan conflict, revising the intelligence finding that had justified the U.S. covert operation. Instead of Ronald Reagan’s goal of helping the Afghans drive out the Soviet army, Bush approved a more elastic rationale, seeking Afghan self-determination.

So, instead of the abrupt aid cut-off that Gates implied in his in-flight briefing, U.S. covert support for the Afghan mujahedeen continued for nearly three years, until December 1991. And Gates was at the center of those decisions.

Indeed, a key reason for Bush rebuffing Gorbachev was that Gates’s CIA analytical division – which he had packed with Cold War hardliners – was projecting a rapid collapse of Najibullah’s government after a Soviet withdrawal. That would translate into a complete humiliation of the Soviets and a total triumph for the United States and the CIA.

String Him Up

In 1989, I was a correspondent for Newsweek magazine covering intelligence issues. After the Soviets left Afghanistan, I asked CIA officials why they were continuing the bloodshed, instead of looking for ways of preventing further fragmentation of the country.

Why not, I asked, bring the war to an end with some kind of national unity government? Hadn't the U.S. national interest of driving out the Soviets been achieved?

One of the CIA hardliners responded to my question with disgust. "We want to see Najibullah strung up by a light pole," he snapped.

What I thought I was hearing was CIA bravado, but the comment actually reflected an internal U.S. government debate. Since the last year of the Reagan administration in 1988, the CIA had been predicting a quick end to the Najibullah government – if and when the Soviet army left.

However, the State Department instead foresaw a drawn-out struggle. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead and the department's intelligence chief Morton Abramowitz challenged the CIA's assumptions and warned that Najibullah's army might hold on longer than the CIA expected.

But Deputy CIA Director Gates pushed the CIA analysis of a rapid Najibullah collapse and prevailed in the policy debates. Gates described this internal battle in his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows*, recalling how he briefed Secretary of State George Shultz and his senior aides about the CIA's prediction prior to Shultz flying to Moscow in February 1988.

"I told them that most [CIA] analysts did not believe Najibullah's government could last without active Soviet military support," wrote Gates, who also was predicting privately that the Soviets would not depart Afghanistan despite Gorbachev's assurances that they would.

After the Soviets did withdraw in early 1989, some U.S. officials felt Washington's geostrategic aims had been achieved and a move toward peace was in order. There also was concern about the Afghan mujahedeen, especially their tendencies toward brutality, heroin trafficking and fundamentalist religious policies.

However, the new administration of George H.W. Bush – with Gates having moved from the CIA to the White House as deputy national security adviser – chose to continue U.S. covert support for the mujahedeen, funneled primarily through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI.

Instead of a fast collapse, however, Najibullah's regime used its Soviet weapons and advisers to beat back a mujahedeen offensive in 1990. Najibullah hung on. The war, the violence and the disorder continued.

Gates finally recognized that his CIA rapid-collapse analysis was wrong. In his memoir, he wrote: "As it turned out, Whitehead and Abramowitz were right" in their warning that Najibullah's regime might not collapse so quickly.

But another comment in his memoir bears on Gates's statement to reporters in December 2009 reiterating the myth about the United States having immediately abandoned the Afghan cause once the Soviets left in February 1989. By his own hand, Gates wrote that he understood the truth, that the U.S. government hadn't departed Afghanistan precipitously.

"Najibullah would remain in power for another three years [after the Soviet pull-out], as the United States and the USSR continued to aid their respective sides," Gates wrote. "On Dec. 11, 1991, both Moscow and Washington cut off all assistance, and Najibullah's government fell four months later. He had outlasted both Gorbachev and the Soviet Union itself."

Misleading the Press

So, in telling reporters in 2009 that the United States had abandoned the Afghan cause in 1989, Gates was at best dissembling, playing to a popular myth that he knew to be false but that

supported his case that the Obama administration must escalate to “win” the Afghan War.

Besides shedding light on his integrity, Gates’s deceptive comments also showed that he had failed to absorb the real lesson of 1989 – that a misguided determination for total victory in Afghanistan only makes matters worse and harms U.S. national security.

Instead of accepting Gorbachev’s olive branch in 1989 and seeking a negotiated peace among Afghanistan’s warring parties, President George H.W. Bush embraced Gates’s hard-line strategy and adopted a triumphalist approach to the complicated Afghan civil war.

By the time it became apparent to Bush that the Gates-CIA scenario of a quick mujahedeen victory was an illusion, Gorbachev was no longer in a position to broker an Afghan peace deal. He was fighting for his own political survival against hard-line communists in Moscow. [Gates and his politicized CIA analytical division also missed the coming collapse of the Soviet Union.]

It was not until late 1991 after Gorbachev’s government had disappeared – along with the Soviet Union – that Russia’s new president, Boris Yeltsin, and the United States finally stepped back from the Afghan quagmire.

Najibullah’s belated fall in 1992 brought an end to his communist regime, but it didn’t stop the war. The capital of Kabul came under the control of a relatively moderate rebel force led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Islamist but not a fanatic. But Massoud, a Tajik, was not favored by Pakistan’s ISI that backed more extreme Pashtun elements of the mujahedeen.

The various Afghan warlords battled for another four years as the ISI readied its own army of Islamic extremists drawn from Pashtun refugee camps inside Pakistan. With the ISI’s backing, this group, known as the Taliban, entered Afghanistan with the promise of restoring order.

The Taliban seized the capital of Kabul in September 1996, driving Massoud into a northward retreat. The ousted communist leader Najibullah, who had stayed in Kabul, sought shelter in the United Nations compound, but was captured.

The Taliban tortured, castrated and killed him, his mutilated body hung from a light pole, just as CIA hardliners had envisioned seven years earlier.

The triumphant Taliban imposed harsh Islamic law on Afghanistan. Their rule was especially devastating to women who had made gains toward equal rights under the communists, but were forced by the Taliban to live under highly restrictive rules, to cover themselves when in public, and to forgo schooling.

The Taliban also granted refuge to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, who had fought with the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s. Bin Laden then used Afghanistan as the base of operations for his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, setting the stage for the next Afghan War in 2001.

So, in summary, Robert Gates, today's newly minted "wise man," had been wrong on nearly every major point about Afghanistan (and the Soviet Union), but he sidestepped the fallout of his miscalculations, remaining a favorite of President George H.W. Bush who rewarded him with his dream job in 1991, the post of CIA director.

A Bush Family Favorite

After losing the CIA position when President Bill Clinton took over in 1993, Gates retreated to Washington State (to work on his memoir) and then moved to Texas (to serve as Texas A&M president). Meanwhile, his past service to the Bush family kept him in good stead with the national security establishment.

Yet, how Gates originally earned his status as a Bush family favorite – how he managed to clamber so quickly up the ladder of Washington power – has remained a mystery, concealed by the fog that has enveloped the dubious origins and hazy corners of the Iran-Contra scandal.

The key question has always been: Did Gates do some extraordinary favors for the senior Bush

and the Reagan administration that guaranteed his rise?

Gates has long faced accusations of handling some sensitive and controversial operations of the Reagan-Bush-41 era, from collaborating secretly with Islamic extremists in Iran to arming Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq to politicizing U.S. intelligence analysis.

Gates's honesty, too, has raised concerns among his CIA colleagues, members of Congress and federal investigators who looked into the Iran-Contra scandal.

Although independent counsel Lawrence Walsh chose not to indict Gates over Iran-Contra, Walsh's final report didn't endorse Gates's credibility either. After recounting discrepancies between Gates's Iran-Contra recollections and those of other CIA officials, Walsh wrote:

"The statements of Gates often seemed scripted and less than candid. Nevertheless, given the complex nature of the activities and Gates's apparent lack of direct participation, a jury could find the evidence left a reasonable doubt that Gates either obstructed official inquiries or that his two demonstrably incorrect statements were deliberate lies."

For his part, Gates denied any wrongdoing in the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostage deal and expressed only one significant regret – that he acquiesced to the decision to withhold from Congress the Jan. 17, 1986, presidential intelligence "finding" that gave some legal cover to the Iran arms shipments.

Beyond that one admission Gates submitted what reads like carefully tailored denials of his involvement in the scandal.

For instance, in November 1987, as the Reagan administration was scrambling to contain the Iran-Contra scandal, then-Deputy CIA Director Gates denied that the spy agency had soft-pedaled intelligence about Iran's support for terrorism to clear the way for secret U.S. arms shipments to the Islamic regime.

“Only one or two analysts believed Iranian support for terrorism was waning,” Gates wrote in articles that appeared in the Washington Post and Foreign Affairs magazine. “And no CIA publication asserted these things.”

However, a month earlier, an internal CIA review had found three reports from Nov. 22, 1985, to May 15, 1986, claiming that Iranian-sponsored terrorism had declined, according to a sworn statement from veteran CIA analyst Ray McGovern, who prepared the review for senior officials in the Directorate of Intelligence [DI].

“My findings uncovered an unexplained discontinuity,” McGovern’s affidavit said. “To wit on 22 November 1985, in an abrupt departure from the longstanding analytical line on Iranian support for terrorism, DI publications began to assert that Iranian-sponsored terrorism had ‘dropped off substantially’ in 1985. I recall being particularly struck by the fact that no evidence was adduced to support that important judgment.

“This new line was repeated in at least two additional DI publications, the last of which appeared on 15 May 1986. Again, no supporting evidence was cited. After May 1986, the analytical line changed, just as abruptly, back to the line that had characterized DI reporting on this subject up to November 1985 (with no mention of any substantial drop or other reduction in Iranian support for terrorist activity).”

The timing of CIA’s dubious analysis in 1985 about a decline in Iranian-backed terrorism is significant because the Reagan administration was then in the midst of its secret Israeli-brokered arms shipments of U.S. weapons to Iran.

The shipments not only were politically sensitive, but also violated federal export laws – in part because Iran was officially designated a terrorist state. So, playing down Iran’s hand in terrorism worked for the White House whether supported by the facts or not.

At that time, Gates was in charge of the DI, putting him in a key bureaucratic position. Even earlier, in spring 1985, Gates had overseen the production of a controversial National Intelligence Estimate that had warned of Soviet inroads in Iran and conjured up supposed moderates in the Iranian government.

That Gates, two years later, would make exculpatory claims about the CIA's reporting – assertions contradicted by an internal DI report – suggests that he remained more interested in protecting the Reagan administration's flanks than being straight with the American public.

[McGovern's report to senior DI management about the Iran-terrorism issue was dated Oct. 30, 1987; his [affidavit](#) was signed Oct. 5, 1991, during Gates's confirmation to be CIA director, but McGovern's sworn statement was not made public at that time.]

Little Knowledge

In 1991, when facing confirmation hearings to be CIA director, Gates denied knowing much about the Iran-Contra activities though they involved officials immediately above and below him. Gates said:

“As Deputy Director for Intelligence, I was not informed of the full scope of the Iran initiative until late January/early February 1986; I had no role in the November 1985 shipment of arms; I played no part in preparing any of the Findings; I had little knowledge of CIA's operational role.”

Note the weasel words: “not informed of the full scope” and “little knowledge of CIA's operational role..”

Left out of the denial was what exactly did Gates know about the Iran initiative prior to January 1986, particularly about several 1985 shipments that violated the Arms Export Control Act.

Nor did he make clear at his Senate confirmation hearings in 1991 whether he exerted any influence over the production of Iran-related intelligence reports, including the ones that downplayed Iran's support for terrorism and another that exaggerated Soviet influence in Iran.

In a Nov. 21, 2006, article for the Los Angeles Times, former CIA analyst Jennifer Glaudemans charged that a special National Intelligence Estimate reversed the professional judgment of CIA Soviet specialists who saw little chance of Moscow making inroads with Tehran.

“When we received the draft NIE, we were shocked to find that our contribution on Soviet relations with Iran had been completely reversed,” Glaudemans wrote. “Rather than stating that the prospects for improved Soviet-Iranian relations were negligible, the document indicated that Moscow assessed those prospects as quite good.

“What’s more, the national intelligence officer responsible for coordinating the estimate had already sent a personal memo to the White House stating that the race between the U.S. and USSR ‘for Tehran is on, and whoever gets there first wins all.’

“No one in my office believed this Cold War hyperbole. There was simply no evidence to support the notion that Moscow was optimistic about its prospects for improved relations with Iran. ...

“We protested the conclusions of the NIE, citing evidence such as the Iranian government’s repression of the communist Tudeh Party, the expulsion of all Soviet economic advisors ... and a continuing public rhetoric that chastised the ‘godless’ communist regime as the ‘Second Satan’ after the United States.

“Despite overwhelming evidence, our analysis was suppressed. At a coordinating meeting, we were told that Gates wanted the language to stay in as it was, presumably to help justify ‘improving’ our strained relations with Tehran through the Iran-Contra weapons sales.” [[LAT, Nov. 21, 2006](#)]

Entering the Scandal

Bolstered by this NIE, Ronald Reagan’s national security adviser Robert McFarlane began circulating a draft presidential order in June 1985 proposing an overture to Iran.

After reading the draft, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger scribbled in the margins, “this is almost too absurd to comment on.” The plan also contradicted President Reagan’s public policy to “never make concessions to terrorists.”

Still, in July 1985, Weinberger, McFarlane and Weinberger’s military assistant, Gen. Colin Powell, met to discuss details for doing just that. Iran wanted 100 anti-tank TOW missiles that would be delivered through Israel, according to Weinberger’s notes.

Reagan gave his approval, but the White House wanted to keep the operation a closely held secret. The shipments were to be handled with “maximum compartmentalization,” the notes said. On Aug. 20, 1985, the Israelis delivered the first 96 missiles to Iran.

It was a pivotal moment. With that missile shipment, the Reagan administration stepped over a legal line. The transfer violated the Arms Export Control Act’s requirement for congressional notification when U.S. weapons are trans-shipped and a prohibition on shipping arms to nations, like Iran, that had been designated a terrorist state.

On Sept. 14, 1985, Israel delivered a second shipment, 408 more missiles to Iran. The next day, one hostage, the Rev. Benjamin Weir, was released in Beirut. But other Americans were snatched in Lebanon, undermining a key rationale for the arms deals.

Word of the Iranian arms shipments also was spreading through the U.S. intelligence community. Top-secret intelligence intercepts in September and October 1985 revealed Iranians discussing the U.S. arms delivery.

The risk of U.S. exposure grew worse in November 1985 when a shipment of 80 HAWK anti-aircraft missiles ran into trouble while trying to transit through Portugal en route from Tel Aviv to Tehran. In a panic, White House aide Oliver North pulled in senior CIA officials and a CIA-owned airline to fly the missiles to Tehran on Nov. 24, 1985.

But one consequence of drawing the CIA directly into the operation was a demand from the CIA's legal advisers that a presidential "finding" be signed and congressional oversight committees be notified. Gates has denied any involvement in those 1985 shipments.

Yet, with the White House desperately looking for ways out of its worsening dilemma, the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence – with Robert Gates at the helm – suddenly reported a substantial decline in Iran's support for terrorism, according to McGovern's affidavit.

By citing this alleged Iranian moderation, the CIA created some policy space for Reagan finally to formalize the arms shipments with an intelligence "finding," signed on Jan. 17, 1986. But the authorization – and the Iran arms deals – were still kept hidden from Congress, the one Iran-Contra decision that Gates said he regretted.

When the Iran-Contra scandal finally broke into the open in November 1986, most participants in the operation tried to duck the consequences, especially for the 1985 shipments that violated the Arms Export Control Act, what Secretary Weinberger once warned President Reagan might constitute an impeachable offense.

For second-tier officials, such as Gates, admitting knowledge of or involvement in the 1985 shipments would amount to career suicide. So, Gates and most other administration operatives insisted they knew or recalled little or nothing.

Undercutting Gates's claims of ignorance and innocence, however, was the fact that his underlings in the DI had been pushing unsupported notions about why shipping arms to Iran made sense, according to Glaudemans and McGovern.

Mysterious Climb

There were other complaints from CIA veterans who had observed Gates's rapid climb up the agency's career ladder.

Before Gates's ascent in the 1980s, the CIA's analytical division has 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 renowned Kremlinologist 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 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 memoir, *From the Shadows*, Gates denied politicizing the CIA's intelligence product, though acknowledging that he was aware of CIA Director William 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 the Casey-Gates 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 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.

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.

A Purge

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 also 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 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 packing 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.

Pakistani Proliferation

Though Dickson’s area of expertise – nuclear proliferation – was on the fringes of the Reagan administration’s 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 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 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 the Soviet menace 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 – pale in comparison.

While worst-case scenarios were in order for the Soviet Union and its clients, best-case scenarios were the order of the day for Reagan’s 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 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.”

Winning for Bob

Though Gates had been implicated in some of the worst judgments of the Reagan years, President George H.W. Bush was determined to put Gates in as head of the CIA in 1991.

Bush lined up solid Republican backing for Gates on the Senate Intelligence Committee. But the key to Gates’s confirmation came from the quiet support of accommodating Democrats – particularly Sen. David Boren of Oklahoma, the Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, and his ambitious chief of staff, George Tenet.

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

With the help of Boren and Tenet, allegations against Gates were downplayed, denounced or ignored. Gates skated past the various controversies as leading Democrats agreed to put bipartisanship ahead of oversight.

The powers-that-be closed ranks around Gates and made sure his nomination was pushed through, although the 64-31 confirmation vote indicated an unusually high level of opposition to a CIA director.

A similar pattern occurred in late 2006 when President George W. Bush picked Gates to replace the controversial Donald Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary. The Democrats in the Senate had no stomach for even a reprise of the unanswered or partially answered questions about Gates. They simply fast-tracked his confirmation without a single question on his controversial history.

At the time, there was a powerful conventional wisdom in Washington that Gates as Defense Secretary would represent the cooler heads of Bush Senior’s Republican establishment and restrain the impetuous Bush Junior on the Iraq War, which was going from bad to worse. However, almost everyone read the tea leaves wrong.

Instead of getting Bush to wind down the war, Gates was privately onboard for an escalation. It was Rumsfeld and much of the Pentagon high command who were the relative doves on Iraq, trying to keep the U.S. military footprint as small as possible and pressing for a withdrawal as quickly as practical.

But Bush (and many of his neoconservative advisers) understood that they were facing an impending defeat in Iraq, which had to be at least delayed if the failure were not to be hung around their necks. While a “surge” of American troops might not change the eventual outcome, it would delay any clear-cut defeat until they were gone, albeit at the cost of many more American and Iraqi lives.

Eager to return to the global spotlight, Gates agreed to go along with Bush's escalation plan, but he didn't share that fact with the Senate Armed Services Committee, which eagerly approved his nomination as Rumsfeld's replacement.

The ugly old accusations about Gates were ignored, even highly relevant ones such as how his politicization of the CIA's analytical division in the 1980s contributed to the false intelligence regarding Iraq's WMD in 2002-03.

In December 2006, Gates won Senate confirmation by a resounding 95-2 margin. Then, once in office, he collaborated with President Bush in cashiering the commanders who weren't in line for the "surge" and replacing them with the likes of Gen. David Petraeus, a neocon favorite, who was.

Though the Iraq "surge" ended up costing the lives of about 1,000 U.S. soldiers – and didn't prevent the Iraqi government from demanding a complete U.S. military withdrawal by the end of 2011 – the decline in Iraq's ghastly violence was hailed by the Washington press corps as "victory at last."

The neocons and their many media allies made a hero out of Petraeus. Gates rode the "successful surge" wave, too.

Little media attention was devoted to the fact that the Iraq War strategic disaster remained – the deaths of more than 4,400 U.S. soldiers, a price tag sure to exceed \$1 trillion, and the loss of American prestige around the world.

Beyond those costs, there were other unpleasant results: expanded Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf, an Iraqi political process that makes a mockery out of democratic principles, and the deep-seated hatred that many Iraqis feel toward the United States, reflected in their current demand that the U.S. military withdrawal be total.

At most, the United States can hope for a last-minute deal that allows a small number of U.S. trainers to be left behind to help Iraqis handle their military hardware. But even that seems

doubtful given the political divisions in Baghdad – and the strong opposition from many Iraqis.

Though the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq at year's end will mark a major American strategic setback – comparable to the ignominious Soviet retreat from Afghanistan in 1989 – Gates and Petraeus still benefitted from the neocons' ability to promote the “successful surge” myth and the Washington press corps buying it.

Keeping Gates

After Obama won the presidency in November 2008, some of his clever advisers recommended that he finesse his inexperience on national security affairs by retaining most of Bush's high command, including Gates at Defense. Obama agreed.

Obama did insist on sticking to the timeline for winding down the Iraq War, but he signaled that he would escalate in Afghanistan while setting as the CIA's top goal the killing or capturing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was believed hiding out in Pakistan.

Vice President Joe Biden pushed for only a modest increase in troop levels in Afghanistan, enough to support a counter-terrorism strategy against al-Qaeda, but Gates and Petraeus wanted another “surge” that would enable the NATO forces to launch major counter-insurgency operations against the Taliban.

The political scheme of Gates and Petraeus was to limit Obama's options so he would have to give them the 40,000 new troops they were demanding. Among senior U.S. military officials, only Gen. Cartwright was willing to give the President the wider range of options that he wanted.

Despite some pushback from Biden and Obama, Gates and Petraeus worked their media contacts and got most of what they wanted, about 30,000 extra troops for counter-insurgency. However, Obama did impose a timeline to begin a drawdown, July 2011.

Though Gates and the military high command signed off on that date, they were soon undercutting it with statements to the press that any troop reduction would be small, almost token.

Now, even as Gates heads toward the door, he is still trying to influence who will be sitting at the table when the decision is made on Afghan troop levels in July.

Petraeus will surely be there as the new CIA director along with Gates's expected replacement at Defense, the current CIA Director Leon Panetta. But Gates was most adamant about shoving aside Cartwright who was next in line to become JCS chairman.

To avoid a nasty political fight, Obama relented and bypassed Cartwright, who became the sacrificial lamb to Gates's departing bureaucratic maneuver.

Yet even as Gates heads into his latest "retirement," he is likely to remain a key national security figure for years to come. He will depart the Pentagon with endless encomiums from the great and powerful. He will be elevated to "wise man" status and will be consulted on future crises.

The United States is not likely to be saying a permanent good-bye to the mysterious Robert Gates.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush](#), was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](#)

His two previous books, [Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq](#) and [Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'](#) are also available there.

