

NEW WORLDS

Judge William Webster, William Casey's successor as DCI in 1987, resigned to return to private law practice in August 1991. He had come into the job in the wake of Iran-Contra, and was the first Director also to have been Director of the FBI (he moved directly from there). He was respected as a safe pair of hands, and as a manager: his appointment was uncontroversial and received widespread support in Congress. His tasks had been to reassure Congress that the Agency had not been responsible for the arms-for-hostages deals, and that it had not broken US law.

Webster succeeded in both these undertakings, but in the process implicitly made clear that DCI was not synonymous with CIA (William Casey personally, rather than the CIA, was shown to be intimately involved in Iran-Contra), and that the Agency was no longer close to the Presidency: Casey's deputy, Robert Gates, observed that the CIA was now mid-way between the White House and Congress when it came to taking orders. Laws, the appointment of a Congressional Inspector General, and regular Congressional scrutiny of Agency activity had made this the case. In consequence, when a President wanted a covert operation such as Iran-Contra or to teach a lesson to the Libyan leader, Muhamar Ghaddafi, because he was implicated in terrorism, he no longer could look to the Agency to undertake it. Even twenty years earlier, a President could look to the CIA (and did in the case of attempting to overthrow the government of Salvador Allende in Chile in the early 1970s) to carry out such undertakings. But it would be a mistake to think that the abilities of the Agency had necessarily changed because it no longer operated as easily as it once did: what had changed was the world within which it operated.

Recognition of the changing world gave Robert Gates, President Bush's nominee as Webster's replacement, severe problems. Gates had been Reagan's first choice to replace Casey in 1987, but had withdrawn his nomination because of the Senate's doubts about his role in Iran-Contra. Four years later, once it was plain that Casey had operated largely outside Agency channels, and that Gates had not been instrumental in any of the arms-for-hostages deals, Bush considered that the way was open for Gates' nomination a second time.

Surprise was in store. Bob Gates had got ahead by going along. He was young - aged 48 in 1991 - and had an impressive career: National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union, 1981-82; Deputy Director of Intelligence, 1982-1986; Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, 1986-1989; Deputy National Security Adviser, 1989-1991. He had impressed Bill Casey with his hard cold war view of the Soviet threat, and his willingness to pursue topics of interest to President Reagan, such as counterterrorism, in ways that also appealed to reigning political sensibilities. He had also impressed George Bush. Bush - a man who had the politician's desire to advance younger men who are dependent on his patronage - found in Gates not only political sensitivity and bureaucratic mastery, but also a matching willingness to have a patron.

The backdrop to the 1991 Senate hearings on Gates' nomination was the collapse of communism in the USSR and the disintegration of the Soviet empire following the failed August 1991 coup attempt by hard-liners in Moscow. These elements combined to make the hearings in September and October 1991 the most fraught and revealing ever for a DCI nomination. The world on which Gates had commented had passed away far more completely than had been apparent just weeks previously.

The hearings turned into a battle over old sores in the CIA's analytical side, and the issues that were raised were those of an earlier time. Casey and Gates had been self-

avowed protagonists of a stronger voice for the CIA in US policymaking circles, and had also shared classic cold war views. But many analysts in the DDI, and especially in its Soviet division, took the CIA's traditionally unexcited attitude toward the USSR. As the A Team/B Team debate in the mid-1970s had shown, they tended to suspect the strength of the Soviet economy and its military capabilities. They also tended to be more positive about the wind of change that Mikhail Gorbachev seemed to usher in during the mid-1980s. Under Casey and Gates during the 1980s, however, their views had often been rejected and ridiculed, and many thought their careers had suffered because of honest disagreement. After the failed coup attempt in Moscow, with its signal that the Soviet system had really collapsed, a settling of scores took place in Washington.

Several serving and retired CIA analysts gave evidence that as DDI and then DDCI in the 1980s, Gates had trimmed estimates to serve prevailing political wishes. In particular, he was accused of presenting harsher estimates of the Soviet threat than CIA analysts in order to please President Reagan and William Casey. Cited in particular was the analysis of the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, when both the CIA and the Reagan administration depicted Moscow as being dangerously expansionist, and Mikhail Gorbachev as being a flash in the pan, unlikely to have a long-term effect on Soviet society or policy.

Melvin A. Goodman, a former division chief in the CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis with twenty-four years' service in the Agency, considered that the review process, whereby divergent views could be accommodated in an estimate, had been subverted, and he testified that:

There were two primary targets for politicization. First, nearly all intelligence issues connected to covert action. That is, the operational commitments that Casey had made regarding Iran, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan. All those issues were politicized. The second area concerned Casey's other major concern, his world view of the Soviet Union. That is, the Soviet Union as the source of all US problems in the international arena. Casey seized on every opportunity to exaggerate the Soviet threat... Gates' role in this activity was to corrupt the process and the ethics of intelligence on all these issues. He was Casey's filter in the Directorate of Intelligence... He pandered to Casey's agenda... Gates' other contribution was to ignore and suppress signs of the Soviet strategic retreat, including the collapse of the Soviet empire, even the Soviet Union itself.¹

Harold Ford, a respected thirty-year veteran of Agency analysis, concurred, saying that Gates lacked 'integrity of judgment' and that he 'ignored or scorned the views of others whose assessments did not accord with his own'.² Jennifer L. Glauemans, a young analyst who in 1989 resigned from the CIA in disgust at what she saw as slanted analysis, went further:

There was, and apparently still is, an atmosphere of intimidation within the Office of Soviet Analysis. Many, including myself, hold the view that Mr. Gates had certain people removed because of their consistent unwillingness to comply with his analytical line... The only answer I have heard to this perception problem was from Mr. Gates himself a few days ago to this committee. He said that when he was a junior analyst, and his views were not accepted, that he too thought this was politicization. Senators, I think that answer is the most smug, condescending, and callous answer to such a sensitive question I could possibly imagine.³

Gates successfully fought back, providing chapter and verse to refute specific

1 New York Times, 2 October 1991.

2 Ibid.

3 New York Times, 3 October 1991.

charges, demonstrating an impressive ability to recall events and to marshal evidence. 'There were a number of unhappy analysts early in my tenure,' he stated, acknowledging the testimony of those opposing his nomination, 'unhappy about too much change from a comfortable, familiar past.'⁴ He admitted mistakes:

I think we overestimated statistically how big the Soviet GNP was, giving a false impression of the economic strength they had and their ability to sustain this military competition as far into the future as anybody could see. It was not by trying to underplay Soviet strength but by overstating it that we erred.⁵

But he could also claim substantial strengths. He had been responsible for a 1983 estimate that said the rate of growth in Soviet military procurement had levelled off and was at zero. This had resulted in a tense battle with Reagan's Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, who at the time was pressing for a major US military buildup. 'It was not a fun time,' said Gates. It emerged that in 1986 he had convened a group of specialists outside the Agency to provide a dispassionate estimate of Soviet capabilities and intentions; that they had reported that in their estimation the Soviet Union was tottering, and that Gates had presented that finding directly to President Reagan. This showed that Gates had not suppressed 'soft' views, and went some way to counter testimony to the contrary. In sum, Gates justified his conduct by constant reference to the record:

A careful review of the actual record of what was published and sent to policy makers demonstrates that the integrity of the process was preserved. We were wrong at times, but our judgments were honest and unaffected by a desire to please or to slant. Our review process wasn't easy, but it was far from closed... I was demanding and blunt, probably sometimes too much so. I had, and have, strong views, but... I am open to argumentation, and there was a lot of that, and I never distorted intelligence to support policy or please a policy maker.⁶

He committed himself to maintaining the integrity and objectivity of CIA analysis. He conceded that there was and had been an atmosphere of fear and suspicion of politicization within the DDI in which he had played an unpopular role, and undertook to try to change this. 'The selection of the head of American intelligence is not a popularity contest', he remarked. 'I sure as hell wouldn't win one at CIA.'⁷

On XX October 1991, the Senate confirmed Gates as the fifteenth Director of Central Intelligence. He was the first DCI to come from the analytical side of the Agency. Under oath he promised to become part of a new beginning in American intelligence, citing his long working relationship with George Bush (dating back to 1976 when Bush had been DCI), acknowledging his position as a Presidential favourite, and echoing his stated view that Congress had a strong role in directing the Agency:

The President thinks I'm the right man for the job... This uncommon relationship between us and his expectations, having himself been Director, offer a unique opportunity to remake American intelligence, and to do so while preserving and promoting the integrity of the intelligence process in a strong and positive relationship with Congress.⁸

For the future, Gates held, a new world order required new approaches that should be set by 'the President, his senior advisers, and, with some appropriate involvement in

4 New York Times, 4 October 1991.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

the process, the Congress.⁹ He recommended some changes immediately: that the CIA should stop investigating Soviet conventional forces and leave it to the Defense Intelligence Agency to handle; that the resources so released within the Agency should be redirected to look at political, social and economic issues in the republics of the USSR; that bureaucratic streamlining should occur in those areas where the Agency duplicated work being done by others. The 'biggest immediate threat to American security', he declared, was the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and of ballistic missile technology. Allied to this was the need to keep a close eye on Soviet nuclear forces 'both in connection with the arms-control agreements that have been signed, but also in terms of assuring ourselves that what they are telling us about control of these weapons to the extent that we can determine is in fact true'.¹⁰

'The Director of the CIA is supposed to keep the game honest', said former DCI Richard Helms about the Gates hearings.¹¹ And this was the real issue. Whatever the intelligence priorities set in the future, of utmost importance to the Agency was that its analysis should be presented to the President and to policymakers fearlessly and honestly. This was more important than accurately predicting revolution, war and peace around the world.

William Donovan had highlighted the importance of accurate research and analysis to policymaking. The CIA had fought to maintain objectivity, especially during the Johnson and Nixon years. In the 1980s, Casey and Gates generally concurred with Presidential perceptions, shaping analysis and estimates to the view they themselves saw. The evidence of Gates' nomination hearings was that in the process, Agency analysis became their prisoner. After the hearings, for the Agency to remain respected and influential in governing circles, Gates had to demonstrate his independence of political coloration. 'I think if you look at the overall picture of production on the Soviet Union by the Agency during this entire period', he said, 'it is a period where we got a lot right, we got some important things wrong, but people were basically calling them as they saw them.'¹² In other words, his professional judgment was that mistakes, both his and others', were honest ones. As DCI, because of the storm over his judgments in the past, in order to prove his and the Agency's independence, he would have to call it not as he saw it, but as the Agency saw it. In consequence, he was the first DCI to be in effect a prisoner of the Agency.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Washington Post, 4 October 1991.

12 New York Times, 4 October 1991.