

Robert M Gates: from cold war to long war

By Fred Halliday,
Created 2006-11-17 00:00

Nothing in life quite prepares one for a face-to-face discussion, over more than two hours, with the former head of the CIA. You wonder what interrogatory tricks he may play, what secrets he may hint at or divulge, what victories he may claim. These were some of my thoughts when, in 1995, I travelled to rural Washington state, near the Canadian border, to interview the man who had served as CIA director [1] from November 1991 to January 1993, and who on 8 November 2006 was nominated as the new United States defence secretary: Robert M Gates [2].

In some ways he appeared to be the opposite of the more famous and long-lasting occupants of the position: among them the swashbuckling William Casey, who unleashed the *Contras* in Nicaragua and the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan, the aristocratic Richard Helms [3], and the austere William Colby [4], veteran of the brutal Operation Phoenix in Vietnam. Most had been from the east-coast elite, Ivy Leaguers with the arrogance (and global aspirations) associated with the caste, and celebrated in perhaps the greatest novel ever written about espionage, Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* [5] (1991).

Robert M Gates [6], by contrast, was born and raised in Wichita, Kansas (and had a close friend in the CIA, he told me, from the town of Cut and Shoot, Texas). On first impression he would not have been out of place as a small-town bank manager: unfazed by questions, reticent in judgment, sure of his ground, but without either incisiveness or (it seemed) the awareness that international experience brings.

Gates had no doubt been on many unannounced trips abroad, but there was no trace in his public biography [7], or in his interview responses, that he had ever lived outside the United States, had any first-hand experience of foreign cultures or countries, or been involved in CIA covert operations there. He was a man of the office, the organisation, an insider. All of this was accompanied by a tendency to the pessimistic, not to say morbid (friends are said to remark that, whenever Gates saw someone carrying flowers, he would ask: "where's the funeral?").

Fred Halliday is professor of international relations at the LSE, and visiting professor at the Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI). His books include *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* [8] (IB Tauris, 2003) and *100 Myths About the Middle East* [9] (Saqi, 2005).

Fred Halliday's "global politics" column [10] on openDemocracy surveys the national histories, geopolitical currents, and dominant ideas across the world. The articles include:

"America and Arabia after Saddam [10]"
(May 2004)

"Terrorism and world politics: conditions and prospects [10]"
(March 2005)

"An encounter with Mr X [10]" (March 2005)

"Iran's revolutionary spasm [10]" (July 2005)

"Political killing in the cold war [10]" (August 2005)

"Maxime Rodinson: in praise of a 'marginal man' [10]"
(September 2005)

"A transnational *umma*: myth or reality? [10]" (October 2005)

"The 'Barcelona process': ten years on [10]" (November 2005)

"The United Nations vs the United States [10]" (January 2006)

"Blasphemy and power [10]" (February 2006)

"Iran vs the United States – again [10]" (February 2006)

"Terrorism and delusion [10]" (April 2006)

"The forward march of women halted? [10]"
(May 2006)

"Letter from Ground Zero [10]" (May 2006)

"Finland's moment in the sun [10]" (June 2006)

"A Lebanese fragment: two days with Hizbollah [10]"(July 2006)

"In time of war: reason amid rockets [10]"
(August 2006)

"Lebanon, Israel, and the 'greater west Asian crisis' [10]" (August 2006)

"Fidel Castro's legacy: Cuban conversations [10]"
(August 2006)

"Warsaw's populist twins [10]"
(September 2006)

"The left and the *jihād* [11]" (September 2006)

"España: memory for the future [12]"
(6 October 2006)

"Paths of history: letter from Nottingham [13]"
(20 October 2006)

The Iran connection

The interview, for a BBC series on the cold war, took place two years after Gates had first left government service, and during a period when he worked as a private consultant. In his office, behind a desk flanked by a CIA flagpole - permission to photograph refused - he recounted his

career and the "splendid" victory he felt [14] the agency, and the US in general, had won in the cold war.

Gates's early life had been conventional enough: the study of Soviet history at university leading to early recruitment to the CIA, and a career in various parts of the Washington national-security apparatus. Before his nomination as the CIA's fifteenth director, he had been the agency's deputy director (April 1986-March 1989) under [15] William Casey and William Webster. He had also been responsible for the strategic, and later much contested, evaluations of the Mikhail Gorbachev [16] era, when he was believed to have seen very late the depth of the changes taking place in the USSR.

But earlier, he had been exposed to a different upheaval: that of the Iranian revolution [17] of January 1979. At the time, he was working in the White House in what turned out to be the endgame of Jimmy Carter's presidency, dealing with the US embassy hostage crisis with Tehran; his connection to Iran (of a nature never entirely clarified) continued through to Ronald Reagan's [18] attempt in 1986 to open a back-channel to the Islamic Republic (which culminated in the Iran-Contra [19] scandal). These failed (from the United States's point of view) Iranian experiences may inform his public advocacy [20] these past two years - against official Washington policy - of dialogue with Iran.

I was reminded, but did not remind Gates, of the former Iran desk officer in the CIA, Jesse Leaf, who went public just after Iran's convulsive transformation. Leaf told me that, prior to his leaving the agency, he had never met an Iranian, had never been to the country (and indeed did not know that Iranians, for example, often turned up late to meetings...). Yet, as he told it, his career as an analyst with the CIA had been stunted because he had spoken out [21] against the prevailing in-house consensus in the mid-1970s by arguing that Iran was moving into a *pre-revolutionary situation*. Leaf's insight came not from exposure to data from Iran, but by reading history; in particular, Alexis de Tocqueville's work on the crisis of the *ancien regime* in late 18th - century France.

It was this life in the depths of the Washington machine that, unexpectedly, revealed Robert M Gates's deepest concern [22]. This was not any strategic threat to the US, but the degree to which the very institutions he had worked for and helped to build up had themselves been penetrated by Soviet agents. The US intelligence organisations had prided themselves on the fact that, whereas the British security forces had been infiltrated [23] by Soviet agents and defectors, from Guy Burgess and Donald McLean in the early 1950s onwards, no Soviet agent had been found in the CIA.

This comforting reflection did not long survive the end of the cold war, and had been confounded by the time I met Gates. He related that this had indeed been a major worry of the CIA leadership: Richard Helms had instilled into him the maxim that, as he went home every night, he should ask himself not *if* there was a mole, but *where* the mole was. And, sure enough, as the 1990s rolled on, several extremely high-ranking Soviet agents - including Aldrich Ames [24] and Edward Howard, working not for ideological reasons but for money or thrills - were uncovered in the CIA and FBI.

Gates was, indeed, convinced that the US's security had been seriously compromised by this succession of long-term agents, some with access to highly classified information, and all operating for years without FBI or other detection. This conviction was partly based on a questioning of one of the core assumptions in much public discussion of the arms race, and of the relative strategic power of the US and the USSR in the 1980s [25].

The assumption was that, while the Soviets clearly had conventional military superiority in Europe, the US had superiority in strategic nuclear forces above all, rooted in a profound inequality in their respective submarine-based nuclear missile forces: the US missile-carrying submarines moved through the oceans of the world without detection by the Soviet forces and were thus invulnerable to any nuclear first-strike, whereas the Soviet submarines were tracked across the globe by an advanced US detection system.

With the discovery and (in 1985) arrest of John Walker [26], Gates had come to suspect that the Soviets *did* have accurate information on the deployment of US submarines and had thereby made up the gap in strategic intelligence that had hitherto existed.

There was, however, much that he claimed never to have known. The CIA had had no success in penetrating the upper echelons of the Soviet leadership just as (so far as Gates believed), they had had not success in penetrating the White House. When I asked him who, in his view, had tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981, he shrugged his shoulders: "It will probably remain one of the great unanswered questions of the cold war".

On one issue in particular we had sharp disagreement, I criticised the US for its support during the 1980s for the fanatical Afghan *mujahideen*. For Gates this was not an issue: the US, he claimed, had delegated responsibility for spending the money and providing the arms to the Pakistanis and it was their decision to support the more extreme groups.

In any case, he added, this was not the issue at the time. "People lost sight of the fact that our objective was to throw the Russians out of Afghanistan, or at least cause them to pay a terrible price there. Frankly, we weren't particularly concerned about what post-Soviet Afghanistan was going to look like".

The costs of intervention

When I further put it to him that the CIA had over the years accumulated a disgraceful record of interference in other countries - from Italy in the late 1940s and Iran in 1953, to Guyana in 1962-63 and Chile in 1973 - he replied that all these operations had taken place but on the instructions of the president. So it was that towards the end of the interview I asked Robert M Gates something which, in the light of his appointment as secretary of defence, may be of particular relevance: what advice he would give to a president about dealings with his officials and advisers.

His reply may serve as a motto for the Washington policy, and personality, battles of today [27]: "The most important thing is to surround himself with diverse voices. He needs a strong secretary of state, a strong national-security adviser and a strong director of central intelligence. There is no president and certainly no Congress that wants to depend on the defence department to describe the threat which they are going to face or on the State Department for an evaluation of how well our diplomacy is doing".

This is counsel which, for sure, Bush could have done with heeding in dealing with Gates's predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld. It may apply to Gates too, once he gets into his stride.

In one respect, at least, the new defence secretary [28] will be well served by his previous experience in handling the affairs of his new post. His study of the retreat of the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev, and the successive reduction and abandonment of hopes for retaining a foothold in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, will arm him for what must be his major task over the next two years: organising the US retreat from Iraq. In this latter case, the "splendid" victory will

belong not to the US, but to the fragmented but resourceful forces opposed to them, some of them at least former allies of the CIA in Afghanistan.

It will be an ironic conclusion to the career of this calm and professional manager, and rather a contrast for the US national-security apparatus as a whole. As ever, of course, its operatives will not care much what post-American Iraq looks like. That, and the costs associated with it, will be left to the Iraqis. Perhaps flowers will indeed be in order.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/gates_4106.jsp

Links:

[1] https://www.cia.gov/csi/books/dci_leaders_us_community_public/chapter_11.htm

[2] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/11/20061108-4.html>

[3] http://intellit.muskingum.edu/cia_folder/ciadcis_folder/dcishelms.html

[4] http://intellit.muskingum.edu/cia_folder/ciadcis_folder/dciscolby.html

[5] <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780345379658>

[6] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/08/AR2006110801589.html>

[7] <http://www.tamu.edu/president/>

[8] http://www.palgrave-usa.com/catalog/product.aspx?isbn=1860648681 target=_blank

[9] <http://www.saqibooks.com/saqi/>

[display.asp?K=51000000322244&sf=CAUTHOR&sort=sort_title&st1=fred+halliday&x=0&y=0&m=1&dc target=_blank](http://www.saqibooks.com/saqi/display.asp?K=51000000322244&sf=CAUTHOR&sort=sort_title&st1=fred+halliday&x=0&y=0&m=1&dc target=_blank)

[10] http://www.opendemocracy.net/columns/halliday_21.jsp

[11] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/left_jihad_3886.jsp

[12] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/spain_memory_3974.jsp

[13] http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/nottingham_4019.jsp

[14] http://intellit.muskingum.edu/alpha_folder/G_folder/gates.html

[15] https://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/vol49no3/html_files/DCI_s_1.htm

[16] <http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/kbank/profiles/gorbachev/>

[17] http://www.iranchamber.com/history/islamic_revolution/islamic_revolution.php

[18] http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-ronald_reagan/issue.jsp

[19] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reagan/peopleevents/pande08.html>

[20] <http://www.cfr.org/publication/7194/iran.html>

[21] <http://www.chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/hershciairan.html>

[22] https://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/1999/dci_speech_111999gatesremarks.html

[23] <http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/experience/spies/isaacs/index.html>

[24] <http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/experience/spies/interviews/ames/>

[25] <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/timeline/1980/index.htm>

[26] http://www.crimelibrary.com/terrorists_spies/spies/walker/1.html

[27] <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/11/08/terror/main2163357.shtml>

[28] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/11/20061108-3.html>



Copyright © Fred Halliday, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.