

Senate Armed Services Plays Taps for the Constitution

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It felt yesterday like paying last respects to the Constitution of the United States at the wake orchestrated by the Senate Armed Services Committee, the very reverend John Warner, gentleman for Virginia, presiding. On the surface, the ceremony was about confirming Robert Gates to be secretary of defense. But at a deeper level, it was quite a sorry spectacle, as pretentious heads and patrician manners once trumped courage, and vitiated the prerogative carefully honed by the framers of our Constitution for the Senate to advise and consent.

In other news, “a series of particularly brutal attacks across Baghdad Tuesday resulted in at least 54 Iraqis killed and scores wounded,” according to the New York Times. The US military announced that three more American soldiers were killed Monday, adding to the 13 killed over the weekend. And five Marines are expected to be charged today with the killing of 24 Iraqis, many of them women and children, in the village of Haditha in November 2005.

No such bothersome details about this misbegotten war were allowed into evidence yesterday by the stuffed shirts sitting in stuffed seats in a hearing room stuffed with 80 stenographers from our domesticated press. Rather, the ornate hearing room seemed to serve as a kind of funeral parlor for the Constitution.

That Gates would be given a free pass without serious probing was already clear in ranking member Carl Levin’s (D-Mich.) deference to lame-duck chairman John Warner’s (R-Va.) plan for a carefully scripted hearing, at which senators could disregard new, documentary evidence of Gates’s deception of Congress and the independent counsel for Iran-Contra. Holding the hearing so quickly after Gates’s nomination also made it possible for him to say, in effect, “Gosh, I just got here; didn’t know about that; haven’t read that, but I’ll put that on the top of my reading pile.”

Fully expecting that Levin’s Democratic colleagues would join him in acquiescing in the charade, anti-war activists told me before the hearing began that they had come prepared with a chant:

You won the elections. Now ask real questions!

I later learned that the activists left after only an hour, to avoid becoming physically ill at the unseemly spectacle of the courtly fawning, as troops and Iraqi civilians get blown up in Baghdad.

They said they started feeling queasy after a brief ray of hope was abruptly dashed during Warner's introductory remarks, when he alluded to what he called the "moral obligation that our government, the executive and legislative, has to the brave men and women of our armed forces." Moral obligation; sounded good! Oops. Its not what you might think. By "moral obligation," Warner meant merely that the president "privately consult with the bipartisan leadership of the new Congress" before making his "final decisions" on Iraq. It gets worse: Witness the hypocrisy shining through the distinguished senator's admonition to Gates:

In short, you simply have to be fearless, I repeat, fearless in discharging your statutory obligations.

Fearless fawning is what followed. It doesn't matter how many times Warner and Levin have dropped into the hermetically sealed Green Zone in Baghdad. There is always the "In other news...." And despite the ample affectation yesterday, none of the senators there is affected in any immediate way by the carnage at the Green Zone gate. It is our soldiers and Iraqi civilians who are Lazarus at the gate. And, as Benjamin Franklin once said, "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are."

From Gates: Candor or Disingenuousness?

On weapons of mass destruction: Little attention is being given to the disingenuous response Gates gave to this question from Sen. Mark Dayton (D-Ohio):

Given what we know today about the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, given the predicament that we're in today, with the benefit of hindsight, would you say that invading Iraq was the right decision or the wrong decision?

Gates left it to "historians" to decide. Defending his early support for the invasion, he resorted to the tried and tested FOX News red herring: "I thought he [Saddam] had weapons of mass destruction ... just like every other intelligence service in the world, apparently, including the French."

Now, please, Dr. Gates: You know better than most where other intelligence services get strategic weapons-related information on denied areas like Iraq. From us. Independent-minded intelligence analysts in the Australian and Danish intelligence services were able to see through the deception and took courageous steps to notify leaders of their governments.

On links between Iraq and al-Qaeda: Senator Levin reminded Gates that he recently told the senator that he saw no "evidence of a link between Iraq under Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda." Why then, asked Levin, did Gates say publicly in February 2002 that:

We know that at least one of the leaders of the September 11 hijackers met twice in Prague with Iraqi intelligence officers in the months before the attack.

Levin wanted to know the source of that information. "Strictly a newspaper story, sir," said Gates. Now that seems odd. For Robert Gates is not used to relying on newspaper stories to make sweeping assertions on such neuralgic issues. It seems likely he would have gotten "confirmation" from his successor as CIA director, arch-neoconservative James Woolsey, who cooked up and - together with Vice President Dick Cheney - promoted that

cockamamie story to a fare-thee-well.

McNamara: The No New Ideas

In one moment of genuine – perhaps unintended – candor, Gates indicated he thought there were no new ideas to be had in addressing the conflict in Iraq. The suggestions made public today by the Iraq Study Group tend to substantiate that sad conclusion.

How about old ideas? Like dispatching more training teams to work with Iraqi security forces. Gates said, “That certainly is an option.” And he vowed to show “great deference to the judgment of generals.” New emphasis on the training mission is what General John Abizaid told the committee less than three weeks ago is a “major change.” Is that the “new” strategy? It is a feckless exercise, as we know from Vietnam. Been there; done that; should have known that.

Three months after John Kennedy’s death, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara sent President Lyndon Johnson a draft of a major speech McNamara planned to give on defense policy. What follows is a segment of an audiotape of a conversation between the two on February 25, 1964:

Johnson: Your speech is good, but I wonder if you shouldn’t find two minutes to devote to Vietnam.

McNamara: The problem is what to say about it.

Johnson: I’ll tell you what to say about it. I would say we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. We could pull out there; the dominoes would fall and that part of the world would go to the Communists ... Nobody really understands what is out there ... Our purpose is to train [the South Vietnamese] people, and our training’s going good.

McNamara: All right, sir.

It wasn’t “going good” then and – as countless middle-grade American officers have now conceded – it’s not going good now, despite our having thrown our best generals at the problem. Hewing to this misguided approach betrays the “woodenheadedness” of which historian Barbara Tuchman speaks in *From Troy to Vietnam: The March of Folly*. Almost always, it is a forlorn hope that unwelcome occupation troops can train indigenous soldiers and police to fight against their own brothers and sisters. That the British seem to have forgotten that, as well, is really no excuse.

Speaking Truth to Power?

Yesterday’s charade at the Senate Armed Forces Committee included repeated allusion to the biblical injunction to “speak truth to power.” This has never been Robert Gates’s forte. Rather, his modus operandi has always been to ingratiate himself with the one with the power, and then recite – or write memos about – what he believes that person would like to hear. Thus, while CIA Director Bill Casey’s “analysis” suggested that the Soviets would use Nicaragua as a beachhead to invade Texas, Gates pandered by writing a memo on December 14, 1984, suggesting US air strikes “to destroy a considerable portion of Nicaragua’s military buildup.”

This makes me wonder what may be in store for Iran, if Cheney solicits help from Gates in

making the case for bombing.

Gates may have “fresh eyes,” but if past is precedent he will add but marginally to the flavor of the self-licking ice cream cone that passes for Bush’s coterie of advisers. What Bush has done is substitute Sugary Gates for Rumsfeldian Tart. Otherwise, the Cheney/Bush recipe is likely to remain the same as the US draws nearer and nearer to the abyss in Iraq.

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