

Bolton Nomination: More Than Meets the Eye

by Ray McGovern

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President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are casting the trials of John Bolton, their nominee for ambassador to the UN, as a partisan political squabble. It is much more than that. It is rather a matter of life and death for the endangered species of intelligence analysts determined to “tell it like it is,” no matter what the Administration’s policies may be. For them the stakes are very high indeed.

The Bush Administration strongly resists the notion that the intelligence on Iraq, for example, was cooked to the White House recipe. And with the president’s party controlling both houses of Congress and the president appointing his own “independent” commission to investigate, Bush and Cheney have until now been able to prevent any meaningful look into the issue of politicization of intelligence.

But the Bolton nomination has brought it very much to the fore, and there will be serious repercussions in the intelligence community if, despite his flagrant attempts to intimidate intelligence analysts, Bolton is confirmed by the Senate.

‘L’Affaire Bolton’

For many, the term “politicization” is as difficult to understand as it is to pronounce. Indeed, it is impossible to understand, when one assumes, as most do, that all institutions in Washington, D.C. have a political agenda. Suffice it to say here that, in order to do their job properly, intelligence analysts must, at one and the same time, be aware of what is going on at the policy level, but be insulated from political pressure to conform intelligence to policy. That way, intelligence analysis can be based on fact (as in “We have no good evidence that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction”), rather than fiction (as in, “Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction pose a grave threat requiring immediate action”). Helpful insight into politicization can be found in John Prados’ article of last Thursday, “Boltonized Intelligence.”

For those who may have tuned in late, in February 2002



Bush nominee for UN Ambassador John R. Bolton. "There will be serious repercussions in the intelligence community if, despite his flagrant attempts to intimidate intelligence analysts, Bolton is confirmed by the Senate," writes former CIA analyst McGovern.

then-Under Secretary of State John Bolton sought intelligence community clearance for his own home-grown analysis regarding Cuba's pursuit of biological weapons and the possibility it might share them with rogue states. (One can only speculate on his purpose in exaggerating the threat.)

Small problem: Bolton's intended remarks went far beyond what U.S. intelligence would support. Christian Westermann of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and counterparts from other agencies, refused to let Bolton represent his views as those of the intelligence community, and proposed instead some alternative, less alarming language. At this Bolton became so dyspeptic that he summoned Westermann to his office for a tongue-lashing and then asked top INR officials to remove him.

For those wondering if this constitutes politicization, a recently declassified e-mail message made available to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the New York Times, should dispel any doubt. On Feb. 12, 2002, after a run-in with Westermann, Bolton's principal aide Frederick Fleitz, sent Bolton this e-mail:

"I explained to Christian that it was a political judgment as to how to interpret this data (emphasis added) and the I.C. [intelligence community] should do as we asked."

Fleitz added that Westermann "strongly disagrees with us."

Good for Westermann, we can say as we sit a comfortable distance from Bolton. But more than seven months later, Westermann was still paying the price for his honesty and courage. In an e-mail of Sept. 23, 2002 to Tom Fingar, deputy to then-INR director Carl Ford, Westermann complained that

"personal attacks, harassment, and impugning of my integrity [are] now affecting my work, my health, and my dedication to public service." Fingar replied that he was "dismayed and disgusted" by the "unwarranted personal attacks."

Bolton and the Cheney/Rumsfeld School of Intelligence

Were it not for the numbing experience of the past four years, we intelligence professionals, practicing and retired, would be astonished at the claim that how to interpret intelligence data is a "political judgment." But this is also the era of the Rumsfeld maxim: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," and the Cheney corollary: "If you build it, they will come"—meaning that intelligence analysts will come around to any case that top Administration officials may build. All it takes is a few personal visits to CIA headquarters and a little arm-twisting, and the analysts will be happy to conjure up whatever "evidence" may be needed to support Cheneysque warnings that "they"—the Iraqis, the Iranians, it doesn't matter—have "reconstituted" their nuclear weapons

development program. Cheney is Bolton's patron; Bolton is well tutored.

But how could Cheney, Rumsfeld, and other senior Administration officials be assured of the acquiescence of the intelligence community (except for mavericks like analysts from INR) on issues like weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? True, former CIA director, "Slam-Dunk" George Tenet, proved entirely malleable, but he could not have managed it alone. Sadly, he found willing collaborators in a generation of CIA managers who put career above objectivity and bubbled to the top under directors William Casey and his protégé Robert Gates. In other words, Tenet was the "beneficiary" of a generation of malleable managers who benefited from the promotion policies of Casey and Gates starting in the early eighties.

How the Corruption Began

Casey, who saw a Russian under every rock and could not be persuaded that Mikhail Gorbachev was anything but a dirty Commie, started the trend by advancing those—like Gates—who pretended to be of like mind. (With a degree in Russian history and experience as a Soviet analyst, Gates knew better.) But as chief of analysis under Casey, he toed the line and made sure that others did too. Casey eventually made Gates his principal deputy, but the young protégé's role in the Iran-Contra affair prevented him from becoming director when Casey died. Nonetheless, Gates' meteoric career became an object lesson for those willing to make the compromises necessary to make a swift ascent up the career ladder.

Why dwell on Gates? Because 1) he is the one most re-

sponsible for institutionalizing political corruption of intelligence analysis; and 2) John Bolton's confirmation hearing provides an eerie flashback to the ordeal Gates went through to get confirmed as CIA director. The parallels are striking.

The dust from Iran-Contra had settled sufficiently by 1991, when President George H. W. Bush nominated Gates to head the CIA. Then all hell broke loose. Playing the role discharged so well earlier this month by former INR director Carl Ford in critiquing Bolton, a former senior Soviet analyst and CIA division chief, Mel Goodman, stepped forward, and gave the Senate intelligence committee chapter and verse on how Gates had shaped intelligence analysis to suit his masters and his career. Goodman was joined at once by several other analysts who put their own careers at risk by testifying against Gates' nomination. They were so many and so persuasive that, for a time, it appeared they had won the day. But the fix was in.

With a powerful assist from George Tenet, then staff director of the Senate intelligence committee, members approved the nomination. In his memoir Gates makes a point of thanking Tenet for greasing the skids. Even so, 31 Senators found the evidence against Gates so persuasive that, in an unprecedented move, they voted against him when the nomination came to the floor.

The First Mass Exodus and Those Who Stayed

The result? Many bright analysts quit rather than take part in cooking intelligence-to-go. In contrast, those inspired by Gates' example followed suit, and saw their careers flourish. So much so that when in September 2002 Tenet asked his senior managers to prepare a National Intelligence Estimate parroting what Cheney had been saying about the weapons-of-mass-destruction threat from Iraq, they saluted and fell to the task. Several of them traced their career advancement to Robert Gates.

Folks like John McLaughlin, who now "doesn't remember" being told about the charlatan source code-named "Curveball" in time enough to warn Colin Powell before he made a fool of himself and his country at the UN, while the whole world watched. Folks like National Intelligence Officer Larry Gershwin, who gave a pass to Curveball's drivel and similar nonsense; and Alan Foley, who led the misbegotten analytical efforts on the celebrated but non-nuclear-related aluminum tubes headed for Iraq, and fictitious Iraqi efforts to acquire uranium from Niger. Folks like the CIA Inspector General, John Helgeson, who bowed to pressure from the White House and from McLaughlin, to suppress the exhaustive IG report on 9/11, which is a goldmine of names—of both intelligence officials and policymakers—who bungled the many warnings that such an attack was coming. Folks like the senior intelligence official who told me last month, "We were not politicized; we just thought it appropriate to lean forward,' given White House concern over Iraq."

The cancer of politicization spreads quickly, runs deep, and—as we have seen on Iraq—can bring catastrophe.

And that is precisely why the stakes are so high in re: Bolton. When Gates became CIA director, the honest analysts who left were replaced by more inexperienced, pliable ones. It is no exaggeration to say that recent intelligence fiascos can be traced directly to the kinds of people Gates created in his image and promoted to managerial positions.

Redux Before a Senate Committee

And now? Never in the history of U.S. intelligence has there been a more demoralized corps of honest intelligence analysts. Leaders with integrity are few and far between. So when a Carl Ford throws down the gauntlet in defense of a Christian Westermann, we need to sit up and take notice. If "serial abuser" (Ford's words) John Bolton wins confirmation, there will be an inevitable hemorrhage of honest analysts at a time when they are sorely needed. It will be open season for politicization.

Does the White House care? Not at all. With more docile intelligence analysts in place, Bolton and others will be even freer to apply "political judgment" to interpreting intelligence, with no second-guessing by recalcitrant experts. It will certainly be easier to come up with the desired "evidence" on, say, weapons of mass destruction in Iran.

And Then There Was Voinovich

Thankfully, integrity is a virtue not altogether lost. The bright light of the past week came when, to everyone's surprise, Senate Foreign Relations Committee member George Voinovich (R-Ohio) decided he simply could not follow his Republican colleagues who had decided to hold their noses and give Bolton a pass. That blocked the nomination from going forward to the Senate until additional information on Bolton can be assessed.

Cheney reacted quickly and forcefully against a suggestion by Senator Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.) that the Republican committee members might consider whether to recommend that the nomination be withdrawn, and it appears the White House will use the coming weeks to pull out all the stops in harnessing the faithful. Already, well-financed hit squads are running radio spots in Ohio saying Voinovich has "stabbed the President and the Republicans right in the back."

Asked why he wanted more time to weigh the charges against Bolton, Voinovich answered with a sentence not often heard in Washington political circles, "My conscience got me."

Can conscience prevail over politics? Voinovich has proved it is still possible. Let us hope that he and his committee colleagues will approach the decision on Bolton with an open mind. For integrity in intelligence is now on life support. Approving the nomination of quintessential politicizer Bolton would pull the plug and ensure amateurish, cooked-to-taste intelligence analysis for decades to come.