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Bush's Free-Speech Radical

Comparatively speaking, it's Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates.

By Jack Shafer

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Secretary of Defense [Robert M. Gates](#) adores the press, and he doesn't care who knows it. Well, he's a tad more direct than that—Gates adores the press, and he wants *everybody* to know it.

For much of his career, Gates has extolled the press and the virtue of openness. Last spring while giving the [commencement address](#) at the U.S. Naval Academy, he nibbled on the ear of the Fourth Estate, calling the press one of the "two pillars of our freedom under the Constitution"—the other being Congress. Pointedly criticizing the conduct of the department and offering himself as the anti-Rumsfeld, Gates thanked the press (that would be the *Washington Post*) for uncovering the "problem" at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. "The press is not the enemy, and to treat it as such is self-defeating," he said.

While serving as president of Texas A&M University, he hit three very high free-speech notes at a September 2003 campus symposium on government-press relations, saying "there is good reason for journalists' skepticism and cynicism," "the press is the surest way for people to know the truth," and "secrecy is too often used as a cover for incompetence."

Even when he was in charge of keeping the secrets as the head of the CIA, Gates wooed the press with the sweetest poetry. In a February 1992 [talk](#) to the Oklahoma Press Association, he called for a more "open" CIA. The press and members of academia deserved better access to the agency, Gates said, including more background briefings and on-the-record interviews with top CIA officials. And he announced plans for aggressive declassification of historical documents.

In his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*, Gates repeatedly comes down on the side of the press. He criticizes his Reagan-era boss, CIA Director William J. Casey, for disrespecting the press and Congress by picking fights with both of them. Instead of threatening the press with legal action for publishing classified leaks, the directors should have pursued the leakers, he writes.

In Gates' mind—well, in his writings at least—openness and accountability aren't just a good thing, they're a necessary thing. Near the end of his memoir, he writes:

I sat in the Situation Room in secret meetings for nearly twenty years under five Presidents, and all I can say is that some awfully crazy schemes might well have been approved had everyone present not known and expected hard questions, debate, and criticism from the Hill. And when, on a few occasions, Congress was kept in the dark, and such schemes did proceed, it was nearly always to the lasting regret of the Presidents involved. Working with the Congress was never easy for Presidents, but then, under the Constitution, it wasn't supposed to be. I saw too many in the White House forget that.

Steven Aftergood, director of the project on government secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, has [called](#) Gates' efforts to increase openness at the CIA as "halting" and "explicitly motivated by bureaucratic self-interest." But those efforts demonstrate a rare Washington awareness "that openness and responsiveness to the public can advance the interests of an agency over the long run," Aftergood has written.

Since becoming secretary 10 months ago, Gates has de-Rumsfeld-ized the Department of Defense's relationship with the press. Not that it's all glasnost all the time at the Pentagon, but Gates has a [working journalist](#) as his press secretary instead of a Republican careerist. Under Rumsfeld, unflattering stories about the military automatically drew fire from inside the Pentagon and from Republican quarters. Today, unflattering journalism gets a fair reading, and the credit for the change in temperament goes to Gates. The openness, such as it is, extends to inside the military. It's inconceivable that Rumsfeld would have tolerated the dissenting *New York Times* [op-ed](#) by seven NCOs or Lt. Col. Paul Yingling's *Armed Forces Journal* [critique](#) of the Army's structure without some form of retaliation. Gates appears to regard argument as a source of valuable information, not as a rebellion that must be put down.

"He's seen how things have gone awry when oversight is missing," says Aftergood today. "He makes it possible to have a disagreement about real things rather than fighting through a blanket."

During confirmation hearings last year, Aftergood [noted](#) that Gates doesn't always walk the walk that he talks, writing:

Most of Mr. Gates's changes in intelligence disclosure policy were incremental and did not fundamentally transform either internal or external communications. Many of the proposed changes were adopted half-heartedly or inconsistently, or later abandoned. Some were not implemented at all.

For example, at his 1991 confirmation hearing [as head of the CIA], Mr. Gates expressed support for the idea of declassifying the intelligence budget total, but he never did so.

An excellent proposal that he presented in his 1992 speech—to "publish on an annual basis an index of all documents [CIA] has declassified"—was never accomplished, though it remains a valuable and perfectly achievable objective, for CIA and other national security agencies.

Because Gates independently returns to the themes of openness, transparency, and accountability again and again, Aftergood suggests several measures he could take that would prove a commitment beyond civilizing relations with the press. For starters, the Department of Defense could give a complete accounting of the cost of the Iraq war, describe in full the role of military contractors, explain how Iraqi casualties are calculated, and assess the credibility and effectiveness of Iraqi forces.

Even if Gates doesn't end up delivering the goods, Aftergood won't be completely ungrateful.

"We've reached the point that being hypocritical about transparency is a step forward," he says.

Gates knows how to send dissent back up the chain of command. When the *New York Times*' David Brooks [asked](#) him last month whether the Iraq invasion was a good idea, "knowing what we know now," Gates looked at the columnist for a bit and said, "I don't know."

Got an idea for openness that Gates could throw the switch on? Send it to

slate.pressbox@gmail.com. Disclosure: [Steven Aftergood](#) has written for *Slate*, and I've edited his copy. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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