

EDITORIAL

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The Un-Rumsfeld

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The nearly universal (and bipartisan) relief at the departure of Donald Rumsfeld ensured that Robert Gates would have an easy confirmation hearing. And Mr. Gates played the role of the un-Rumsfeld masterfully yesterday. He offered just enough candor and conciliation to persuade most senators that he plans to be a very different sort of defense secretary, while deftly holding back any real information about how he plans to clean up President Bush's mess in Iraq.

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Mr. Gates's truth-telling did not go much further than acknowledging what is obvious to everyone but this White House. He agreed with various senators that the United States is not winning in Iraq, that politicians in Baghdad need to be pressured into negotiating a political settlement, and that the Pentagon botched the post-invasion by failing to send enough troops and committing other now infamous errors.

He was less accommodating when asked to share his prescriptions for Iraq, saying only that he was open to all ideas. Given both President Bush's and Mr. Rumsfeld's unrelenting denials of Iraq's disastrous reality — and their refusal to accept the advice of others — even statements of the obvious and a pledge to keep an open mind sound good. But Iraq is unraveling so fast that Mr. Gates will have to come up with opinions quickly, and be willing to express them to the president forcefully.

Mr. Bush has certainly shown little sign of opening his mind. Since announcing Mr. Gates's nomination, he has sought to pre-empt the much-anticipated advice of James Baker's Iraq Study Group (on which Mr. Gates served), brushing off suggestions that he talk directly to Iran and insisting that there would be no "graceful exit" from Iraq.

Still, Mr. Gates seems at least game to try to break through the wall. He said that Iraq was only "one of the central fronts" in the war on terror — a departure from the official litany. He said that he did not believe that the president had been given authority — either under the 9/11 war resolution or the Iraq war resolution — to attack Iran or Syria (and would counsel against it). And he said bringing both countries into negotiations about Iraq's future at least "merits thinking about."

In any other time that would all be considered pretty bland stuff. But for an aspiring member of this administration, that came close to speaking truth to power.

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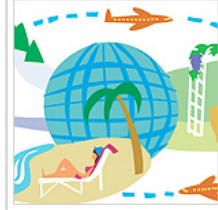


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