

If Sec'y Gates Goes

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 17, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

[Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has announced](#) [1] his intention to step down next year. I hope he can be persuaded to stay, but if he goes through with his plan, I hope the White House will seek out a prominent, capable Republican to fill the post.

Partisanship, when taken to an extreme, can be a horrible thing, although the two party system has served our nation well to these many years. It can induce paralysis in government as we have seen. It can poison policy debates. But, it can also clarify differences of opinion and judgment in important ways. The one area of public policy that should be most immune to partisanship, however, should be the U.S. military.

This is not the time, nor do I have the time this morning, to assess who is to blame for the encroachment of partisanship into our military matters. There seems to be plenty of blame to go around from the Democrats who only acknowledged nefarious influences at work in the Bush years, arguing that the Iraq War was all about oil, to the Republicans who used nation security concerns in the 2002 midterms in ways that still shock, running ads that indicted the patriotism of Sen. Max Cleland, who had lost both legs and one arm in the Vietnam War.

As a candidate for the high office he now holds, President Obama, like President Bush before him, promised to try and unite the nation, to bridge partisan divides and put the national interest first. Both presidents largely failed in that objective and, on the domestic front, the divides often reflect vastly different but completely honorable differences in approach to the role of government in the life of society. But, in asking Secretary Gates, who had been appointed by Bush, to stay on, President Obama sent a loud message that he really did intend to rebuild the nation's, not either party's, confidence in the idea that the military should be above partisanship. Gates was Bush's finest appointment and Obama's decision to keep him at his job was inspired. So, too, was President Clinton's decision to appoint Republican Sen. William Cohen to the post.

There are no shortage of suitable candidates. Among the Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee are such reasonable public servants as Sen. Lindsay Graham of South Carolina and Sen. Susan Collins of Maine. It is a bit too soon to assess the judgment of Sen. Scott Brown of Massachusetts, but by next year he might be ready for the job. What is clear already is that the President should not miss the opportunity to keep the Pentagon away from politics, and to have at the decision-making table someone whose credentials do not include fealty to the Democratic Party.

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