

Obama Pressured to Back Off Iraq Withdrawal

By Gareth Porter

The promotion of Robert M. Gates as President-Elect Barack Obama's secretary of defense appears to be the key element in a broad campaign by military officials and their supporters in the political elite and the news media to pressure Obama into dropping his plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq in as little as 16 months.

Despite subtle and unsubtle pressures to compromise on his withdrawal plan, however, Obama is likely to pass over Gates and stand firm on his campaign pledge of military withdrawal from Iraq, according to a well-informed source close to the Obama camp.

Within 24 hours of Obama's election, the idea of Gates staying on as defense secretary in an Obama administration was floated in the *New York Times*, which reported that "a case is being made publicly by columnists and commentators, and quietly by leading congressional voices of Mr. Obama's own party—that Mr. Gates should be asked to remain as defense secretary, at least for an interim period in the opening months of the new presidency."

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday that two unnamed Obama advisers had said Obama was "leaning toward" asking Gates stay on, although the report added that other candidates were also in the running. The *Journal* said Gates was strongly opposed to any timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, and it speculated that a Gates appointment "could mean that Mr. Obama was effectively shelving his campaign promise to remove most troops from Iraq by mid-2010."

Some Obama advisers have been maneuvering for a Gates nomination for months. Former Navy Secretary Richard Danzig publicly raised the idea of a Gates reprise in June and again in early October. Danzig told reporters on October 1, however, that he had not discussed the possibility with Obama.

Obama advisers who support his Iraq withdrawal plan, however, have opposed a Gates appointment. Having a defense secretary who is not fully supportive of the 16-month timetable would make it very difficult, if not impossible, for Obama to enforce it with the military.

A source close to the Obama transition team told the Inter Press Service (IPS) that the chances that Gates would be nominated by Obama "are now about 10 percent."

The source said that Obama is going to stick with his 16-month withdrawal timeline, despite the pressures now being brought to bear on him. "There is no

doubt about it," said the source, who refused to elaborate because of the sensitivity of the matter.

Opposition to Obama's pledge to withdraw combat troops from Iraq on a 16-month timetable is wide and deep in the U.S. national security establishment and its political allies. U.S. military leaders have been unequivocal in rejecting any such rapid withdrawal from Iraq, and news media coverage of the issue has been based on the premise that Obama will have to modify his plan to make it acceptable to the military.

The *Washington Post* published a story Monday saying that Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, opposes Obama's timeline for withdrawal as "dangerous," insisting that "reductions must depend on conditions on the ground." Along with Gen. David H. Petraeus, now the head of U.S. Central Command and responsible for the entire Middle East, and Gen. Ray Odierno, the new commander in Iraq, Mullen was portrayed as part of a phalanx of determined military opposition to Obama's timeline.

Post reporters Alec MacGillis and Ann Scott Tyson cited "defense experts" as predicting a "smooth and productive" relationship between Obama and these military leaders "if Obama takes the pragmatic approach that his advisers are indicating, allowing each side to adjust at the margins." But if Obama "presses for the withdrawal of two brigades per month," the same analysts predicted, "conflict is inevitable."

The story quoted a former Bush administration National Security Council official, Peter D. Feaver, who was a strategic planner on the administration's Iraq "surge" policy, as warning that Obama's timetable would precipitate "a civil-military crisis" if Obama does not agree to the demands of Mullen, Petraeus, and Odierno for greater flexibility.

Underlying the campaign of pressure is the assumption that Obama's 16-month timetable mainly represents posturing for political purposes during the primary campaign, and that Obama is not necessarily committed to the withdrawal plan.

Feaver, who has returned to Duke University, said in an interview with IPS that he did not believe such a crisis was likely, because, "It is unlikely Obama will come in and do what he said he would do during the campaign." Obama has given himself "enough wiggle room to change the plan," Feaver said.

Similarly, CNN Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre also reported November 7 that Obama "gave himself some wiggle room" to respond to military demands for more flexibility. McIntyre said he had "pledged to consult U.S. commanders and adjust as necessary."

Obama's website makes no such pledge to "adjust" the timetable. Instead, it says the "removal of our troops will be responsible and phased, directed by military commanders on the ground and done in consultation with the Iraqi government." It defends the rate of withdrawal of one or two brigades per month and offers to

leave a "residual force" in Iraq to "train and support the Iraqi forces as long as Iraqi leaders move toward political reconciliation and away from sectarianism."

When Obama met with Petraeus in Baghdad in July, Petraeus presented a detailed case for a "conditions-based" withdrawal rather than Obama's timetable and ended with a plea for "maximum flexibility" on a withdrawal schedule, according to Joe Klein's account in *Time* October 22.

But Obama refused to back down, according to Klein's account. He told Petraeus, "Your job is to succeed in Iraq on as favorable terms as we can get. But my job as a potential commander in chief is to view your counsel and interests through the prism of our overall national security." Obama defended his policy of a fixed date for withdrawal in light of the situation in Afghanistan, the costs of continued U.S. occupation, and the stress on U.S. military forces.

Opponents of Obama's plan outside the Bush administration appear to be unaware of the fact that the Bush administration has already given up the "conditions-based withdrawal" that the U.S. military has called for in agreeing to Iraqi demands for complete U.S. withdrawal by the end of 2011.

Feaver, the former strategic planner for National Security Adviser [Stephen J. Hadley](#), said he assumes that, "if the U.S. agreed to it, it preserves the flexibility that Petraeus and Odierno say they've needed all along."

But even the small loophole left in previous versions of the text of the agreement with Iraq, allowing the 2011 deadline to be extended if the pact were revised with the agreement of the Iraqi parliament, has now been closed in the "final" version that the Bush administration submitted to the Maliki government last week, according to a report by the Associated Press, which obtained a copy of the text.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam, was published in 2006.