

December 15, 2008

DIPLOMATIC MEMO

A Defense Secretary at Work for 2 Commanders in Chief

By [ELISABETH BUMILLER](#)

WASHINGTON — At a brief news conference in Kandahar, [Afghanistan](#), an Afghan reporter asked [Robert M. Gates](#), President Bush's defense secretary, the first, pertinent question: Just what was President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s policy for his war-weary country?

Mr. Gates's response was swift, as if he had been working for Mr. Obama for months.

"The president-elect has been very explicit throughout the campaign and since the election that he believes that waging this fight in Afghanistan is a high priority and he would like to see more resources devoted to this fight, including more troops," Mr. Gates said at the news conference, held Thursday at a military base in Kandahar, the ideological center of gravity for the [Taliban](#). "So I think that you will see a continuing American commitment to defeating the enemies of the Afghan people during the administration of the president-elect."

Mr. Gates, who will be staying on as Mr. Obama's defense secretary, is making his own transition from one commander in chief to the next.

The metamorphosis was particularly startling last week on his unannounced trip to Afghanistan and Iraq, where he traveled as an emissary and reconnaissance agent for his next boss.

What was originally conceived as a goodbye tour for a lame-duck defense secretary instead offered a preview of the president-elect's strategy for winding down one war, building up another and tackling the issue of Iran. Mr. Gates acknowledged that effectively working for two commanders in chief created certain strains.

"I'm not forgetting at all, for a second, who is the president until noon on Jan. 20," Mr. Gates told reporters on his plane en route to Afghanistan. Nonetheless, he said, the transition "does create some occasional awkwardness."

For example? "Well," he said, offering a sampling of apparent recent conversations with schedulers in the West Wing, "I would love to come to this meeting at the White House, but I actually have a meeting with the transition.'

More substantively, Mr. Gates's four-day trip was an indication that Mr. Obama would be continuing much of the Bush administration's latest policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, at least for now: reducing American troops slowly in Iraq but adding some 20,000 next year in Afghanistan.

Mr. Gates, who said he had had discussions with Mr. Obama about both wars, also signaled that Mr. Obama

would take a forceful line against Iran.

“The president-elect and his team are under no illusions about Iran’s behavior and what Iran has been doing in the region and apparently is doing with some weapons programs,” Mr. Gates said Saturday at a regional security conference in Manama, Bahrain, where he stopped between visits to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mr. Gates, 65, who had planned to retire in January and spend more time at his vacation home north of Seattle, stayed on, his advisers said, because he did not believe in saying no to the commander in chief. (The deal was sealed on Nov. 10, when Mr. Obama asked Mr. Gates during a secret meeting at the fire station at Reagan National Airport if he would remain in the job.)

Mr. Gates is also a proponent of continuity in national security, a view he underscored to the leaders of the Persian Gulf nations assembled in Manama. “I bring from President-elect Obama a message of continuity and commitment to our friends in the region,” he told them.

Mr. Gates’s advisers say he is able to make the transition from Mr. Bush to Mr. Obama because over a 42-year career in government, much of it at the [Central Intelligence Agency](#), he has worked for seven presidents of both parties; Mr. Obama will be his eighth.

Over the next weeks, Mr. Gates, with heavy feedback from the Obama [transition team](#), will be assembling his new staff, including his deputy defense secretary. “It’s a dialogue,” he told reporters, adding that the team was sending him names and he was in turn making recommendations on them to Mr. Obama.

But he knows who is boss. “I believe I have substantial influence over those decisions,” Mr. Gates said. “But if the president of the United States wants to appoint somebody to a job, nobody in the executive branch has a veto.”

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
