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New boss of the CIA will have to fight off temptations of secrecy and partisan politics

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THE Senate hearings regarding the confirmation of Robert M. Gates to become director of Central Intelligence have focused anew on one of the great anomalies of American life: we keep playing games of secrecy when one calamity after another tells us that secrecy and democracy are incompatible.

The history of the CIA, from Day One till now, tells us that no agency that operates in secrecy, with billions of dollars to spend, can long be controlled — by the Congress, the President, the judiciary, the press or anything else.

We Americans assume that, in a wicked world of violent intrigue, we must have an agency that deals as dirtily as the KGB. But we learn that in giving power and the right of secrecy to such an agency, we virtually wipe out the constitutional system of checks and balances.

Secrecy becomes an even greater bane of a free and democratic society when the CIA can pull off a stupid clandestine operation, then have it shielded by a "retroactive finding" by the President.

Under these circumstances, the CIA must become a magnet for all the Rambos, zealots and soldiers of fortune in America.

You need not have spent more than four years in top government jobs, as I did, to know that this country could not long survive without a strong and competent CIA. This is a brutally mean world in which one nation always is seeking a military, intelligence, scientific or other advantage over a perceived adversary.

So the Soviets spy at the Pentagon and the State Dept. and the super-secret National Security Agency — and in Silicon Valley and wherever else U.S. secrets are to be grabbed to the benefit of the Communist countries. And we spy, steal, counter-spy, strive for technological breakthroughs to ensure that the Kremlin will never dare order an invasion and occupation of America akin to the television nonsense some Americans watched last week.

The much-maligned CIA is vital to the comfort and security of every American. But, sad to say, the CIA is, like that "Mission Impossible" tape in the telephone booth, programmed to self-destruct at least every generation.

I have defended the CIA time and again, knowing that we live in a world in which we would be naked to America's enemies without such an agency. The Soviet Union and its KGB try to manipulate the outcomes of elections in Nicaragua, Finland, Italy and even Argentina. The CIA tries to destabilize an Allende government in Chile, to overthrow a black government in Angola, or in Grenada, all in the name of protecting and spreading democracy.

Quarrel with this role, if you will, but reasonable people might conclude the CIA is acting responsibly — until the stories pop up that it is not just trying to manipulate politicians and governments thousands of

miles away, but is trying to dictate the policies of the State Dept., the military decisions of the Defense Dept.

The CIA is a great American institution until it follows some self-destructive urge to tread upon the constitutional rights of the American people.

During the Nixon years, it blundered into the outrages of "The Huston Plan" and other unconstitutional schemes of Nixon's White House "plumbers." The CIA was almost destroyed by revelations that it had perpetrated burglaries, murders or attempted assassinations, illegal drug experiments on unwitting citizens, attempted toothpaste poisonings and other crimes.

Here we are again, with a seriously wounded CIA, and with a nominee to head it who seems less than up to the challenge.

Before confirming Gates, the least the Senate can do is try to insure that the new director of Central Intelligence takes seriously the business of congressional oversight, and that he will not quickly succumb to the temptations of secrecy or the corrupting influences of partisan politics.