

Gates's Solid Performance Follows a Cautious Script

Key Is Avoiding Harmful Clashes, Disclosures

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Congressional hearings are theater, and supporters of CIA Director-designate Robert M. Gates have aimed to keep the nominee cool and away from any bitter clashes or revelations in the first two days of confirmation hearings before the Senate intelligence committee.

They have succeeded because Gates has delivered a solid performance, following a script that so far has kept him out of trouble.

Gates's critics have sought to heat things up before the television cameras and national press by dramatizing what they allege was the nominee's involvement in the Iran-contra affair and later attempts to cover up the five-year-old scandal. If they could poke holes in his past testimony or get him to make some misstatements—as happened four years ago when he first sought confirmation as CIA director but subsequently withdrew—it was thought they might have a chance to block him again.

Sen. Howard M. Metzenbaum (D-Ohio), who has taken the lead in questioning about the lingering Iran-contra scandal, has not been able to reignite committee interest in the issue. He has delivered prepared questions, often without emotion, and has not followed up on many answers. Gates, in turn, has taken to prefacing his replies with "as I said before" and "as I said yesterday," phrases that have left listeners and viewers with a sense that old ground was being gone over, when often it wasn't.

The biggest hurdle facing Gates is expected to come Thursday, in the next act, when present and former CIA colleagues and subordinates appear before the committee to discuss the roles they played in the Iran-contra affair. That may bring the scandal back to life and,

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perhaps, add drama to the nomination process—depending on what is said about Gates.

Gates, who has a reputation for tending to the needs of his bosses, appears to have anticipated those of Senate committee members by preempting many of the problem areas that had been foreshadowed in the press.

Bring up Iran-contra, he admits misjudgments. Ask about the withholding of information on covert operations from Congress, he promises to push for quick disclosure and, if a president won't agree, says he'll keep pushing and think about resigning. Illegal covert operations? Never, and he'll go to the president and consider resigning.

Politicizing of intelligence analysis? He had the same suspicions himself, as a young analyst, when his reports were returned. Now, he's always on the alert.

The Iran-contra mea culpa seemed to eliminate for many of the panel members the need to probe Gates's past actions and previous testimony relating to Iran-contra. By his own description, he seemed more an observer than a participant in those events.

Although the committee staff uncovered some new striking instances in which Gates was exposed to Iran-contra events and information, the nominee for the most part took the wind out of those sails by stating he had no memory of most of it. Nothing can be duller before the cameras or the press than asking about an event the witness says he can't recall. The questioner has to create all the drama.

Gates made it even more difficult by saying he might have been at a meeting or received a document, even if he didn't remember. A solid Gates denial could open the way for a questioner to create some tension.

Gates also pacified several members by drawing a sharp line between his own approach to leading

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the agency and that of the late William J. Casey, who was openly contemptuous of Congress. Gates never directly criticized Casey, who in five years promoted him three times through the agency management ranks to the No. 2 job at CIA at the tender age of 43.

While senators described Casey as the architect of Iran-contra and said he lied to Congress about it after it became public, Gates talked gently about his former boss. "I began to wonder whether Mr. Casey had withheld information from me and perhaps even misled me," Gates told the committee in answer to a question. But he added: "I still have not been able to answer for myself to what extent Mr. Casey was involved or knowledgeable [in Iran-contra]."

Gates hinted the late director may have cut him out of information about clandestine activities because he might have objected to them and talked to Congress. He also related some anecdotes indicating that Casey's illness may have hurt his judgment.

Against that background it will take some explosive disclosures produced at the hearing by a credible figure to revive Iran-contra as a Gates issue.

The potential script may be there. In January 1987, for example, little more than two months after the scandal became public, Gates gave the Tower Review Board what the congressional Iran-contra investigating committees concluded was a cover story about the initial 1985 arms-for-hostages shipment. It was a story that Robert C. McFarlane would later testify was initially developed in the White House to distance President Ronald Reagan from the shipments.