

Part 9/26/91
Gates's Cloak of Ignorance

Like George Bush, Robert Gates is neat, polite and quiet. Like George Bush, he has advanced steadily by being secretive, sycophantic, loyal and incurious.

The expected confirmation of Gates as CIA director will represent a major victory for the president. Already, it is a triumph for Ronald Reagan, who invented the curious ethical standard whereby an offense is disqualifying only if it is indictable. The corollary: truth is that which the Democrats can't prove.

This Reagan legacy informs the whole Gates appointment process. And that is as it should be, because from the day it was discovered, Reagan maintained that there was no Iran-contra scandal, which was Bush's position, too, although he admitted that "mistakes were made." Naming Gates makes the denial official dogma.

The first absurdity of the appointment is that Gates, whose official job will be to ferret out the world's darkest secrets, is considered wildly eligible by all Republicans for the contradictory reason that he insists he had no idea of what was going on in his own office.

The Republicans' faces at the hearings light up every time the point is made that Gates, allegedly cut out of the loop by White House aide Oliver North and William J. Casey, the old rogue who was his boss at the CIA, was in the dark. The Republicans learned the essential lesson of the Reagan years, too. Don't worry about how silly a thing sounds or looks, get with the program. They are solidly behind Gates and trumpet his ignorance, which may be slightly at odds with his vaunted grasp of facts, but hey, he's a shoo-in, and besides, look at Bush's polls.

Several of Gates's subordinates attempted to inform him of the goings-on under his nose. One, Charles E. Allen, who was aptly called a warning officer, reported in August 1986 to a superior, Richard J. Kerr, that he suspected arms profits were being diverted to aid the contras. Kerr told Gates—who can't remember being told that North was involved.

Kerr followed Allen to the stand. Both of them could be midwestern insurance agents; there's not a jot of James Bond in either. Kerr said Gates just didn't register. Gates's fans, who include Allen and Kerr, say many people told him many things.

Still, it does seem odd that a man who went so far by noticing his masters' wishes would have passed

over something so startling about a project that obsessed Reagan and preoccupied Casey.

A certain delicacy and a lack of "hard evidence" caused Allen to couch his "analytic judgment" in a way that hardly reflected his fear that the matter went straight to the White House and perhaps even to the president. But as the frantic calls from Manucher Ghorbanifar, the Iranian middleman, became more frequent—Ghorbanifar was losing his shirt in the prodigious price markup—Allen decided to speak directly to Gates. He told Allen to make an appointment with Casey—to inform him of a plot that Casey was, of course, masterminding.

The scene Allen described the day he presented his memo of what he felt was a dangerous situation sounds as if it were taken right out of "Casablanca"—the immortal sequence in which Claude Rains pronounces himself "shocked, shocked" to discover that gambling was taking place in Rick's cafe.

Casey and Gates promptly marched over to the White House to confront national security adviser John M. Poindexter, who may well have been amused at being called to account for following Casey's instructions.

Allen painted another picture of farcical confusion at the agency on Nov. 20, 1986, five days before the roof fell in and Attorney General Edwin Meese III announced the arms sale and the fund diversion to a genuinely startled press corps. Twenty spooks dashed around trying to paste up a plausible account of what Casey had been up to for the preceding 15 months—carefully ignoring the central fact of the diversion. Gates was the impresario of what would be called perjury if the CIA thought lying to Congress was wrong.

Gates's record at analysis, on which the "new CIA" will focus, is not stunning. He overestimated the red menace, misread Mikhail Gorbachev and promoted "Star Wars." In short, he told his superiors what they wanted to hear. He was so anxious to please that he advocated bombing Nicaragua, a macho initiative that had to go down well with Casey, who was aggrieved at the outcry against his mining of the Nicaraguan harbors.

Republicans exult that there is no "smoking gun" against Gates. Smoking rubble doesn't count. In the mysterious alchemy of Washington, Gates has gone from unmarketable to inevitable, so nobody wants to hear about it. Besides, Iran-contra never happened.