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Charades in the 'Ambient'

Alan D. Fiers says he waited five years to tell the truth about the Iran-contra affair. When his chance came before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence yesterday, the former CIA covert operator demonstrated only how difficult—if not impossible—it will be to determine that “truth.”

After listening to his fascinating account of evasions, half-truths, charades, intrigues, deceptions and apparent outright lies, the senators were left with an unsettling thought. If so much dissembling and game-playing were taking place among CIA officials in private dealings with each other inside their palace of mirrors, how could Congress ever expect to learn the truth in public testimony years later?

Fiers's account of the ever more tangled Iran-contra affair provides a new twist to the old saying that, in the land of the blind, a one-eyed man is king. In the world in which Fiers operated, it seems that everyone was blind when it was convenient to be so. That, apparently, was much of the time when it came to Iran-contra.

Not that Fiers admitted to outright lies by fellow CIA operatives with knowledge of the secret effort to resupply the Nicaraguan contra guerrillas at a time when such aid was banned by Congress. He carefully avoided that direct characterization. Instead, he laced his testimony with euphemisms to describe “the general ambient that we lived in.”

It was an atmosphere, he explained, or “a universe” of “an unspoken understanding,” of “understanding the framework but not the details,” of appreciating that there “are things you shouldn't know and don't want in your head when you testify,” of not operating in “a black-and-white world.”

Fiers was in a key position to observe that world. He headed the CIA's Central American task force during the years that Oliver L. North was carrying out his extraordinary extralegal secret operations for the Reagan administration in which U.S. arms were sold to Iran for hostages and proceeds from those sales were diverted to fund the contras. During that period, Fiers developed a close relationship—similar to that of a father and son, he said—with William J. Casey, the late director of central intelligence.

The Casey he described was infinitely complex and elusive. In the single most riveting moment of his testimony, Fiers recalled an incident after he was

informed that North, denials to the contrary, was running operations in Central America. Fiers and his immediate covert-operations superior, Clair E. George, were summoned to a meeting with Casey and North.

According to Fiers, Casey asked North if he were operating in Central America. “Ollie looked at the director and said no,” Fiers testified. “The director said, ‘Good. I want you to understand you're not to operate in Central America.’” After they left the meeting, Fiers recounted, George turned to him and said: “Somewhere in the dark of the night, Bill Casey has said, ‘I'll take care of Central America. Just leave it to me.’” When George characterized that entire meeting as a “charade,” Fiers said he exclaimed: “. . . If that's true, this will be worse than Watergate if it ever comes out in the open.”

All of this melodramatic material adds still more pieces to the Iran-contra puzzle. But when it comes to the purpose of the hearings—whether to confirm Robert M. Gates as director of central intelligence—it sheds little light. In fact, Fiers in effect performed the same task for Gates yesterday that John M. Poindexter did four years ago for President Ronald Reagan when asked by Iran-contra congressional investigators about Reagan's knowledge of the diversion. Poindexter absolved him.

Once again, focusing on who knew what and when about the diversion is taking attention from more serious questions about the character and cast of mind of the next person who will head the CIA.

With Gates, unlike Clarence Thomas at his confirmation hearings, there never has been doubt that he is qualified by experience and training for his high position. Nor does the central question about Gates concern his murky involvement with, and/or knowledge of, Iran-contra.

The key question is whether Gates, the career CIA analyst as opposed to covert operator, has the ability to enable the intelligence community to make the right kinds of assessments about this turbulent world. In such critical areas as reading, or misreading, conditions inside the Soviet Union and Iraq, his record is poor. Gates has been, as Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) put it this week, “dead wrong.”

It isn't just covert intelligence operators running amok that causes chaos. As events in Iraq have demonstrated, faulty intelligence analysis can be as much to blame.