

Gates Passed Panel's Test on Lessons Learned From Casey's Controversies

'Matured' Is Intelligence Committee Code for Changed Ways

By Charles R. Babcock
Washington Post Staff Writer

In recommending Robert M. Gates to become director of the CIA, a majority of the Senate intelligence committee signaled their willingness yesterday to take a risk that Gates, a consummate agency insider, has learned from the controversies of his years with former director William J. Casey and will be as forthcoming to Congress on intelligence secrets as he is to President Bush.

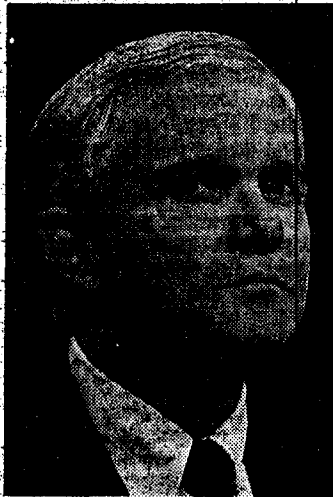
NEWS ANALYSIS

There was little doubt from the beginning of the confirmation process that Gates had the support of the committee's seven Republican members. He enjoyed the confidence of the president and was a career analyst knowledgeable about the intelligence agencies at a time they are facing sweeping change and budget cuts in the post-Cold War era.

But for the committee's eight Democrats, whether or not to endorse the Gates nomination was a more difficult decision, largely because of what some have referred to as "the baggage" Gates carries from his days as a top Casey aide in the 1980s.

Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), the committee chairman, who has had a close professional relationship with Gates for several years, says he is convinced the nominee—unlike Casey—is committed to the idea of congressional oversight. Several times during the hearings, Boren said he felt Gates has "matured" since the days he served Casey from 1981-87 as head of the intelligence directorate and as deputy director of the agency.

"Matured" seems to be a code word for a feeling that Gates has learned his lessons from the Casey days, especially after the CIA was



ROBERT M. GATES
... failed to convince four Democrats

partisan fray, like the one that split the Judiciary Committee over the Thomas nomination. That tradition broke down during the Gates hearings as GOP members—who all voted for Gates—attacked the testimony of three former CIA analysts who accused the nominee of slanting intelligence estimates to fit the anti-Soviet views of then-director Casey and other Reagan administration policymakers during the 1980s.

Several times during the confirmation hearings, Boren said he hoped the testimony would help educate the public about the CIA so they will know more about the billions of dollars spent secretly on intelligence gathering. But the lesson may be different than the one he intended. Testimony from former analysts who accused Gates of "cooking the books" opened a window on internal disputes over intelligence reporting that made the CIA seem much like any other government bureaucracy.

Little was said at the end of the process about Gates's role in the Iran-contra affair, which had been expected to be the main issue when Bush nominated him in May. Unresolved questions about what Gates had known about the affair forced him to withdraw his name from consideration as CIA director in 1987.

The issue seemed to come alive again this summer when one former CIA official pleaded guilty to withholding information from Congress, another was indicted on an array of related charges, and it was disclosed Gates was a "subject" of the continuing investigation of independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh. But the nominee disarmed several committee critics at the start of the hearings when he apologized for not having been more aggressive in finding out more about the CIA's role in the scandal while he was deputy director.

The floor debate on the Gates nomination is expected to be conducted on a less rancorous level than this week's debate on Thomas. Senators have received thousands of calls on Thomas but those on the intelligence committee have counted only a handful on Gates. Intelligence, despite the internal disputes uncovered at the hearings, is still an arcane business closed to all but the expert.

But is the "matured" Gates the real Gates? Will he provide unbiased intelligence advice and be honest and open with Congress? Has he simply been cultivating Boren and other key senators in order to realize his ambition to head the CIA? Will he be able to lead the CIA effectively and repair the morale of agency analysts, a number of whom have opposed his nomination?

The four Democrats who finally voted against the nomination clearly are not as confident of the answers as Boren or the intelligence committee's GOP members. After studying Gates's record, they determined he isn't the man for the job because his credibility is too damaged and his answers to their questions too clever.

But the record on Gates is less clear than supporter or critic would like. Several committee members observed yesterday that the same evidence can be judged differently, either in Gates's favor or against him, depending on the outlook of the viewer. Even two of the Democrats who voted for Gates said they still have serious questions about his record.

With the full Senate expected to vote on the nomination later this month, it is not certain whether Senate Democrats, still reeling from criticism of their handling of the confirmation fight over Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, will muster the energy for another floor fight.

The intelligence committee has long prided itself in being above the

caught up in the Iran-contra scandal and cold warrior Casey, who died in 1987, was replaced by straight-arrow William H. Webster, a former FBI director.

Most of the allegations against Gates that came out at the confirmation hearings—of slanting intelligence estimates, suppressing dissent and going along with an attempted cover-up of the Iran-contra scandal—stemmed from those days when the Soviet Union was viewed as an "evil empire," not a collapsed giant.