

Senate Opens Debate on Gates; Vote

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Nearly six months after President Bush announced his choice of Robert M. Gates to be CIA director, the Senate yesterday began floor debate on the nomination with confirmation expected today by a wide margin.

Administration officials said they were "confident and optimistic" about the vote, which is scheduled for no later than 6 p.m. today. A White House count late last week indicated Gates would get more than 60 votes, and yesterday Bush aides said the number might top 70.

Key to the higher estimate is the prospect that Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a member of the Senate intelligence committee, will support the nominee. Nunn could not be reached for comment yesterday, and his staff said he had not made up his mind. He voted for Gates when the intelligence committee recommended confirmation last month by an 11 to 4 vote, but said then he still had "serious reservations" and might vote against Gates on the floor.

Intelligence committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) opened debate on the nomination with remarks about the need for Senate reforms to counter the public's dissatisfaction with Congress and widespread disbelief in the sincerity of elected officials. By the time he turned to discussing Gates, Boren was addressing an empty chamber.

He said he was convinced that Gates, 47, a career intelligence officer who joined the CIA as a 24-year-old junior analyst and has been Bush's deputy national security adviser since 1989, was genuinely committed to the congressional oversight process and well-equipped to guide the intelligence community into the post-Cold War world.

"Nobody should be faulted if they are wrong some of the time," Boren said of complaints that Gates was not alert enough to danger signs in the Iran-contra affair of the mid-1980s and, at times, exercised

questionable judgment while head of the CIA's intelligence directorate in the early 1980s.

Referring to the sharp criticisms of Gates during confirmation hearings by former associates and some committee Democrats, Boren said that "benefits flow from a tough nominating process." He said he believed Gates, as director of central intelligence, would be more

sensitive to the ideas and feelings of others at the CIA as a result of the past months' scrutiny.

Boren has led the fight for Gates among Senate Democrats, assisted by retired deputy CIA director Bobby Ray Inman, chairman of the President Bush's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) appears to be the only one actively trying to muster opposition among Democratic colleagues, but he has been hampered by lack of support from the Senate Democratic leadership and others such as Nunn, sources said. Majority Leader George J. Mitchell (D-Maine) is not expected to announce his position on Gates until just before the vote.

All of the Senate's 43 Republi-

cans are expected to vote for Gates, although Orrin G. Hatch (Utah) may be absent.

One reason for the lack of a vigorous fight or even debate, according to an administration official, is that senators are tired of the Iran-contra scandal and even of allegations that Gates slanted intelligence reports, because a clear case against him has not been made.

The most spirited speech yesterday came from Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), a former vice chairman of the intelligence committee who declared that his opposition to the nomination rests mainly on "the routine-ization and bureaucratization" of the CIA and its work. He said the agency had consistently failed to gauge the Soviet economy

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properly, and said the CIA is now engaged in "revisionist rumblings" by denying it was ever wrong.

With the Cold War over, Moynihan charged that the CIA has gone into a state of "organizational maintenance" that federal agencies practice once their original missions are accomplished. With heavy sarcasm, Moynihan complained about a 1984 memo about the Marxist regime in Nicaragua in which Gates warned of U.S. "helplessness" if Nicaragua should become "a second Cuba."

"What difficulties has Cuba caused us in the last 25 years" since the Cuban missile crisis, Moynihan demanded. He said he could think of none except that "it has been difficult to come by a good Monte Cristo cigar."