

John P. Canham-Clyne

What Gates Knew

George A. Carver Jr. must be exhausted. Flailing at straw men will do that to you. In a column on this page Aug. 7, Carver defended Robert Gates, President Bush's nominee for Director of Central Intelligence, from charges that no one except a few sloppy reporters have made.

Carver writes that the "core Iran-contra argument" against Gates is the assertion that he "must have known 'all about' " Iran-contra, because two men who appeared directly below him in the agency's organizational chart, Clair George and Alan Fiers, now appear to have known more than they originally admitted. In fact, the allegations against Gates arise not from a vague idea of what George "must have" told him, but from the mountain of documents and sworn testimony released by the various congressional committees investigating the operations and at the trials of various figures in the affair. The documentary record suggests that Gates knew much more about the Iran arms shipments, contra resupply and even about the diversion of funds than he admitted under oath to congressional investigating committees.

The documents cast doubt even on the central point that Carver makes in defense of Gates. Carver insisted that deputy directors have always concentrated on assisting the director with his relations with other government institutions and foreign intelligence agencies, not on the day-to-day operations of the CIA. In his deposition before

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the Iran-contra investigating committees, Gates's predecessor John McMahon described under oath his job as deputy director for Central Intelligence, saying "[i]t covered all aspects of running CIA as well as running the community." But defer for the sake of argument to Carver's experience and expertise. Instead look at one task that Casey explicitly assigned to Gates.

When the Iran arms sales were exposed in early November of 1986, Congress demanded an explanation from the administration. The House and Senate intelligence committees set Nov. 21 as the date for testimony from Casey and briefings from the national security adviser, Vice Adm. John Poindexter. One subject the committees were particularly interested in was a shipment of Hawk anti-aircraft missiles sent to Iran on Nov. 24 the year before.

Casey and Poindexter tried to cover up U.S. participation in the shipment by lying to the committees about it. They told the committees that the shipment had been an Israeli one and that the United States did not learn that missiles had been shipped until mid-January 1986, seven weeks after the flight. In reality, Poindexter directed the operation. He has since been convicted in federal court for those lies. Only Casey's untimely death saved him from similar prosecution.

Casey was in Central America for the week preceding the hearing. On Nov. 16, Casey sent Gates a memorandum putting him in charge of pulling the testimony together. Gates had personal knowledge of the details of the flight, and even if his memory failed him, he had documentary evidence and numerous informed colleagues around him from which to draw truthful testimony.

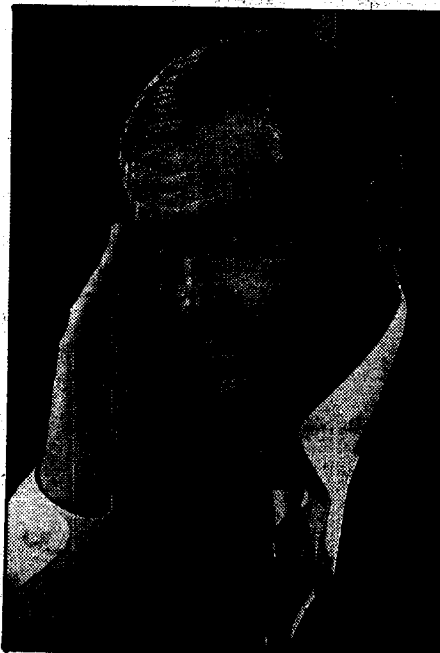
Gates attended a crucial meeting shortly after the shipment. At the time of the flight, Gates was in charge of the Intelligence Directorate, the head of the CIA's analysis wing—one of the four "line deputies" through which Carver insists all directors run the CIA.

A week after the flight, on Dec. 1, Ronald Reagan signed a covert action finding that later became controversial because it retroactively ratified the actions of the people involved. Beyond politics, however, the finding had an important bureaucratic effect, making the CIA's continued support of the NSC staff legal. Deputy Director John McMahon gathered the senior officials with responsibility for the program in his office to share information on Dec. 5. McMahon "reconstructed" his notes of the gathering for the Iran-contra committee. That reconstruction places Gates at the meeting along with intelligence and operations officers responsible for the region. According to McMahon's notes, the meeting was told "[The Rev. Benjamin] Weir released for one plane load; got nothing for the second load."

Even if Gates didn't know the truth about the shipment at the time Casey assigned him to coordinate the testimony, there was a wealth of information available to him. In stipulations at the trials of Poindexter and Lt. Col. Oliver North, both the government and defense attorneys admitted as true certain facts about intelligence reports from the National Security Agency, the nation's eavesdropping service. North had asked the NSA to track Iranian response to the initiative. According to the stipulations, Casey and McMahon were on the distribution list for the reports, and the North stipulation says that the "reports of very late November and early December, 1985 revealed that Hawk missiles were shipped to Iran from Israel in connection with hostage recovery efforts." The Poindexter stipulation asserts that there were "further distributions" within the agencies receiving them.

Of course, by the time he was coordinating Casey's testimony Gates didn't need any "further distribution." After he replaced McMahon in April 1986, Gates himself went on the distribution list for the NSA intercept reports. NSA reports are always referred to solemnly as "highly reliable intelligence" in court proceedings, and Gates is always described by his supporters as a consummate intelligence professional. Yet in preparing crucial testimony, Gates would have us believe he neglected to look at one of the most reliable sources of information available on the operation. All he had to do to find out what was on the plane was to look at the file of these

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reports, and the distribution list alone would have let him know that this information came into the agency long before January of 1986.

Assuming that Gates couldn't remember the Dec. 5 meeting and couldn't find the NSA reports, there were plenty of people around who knew. Certainly Clair George, intelligence officer Charles Allen, Associate Deputy Director for Operations Bert Dunn, then chief of the Near East Division Thomas Twetten (now deputy director for Operations) and a host of other officials could have filled Gates in on the details of the operation.

For Gates not to have known, he would have to have been the target of an elaborate plan to deceive him similar to the one directed against Congress. However, that would have been a suicidal risk to take on Casey's part. There was too much accurate information around, some of it available directly to Gates. It would have made much more sense to put someone who knew the truth in charge of the testimony, thereby eliminating the risk that Gates would stumble unwittingly across the truth.

Profound questions remain about Gates's knowledge, actions and veracity about other aspects of the Iran arms shipments, the contra supply operation and the diversion of funds. They can be answered only by reading the documents and questioning participants under oath, not by commenting on erroneous presumptions in daily news stories.

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