

Ex-CIA Operative Chooses To Stand and Fight Charges

George Says He's Become a Political Pawn

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Clair E. George, ex-chief of the CIA's covert operations service, seemed calm as he faced the press Friday afternoon after learning that 11 felony counts were returned against him by the Iran-contra grand jury.

"I've been through worse than this," he told reporters and photographers outside his Bethesda house, "with much more dangerous people than you are. And you're not shooting," he added with a little laugh.

The gregarious CIA veteran has confronted physical danger: He was stationed in Beirut after civil war broke out there in 1975. Later, he moved to Athens to replace station chief Richard Welch, who had been assassinated. No one underestimated that danger, said John F. Blake, former deputy CIA director for administration. "He had to figure out how to live first. Literally."

George faced a critical choice last week: Whether to fight the grand jury charges or to plead guilty to some charges and cooperate with the investigation by independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh, as had Alan D. Fiers, another ex-agency operative.

George chose to fight, claiming, as he put it Friday, that he had become "a pawn in a continuous drama of political exploitation," caught in the long battle over Iran-contra between Congress and the executive.

The George indictment is the latest, but not the last, chapter in the Iran-contra scandal, which surfaced publicly in November 1986 when the world learned that the Reagan administration, in violation of its own expressed policies and of an act of Congress, had sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages, diverting the profits to the contra rebels fighting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

Walsh is attempting to determine how far the coverup extended in the CIA. George is the highest level ex-

CIA official to be criminally prosecuted since the mid-1970s. He stands accused of lying and obstructing congressional and grand jury investigations of the scandal.

The irony in George's indictment is that the record shows he was against aspects of the Iran initiative, including using the Iranian middleman chosen by then-National Security Council aide Oliver L. North and approved by then-CIA Director William J. Casey.

Some in the intelligence community who are critical of George say no one can be exempt from the legal requirement to disclose information to Congress, particularly in the closed sessions of the two intelligence committees.

Others who support George say he fell victim to changing rules to which he and his boss, Casey, never fully adapted. In essence, they say, the same strengths that made George effective in running the overseas spy service were also key to his downfall.

"He knows how to keep a secret," said a former high agency official who sympathizes with George. "That's what he's done all his life; that's what he did in this case, and he did it very well."

"Does Clair George have a strong view that Congress is not competent to be entrusted with this kind of data? You bet. And you can debate that point, but from his point of view, if he's been told to keep it secret, he's going to keep it secret. And if he's given the authority to deny that information to the Congress, he'll deny it with great enthusiasm," the official said.

David D. Whipple, executive director of the 3,300-member Association of Former Intelligence Officers, said, "Here's a guy who served his country in rather dicey and dif-

difficult situations for many years, and now is sort of hunted down as a common criminal. The damage it does is incomprehensible to me."

Much of the case against George depends on the testimony of Fiers, who ran the CIA's Central American task force under George and alleges that George told him to keep their knowledge of the scandal from Congress.

David Holliday, a former Senate intelligence committee senior staff member, said George "was never able to make the adjustment to the idea that somebody outside"—namely Congress—"had a right to know what in fact was going on in the DO [directorate of operations]. . . . He was not able to adjust to the times as they have in fact changed."

Thomas Polgar, a longtime CIA official who retired in 1981 and worked for the Senate Iran-contra investigating committee staff, said, "I do not agree that he is a political pawn."

"I think the problem that somebody ought to speak to is the crime that Bill Casey created in the top levels of the agency. Casey had the idea that you can bend, push, manipulate and exploit the law for your own purposes and that if you get caught, it's sort of an operational accident, sort of the cost of running the enterprise. He created a wrong atmosphere in which these things could happen," Polgar said.

George, 61, a native of Beaver Falls, Pa., attended Penn State, served in Korea with the Army, and joined the CIA in 1955. In the 1960s, he sought a post in Africa, a hot spot "where your reporting

would be noticed and your activities would be noticed and you'd have a chance to shine," said Whipple, who did the same.

He served in Mali, India, Beirut and Athens. He became director for operations in Africa, and in 1978, when a CIA promotions panel evaluated senior operations officers, George was ranked No. 1 out of more than 100, according to Polgar, then chairman of the panel.

George became known as an ebullient leader, bright, loud, witty, emotional. "You'd exchange views at the top of your lungs," one agency officer said. "He'd blow up and yell at people, and 10 minutes later it's over. He'd argue but respect your views."

Casey made George liaison with Congress in 1983. "Once Clair got there, he reinforced all of Casey's worst instincts," Robert M. Gates was quoted as saying in the 1990 biography of Casey by Joseph E. Persico. Their attitude, Gates said, was "don't tell Congress anything unless you're driven to the wall."

Gates, now White House deputy national security adviser, was sandwiched between Casey and George in the CIA. The Senate will confront his professed lack of knowledge of the Iran-contra affair at hearings beginning Sept. 16 on Gates's fitness to be CIA director.

George called the indictment "another in a host of crises which we have had to confront during my years with the CIA. . . . In the end, I and my service to my country will be vindicated," he said.