

Gates Concedes Lack of Vigilance on Iran-Contra

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Robert M. Gates told the Senate intelligence committee yesterday that he should have been more alert to early warning signals in the Iran-contra affair, but said repeatedly in written statements that he could remember very few details about what he was told of the scandal and when.

With his nomination as CIA director hanging in the balance, Gates acknowledged at the opening of his confirmation hearings that he should have "done more" when he first learned in the fall of 1986 about the possibility that profits from the secret sale of arms to Iran had been diverted to the Nicaraguan contra rebels.

Then deputy director of central intelligence at the agency, Gates said he should have been more aggressive in pursuing the issue and more skeptical about what he was told. "I should have asked more questions," he added, "and I should have been less satisfied with the answers I received, especially from Director [William J.] Casey."

Several committee Democrats said they found it hard to believe that Gates, a meticulous administrator, could have such a dim memory about important events in the scandal. In written responses to committee questions that he answered in July and were released

yesterday, Gates said numerous times he could not recall documents that had been sent to him or key meetings in which he apparently took part.

Sen. Howard M. Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) said he counted "no less than 33 instances" in which Gates failed to recall his role in Iran-contra-related events. In more than 40 other responses, Metzenbaum complained, "your answers were not that you didn't recall, but that you never knew, or better stated, that you never sought to know."

"I hope your memory improves during the course of these hearings," Metzenbaum told him. The first day began easily for Gates, with Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), the committee chairman, alerting to Gates's efforts to restore the trust of Congress after the scandal broke in November 1986.

"There was never a time when I felt you were not forthcoming," Boren said of the post-Iran-contra period. Gates remained at the CIA as deputy director until 1989, when he moved to the White House as deputy national security adviser to President Bush.

A veteran of dozens of appearances before the panel, the 47-year-old Gates testified calmly, sitting alone at a long witness table with White House strategists in a row behind him. He recalled beginning his public career 25 years ago when he came to Washington "with all I

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BY RAY LUTTEN—THE WASHINGTON POST
Robert M. Gates is sworn in for hearings on his nomination as CIA director.

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owned in a 1965 Mustang and no money."

"The Mustang is long gone, sold before it became a collector's item, and I still have no money," Gates said, adding that he still has the "idealism that I brought with me from Kansas a quarter century ago—a deep conviction in the greatness of this country . . . and in its mission as a force for good in the world."

A career intelligence analyst who has specialized in the Soviet Union, Gates emphasized the need for changes in the U.S. intelligence community in the wake of collapse of the Soviet Union, a collapse that Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.)—in a special appearance yesterday before the committee he once served as vice chairman—pointedly noted Gates and the CIA failed to predict. Gates admitted as much, saying that "the old verities that have guided this country's national security policy for 25 years, and thus its intelligence service, have disappeared in a historical instant."

If confirmed, he said, he would embark on a hurry-up program, in cooperation with Congress, to settle on new missions and priorities by the end of the year, "in time to influence the next budget cycle."

The hearings are expected to continue into next week, with a day off Wednesday for Yom Kippur. Republicans and Democrats alike seem agreed that Gates's performance at the sessions will determine the outcome, that confirmation is his to win or lose.

Asked what he meant when he said he should have been more skeptical and asked more questions in the Iran-contra scandal, Gates said two instances came to mind. One was a lunch with Casey and then-White House aide Oliver L. North on Oct. 9, 1986, four days after a contra resupply plane was shot down over Nicaragua.

North had assured Gates and Casey that there was no CIA connection to the flight, which took place after Congress had barred military assistance to the contras. But as the meeting ended, North made what Gates called "a cryptic remark" about Swiss bank accounts and the contras.

Gates said North's remark puzzled him, but he didn't pursue it after Casey shrugged it off. "If I had it to do over again, I would have



BY MAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST
Robert M. Gates told senators, "I should have asked more questions."

pressed him [Casey's] border," Gates said.

The second example was an Oct. 15, 1986, White House meeting at which Gates and Casey gave then-national security adviser John M. Poindexter a senior CIA officer's memo warning that an Iranian middleman might disclose the diversion to the contra resupply effort of profits from U.S. arms sales to Iran.

Casey, Gates recalled, told Poindexter to have the White House counsel review the entire Iran initiative. Gates said he now feels "I should have pressed harder" and drawn Poindexter's attention to the middleman's threats.

In admitting that he made "misjudgments," Gates said he had also "learned the lessons of Iran-contra" and told the committee there had not been "a single crisis of confidence" between Dec. 15, 1986, when he took over briefly as acting director in place of the ailing Casey, and early 1989 when he left the CIA after serving as deputy to William H. Webster.

"Nor will there be such a crisis under my stewardship if I am confirmed," he vowed. "You will not find a nominee for director of central intelligence more aware of and sensitive to the lessons of that time."

Gates first sought to become CIA director in 1987 as President Ronald Reagan's nominee and had problems with questions about the funds' diversion in aborted confir-

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mation hearings then. He may have created more problems for himself yesterday.

In 1987, he insisted that the first time he heard of the possibility of the diversion was on Oct. 1, 1986, in a meeting with CIA analyst Charles Allen. His reaction, he said then, was to tell Allen to write a memo for submission to Casey, but Gates called the evidence extremely "flimsy." At that time, senators were disturbed that Gates's initial reaction to Allen's warning had been that he didn't want to hear about it.

Subsequently, during the congressional Iran-contra investigations of 1987, it was disclosed that Richard Kerr, then-deputy CIA director for intelligence, told Gates in the late summer of 1986 about a possible diversion. Gates told investigators that he could not recall the conversation.

Yesterday, Boren disclosed that a second CIA official, Charles Helgerson, also had heard of the diversion from Allen and that Kerr told Helgerson about discussing the diversion with Gates.

The senator also revealed that Kerr, now acting CIA director, said in sworn testimony last week that Gates had stated at his late summer meeting with Kerr that Gates "had already heard rumors" about a diversion.

Gates said yesterday that he still could not recall the meeting, but that if he made any comments about "rumors," they would have been about "contra funding," and not a diversion from arms sales profits.

Another new disclosure was contained in Gates's written answers released yesterday. One of the questions dealt with a Nov. 7, 1986, memo from Charles Allen that reported that a lawyer for individuals who financed one of the U.S. arms shipments to Iran said his clients believed they had been "swindled and that the money paid by Iran for the arms may have been siphoned off to support the contras in Nicaragua."

Gates replied that the CIA had located the copy of the memo that went to his office, but he said, "I do not recall seeing the Allen memo-

randum . . . or learning of its substance" until Nov. 25, 1986, when the diversion was publicly announced by Attorney General Edwin Meese III.

Gates was also asked in the written interrogatories about mention of his name in North's notebooks. Gates's repeated response was that he had not read the North notebooks.

In one case, however, North jotted down Gates's name after a meeting North had with retired Air Force major general Richard V. Secord and others on Oct. 13, 1986—a time when the contra resupply operation was being exposed. North and Secord were concerned that further disclosures could lead to several problems and could harm Southern Air Transport, the airline that was carrying U.S. arms to Israel for shipment to Iran.

Instead of saying he did not know the meaning of this entry of his name, Gates wrote that "North did not discuss those subjects with me."

A few days later, according to the committee, former CIA general counsel David Doherty said Gates spoke to him about Southern Air and an FBI investigation of the airline. Doherty related that Gates's concern was that the FBI in its investigation had "stumbled onto the Iranian operation." Gates told the committee in his written answers that he had "no specific recollection of my discussion with Mr. Doherty beyond what I have said in previous testimony."

At one point during the hearing, after the committee was informed of independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh's decision to dismiss all criminal charges against North, members suggested that North might be called as a witness to deal with some unanswered questions.

Boren subsequently announced that North's lawyer, Brendan V. Sullivan, would not allow him to appear without a grant of immunity from prosecution and that Walsh felt another congressional appearance by North would complicate his ongoing investigation. It was a congressional grant of immunity to North for his testimony before the Iran-contra committees in 1987 that led to yesterday's dismissal of the charges against him.