

Style

By Marjorie Williams
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It comes down to this: a small, gray man of almost eerily symmetrical features, his face schooled into an expression of rigorous blandness, looking up at the red-draped dais of his inquisitors. In a resting state his lips seem slightly pursed, as though he balances an ice cube on the tip of his tongue.

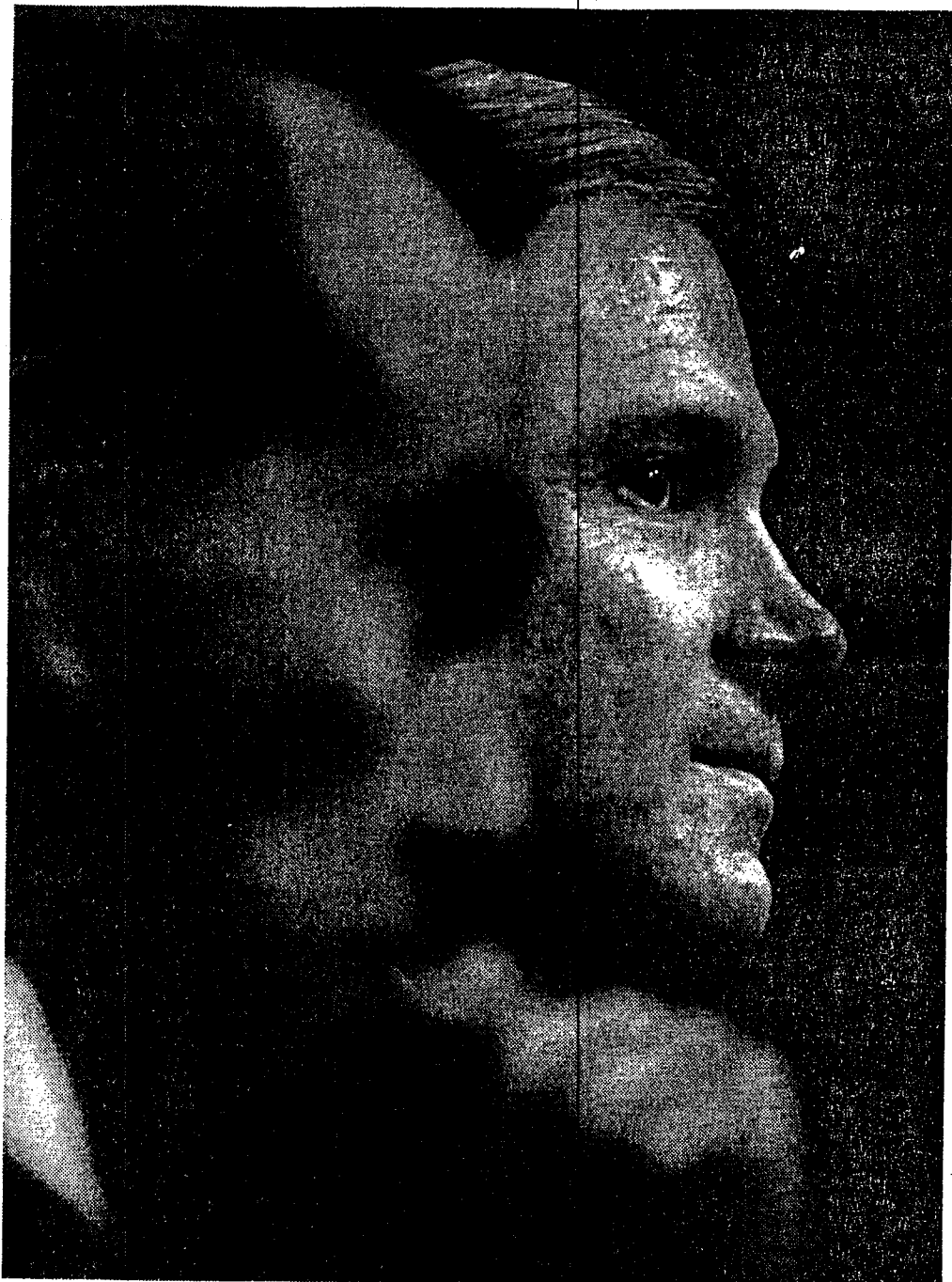
With that patient, chilly look he has been listening as senators question his honor, his truthfulness, his fitness for the high office he is pursuing for the second time. It is the price Robert Gates has to pay if he wants to be confirmed as director of central intelligence.

"I arrived in Washington 25 years ago this summer," he told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence when he was finally allowed to speak, "with everything I owned in the back of 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." Carrying a hint of sacrifice for the public good, it was the standard Regular-Joe credential required of a man nominated to high office.

But the normal theater of confirmation has a second sub-

Robert Gates And the Neverending Story

Underlying Confirmation Hearings,
The Desire to Explain Iran-Contra



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST
Clockwise from top left: Sandinista soldiers with Eugene Hasenfus in 1986; cover of the November 1987 congressional report of the Iran-contra affair; Oliver North as he appeared on television in 1987 during the Iran-contra hearings; Fawn Hall being sworn in at the hearings; and Robert Gates at his confirmation proceedings Monday.

text in Gates's case, a second ritual he must satisfy: He is briefly reanimating our intermittent struggle to arrive at a settled narrative of the Iran-contra scandal, of what it was and how much it mattered.

Questions about Gates's role in Iran-contra have so far dominated his hearings, which began Monday and continue today. It is *deja vu* all over again: The Hasenfus plane! The December finding! Roy Furmark! And slowly, dully, this committee of the Senate is adding a new layer of silt to the landfill: The Allen memorandum . . . The Kerr deposition . . . *The mini-finding* . . .

It all serves to remind us that we never really decided what Iran-contra meant. Different people offer a panoply of reasons for this, ranging from frankly political theories—the Democrats lacked the nerve to press their advantage—to ruminations on the American character and its continuing disinclination to disturb the bones of Reagan's presidency.

But here we are, five years on: November will mark the

See GATES, D2, Col. 1

GATES, From D1

anniversary. Independent Counsel Lawrence E. Walsh is approaching his 80th birthday, and still his investigation grinds on, at a price to date of more than \$27 million. Young lawyers who worked on his staff have left, taken new jobs, written books, had babies. Ronald Reagan has retired to California, and a misty state of non-recall about the convulsion that almost destroyed his presidency. John Tower, who chaired the commission that first outlined the full scope of the scandal, had his own fall from public grace and died this year in a plane crash. The National Security Archive, which collects and publishes declassified government documents, has flourished on the output of Iran-contra, amassing about 83,600 pieces of paper.

And still the Senate asks: *What did you know and when did you know it?*

Even as Gates began answering that question on Monday, the Oliver North saga was sputtering to its conclusion a few blocks away in U.S. District Court. Walsh threw in the towel, admitting that he could not meet an appeals court's stringent requirements for proving that North's criminal conviction on three felony counts was untainted by his forced testimony in the congressional hearings of four summers past. The scandal's central figure, who had come as close as anyone to giving Iran-contra a coherent narrative form, was finally out of the picture.

And still the senators asked: What did Casey tell you? What did you know about North? Why didn't you ask Poindexter?

At issue are specific questions of whether Gates, as deputy to the late

CIA director William J. Casey, knew that the National Security Council was engaged in a secret effort to resupply the contras, and that profits from the sale of arms to Iran were being diverted to that effort. Witnesses who will testify today have contradicted Gates's past testimony on these points, saying he learned of the diversion earlier than he acknowledges and may have participated in efforts to obscure it once the scandal broke.

But, barring unforeseen bombshells in the course of the testimony, Gates is likely to be confirmed in the end. The committee will never quite scratch the itch, address the root restlessness, that has irritated American political life for the past five years.

For this moment, though, Gates is the unwilling embodiment of the scandal that will not end.

"I might say parenthetically that I hope that some day I will never have to talk about this subject again," said Sen. Warren Rudman (R-N.H.) during his questioning of Gates Tuesday, "but I guess it just keeps coming up. It's almost like a typhus epidemic in that anybody within five miles of the germ either died, is infected, or is barely able to survive, so I guess we're back in that mode again."

No Easy Narrative

Ah, for the shapely narrative of Watergate, with its heroes and villains, its dramatic unities, its *deus ex machina* in the Oval Office taping system. Wilfrid Sheed wrote of wallowing in Watergate as in a masterly novel: "For the average citizen, such living political fiction undeniably quickens the spirit. A nation needs a novel to follow, a story to bring us crowding round the bulletin board, be it a war, a scandal, or a humble moonshot . . . and Watergate is a dilly: deeply flawed, as the boys say, but a hell of a read."

How poorly Iran-contra stacks up. "I forget who came up with the metaphor, but I've plagiarized it left and right," says Tom Blanton, deputy director of the National Security Archive. "Watergate was the great tragedy. The high and mighty were brought low, and so on; it was Shakespeare. Iran-contra is like Samuel Beckett: Everyone keeps wandering on and off stage, but you don't know what to make of it."

We never decided what Iran-contra was, or why it mattered; whether it was a national disgrace, a set of discreet crimes, a policy struggle or a constitutional crisis. "There is no official reality of Iran-contra," in the sar-

domic words of one Democratic hill aide, "other than, 'the Democrats screwed it up.'"

One problem is the sheer size and variety of Iran-contra. "Even among people who followed it very closely, different things strike different people as being what was wrong," says a lawyer involved in one of the investigations. "It was so vast, and there are so many different angles on it, that there's never been one kind of crystallizing image in everyone's head that everyone agreed they were offended by."

The narrative void enables conspiracy theorists to see Iran-contra as the root or relative of every government shenanigan since the Warren Commission. It enables conservatives to argue that the crisis wasn't a crisis at all but a symptom—a sign of how congressional meddling distorts executive branch functioning.

Our confusion is apparent in the Gates hearing, where even the Democratic senators can't seem to decide whether association with the scandal ought to disqualify a man from high office. They don't appear sure whether they are digging for sins of omission or sins of commission—or how many of the former add up to one of the latter.

We don't even know how to debate it, says Todd Gitlin, professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. "There are a lot of [other] historical matters that we don't agree on, but where the issues have at least been defined well enough that there's a good folk argument about it," he says. For instance, "we still have a good folk argument about the Vietnam War. But what you have there is two coherent narratives contending against each other. . . . On Iran-contra, I don't think the positions are confronting each other."

Today, Iran-contra divides the world into two groups. One, consisting of almost every man and woman in America, gave up on following the details years ago. The other group forms a priesthood: By their dogeared copies of the Tower Report you shall know them, the ones who can tell you in their sleep the difference between Richard Secord's story and Albert Hakim's.

For neither group is Iran-contra a finished tale. The first looks at the avalanche of existing information and shrugs, a mite guiltily: *I should know what was wrong there, but there are just too many facts I can't follow.*

The second group believes that the

ruin will eventually set it free—some day, just as soon as all the facts come out.

The Career American

Gates is perfectly a government apparatchik: His face looks as though he has emptied himself of every thought and feeling not useful to the mission, and he answers questions with an uncanny mildness. Yes, sir. No, sir. To the best of my recollection, sir. His voice has a surprisingly reedy quality, a Kansan compression that flattens all

his vowels. He is, he tells the senators, "unbled" by the president's faith in him.

"I should have done more," he said on Monday.

"I should have been more skeptical about what I was told," he said.

"I should have asked more questions," he said.

On Tuesday, he told the senators, "in retrospect, I didn't do enough."

"I probably should have protested," he said.

"I've acknowledged that I should have been more vigilant," he said.

It is an even-tempered, level-toned ritual of self-flagellation. It amounts to an admission that mistakes were made, in the immortal words of President Reagan. It will probably work. Because where is the narrative strong enough to counter such a flood of self-abasement?

Think back to Nov. 3, 1986, when Iran-contra began to erupt. The story was improbable—*impossible*. Details were hard to come by: There was a Bible, a cake, a key—or a cake baked in the shape of a key. It made no sense, and yet it spilled out, more and faster, until the astonishing Nov. 25 press conference when Attorney General Edwin C. Meese III announced that the scandal would combine all the greatest hits of the Reagan foreign policy.

Even then you couldn't describe the crisis in a single sentence, not without a pause for breath: Popular president sells arms to archenemy hostage-taker Iran, violating not one but two U.S. policies (against arming Iran and dealing for hostages), marking up the price of the arms and sending the profit to the Nicaraguan contras in violation of a third policy, the congressional Boland Amendments forbidding contra aid.

From there, it was all denouement, a tangled skein of money and guns, middlemen and bank accounts, dates and times and findings and channels.

Polls began to show that as the narrative fragmented, the American people, initially outraged, ceased to follow it.

Says a Senate aide: "I think of Iran-contra as the MTV version of Watergate, which is a series of images cascading. You get Ollie North, 'lies for lives.' You get Albert Hakim, looking like Peter Lorre, with his ledger books. You get Fawn Hall, 'above the law.' You get Reagan, 'I can't remember.' None of it sticks with you. . . . It was a series of rapidly moving images, and when it stopped moving fast enough, America clicked off the tube."

But wasn't it the Democrats' job to make those images into a coherent whole? Only the president's men even came close to seizing the authorial voice. At best, their story was the autobiography of Oliver North, a Career American engaged in a one-man struggle to compensate for the timidity of a pettifogging Congress. At worst, it was passive picaresque starring a president with too soft a heart for the hostages held in Iran. Both versions flew in the face of the evidence, of course, but Democrats and



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

CIA Director-designate Robert Gates.

investigators never really produced a better version.

One thing almost everyone agrees on is that Congress kicked away its great chance at seizing the narrative, during joint committee hearings in the spring and summer of 1987. They rushed the job, some say. They defined the investigation narrowly, as a question of whether the president knew of the diversion: When John Poindexter said the buck stopped with him, the investigation, as defined, was

over; when Poindexter's story later changed, at his trial, it was too late to seize the narrative back. They created a forum and then handed it over to North, letting his lawyer dictate the terms of his appearance and being bullied into submission by his brushfire popularity.

Above all, the men running the investigation failed to appreciate the importance of creating their own narrative. Sam Dash, former chief counsel to the Senate Watergate committee, commented soon after the Iran-contra hearings closed, "These hearings were predestined to fail—to provoke no public outrage—because the hearings had no strategy. They never told a story, never explained to the people what happened."

"It enabled Ollie North to walk away with it, because he had a story—he had a narrative," says Gitlin.

The hearings were symptoms of the other strange confusion that has muddied our reckoning with Iran-contra. By granting immunity to North and Poindexter, Congress ruined Walsh's chances of making legal sanctions against them stick. Implicitly, the committee had decided that it was more important to make an immediate political accounting of the crisis. Jeffrey Toobin, a young prosecutor who wrote a book about his experience on Lawrence Walsh's staff, observed, "The goal of educating the public about the misdeeds of its government may well be as important as

assuring that the criminally culpable go to jail. But with its precipitous immunity grants and vacuous hearings, Congress assured that neither goal would be fulfilled."

We still haven't chosen between those two goals. From the beginning, legal inquiries have tended to spiral into small questions with provable fact patterns. Not: Was there a conspiracy to subvert the Congress's constitutional prerogatives? But: Did Person A lie to Congress about his activities on Date B? The second is an inherently less gripping question.

Therefore, say critics of Walsh's office, Iran-contra should have been—should still be—debated in the realms of politics and policy. But when push comes to shove, politicians have shown scant appetite for imposing political sanctions.

The Gates hearings are following suit. Two days into what was supposed to be high-tension hearings, he has been questioned sharply by a few senators—but by no means as harshly

as expected, even by Democrats on the panel. Senators have fallen over themselves to thank Gates for his candor. Chairman David Boren (D-Okla.), from the start, has been wreathed in smiles.

With all his murmurs of hindsight regret, Gates is in essence offering senators a deal: If Congress won't blame him for the last set of high officials who lied to it and cut it out of its entitled role in foreign policy, it can expect different treatment from him.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, at this writing, seems willing to accept.

The scene may point to another reason why Iran-contra is, in the words of Theodore Draper in his new Iran-contra history, "A Very Thin Line," "unfinished business." A final accounting of the affair, he writes, will have to include the reckoning that "Congress was an easy, almost willing victim of the administration's machinations."

"Congress had abdicated," says Blanton. "To address it as a balance-of-power, constitutional issue, you have to have a real engagement between Congress and the executive. Lawrence Walsh can make all the indictments he wants, and that's not going to restore power to Congress unless Congress wants to take it back."

At the Scene of History

We should bear in mind that Watergate spoiled us.

Where Watergate had John Dean, a man at the center of the scandal, telling the whole story to Congress, Iran-contra had William Casey, a dead man who could tell no tale at all. Where Watergate had colorful Sam Ervin, Iran-contra had dour Dan Inouye. Where Watergate's villains hung tough, giving testimony to Congress that sent them to jail, Iran-con-

tra had a succession of witnesses who took the Fifth, said one thing in Congress, another thing in court, and escaped accountability in both arenas. And where Watergate conditioned us to expect a smoking gun, a central crime, Iran-contra needed a different lens, a different definition of culpabili-

ty.

Above all, Watergate had the resolution Iran-contra lacked: Nixon resigned and was pardoned; Reagan retired to Bel-Air.

"To come to grips with Iran-contra would also be to come to grips with Ronald Reagan, I think," says Todd Gitlin. "And this is something that the country has, in general, preferred not to do. To have a clear narrative about what happened, and what it meant, we would have to place Reagan in that narrative. Is he responsible or not?"

And so we beat on, asking who knew about it, and when: but not what it was.

The press covering the Gates hearings is largely made up of the cognoscenti, but scattered in the audience are pairs of stalwart tourists in T-shirts and shorts, conscientious dabblers lured by news accounts of history in the making. A fortyish couple in matching yellow shirts wandered in Tuesday morning, as Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) was interrogating Gates about why he had not acted more decisively when the pieces of Iran-contra's puzzle first came into his possession.

... "The only recollection that I had of Mr. Secord's name being mentioned was the broad view, broad statement by Mr. Allen that one of the things that aroused his concern was the fact that Mr. Secord was involved in the private benefactor effort and also was involved in the Iranian effort" ...

On Gates talked, in tones as level as the land he came from. Yes, sir. No, sir. I should have done more, sir. After about 10 minutes the couple was eyeing the clock; after 15, they were scuffling toward the door in the bent-over posture of children, gleeful but embarrassed, sneaking away from their chores. Off to the linear narratives of the Mall, the history people come to Washington to see: in which Lincoln follows Washington and dinosaurs live and then perish, where Apollo follows Mercury until man reaches the moon.

An older couple, dressed in jeans and bright new Reeboks, stuck it out a little longer. They were Olga and Herbert Flanders, a pair of devout Democrats from Santa Clara, Calif.

"I think we're stupid to be playing this game," said Herbert during the mid-morning break. "This guy was doing what his boss approved. . . . Why doesn't the press point out, the president promoted these policies?"

"It seems like it just keeps bubbling up," said Olga Flanders. "It gets brushed aside, then it bubbles up."