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Gates Bolstered by Strategy of

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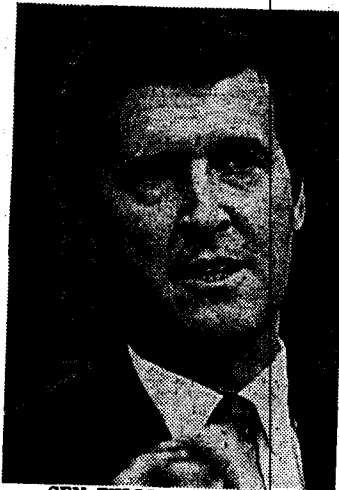
The Friday before the start of confirmation hearings on Robert M. Gates's nomination as CIA director, Gates told Senate supporters at a White House strategy session that he was going to begin by apologizing for not having been aggressive enough in pursuing the Iran-contra scandal.

Gates's act of contrition had been planned months before, according to administration officials. Read from handwritten notes on a yellow legal pad, it turned out to be a major factor in dissipating what administration strategists say was a state of panic over the nomination at the White House earlier this month.

Gates's *mea culpa* has been accompanied by his willingness to tell the Senate intelligence committee what it wants to hear most from prospective CIA directors—namely, that he will tell them whatever they want to know, report all covert actions as quickly as possible and even consider resigning if there is no other way to stop illegal operations.

There were two other developments last week outside of the hearings that also have helped solidify a committee majority for Gates, officials said yesterday.

One was the abrupt dismissal in federal court of all charges against former White House aide Oliver L. North the morning the hearings began. North was the central figure in running the Reagan administration's secret arms sales to Iran and the covert supply network for the contra rebels in Nicaragua.



SEN. WILLIAM S. COHEN
... defended Gates against criticism



SEN. SAM NUNN
... got the answers he wanted

The other key factor was the lack of any explosive disclosures from Alan D. Fiers, a former CIA official-turned government witness, who had been immunized from prosecution so that the senators could get his insights.

As chief of the CIA's Central American task force in the mid-1980s, Fiers had been aware of aspects of the Iran-contra operations, and his decision in July to cooperate with independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh's office startled the White House and upset the administration's expectations of an easy confirmation process. Until Fiers testified before the intelligence committee last Thursday, Bush administration strategists were uncertain whether he was "going to finger people and leave them reeling," one source said.

"Democrats believed the press

when they played it up as a hot political issue, but it's turned out not to be that way," one administration official said of the impact of the Iran-contra affair on the Gates nomination. "Outside the Beltway, Iran-contra is gone."

Gates was CIA deputy director under William J. Casey when the scandal broke in November 1986 and is still a "subject" of Walsh's investigation of complicity by CIA officials in a cover-up of the affair.

White House anxiety over Gates hit its peak when Congress returned after Labor Day and the CIA's former chief of covert operations, Clair E. George, was indicted on 10 felony counts, accusing him of lying and obstructing congressional and grand jury inquiries.

At that point, Andrew H. Card Jr., a top aide to White House Chief of Staff John H. Sununu, was assigned to coordinate confirmation

Contrition, Reassurance

strategy for Gates. One of Washington's canniest lobbyists, Tom Korologos, was called in for advice and has turned up at the hearings each day with a battery of White House and CIA legal and legislative specialists. Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady sat in on a number of the skull sessions at the White House as the hearings approached.

The mood within the administration now is one of cautious confidence tempered by fears that Walsh could turn up some "smoking gun" before the full Senate approves the appointment. Members "could still get spooked" if something surfaces that directly contradicts Gates's testimony, one strategist said.

The White House at one time had been worried about Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), who questioned Gates sharply in 1987 when President Ronald Reagan nominated him as CIA director. It was Gates's controversial defense of the Iran-contra operations to Nunn and two Republican senators, William S. Cohen of Maine and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, that eventually forced Gates to withdraw his name.

But last week, when Nunn repeated his 1987 questions, he got the answers he wanted.

Specter and Cohen are no longer on the committee. But Cohen, who also served on the Senate committee four years ago that investigated the Iran-contra affair, showed up at the hearings to provide helpful notes to committee Republicans and defend Gates against criticism from Tom Polgar, a former CIA official and onetime Iran-contra investigator for the Senate.

Republican strategists say they took heart when Sen. Howard M.

Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) took the lead in the Iran-contra questioning. "It showed us that the others didn't want to do it," one strategist said.

Even so, Sen. Warren B. Rudman (R-N.H.), a leading member of the panel that investigated the scandal, has been enlisted by Gates's supporters to serve as "a truth patrol," countering any situations where Metzenbaum was scoring points.

Metzenbaum said yesterday that he had not been able to ask all the questions he wanted, especially of Fiers. "When you're a lone soldier out there, you begin to worry a little about wearing out your welcome," he said.

The Republican strategists said they have not worried much about the critical questioning from Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) because, as one put it, "Bradley doesn't seem to have the ability to go for the jugular." The strategists also said one of Bradley's main lines of questioning, pursuing whether there might have been other unauthorized covert actions begun with Gates's knowledge and approval, will not derail the nomination because, even if true, it is technical and can be adduced only in closed session.

Sen. Frank H. Murkowski (R-Alaska), the committee vice chairman, said he was struck by the expressions of public disappointment over the tame nature of the widely ballyhooped hearings when he went on C-SPAN last week to talk about the proceedings and was peppered with phone callers complaining about the lack of fireworks.

"People who watched the hearings were lining up for a bullfight," Murkowski said. "They'd paid the price of admission and they wanted to see some blood. They were not happy."