



VITALY YURCHENKO
... redefected to Moscow after 93 days

Gates Calls '85 Defector Bona Fide

*CIA Breaks Silence
On Spy Who Went Home*

Reuter

CIA Director Robert M. Gates says his agency has concluded that Vitaly Yurchenko, a high-ranking KGB officer who appeared to defect in 1985 then escaped from his CIA minders here and returned to Moscow, was a bona fide defector.

"My view, and I think the view of virtually everybody in this building, is that Yurchenko was genuine," Gates said in an interview Thursday. "He provided too much specific information, including in the counter-intelligence arena, that has been useful, for him in my judgment to have been a plant."

Some counterintelligence officials suspected Yurchenko may have been part of a KGB plot to compromise the CIA, sow confusion in Western intelligence ranks, divert attention from possible KGB "moles" and learn debriefing techniques.

But Gates said he believes Yur-

chenko redefected because he had "a lot of second thoughts, a lot of personal problems." Gates also acknowledged that CIA bungling probably contributed. "I will say that I think the CIA made some mistakes in the handling of Yurchenko."

Gates worked on the case as deputy director of the CIA's intelligence directorate. His comments broke more than seven years of official CIA silence on Yurchenko.

Yurchenko was a KGB colonel who had become deputy chief of the department in charge of spying in the United States and Canada. On Aug. 1, 1985, he turned himself over to the CIA station at the U.S. Embassy in Rome and was whisked to a "safe house" in Vienna, Va. During 93 days in CIA hands, he gave clues to the

identities of two Americans who were spying for the Soviets: Edward Lee Howard, an operative dismissed by the CIA just before he was due for assignment in Moscow, and Ronald W. Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency.

Howard escaped from surveillance in Sante Fe, N.M., and made his way to Moscow. Pelton is serving a life sentence for espionage.

Three months after he defected, Yurchenko bolted from a CIA escort at a restaurant in Georgetown and, two days later, told a news conference at the Soviet Embassy compound in Washington that he had been drugged and kidnapped by the CIA.

He then boarded a special Aeroflot flight home, where, as far as is known, he remains alive and well. Ronald Kessler, an author who interviewed Yurchenko in Moscow in 1989, reported in his book "Escape From the CIA" that the Russian then claimed he was still a colonel in the KGB but worked in a "research institute."

In the interview, Gates acknowledged "some concern right after he went back, a lot of debate" over whether the CIA had been hoodwinked.

"But I think that what we've seen over the years, as the information he provided has, as I've suggested, proved out, that most of the reservations in the professional intelligence community have dissipated," said the CIA chief who is leaving office next week with the change in administration.

"Given what information he provided that was genuine, and actionable, if he were a plant they've paid a huge price and didn't get very much for it," Gates added. "What he learned about our debriefing techniques and that sort of thing was pretty much on the margin."

After Yurchenko returned to the Soviet Union, the CIA revamped its handling of defectors, "in terms of security but also in terms of their treatment ... after they've been debriefed," Gates said.

Why did the KGB welcome back a turncoat? Gates said the Soviets may have hoped to signal other defectors that they also could come in from the cold. Then too, Yurchenko boosted his chances of survival by bowing out in front of a bank of television cameras.

"What are they going to do, take him back and kill him?" asked Gates. "I mean there's a certain logic in these things."