

Gates Admits Deficiencies In Note on Pope Shooting

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One of the key exhibits in the debate over whether CIA director-designate Robert M. Gates has practiced what he preaches about the need for balanced, unbiased intelligence assessments is a 1985 intelligence report titled, "Agca's Attempt to Kill the Pope: The Case for Soviet Involvement."

The Senate intelligence committee has heard a barrage of contradictory testimony, supplemented yesterday by sworn statements on both sides of the issue, of whether Gates supervised the production of the flawed paper to please the anti-Soviet wishes of his boss, the late CIA director William J. Casey.

Gates yesterday flatly denied charges by former senior CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman that he rewrote the summary and key judgments of the assessment and dropped a "scope note"—defining the purpose and limits of the paper—that had said the assessment was one-sided. The authors of the report backed up Gates's claims.

The nominee acknowledged under questioning, however, that he probably should not have sent a cover note to then-Vice President George Bush in April 1985 calling the assassination study the "most comprehensive" the agency had done.

"I think, in retrospect, the covering note probably should have indicated what in fact was the primary deficiency of the paper and that was that it did not thoroughly examine all the alternatives that were available," Gates said.

Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.) noted that a study in July was critical of the one-sidedness of the April study. This "Covey report" said many of the analysts interviewed thought that "calling the paper 'The Case for Soviet Involvement' and marshalling evidence only for that side 'stacked the deck' in favor of this argument and ran the risk of appearing biased."

Casey's belief that the Soviets

were behind the plot, fed by a book by author Claire Sterling, were well known in the CIA.

The "Case for" study had been ordered by Gates—four years after the assassination attempt—after the CIA's operations directorate, which runs the agency's covert operations and spy networks, received new human-source intelligence about the shooting. That intelligence was described as second- or third-hand.

The Covey report said: "Many participants in the process thought that without the qualifiers, particularly on source reliability, the key judgments give readers the impression that the agency is saying—more definitively than the paper intends or the evidence warrants—that the Soviets were responsible.

"At the very least, the sourcing in the key judgments is inconsistent with the DDI [deputy director for intelligence] guidelines in 1982 to 'focus on the weakest element in the collection chain in terms of reliability' when referring to DO [directorate of operations] sources in DI [directorate of intelligence] publications." Gates had become the DDI in 1982.

The operations directorate com-

plained to Covey that their reservations about the sourcing of the raw intelligence had been serious enough to stop them from distributing the reports, if not for the high interest in the subject.

"In their view, the paper was deliberately skewed to make the case for Soviet complicity look more solid than it is; they thought the authors had been 'manipulated,'" the Covey report said.

DeConcini challenged Gates's handling of the "Case for" study, noting that Gates had known the April study failed to adequately weigh alternate views, but disseminated it anyway. The senator said Gates's lack of action after receiving the Covey report also was "very troubling" to him.

Gates said he had not felt it necessary to inform Bush and the other policymakers about Covey's challenge to the original report.

During yesterday's session, sworn statements from two of the "Case for" report's authors were introduced into the record. Lance W. Haus said that the analysts involved all knew of Casey's inclination to believe the Soviets played a role in Mehmet Ali Agca's assassination attempt, but that Gates told him he was "agnostic" about the issue.

Haus said he, not Gates, wrote the summary and key judgments and had decided to drop the "scope note" because he thought it wishy-washy and redundant, given the title of the study. He said he did not "give a damn what preconceptions" Casey or any other policymaker had, his team produced "our best analysis of the information available." Kay Oliver, another drafter, filed a similar statement.

In contrast, the sworn statement of John Hibbits said his boss, Douglas MacEachin, asked him to take a critical look at the Haus-Oliver paper in May, the month after it was first distributed. "As I read it for the first time, I saw it as an effort by Casey, using Gates, to push the case further than the evidence would take us," Hibbits said.

More important than who was right or wrong on the call in the case, he said, was "how the game was played." The process he reviewed, he said, had not presented policymakers with "a balanced and dispassionate analysis of the event with uncertainties and alternative analysis properly rendered."