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When the CIA prepared a study in 1985 making the case for Soviet involvement in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, Robert M. Gates, then head of the CIA's intelligence directorate, wrote on the cover sheet of one copy: "This is the best balanced and most comprehensive work we have ever done on this subject."

Did Gates misrepresent the findings of that study?

That question has become a central issue in the debate over the politicization of intelligence which has surfaced at his confirmation hearings to become director of the CIA. It arose most forcefully in a closed hearing last week when three analysts who once served under Gates alleged he systematically tailored intelligence assessments to fit the political views of his boss, William J. Casey, and suppressed dissent.

Today, those analysts will testify in a public hearing and detail their allegations.

Based on documents and testimony received by the Senate intelligence committee, Gates stands accused of a pattern of slanting intelligence reports, particularly regarding the Soviet role in Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Iran. The papal shooting, Gates's critics say, is a case study of how that may have happened.

When the assassination attempt occurred in 1981, the intelligence community was already embroiled in a debate about the Soviet role in global terrorism, and CIA studies had largely shown no provable Soviet involvement, much to Casey's consternation, according to reports.

In 1985, Gates, apparently acting at Casey's behest, asked three analysts to look at the papal shooting and argue the strongest case possible for Soviet involvement—ignoring evidence to the contrary—according to classified testimony given last week by Melvin A. Goodman, a senior Soviet analyst and chief of the Soviet-Third World division under Gates, sources said.

Even with those constraints, Goodman testified, the analysts were unable to document Soviet involvement in their report, entitled "Agca's Attempt to Kill the Pope: The Case for Soviet Involvement."

Gates then took the report, changed the key judgments and summary sections to strengthen the case for Soviet complicity, and de-

leted a "scope note" that stated the paper had made no attempt to examine counter-arguments, Goodman told the committee.

Gates added a cover note, suggesting the report was the most balanced and comprehensive work done by the CIA on the subject, Goodman alleged.

Numbered copies of the highly sensitive report were then sent to a handful of White House officials, including President Reagan, Vice President Bush, the secretaries of state and defense and the national security adviser. Bush wrote back to Casey: "Bill, read with interest . . . Nobody else saw it, thanks," according to two sources who have seen the partially redacted document obtained by the committee.

Gates, apparently anticipating the criticisms, cited the study of the papal shooting in testimony two weeks ago. He said that there had been a "mindset" at the CIA that "accepted the idea that a lone gunman was responsible" and that the agency moved with "extreme caution in trying to deal with the problem."

He also volunteered that he had asked for internal critiques of the study.

Goodman has told the committee that one internal critique "concluded that the assessment was poorly sourced and lacked balance and that the 'seventh floor'—meaning Gates—"had stacked the deck and overwhelmed the analytical line of the assessment," according to sources who have reviewed his prepared testimony.

The committee has examined one critique, a five-page memo dated May 20, 1985, that criticizes the original study in 13 places. For example, the critique found that the study overplayed incentives the Soviets might have had to kill the pope. "Soviet disincentives for moving against the pope, however, are relegated . . . mainly to parenthetical comments and a footnote, even though these disincentives could have outweighed the incentives."

Gates has not had an opportunity to respond to the broad criticisms raised by the former analysts, and is expected to do so later this week. Two weeks ago, he did say the critique was an example of his willingness to tolerate dissent.

"The way I would characterize myself is as a person who has strong views, but I am open to different interpretations, and I also recognize and am willing to acknowledge when I've been wrong," he testified.

Papal-Shooting Analysis: Case Study in Slanting?