

Ex-Spy Chief Asserts Mistakes in

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Former CIA spy chief Clair E. George took the witness stand in his own defense yesterday, admitting he made mistakes in past testimony about the Iran-contra affair but none that amounted to a crime.

Testifying at his trial in federal court here, George, 62, said he had serious misgivings about the secret operations that turned into the Reagan administration's worst scandal and faulted himself for not pressing his objections more vigorously.

But he denied lying at congressional and grand jury inquiries into the affair and rejected other charges that he had obstructed the investigations. He said he was poorly prepared at some of his appearances and unfairly treated at the last session, which occurred before a 1991 grand jury directed by special prosecutors for independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh.

"Generally, I knew the high points," George said of the covert arms-for-hostages deals with Iran and the secret military resupply network for the contra rebels in Nicaragua that were run from the Reagan White House in the mid-1980s. "I did not profess to know the details."

A veteran of 33 years with the CIA and director of the agency's covert operations from 1984 to 1987, George did not deny making what may have amounted to false state-

ments about the Iran-contra actions, but in every instance took the position that he had no criminal intent.

Under questioning of his chief defense lawyer, Richard A. Hibey, George was relaxed and at times jovial, occasionally poking fun at himself as he described his rise from junior operations officer in Hong Kong to what is regarded as the No. 3 post at the agency, in charge of its worldwide clandestine service.

Although he concluded his direct testimony with a count-by-count denial of the nine felony charges against him, George only once contradicted allegations by his chief accuser and onetime colleague, Alan D. Fiers, former chief of the CIA's Central American Task Force.

Fiers testified that George had instructed him not to tell the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Oct. 10, 1986, that a rebel resupply operative identified as "Max Gomez" was actually Felix Rodriguez, a retired CIA officer who had ties to the staff of then-Vice President Bush.

Asked by Hibey if he had ever given such instructions to Fiers, George replied: "No, I would never do such a thing."

In almost every other instance, George testified that he could not recall actions attributed to him in the indictment. In one case, George said he had given mistaken testimony that he corrected soon thereafter.

Among the things George said he could not recall was ordering Fiers to remove from George's opening

statement to one committee a description of how congressionally authorized humanitarian aid to the contras evolved into the covert military supply network. The prosecution has presented evidence that a copy of a draft of his prepared testimony for the Oct. 10, 1986, hearing—retrieved from George's office safe—had his fingerprints at the spot where the description was crossed out.

Asked by Hibey if he had ordered the deletion, George replied: "I may have, I may not have. I assume if everybody says I did, I did."

Hibey's direct questioning of George lasted three hours. George's demeanor changed almost immediately under cross-examination by prosecutor Craig A. Gillen, who asked him about his prickly relations with Congress.

George served for a year as head of congressional relations for the late CIA director William J. Casey, a job that George wryly described for Hibey as one of the most dangerous he ever had. Gillen asked George whether he was as controversial as Casey had been.

"I would say that when I left the congressional job, I was disliked by many members of Congress and their staff," George said.

"Were you mistrusted?" Gillen shot back.

"I don't know," George said. "I certainly was not liked."

George was promoted in 1984 to deputy director for operations and found himself still consumed by the

Iran-Contra Testimony Were Not Crimes

dispute between the Reagan White House and Democrats in Congress over military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, which he called "the most controversial issue of the mid-1980s."

"My time was taken up with the politics of Washington much more often than how many men it would take to carry a bazooka," George recalled.

Embittered by the CIA's mining of a Nicaraguan harbor, Congress in the fall of 1984 passed a law prohibiting the CIA or any other U.S. intelligence agency from providing military aid, directly or indirectly, to the contras.

George testified that he knew the White House "was going to try to do something" to keep the contras going. "They were not going to leave fighters out in the field without our support," he said.

Asked how he could be assured that all his people would obey his cables calling for adherence to the congressional ban, George said he had to trust his subordinates.

Several of the prosecution's counts against George concern his repeated denials to congressional committees that he had ever met with Richard V. Secord, the key middleman in both the contra network and the covert arms sales to Iran.

Yesterday, George readily admitted having met Secord on Jan. 20, 1986, in the White House situation room at a meeting called to discuss the arms sales to Iran. He said he knew Secord by reputation as

someone involved with a CIA renegade who sold arms to Libya's Moammar Gadhafi.

Under questioning by Hibey, George said he told Casey about "the inadvisability of [using] Secord in this affair." He said Casey "listened politely," but overruled him.

Asked why he did not tell the Senate intelligence committee he had met Secord, George said: "I have no idea. . . . I was in error. It was a mistake. I had no reason to hide the secrecy of Mr. Secord."

George added that when he was called before the committee, he was advised to come alone, without CIA experts. He said he was told, "if I didn't like these rules, I should bring a private attorney."

"I was frightened," George said. "Being told to come alone and bring a lawyer doesn't send warm feelings up your back."

At the end of the day, District Judge Royce C. Lamberth announced that "in order to protect the integrity of the jury" he was ordering U.S. marshals to escort each of them between their homes and court each day and to lunch.

When the jurors appeared concerned by the announcement, Lamberth assured them it had nothing to do with their safety. He said an individual had approached one juror at lunch yesterday and attempted to get into a conversation about the case. The individual was questioned by the FBI and released after it was determined "he was not trying to tamper" with the jury, Lamberth said.

On Monday, David W. Bullock, one of the jurors, was excused by Lamberth without explanation. Bullock told the Los Angeles Times he asked Lamberth's clerk late last week what the judge thought of the doctrine of "jury nullification"—a term used to justify refusing to convict regardless of the evidence.