

Ex-CIA Official Charges He Was 'Set

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Former CIA spy chief Clair E. George, red-faced and pounding the witness stand, protested yesterday that he had been "set up" for criminal charges by "goddamned hypocrites" in Congress opposed to the Reagan administration's policy in Nicaragua.

Shouting so loud he could be heard in the hallway, George complained at his trial in federal court here that he was being prosecuted for trying to cover up what was common knowledge in Washington in the mid-1980s: White House aide Oliver L. North's involvement in arming the contra rebels in Nicaragua.

"Congress knew it," George declared. "Congress wanted to set somebody up . . . and I walked right into it."

On trial for allegedly lying at congressional and grand jury investigations and obstructing their inquiries into the Iran-contra affair, George spent nearly six hours yesterday under cross-examination, portraying himself to the jurors as a man hounded into the dock.

He was at turns argumentative, angry, petulant, pedantic, beleaguered and bored. He quarreled constantly with his interrogator, prosecutor Craig A. Gillen. A few

jurors laughed at some of George's quips, but most sat stony-faced.

The high point came in early afternoon as Gillen questioned George about his testimony to the House intelligence committee on Oct. 14, 1986, that the CIA had no knowledge of who was behind covert resupply flights to the rebels. One such flight had been shot down over Nicaragua nine days earlier.

All the CIA knew at that point, George said then, "is from the press."

George conceded yesterday this was "a dumb remark" and he had known a "bit more" from CIA cable traffic. But he lost his temper as Gillen pressed on, reminding George that North had tried to sell aircraft from the resupply operation to the CIA in the summer of 1986, an offer that George has said he politely rejected.

Gillen recalled that the administration in 1985 and 1986 repeatedly denied North was involved in arming the rebels. At the time, Congress had banned military aid.

"Everybody was a goddamn hypocrite about this," said George, who served as the CIA's deputy director for operations from 1984 to 1987. He pointed out that Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), then chairman of the House intelligence committee, had agreed with administration officials to flights with "mixed loads" of humanitarian supplies and

limited amounts of arms. "If you're going to sit around and nitpick and nitpick and nitpick every word I've said, I'm not going to go along with it," George said. He accused Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) and former Sen. Thomas D. Eagleton (D-Mo.), both of whom have testified for the prosecution, of being among those who set him up.

But "you never gave them the knowledge you had," Gillen said.

"They never gave me the knowledge they had," George replied. "Not one of them had the guts to ask me the question they knew the answer to: What about Oliver North? They were waiting for me to say the wrong thing. God damn it, that's hypocrisy."

George, 62, has also been accused of obstruction and lying to Congress in October 1986 about the role played by Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA officer who helped run military supply flights out of El Salvador under the alias of "Max Gomez."

Alan D. Fiers, the former CIA Central American Task Force chief who has been George's chief accuser at the trial, testified that George instructed him not to reveal that "Gomez" was actually Rodriguez at an Oct. 10, 1986, hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Fiers also testified that buttons popped up at the CIA around that time, saying "Who is Max Gomez," "I Am Maximo Gomez" and the like.

Up' by Hill 'Hypocrites'

George disclosed yesterday that he got the buttons from the office of Donald Gregg, a longtime friend of Rodriguez who was then Vice President Bush's national security adviser and is now U.S. ambassador to South Korea.

"They were humorous buttons and people took them," George said. "It was a funny item for the White House. That's where I got 'em."

"What was funny about the buttons?" interrupted U.S. District Judge Royce C. Lamberth.

"There was great debate in the press" about who Gomez was, George replied.

At several other points, the judge intervened to order George to answer questions. More than once, George interrupted Gillen in mid-sentence to make points or try to ask questions.

George also accused Gillen of unfairly calling him before a federal grand jury last year without telling him he was "a subject" of the investigation. George kept pressing the point, finally asking the judge if he had "a right to be told."

"You did not," the judge told him curtly.

Throughout the day, George, a one-time chief of congressional relations for the CIA, made clear his view that Congress was entitled to know only what the CIA was willing to tell them, not what they wanted to know.

For example, at the Oct. 14, 1986, hearing, George was asked about "the private [resupply] operation," but answered only in the context of the plane that was shot down Oct. 5.

"I went down to tell them [members of Congress] that the CIA was not involved in this particular flight," George said yesterday. "If they thought I was going to come down and tell them everything I suspected or heard by rumor, they were wrong."

As the CIA's deputy director for operations, George said all he knew was "hearsay" from around the world. He contended he had every right not to respond to questions from Congress when the information he had was just "hearsay" and not firsthand knowledge.

George also defended 1986 testimony in which he said he did not "know" Richard V. Secord, a middleman in the Iran-contra affair, even though George had met Secord in the White House Situation Room in January 1986 at a meeting called to discuss covert arms sales to Iran.

"I still don't know the man," George said of Secord.

"But you met him," Gillen pointed out.

"There's a big difference," George replied. "I have met you many times, Mr. Gillen. I don't know you."

Staff writer Walter Pincus contributed to this report.