

The See-No-Evil CIA Nominee

Should the Iran-Contra Coverup Disqualify Robert Gates?

Post 6/23/91

By Tom Polgar

ROBERT M. GATES, President Bush's nominee to be director of central intelligence, is intelligent, well-educated, articulate and hard-working—like virtually all CIA “supergrades” and senior career officials elsewhere in the federal bureaucracy.

However, he is the wrong choice to head the CIA, just as he was the wrong man for the job in 1987 when President Reagan nominated him to succeed the ailing William J. Casey.

My objections to Gates center on his performance during the Iran-contra affair, which tarnished Reagan's presidency more than any other single episode of his two administrations. Throughout it, Gates acted as if he was in a complete fog or was interested primarily in

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keeping the truth from being aired in public or, indeed, from reaching Congress.

His performance during what was a moral and operational crisis for the agency is all the more remarkable because of Gates's extensive managerial experience at the agency: A career officer, Gates has served as special assistant, deputy director for intelligence and later deputy director to Casey.

Through more than 20 years' service, Gates earned a reputation as an able staff officer, outstanding briefer (no small task), reliable subordinate and a non-competing deputy. These are qualities much sought after in Washington, particularly during periods when management is valued more highly than leadership.

If confirmed, Gates, who is now Bush's deputy national security adviser, would bring to the CIA a working relationship with the top players to a degree that

See GATES, B4, Col. 1



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perhaps no previous director of central intelligence has had.

Despite his qualities, Gates's reputation within the CIA is controversial. Although clearly in a position where he should have noticed, Gates either kept himself unaware of or failed to take action concerning the distortions of intelligence and the violations of law and of CIA regulations in connection with Iran and Central America. His complicity in the fall of 1986 in an attempted cover-up is a matter of record. In November 1986, with Casey absent from Washington, Gates as acting director was responsible for a blatant attempt to withhold from Congress information on the CIA's role in support of Lt. Col. Oliver North's covert operations—specifically, the CIA's role in the arms supply to Iran prior to the presidential finding of November 1985, which stated that "certain foreign material and munitions may be provided to the government of Iran which is taking steps to facilitate the release of the American hostages."

In July 1986, Adm. John M. Poindexter, then Reagan's national security adviser, sent an internal White House message to North: "I did tell Gates that I thought the private effort should be phased out. Please talk to Casey about this . . ." This was a reference to the contra-support operation, which was financed from profits gained by the adminis-

tration's covert sale of weapons to Iran in the misguided effort to free U.S. hostages who had been seized in Beirut.

Two obvious questions arise from Poindexter's memo to North:

■ Would Poindexter have talked to Gates unless he was sure that Gates was involved in the operation?

■ Even assuming Gates did not know about the "private effort" until then, should he not have undertaken inquiries to establish what Poindexter was talking about?

The record shows that details of the private effort were well known at several levels of the CIA. Indeed, anyone who talks about Gates having been left "out of the loop" does not understand the relationship that existed between Casey and Gates or the internal mechanics of the CIA, where the DDCI's authority is practically unlimited, assuming he knows how to exercise it. Casey could not have afforded to let Gates deal directly with the National Security Council staff and with internal CIA components had he been concerned that through these contacts Gates might find out something that Casey wanted to keep from him.

Chapter 18 of the congressional committees' final report on Iran-contra reflects that in early October 1986 Gates was advised of allegations that proceeds from the Iran arms sales were being diverted to the contras. On Oct. 9, Casey and Gates had lunch with North, during which fund-raising for the contras was discussed. North commented on Swiss accounts and contras but, according to Gates, he

could not make heads or tails of what North was talking about. What did the nation's second-highest intelligence officer then do to find out what may be involved? If you believe Gates, he did nothing.

On Oct. 14, 1986, Charles Allen, a senior CIA analyst, submitted a lengthy memorandum on the Iran initiative, including an allegation that some of the Iran profits had been redistributed to other projects—clearly in violation of federal law. Casey and Gates met with Poindexter the next day to discuss the Allen memorandum. After meeting with Poindexter, Casey and Gates met with Allen and directed him to seek further information.

Allen, who was national intelligence officer for counter-terrorism, was left to spearhead the probe, even though he had numerous other pressing responsibilities. Gates, Casey's alter ego, remained passive. He did not engage himself directly in making inquiries within the agency about the extent and ramifications of the problem.

It would not have been implausible at this moment for a careful, experienced bureaucrat such as Gates to call in the key players to find out what was known inside the agency about this affair. Instead, he did no such thing. But had he done so, he could not have pleaded later that he knew nothing about it.

Gates described his passivity in testimony to the Tower Commission on Dec. 4, 1986, when he related that he had previously told the Senate Intelligence Committee that "Agency people from the director on down actively shunned information. We didn't want to know how the contras were being funded. We actively discouraged people from telling us things. We did not pursue lines of questioning."

Gates also told the Tower panel that when he heard Charles Allen's suspicions that a diversion of funds had taken place, Gates's first reaction was to tell Allen, "I didn't want to hear any more about it."

Another example of Gates' conduct dates from earlier that month. On Oct. 5, 1986, a U.S. registered aircraft was shot down over Nicaragua and a surviving crew member tied the operation to activities previously connected with the agency. Would that not be the moment for the deputy director to talk to the head of CIA's Central American Task Force about the possible ramifications of the case for the CIA and the U.S. government's policies? Gates did not do so.

On Nov. 20, 1986, a meeting was held in Poindexter's office to consider Casey's scheduled testimony before the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. Gates coordinated the CIA contribution and agreed to a version which was so far from the known facts that Abraham Sofaer, the State Department's legal adviser, said he would leave the government if Casey's testimony was given in the proposed form—to which Assistant Attorney General Charles J. Cooper replied, "We may all have to."

In his public testimony, North admitted that the testimony prepared for Casey at the Nov. 20 meeting was false. In the event, the disputed testimony was not given. Interestingly, the CIA's Operations Directorate submitted a chronological account, in preparation for the testimony that was remarkable for its accuracy. This correct version of who knew what and when was altered, weakened and distorted in two revisions and during the Nov. 20 meeting—to all of which Gates was a party.

After Casey's incapacitation, Gates became acting director and performed smoothly. Even so, in February 1987, he withdrew his nomination in the face of strong opposition from members of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Now, four years later, what kind of signal does his renomination send to the troops in the intelligence community? Live long enough and your sins will be forgotten? Serve faithfully the boss of the moment, never mind integrity?

If so, those are the wrong messages. Temptations to engage in illegal or immoral acts are inherent in the shadowy business of secret operations. Lack of integrity at the top will be reflected down the chain of command. A secret intelligence agency in a democratic state must have the will and the ability to police itself and to be the conscience, if necessary, of the administration. If the CIA becomes a cheerleader for policy, both intelligence and policy will suffer.

The end of the Cold War does not signal the end of the need for intelligence-gathering. There will always be requirements for secret intelligence; but targets, methods and sources may well differ from those of the past. Even more than the military, the intelligence community, led by the CIA, will have to rethink its requirements, resources and operating methods.

It is unfortunate that the president nominated for director an official closely associated with the errors and misjudgments of the past, who advanced in his career by sticking close to his desk and who has had very limited personal experience in foreign parts. Getting along with Congress is very important but should not be viewed as the principal task of a CIA director.