

# Robert Gates: A Look at the Record

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**B**Y nominating Robert Gates to be director of Central Intelligence, President Bush is betting that the Iran-contra scandal has become irrelevant history. But since February 1987 — the previous time Mr. Gates was nominated to be C.I.A. director — thousands of pages of documents and testimony in the Iran-contra affair have been declassified. It is a record Congress cannot ignore.

The documents suggest that, at worst, Mr. Gates participated in a cover-up. At best, he was a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil bureaucrat with information on his desk about the arms-for-hostages deals, about the illicit contra-resupply efforts and the diversion of funds between the two — and simply looked away.

While head of the C.I.A.'s analysis directorate, Mr. Gates attended a Dec. 5, 1985, meeting in the office of then-deputy C.I.A. director, John McMahon. According to meeting notes, those present were informed that an American hostage, Benjamin Weir, had been "released for one plane load" but that the U.S. "got nothing for second load." They also learned

that National Security Council staffer Oliver North was "arranging up to five plane loads," and that the "President signed the finding" — a retroactive authorization for the C.I.A.'s role in arranging the "second load," a November shipment of Hawk missiles to Iran.

Testifying before Congress a year later, Mr. Gates defended the arms-for-hostages initiative, calling it "an exchange of bona fides" that "had merit." Senator William Cohen asked, "How can you say that this program makes sense" and also say "you don't know the details of the operation?"

Mr. Gates also knew about Oliver North's secret contra resupply operation. In May 1986, Mr. North's use of a Danish freighter to ship arms to the contras was on the written agenda of a meeting between C.I.A. director William Casey, Mr. Gates and the national security adviser, John Poindexter. "I did tell Gates that I thought the private effort should be phased out," Mr. Poindexter wrote in a computer message to Mr. North two months later.

Finally, Mr. Gates knew about the diversion. On Oct. 1, 1986, a C.I.A. analyst, Charles Allen, told Mr. Gates that funds had been diverted from the Iran arms deals to the contras. "I was startled by what he told me," Mr. Gates testified later. In an Oct. 7 meeting, between Mr. Casey, Mr. Gates and Mr. Allen, it was decided Mr. Allen would to put the information in a memorandum.

Two days later, Mr. Gates, Mr. North and Mr. Casey had lunch at

C.I.A. headquarters — the day Eugene Hasenfus had told a press conference in Managua he believed he was working for the C.I.A. when his plane, carrying weapons for the contras, was shot down over Nicaragua. Mr. Gates claimed later that all he asked Mr. North about was the C.I.A.'s role in Mr. Hasenfus's flight, and when Mr. North assured him that the C.I.A. was "completely clean," Mr. Gates inquired no further. After lunch, Mr. Gates wrote a short memo to the file, repeating the "clean" quote and almost nothing else.

## How much did he know about Iran-contra?

Why didn't Mr. Gates ask Oliver North about the diversion he had found so startling? Mr. Gates has testified that "I assumed that he was involved in efforts involving private benefactors to get money for the contras, and this was one of those areas where we did not pursue obvious lines of questioning because we didn't want to get involved in knowing about the sources of funding."

But Oliver North's notebooks suggest a different lunch conversation. A Oct. 13 entry lists Mr. Casey and Mr. Gates above the notes "vulnerabilities if RVs [Richard V. Secord] be-

comes public/SAT [Southern Air Transport] public." Richard V. Secord and Southern Air were key players in the Hasenfus affair. Investigations of which threatened to uncover the arms-for-hostage deals.

Then, on Oct. 14, Charles Allen produced his memo. Curiously, the startling diversion issue was buried in one sentence on page six of a discussion of fears that the Iran arms deal would be exposed by disgruntled mid-levels.

Ultimately, leaks from Iran broke the scandal in early November 1986. William Casey was called to Capitol Hill. Robert Gates, who by now had succeeded John McMahon as deputy director, was in charge of coordinating Mr. Casey's testimony. After reading "two or three drafts" he recommended no changes — even though the testimony failed to mention the diversion and maintained that the C.I.A. did not know the November 1985 shipment to Iran included Hawk missiles.

Mr. Casey, who is now deceased, was never questioned about the effort to cover up the C.I.A.'s still largely unknown role in the Iran-contra operation. Last year, the Bush Administration squashed the prosecution of the former C.I.A. station chief in Costa Rica, charged with perjury, on the grounds of protecting secrets. The independent counsel, Lawrence Walsh, protested that this action "created an unacceptable enclave that is free from the rule of law."

Robert Gates's confirmation hearings could shed light on that "enclave." Or Congress can simply look away. □