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Vowing fidelity to the Constitution, Webster becomes director of CIA

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WASHINGTON — William H. Webster, who as head of the FBI worked to restore that agency's tarnished reputation, yesterday was sworn in as the 14th director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Directed by President Reagan to maintain the CIA's high standards, Webster takes over at a time when the agency is under scrutiny by Congress for its purported role in providing possibly illegal aid to Nicaraguan contras.

Webster, in brief remarks after being sworn in by Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell, pledged to carry out the CIA's mission abroad "with fidelity to the Constitution and to the laws of our beloved country."

His friends have long praised Webster for his devotion to the rule of law and have said that his greatest contribution as director of the FBI was his constant insistence that it adhere to strict legal procedures in investigations and covert operations.

Reagan presided over the open-air swearing-in ceremony at CIA head-

quarters in Langley, Va., about eight miles from the White House.

In his new post, Webster succeeds William J. Casey, a Reagan confidant who died May 5, four months after surgery for brain cancer.

Just as he praised Webster for raising the FBI's standards, Reagan also praised Casey — a prime player in the Office of Strategic Services in World War II — as a person "whose determination and personal courage in the clandestine effort against Adolf Hitler meant the difference between victory and defeat."

In his remarks, Reagan also defended the CIA against critics who say it has overstepped its bounds in carrying on questionable covert operations in distant places.

"The United States cannot survive in the modern world without a vigorous intelligence agency capable of acting swiftly in secret," Reagan said. "So long as I am president, I will never consent to see our intelligence capability undermined."

The CIA, the President told several hundred CIA employees who attended the swearing-in, "is by its very nature a likely subject of controversy. Yet it is also irreplaceable."

Webster, as CIA director, will not enjoy cabinet rank, as did Casey, a close friend of Reagan's who served as manager of his 1980 presidential campaign.

"The cabinet status was accorded Director Casey when he came in because he had a special relationship with the President," said White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater. "And that will revert now back to the status it was before then."

Webster, 63, is noted chiefly for his experience in law enforcement and the judiciary, although he has had some exposure to counterintelligence operations as the FBI chief.

A former United States attorney in St. Louis, Mo., his home town, and a federal appeals court judge for the Eighth Circuit, Webster was appointed to head the FBI in 1978.

His tenure there, particularly in the early years, was marked by efforts to undo the damage wrought by J. Edgar Hoover, whose autocratic administrative style and zealous anti-communism led the bureau into recurrent abuses of citizens' civil

liberties.

More recently, Webster increased the bureau's manpower and made better use of high-technology equipment in crime detection. He also increased emphasis on investigations of white-collar and drug-related crimes.

Webster's departure from the FBI has left a vacuum that the White House appears to be having trouble filling.

Webster was first nominated for the CIA job two months ago. The White House has been searching since then for a successor at the FBI. At least two people — former Pennsylvania Gov. Dick Thornburgh and Supreme Court Justice Byron White — have turned down the job.

Yesterday at Webster's swearing-in ceremony, Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d, who is spearheading the search for a new FBI director, was asked by reporters about the timetable for a choice.

"Soon," he replied. "There's a good long list. We're whittling it down. Nobody's been offered it yet."

The Associated Press contributed to this article.