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Senate Overwhelmingly Confirms Webster as New CIA Director

By Tom Kenworthy
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The Senate yesterday overwhelmingly confirmed the nomination of FBI Director William H. Webster as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Webster, 63, a respected former federal judge and prosecutor who restored public confidence in the Federal Bureau of Investigation during his nine years as its director, will take over the nation's intelligence operations at a time when the agency's role in the Iran-contra scandal is under intense scrutiny on Capitol Hill.

Webster assumes command of the CIA from acting director Robert M. Gates, who has run the agency's operations since the resignation of the late William J. Casey. Gates, President Reagan's first

nominee to succeed Casey, withdrew his name from consideration amid questions about the agency's involvement in the Iran-Contra affair.

The Senate approved the Webster nomination 94 to 1, with Sen. Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) dissenting because of what he said were lingering questions about FBI conduct during a series of criminal investigations in his home state.

Webster's confirmation came after prolonged hearings by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which were extended to probe the FBI's dealings with fired National Security Council aide Oliver L. North.

The hearings disclosed that Webster was unaware of FBI memoranda indicating that Marine Lt. Col. North might be a target of a criminal probe because of his role in providing arms to the Nicaraguan

rebels and other documents detailing his attempts to interfere in agency investigations of the Iran-Contra affair.

"The evidence showed that the FBI and Judge Webster himself did not respond to the danger signals of improper and even illegal activities by Col. North," said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), a member of the intelligence panel.

Nonetheless, Specter said that "on the whole Judge Webster ought to be confirmed because he has an outstanding record as a judge, practicing attorney and director of the FBI."

Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) said that an "exhaustive review" of Webster's career showed that he is "fully qualified in all respects to provide the leadership needed by the intelligence community at this critical time."

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Yesterday's brief debate on Webster's nomination underlined the Senate's renewed sensitivity to the CIA's relations with Congress, which have once again been strained by the failure of the Reagan administration to inform the intelligence committees promptly about covert operations involving Iran.

Noting the sometimes conflicting demands on the CIA to maintain secrecy yet operate "within the law," Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Maine), vice chairman of the intelligence panel, cautioned his colleagues that secrecy can ultimately bring about "the political paralysis which we are seeing a certain amount of now."

But both Cohen and Boren declared that Webster is well-suited to repair the relationship between the CIA and Congress.

"I am particularly impressed with the commitment of Judge Webster to the [congressional] oversight process," Boren said.

In an attempt to "provide a degree of independence" to the leadership of the CIA, Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) introduced legislation yesterday that would establish fixed seven-year terms for the director and deputy director.

Byrd said that revelations of CIA involvement in the arms-for-hostages deal and evidence that Casey "was far more deeply involved than originally thought in helping the contras get military supplies" were reasons why Congress should move to insulate the agency's top officers from "political pressure."

Fixed appointments, he argued, would lessen the chance of the CIA engaging "in questionable or illegal activities."



WILLIAM H. WEBSTER
... praised by both sides in 94-1 vote

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