

Webster nomination draws praise

FBI director appears to be untouched by the Iran-contra affair, but his appointment to head CIA will get close Senate scrutiny

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The nomination of Federal Bureau of Investigation Director William Webster to head the Central Intelligence Agency helps solve a problem for the Reagan administration by showing that the President is intent on moving beyond the Iran-contra affair.

In accepting President Reagan's offer Tuesday evening, Mr. Webster seems to have removed the taint of the Iran-contra affair from the task of finding a replacement for former CIA director William Casey.

In the Senate the reaction was positive and supportive of the Webster nomination, with both Democrats and Republicans praising the President's choice.

In a joint statement, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D) of Oklahoma and Vice-Chairman William S. Cohen (R) of Maine said Webster was "widely respected both for his high standard of personal integrity as well as his professional ability."

Nonetheless, they stressed that the nomination would be subjected to a "careful and thorough public hearing."

Senator Dave Durenberger (R) of Minnesota, who served as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee during the time Mr. Casey was director of central intelligence, says Webster is an "outstanding" selection by the President.

"The main thing we need now is quiet competence and trust, and we have got all of that in Bill Webster," Senator Durenberger says.

He notes that one of the prime assets Webster would take to the CIA was his reputation as a man of integrity. Durenberger says Webster's honesty will help improve the

intelligence oversight process in Congress and strengthen the strained relationship between Congress and the CIA.

"The Senate and House are going to believe [Webster] because he is trustworthy and forthcoming. He has experience with the oversight process that is almost as old as the oversight process," Durenberger says.

Webster is expected to be ques-



tioned closely in his Senate confirmation hearings about his decision, at the urging of Attorney General Edwin Meese III, temporarily to halt an FBI investigation last October of a Florida air transport firm suspected of illegally supplying arms and ammunition to the Nicaraguan contra rebels.

He also may be questioned about his contacts with Mr. Meese in late November, when a group of high-ranking Justice Department officials was discovering the initial hints of what has since become the Iran-contra affair.

But such inquiries are not expected to give rise to serious concerns about Webster's actions in the Iran-contra affair. There has been no indication that he was directly

involved in secret White House efforts to ship arms to Iran and funnel the profits to the contras. And there is no indication that he participated in an attempt to cover up details of the White House's covert operations.

Iran-contra special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh is reported to be investigating among other things whether the attorney general and other Justice Department officials acted properly in the initial stages of the Iran-contra investigation, and whether they sought at the urging of White House officials to derail or postpone FBI and other investigations in 1986 that might have led to discovery of the Iran-contra covert operations.

Webster's reputation for honesty and integrity has remained unscathed throughout the unfolding Iran-contra situation, and he is expected to win confirmation by the Senate. During his nine-year tenure at the FBI he has boosted morale and restored credibility to an institution that was badly battered in the 1970s from revelations of illegal domestic spying, unauthorized wiretaps, and break-ins.

Webster, a former federal district court judge and later a judge on the US Court of Appeals for the 8th circuit, has led the FBI into the modern age of crime fighting with increased use of electronic surveillance and the expanded use of computers to help locate criminal suspects and analyze crime trends.

During his tenure the bureau deemphasized past priorities such as bank robbery investigations and worked instead to build significant cases against organized crime groups, drug-trafficking cartels, and spies. The FBI's counterintelligence and counterterrorism budgets have increased substantially in recent

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years. Spy cases have proliferated, but terrorist incidents within the US have sharply declined recently.

President Reagan's first choice to fill the top US intelligence post was Casey's deputy director, Robert Gates. Mr. Gates, a career intelligence officer and Casey protégé at the CIA, decided to withdraw from consideration after it became apparent that a long Senate fight was in store.

Several senators had raised questions about Gates's possible involvement in the Iran-contra affair and his alleged acquiescence in shading intelligence reports to support administration policy. Senators expressed concern that if Gates were quickly

confirmed, a cloud of suspicion would hover over the CIA during the Iran-contra investigations.

Though Webster has no significant foreign experience, he has had regular contact with the CIA through FBI counter-terrorist and espionage investigations.



Webster has reputation for integrity and skill

Under a strict division laid down by Congress, the FBI is responsible for criminal probes, intelligence gathering, and counterintelligence within the United States, while the CIA is responsible for intelligence gathering and covert operations overseas. The FBI may conduct criminal investigations overseas, as in cases of airline hijackings. The CIA is forbidden from engaging in intelligence operations in the US, with the exception that it may conduct domestic surveillance if there is a foreign intelligence connection.