

GATES FACING GRILLING ON IRAN DEALS

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STAT

~~Robert Gates~~, nominated by President Reagan to be CIA director, promised lawmakers last year full disclosure of covert operations at a time when the White House was well into its efforts to conceal the sale of U.S. arms to Iran.

Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has said Gates will be questioned about the secret policy and the possible diversion of profits to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels when he faces a confirmation hearing this week to become the youngest CIA director in history.

The hearing, which starts Tuesday, is expected to last a day and most of it will be public. Boren said the committee will not take a quick vote on the confirmation, but will wait a full 14 days before considering the nomination.

It is unclear exactly when Gates learned about the Iran deal, but an intelligence source told United Press International that Gates was a confident of CIA Director William Casey, who knew about efforts to supply arms to Iran from the beginning.

On Jan. 17, 1986, President Reagan signed a secret national security "finding" approving the deal and ordering that it be kept secret from Congress to protect the lives of American hostages in Lebanon. Casey knew about the secret order and may even have been more deeply involved in the Iran policy than previously disclosed, according to reports.

Less than three months later, on April 10, 1986, Gates appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee for confirmation as the CIA's No. 2 official and he assured lawmakers the agency understood it must tell Congress what it is doing.

"The concept and principles of congressional oversight of intelligence are fully accepted within the American intelligence community," Gates told the panel months after the administration had put the wheels in motion to sell arms to Tehran and circumvent Congress.

"Nearly two-thirds of those now serving in (the) CIA began their careers after 1976 when oversight as we know it began," he said. "They know no other way of doing business than within the framework of congressional oversight."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., former vice chairman of the committee, said he did not think Gates intentionally misled the committee because "I don't know how much he knew. But he knows it's going to be the major part of his confirmation hearing."

But committee member Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., said, "I find it difficult to believe that the CIA did not know about early efforts to trade arms to Iran and raise money for the Contras."

Casey's role in the deal remains controversial but he was involved in discussions about arms sales to Iran from the beginning and became aware that profits from the deal may have been diverted to the Contras in October, more than a month before it was made public, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee report.

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The administration has denied the arms sale was strictly a swap for American captives held in Lebanon by pro-Iran extremists although the Senate Intelligence Committee report said it quickly turned into an arms-for-hostage deal.

A source who worked with Gates at the CIA, said, "I'm sure he would testify honestly. He was not a person who was in the chain of command in this thing early on. I think he would tell them what he knew and when he knew it."

A career intelligence officer who has never worked as a spy, Gates was nominated Feb. 2 by Reagan to replace Casey, a pivotal figure in the Iran-Contra scandal who resigned six weeks after his Dec. 18 brain surgery to remove a cancerous tumor.

Gates, who until April 1986 served as the CIA's deputy director of intelligence, never mentioned Iran when he testified at a public session of the committee that confirmed him as the CIA's No. 2 official.

He said then, "Oversight has created an environment that fosters adherence to the rules at all levels and discourages corner-cutting or abuses."

The Senate Intelligence Committee report on the Iran-Contra affair noted that as early as January 1986, Gates was aware that intelligence information on Iraq was being turned over to Iran. In March 1986, Gates participated in a meeting about what intelligence materials should be turned over to the Iranians.

The committee's report, released Jan. 29, also said Gates learned on Oct. 1, 1986, of the possibility that money from the Iran arms sales had been funneled to the Contras and raised questions about how he handled that information.

But Gates told the Senate committee that in October, he knew only "bits and pieces of information and analytical judgments by one intelligence officer, and that was not considered very much to go on."

Gates's nomination has been praised by lawmakers on Capitol Hill where two Watergate-style congressional committees are investigating the secret sale of U.S. arms to Iran and the alleged diversion of profits to the Nicaraguan rebels. A special prosecutor also is investigating the affair.

The Tower Commission, a presidential panel, is expected to issue a report Feb. 26 on how the National Security Council executed the policies that led to the scandal.