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COHEN EXCUSES GATES AS 'NEW KID ON THE BLOCK'
BY DANA WALKER

WASHINGTON (UPI) Sen. William Cohen, R-Maine, was speaking as one P
ambitious young man to another.<

Cohen offered acting CIA Director Robert Gates, nominated to head the agency, an avenue Tuesday for handling his Senate confirmation hearings that most would agree rivaled any game plan entertained by Lt. Col. Oliver North:< Plead ignorance in the Iran arms-Contra aid scandal.<

"You are, No. 1, an ambitious young man, Type A personality I assume, climbing a ladder of professional success," the 47-year-old Cohen, one of the younger senators, told the 43-year-old Gates, who will become the youngest CIA director if confirmed after testifying to the Senate Intelligence Committee.<

"That's not an affliction that's unknown to members of the Senate, and indeed, members of this committee," Cohen said. "As a matter of fact, once you were sworn in, you essentially became the new kid on the block.<

"Basically, you're not prepared to lay your career on the line for a program that you didn't have much involvement with. Isn't that essentially what's involved here?"<

Cohen, the committee vice chairman, was offering Gates a way out of having to defend administration policy as Democrats questioned why the CIA officer did not speak up sooner or protest louder about covert U.S. arms sales to Iran and the possible diversion of sale profits to Nicaraguan Contra rebels.<

Gates had been on the defensive about the doomed policy _ in place for months before he became deputy director to William Casey last year _ for much of the daylong confirmation hearing.<

His voice raised at one point, Gates responded to one question by saying, "At each stage, it seems to me that my instinct was not to sit on it, not to try and make it go away." But he maintained that his actions and those of Casey were defensible, as was the premise of the arms sale policy.<

Cohen disagreed, advising Gates it was futile to continue defending the affair and also unnecessary because Gates need not bear blame. Most of that burden has been laid on North, the fired National Security Council deputy who has refused to testify, citing his Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination.<

"I think it's important to add the perspective," Gates persisted, "that while this was a risky operation, there was no reason to quarrel with it."<

"Wait. Stop. Of course there were reasons to quarrel with it," countered Cohen, his hand raised. "It was not your recommendation and you didn't want to throw your career down the drain. I don't fault you for that.<

"I'm just trying to put your candidacy and nomination in the kind of perspective so you don't get caught in the crossfire that you're finding yourself in right now."<