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CIA choice has tough tasks ahead

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A The Senate could confirm Robert Gates today as youngest-ever CIA director.

But, at 43, the 21-year CIA veteran faces two larger tests:

■ First, defending the CIA's role in the Iran-contra scandal at confirmation hearings — today on CNN at 10 a.m. EST.

■ And, over the next two years, establishing his independence from the Reagan administration so he can retain the post under a new president.

"I flatly predict — I have no question in my mind — he should be confirmed," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

Gates has a reputation for hard work, a flair for analysis and a scholar's savvy about the Soviet Union. He joined the CIA in 1966, remaining in the analysis unit — never in clandestine activities. He became deputy director in April.

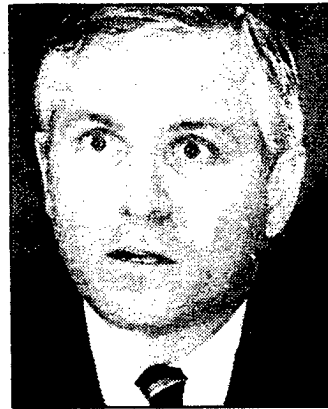
But the Senate Intelligence Committee hearings will raise sticky questions about Gates' role in the Iran affair.

"I expect some fairly tough questions on ... what he knew and when he knew it," says Jim Dykstra, a committee staffer.

If Gates knew anything, the questions are likely to turn to why he didn't tell Congress.

While committee Chairman Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., says the hearing won't become a full-blown arms scandal probe, Gates is certain to be asked about reports of a cover-up.

News reports claim a cover-up story was drafted for ex-CIA director William Casey — now recovering from brain surgery — to be presented before the Senate, saying the CIA believed missile shipments to Iran were



UPI
GATES: Married father of two called a very private person

"oil drilling equipment."

Some senators may try to extract a pledge that Gates will tell the panel of all future secret CIA operations or resign.

Ex-CIA Deputy Director Bobby Inman says Gates has a strong chance of staying on after Reagan: "His reputation (as) a non-partisan, competent professional is already there."

Says ex-CIA Director Stansfield Turner: "It's a good move to start with a new generation."

Roy Godson, a Georgetown University government professor, says Gates will have to fend off congressional efforts at new restrictions on the CIA while improving counter-intelligence in the wake of embarrassing big spy cases.

"It would be hard enough to do either one of those," Godson said. "And he's got to do both."

Contributing: William Ringle