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FILE ONLY

WHITE HOUSE DECISION NEARS ON WHETHER TO WITHDRAW GATES CIA NOMINATION

BY JOAN MOWER

WASHINGTON

Robert M. Gates met with new White House chief of staff Howard H. Baker Jr. today after a presidential spokesman said the question of withdrawing his nomination to head the CIA "is a matter for Mr. Gates to decide." Spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Gates requested the meeting with Baker, in Baker's first day as chief of staff, at midmorning.

They met for about 30 minutes, a source who declined to be identified said.

"The president stands behind his nomination of Mr. Gates," Fitzwater said.

He added, however, "I have no knowledge of his (Gates') position. It's a matter for Mr. Gates to decide." The Washington Post, citing administration and congressional sources it did not name, said Gates had decided "without much prodding" to withdraw his name.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said, "He hasn't withdrawn as nominee, and as far as we know he doesn't have any plans to do so." The Senate Intelligence Committee, which is reviewing the nomination, had not been informed of such a decision by Gates, David Holliday, a spokesman for committee Chairman David Boren, said today.

Holliday said as recently as Friday Gates was still defending his nomination, sending to the panel documents which he said would mitigate concerns about his role in a 1985 plan for a joint U.S.-Egyptian invasion of Libya.

While Holliday said committee members had not yet had time to read the material, it was presented as something that would show Gates had argued against the invasion idea in discussions with then-CIA director William Casey.

President Reagan was aware of the potential problem Gates faced in gaining confirmation if a quick vote was sought, Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., said Sunday on NBC-TV's "Meet the Press." At the same time, Dole said he didn't think Gates "should be sort of held out there for five or six months until we finish all the committee hearings" into the Iran-Contra affair.

Gates, 43, was picked to head the CIA after William J. Casey resigned in December because of brain cancer.

Reagan's nominee, who held key CIA posts during the period that weapons were shipped secretly to Iran and money apparently was diverted to Contra rebels in Nicaragua, was quizzed about his involvement by members of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

At least one senator, Arlen Specter, R-Pa., said he was troubled by information he had received about Gates' actions.

Dole said Sunday he was canvassing senators on the Gates nomination, and once he finished he was expected to relay the results to the White House.

"I would guess that there would be some judgment made on this early this week," Dole said.

If Gates' nomination is sent to the Senate floor, "it could be a long process," Dole said, adding he indicated to Reagan last Thursday the nomination "could be in some difficulty" if senators pressed for a quick vote.

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Boren, D-Okla., has said he favors an early vote because the CIA should not be operating with a temporary chief.

Sources told the Post the White House needed a CIA nominee with no role in the Iran-Contra arms affair.

"It is crucial to have a new CIA director who can credibly investigate and clean up any remains of Iran-Contra, not a director who himself is the subject of the investigation," the Post quoted a senior administration official as saying.

Brent Scowcroft, a member of the Tower commission which investigated the Iran-Contra affair, said the panel found no evidence Gates knew about the diversion of profits to the Nicaraguan Contras.

The Tower panel, a three-member board headed by former Sen. John Tower, R-Texas, released a 300-page report last week that was sharply critical of the Reagan administration's handling of the Iran-Contra case.

Scowcroft, a former national security adviser, also said the discussion of whether intelligence reports on Iran in 1985 had been doctored by the CIA to back up the objective of selling weapons to Tehran should not disqualify Gates' nomination.

"We merely call attention to that (slanting intelligence) as something that has to be guarded against," Scowcroft said.

Until February 1986, Gates was head of the CIA's analytical division, which performs research and produces intelligence reports.

Reagan formally approved selling weapons to Iran in a written "finding" in January 1986, a month before Gates became Casey's deputy.

The president gave verbal approval for the 1985 shipments through Israel, although there has been a dispute over whether the presidential permission was granted before or after the shipments were made.

Scowcroft, who has been mentioned as a possible CIA chief should Gates' nomination be withdrawn, said no one has talked to him about the job and it would be "purely hypothetical" to discuss it. Scowcroft appeared on the same program as Dole.