

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
10 April 1987

CIA probe promised by Webster

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WASHINGTON — FBI Director William H. Webster, on his way to virtually certain Senate confirmation as head of the CIA, pledged yesterday to investigate whether CIA Deputy Director Robert M. Gates helped deceive Congress about the Iran-contra affair.

Webster reluctantly made the promise to the Senate Intelligence Committee at the insistence of Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.), who asserted that Gates might have helped former CIA Director William J. Casey conceal vital facts from the committee in Casey's testimony in November about the Iran-contra scandal.

Specter said Casey had failed to disclose his knowledge that proceeds from U.S. arms sales to Iran might have been diverted to the Nicaraguan rebels, that the United States had dealt with an Iranian arms dealer who had flunked two lie detector tests, that the CIA had participated in a shipment of arms to Iran without presidential approval and that the agency sought to get a retroactive authorization for the shipment from President Reagan.

Specter, a former district attorney in Philadelphia, said also that Gates helped prepare Casey's testimony and had a duty to "inform this committee of material facts which were not disclosed by the director."

An inquiry into Gates' role "is very important. . . . It goes to the crux of the issue of disclosure of information by the CIA," Specter said.

Webster, however, warned against "a hasty rush to judgment on a very senior official."

Committee chairman David L. Boren (D., Okla.) and vice chairman William S. Cohen (R., Maine) vigorously defended Gates' honesty and frankness.

Gates has been "extremely forthcoming . . . totally candid" and has "aggressively pursued any abuse in that agency," Boren said shortly before the committee ended a public hearing and went into a secret session.

"Just because Mr. Casey knew something does not mean that Mr. Gates knew it," he said.

Gates has denied that either he or the CIA tried to cover up the agency's participation in the Iran arms deal.

Doubts about Casey's testimony in late November led Reagan to call for a fact-finding inquiry by Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d, who four days after Casey's testimony disclosed that money from the sale of arms to Iran may have been funneled to the insurgents in Nicaragua.

After Casey resigned following surgery on a brain tumor, Reagan nominated Gates as CIA director. But the President withdrew the nomination last month after Senate leaders warned that the CIA's role in the sale of arms to Iran made Gates' confirmation doubtful.

Boren and Cohen said that there were no such doubts about the confirmation of Webster. Webster, FBI chief for more than nine years, has been widely praised in Congress as a man of high ability and integrity who, as Cohen said, "had done an outstanding job as director of the FBI."

Webster pleased committee members yesterday by making a "solemn pledge that I will not be devious or cute with the committee." In exchange for Webster's promise to tell the committee what the CIA was doing, Boren promised to seek the removal of any committee member — and the resignation of any staff member — who leaked classified information.

In other parts of his testimony, Webster said:

- He was promised frequent access to Reagan to present "my own unvarnished views." Webster said: "I would want to exercise that privilege because unexercised privileges disappear."

- An internal FBI investigation had turned up "no evidence" of illegal FBI break-ins of offices of groups opposed to Reagan's policy in Central America. But Webster said that the FBI was unable to interview Frank Varella, a former FBI informant who has alleged that, for political reasons, he was instructed by the FBI to look for evidence of terrorist activities by the groups.

- Excused his membership in the all-male Alibi Club here, explaining



William H. Webster
Will study possible deception

that it is a weekly luncheon group with a "prestigious membership" of only 50. It was "so small that I do not consider it significant that it has no female members," he said.

Then, as Webster was explaining his membership in the all-male Alfalfa Club, Cohen cut him off, saying:

"You can stop. I'm told that the chairman [Boren] is a member of that group."