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Judge Webster's High Standard

William Webster resigned yesterday, an unofficial casualty of the Persian Gulf war.

After the derring-do and double-talk of William Casey, Mr. Webster's discretion and candor as Director of Central Intelligence were a refreshing change. He reined in lawless covert operations and rebuilt trust on Capitol Hill. President Bush could use a successor with Mr. Webster's probity and judiciousness.

He pleased Congress, and annoyed the White House, by his willingness to give timely notice on covert operations and his refusal to shape his intelligence reports to the Administration's political needs. At the same time he was roundly if not always justly criticized for notable intelligence failures, including belated assessments of the Soviet economic collapse and Saddam Hussein's designs on Kuwait. Still, the C.I.A. did far better than others in anticipating developments.

Despite pressure to name his own man, Mr. Bush kept Mr. Webster on. The Director survived intermittent White House sniping until the gulf war eroded his support at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. He irritated the White House when, faith-

fully reflecting the intelligence community's assessment, he argued that economic sanctions were working. But just before Congress voted on the war he reversed himself, thus looking like a White House pawn and damaging his credibility in Congress.

Mr. Bush's hint that he might appoint Robert Gates, his deputy national security adviser, to head the C.I.A. alarms anyone familiar with the long battle for an accountable intelligence agency and unvarnished intelligence assessments. Ronald Reagan proposed Mr. Gates for the post four years ago but was forced to withdraw the nomination by a Senate troubled by Mr. Gates's evasive testimony about the Iran-contra scandal.

It was then that Mr. Reagan turned to Mr. Webster, who had already built a commendable record as F.B.I. Director, curbing agency abuses while effectively combating domestic racketeering and terrorism.

In choosing a replacement, President Bush would do well to keep Mr. Webster's qualifications in mind. Until the gulf war, he earned widespread respect by combining an outsider's perspective with an insider's know-how.

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