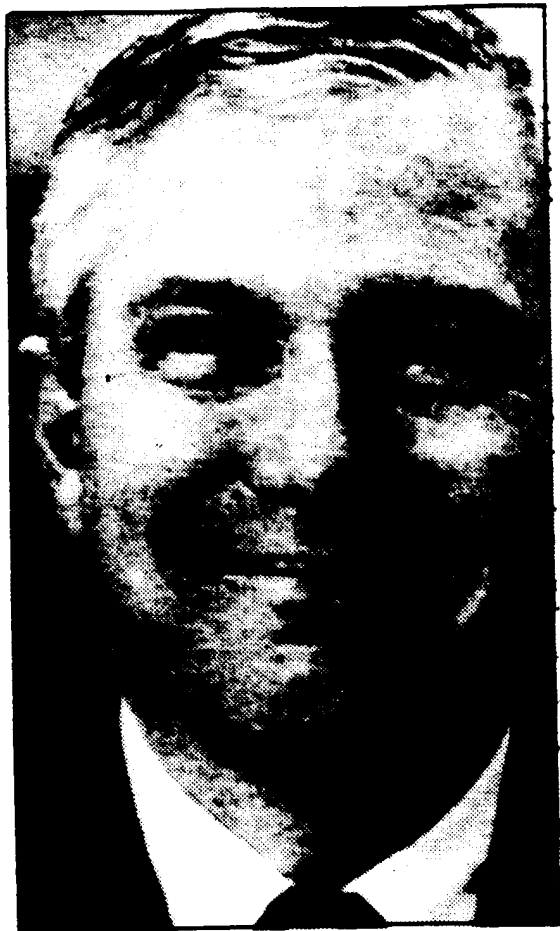


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Robert M. Gates

Associated Press

Gates Finds C.I.A. Beset By Problems

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG

WASHINGTON

SOME agencies in this city gain prominence because of what they do, others because of whom their leaders know. In the last six years, under William J. Casey, President Reagan's close friend, the Central Intelligence Agency achieved new influence for both reasons. But that very power has contributed to a long list of potentially difficult problems that his newly nominated successor must face — without the benefit of Mr. Casey's clout.

As Mr. Casey resigned last week because of ill health, his deputy, Robert M. Gates, took over an agency once again under investigation on Capitol Hill for its role in a covert operation that went sour, the Iran arms deal. He will also be asked some tough questions about whether any senior agency officials were involved in illegally helping Nicaraguan rebels.

Although Mr. Gates is expected to receive quick confirmation from the Senate, questions will be raised about his own role in the affair. Some Senators want to know why Mr. Gates did not tell them about his investigation a month before the operation became public of suspicions that profits from the arms deal were going to the contras of Nicaragua.

Mr. Gates, a career intelligence professional, will also be returning more than once to Capitol Hill to try to protect the intelligence agencies against the trend toward slower growth in spending on military and intelligence matters. One item likely to put pressure on their budget is the need to pay for alternate methods of launching spy satellites that were to have been carried by the grounded space shuttles.

P"We have a serious problem," observed William Cohen, the Maine Republican who is the new vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee. "People want more intelligence, but they're not willing to pay for it."

Mr. Gates, at 43 years old the youngest Director of Central Intelligence, has been accorded Cabinet rank and promised access to President Reagan whenever he needs it. Nonetheless, several Administration officials predicted that the agency will inevitably suffer a loss of clout, not only because of the Iran-contra affair but also because of the absence of Mr. Casey's influence at the White House. Several legislators, however, have expressed optimism that Mr. Gates, the first director of central intelligence to come from the analytical branch of the C.I.A., will cooperate more fully with the Congressional oversight committees than Mr. Casey did.

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New Call for Closer Oversight

This week, there were already indications of a new relationship between Congress and the intelligence agencies. Representative Louis Stokes, Democrat of Ohio and the incoming chairman of the House Permanent Select Intelligence Committee, announced he had drafted legislation to forbid the President to keep a covert operation secret from Congress for more than 48 hours. In the covert dealings with Iran, Government lawyers concluded that existing statutes permitted Mr. Reagan to delay notification of Congress for nearly a year.

Mr. Stokes's bill would also bar any oral "findings" by the President authorizing covert action, requiring instead that all such decisions be approved in writing with copies given to all the members of the National Security Council. Mr. Gates himself will have to resolve a sharp split within the intelligence community. Under Mr. Casey, the agency has actively pursued support for anti-Communist insurgencies, in Angola and Afghanistan, for example, as well as Nicaragua. Many longtime intelligence professionals contend that such operations cannot be kept secret long and that they inevitably drag the C.I.A. into questionable activities.

Legislators and Administration officials agree that, despite Congressional feuding with Mr. Casey over such covert operations as the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, the committees have given intelligence agencies substantial support in recent years. Because of Mr. Casey's close ties to Mr. Reagan and because of a consensus in Congress that a rebuilding was needed, spending for intelligence agencies has increased even more than military spending.

Members of Congress are asking, however, whether the intelligence agencies are spending their money wisely. A report this week by the House Intelligence Committee harshly criticizes the intelligence agencies for "dangerous laxities" in security and personnel policies. In particular, the report notes that Edward Lee Howard was hired by the agency despite a history of hard drug use and was given access to highly sensitive information during his probation period. He is believed to have devastated the C.I.A.'s Moscow station by describing it to the Russians.