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Gates says he objected to sale of arms to Iran

By Nancy J. Schwerzler
Washington Bureau of The Sun

WASHINGTON — Robert M. Gates, the administration's nominee as director of central intelligence, testified yesterday that while deputy director of the CIA he had urged an end to Iranian arms deals last fall and had termed the program "a bad idea."

Appearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in the second day of public confirmation hearings, Mr. Gates said he had expressed his objections to the Iranian arms operation in several discussions with then-CIA Director William J. Casey.

"We had several discussions about it in the summer of 1986," Mr. Gates said, and again in September 1986 after two more Americans were taken hostage in Lebanon.

At the September meeting, Mr. Gates said, he told Mr. Casey, in the presence of another top CIA official, that the Iranian arms sale program "should be called off; the whole policy was a bad idea."

Mr. Gates, who had not previously disclosed his opposition to continuation of the arms sales operation, also said that he had offered "implicit" criticism of the decision to keep congressional oversight panels in the dark about the arms operation by telling Mr. Casey that the decision would jeopardize relations between the agency and Congress.

The Senate panel will continue its scrutiny of Mr. Gates in private sessions in the next few weeks but will not vote on the nomination until some time after a report on the Iran-contra affair is released by a presi-

dential inquiry commission next week. Sen. David L. Boren, D-Okla., the intelligence panel chairman, said his committee might reopen its public inquiry if new information warranted it.

In two days of open hearings, Mr. Gates' role in the Iran-contra operation has come under close scrutiny by committee members, even as they have praised his qualifications and reputation for candor with the committee in past dealings. Barring some new disclosures, Mr. Gates is expected to receive full Senate confirmation eventually, but with greater difficulty than had been anticipated.

Repeatedly, senators from both political parties challenged Mr. Gates during the confirmation hearings on why he had not tried to find out more about the arms operation or probe a suspected diversion of funds to the contras. He also was challenged on his role in preparing testimony last November by Mr. Casey that committee members said was misleading and incomplete.

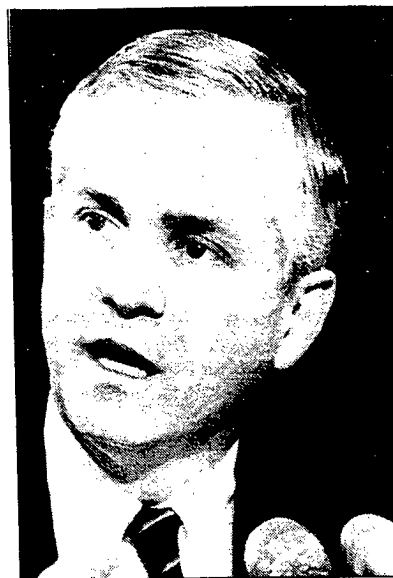
Mr. Gates also modified and clarified his positions on several issues during the hearings, prompting Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., to declare that every time a new question was raised, "you find a new way to answer it, once it's disclosed."

Mr. Specter, who has been among the most aggressive committee questioners of Mr. Gates, said the nominee gave the impression of being "a high-ranking number-two man who plays it safe and doesn't speak up."

Mr. Gates insisted that he was not a "yes man" and declared, "Sycophants in this town only reach a certain level; there's an ample supply and they only go so far."

In disclosing that he had protested continuation of the arms sales, Mr. Gates put greater distance between himself and the Iran operation that Mr. Casey generally supported. Mr. Casey was not pleased with his dissent, Mr. Gates said after the hearing.

And Mr. Gates demonstrated that he had gained some political savvy from his grueling interrogation by senators, whose fury that their oversight panel was not told of the arms deals heightened their already long-running feud with the secretive Mr. Casey over keeping Congress informed of covert arms operations.



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ROBERT M. GATES
Challenged by senators

Asked by Sen. Bill Bradley, D-N.J., what he would do if he learned of any other covert operation not previously disclosed to Congress, Mr. Gates replied, "First thing I would do would be hop in a car and come up here" to Capitol Hill.

"You're learning, Mr. Gates," Mr. Bradley said.

In testimony yesterday, Mr. Gates also disclosed:

□ Operatives linked to Lt. Col. Oliver L. North paid "the going commercial rate" of \$127,000 to charter an aircraft from an airline with CIA ties for shipment of arms to Iran by Israel in November 1985. But CIA officials violated agency rules by not notifying the deputy director or the director of the CIA about the operation in advance.

□ Internal CIA investigators have uncovered a roughly \$300,000 surplus in CIA accounts, left over after the CIA reimbursed the Defense Department for weapons shipped to Iran in 1986. The money is being turned over to the Treasury.

□ In the future, under a recent order by Mr. Gates, agency staff must "assume" that a presidential finding authorizing a covert action is necessary before any agency "operational assets" such as aircraft or equipment are used. Staff must check to see whether the proposed operation in which equipment is used is part of an authorized covert action.