Nominee for US defense secretary advocated bombing of Nicaragua

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In December 1984, Robert Gates, the Bush administration's nominee to replace Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary, advocated military strikes against Nicaragua in response to what he considered to be a growing threat to US interests in Central and South America. Gates was then deputy director of intelligence at the CIA.

Gates made his proposal in a newly declassified document that is part of a collection put together by the National Security Archives, a private research group, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Iran-Contra affair. The scandal involved top Reagan administration officials secretly selling arms to Iran in order to finance right-wing "contra" guerillas in Nicaragua in violation of a congressional prohibition. Gates has long been suspected of involvement in these illegal activities, though he was never indicted.

Leading Democrats have already indicated that Gates will be easily confirmed with bipartisan support before the end of the lame-duck congressional session in December.

In a memorandum to then-CIA Director George Casey, Gates urged that the administration use "all necessary measures (short of military invasion) to bring down the regime" in Nicaragua. Among these measures, he advocated "the use of air strikes to destroy a considerable portion of Nicaragua's military buildup."

"Without a comprehensive campaign openly aimed at bringing down the regime, at best we somewhat delay the inevitable," Gates wrote. "Without US funding for the Contras, the resistance essentially will collapse over the next year or two."

In the memo, Gates advocated a view with which he had become associated within the administration and the intelligence apparatus: a hard-line militarist position against the Soviet Union and any regimes considered to be "left" or pro-Soviet. Gates denounced negotiations with Cuban President Fidel Castro in 1958-60, wrote that the conduct of the Vietnam War consisted of "half-measures, half-heartedly applied," and denounced congressional legislation that placed constraints on executive power to conduct foreign policy. In the latter category he included the Boland amendment, which prohibited US backing for the anti-Sandinista contra forces in Nicaragua.

The lesson he drew from this historical experience was the need for direct military action in Nicaragua, which would have to circumvent congressional restrictions. "Any negotiated agreement simply will offer a cover for the consolidation of the regime and two or three years from now we will be in a considerably worse shape than we are now," he wrote.

Gates' position mirrored that of others in the Reagan administration who now occupy prominent positions in the Bush administration, including then-ambassador to Honduras John Negroponte. Negroponte is currently the director of national intelligence, a position that was first offered to Gates, but which Gates declined. (See "Democrats back Negroponte nomination as new documents detail role in contra war").

The Reagan administration decided not to follow Gates' suggestion to carry out military strikes and instead elected to illegally pursue CIA financing of the contras, paid for through sales of weapons to Iran. Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel in the Iran-Contra investigation, decided not to indict Gates for involvement in these activities, however there is little doubt that Gates played a prominent role. Walsh later wrote that he was highly skeptical of Gates' claims that he did not learn of the secret funding until 1986.

Robert Parry, an investigative journalist who helped

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uncover the Iran-Contra scandal, noted in an interview on *Democracy Now!* November 9 that, even while serving as a member of the Carter administration's National Security Council, Gates helped arrange contacts between Iran and the Reagan presidential campaign. These contacts continued through the 1980s, and, according to some reports, Gates helped manufacture an intelligence rationale to justify the sale of weapons to Iran.

Primarily because of his role in Iran-Contra, Gates was forced to withdraw his nomination as CIA director in 1987, however this nomination was resubmitted and approved by the Senate in 1991. Thirty-one senators voted against Gates, an unprecedented number for a nominee to head the CIA.

Gates' role in the Iran-Contra scandal is not uncharacteristic. He has a long and sordid history as a leading figure in the CIA. When nominating Gates, Bush said that he "helped lead America's efforts to drive Soviet forces from Afghanistan" in the 1980s. At that time, the CIA was financing Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, in the American proxy war against the Soviet Union.

Even as he was helping sell weapons to Iran, Gates played a role in weapons sales to Iraq. Throughout the 1980s, the two countries were at war with each other. An affidavit submitted by Howard Teicher, a former National Security Council member under Reagan, names Gates as one of those involved in approving the sale of chemical weapons precursors and cluster bombs to Saddam Hussein.

Gates has also been accused of "politicizing" intelligence while at the CIA—that is, manufacturing intelligence to justify US policy. In particular, he has been accused of helping to concoct a supposed Soviet plot to assassinate the Pope in 1981 in order to push for a harder line against the Soviet Union.

The confirmation hearings for Gates are scheduled to begin next week, but leading Democrats have already indicated that he will be easily confirmed. Earlier this month, the incoming Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, said he hoped that Gates would be confirmed "as soon as possible." "The one thing he has going for him ... is that we want the change to take place very quickly," Reid said.

Before Gates was nominated as defense secretary, he was part of the Iraq Study Group, which consists of top strategists and former officials from both the Democratic and Republican parties. The group, led by Republican James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton, is expected to issue recommendations next month, which are said to include initiating talks with Iran and Syria. The Democratic Party as a whole is lining up behind the Iraq Study Group. The White House, meanwhile, has announced the formation of its own study group.

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