

# Gates confirmation: Irangate won't die

by Herbert Quinde

The confirmation of Bush administration nominee Robert Gates to replace William Webster as Director of Central Intelligence has foundered on an iceberg. The iceberg's tip broke the surface when a senior ex-CIA official, Alan D. Fiers, pleaded guilty on July 9 to participating in a coverup, on orders from his superiors, of the Iran-Contra affair, the worst foreign policy fiasco of the Reagan-Bush administration. Gates was number two at the CIA, handling day-to-day affairs at the time Fiers said a coverup was carried out.

In May, President George Bush nominated Gates to take over the spy agency. Gates, who is deputy assistant national security adviser, was a central figure at President Bush's side during the Persian Gulf war, and up to now was expected to breeze through his confirmation hearing before the Senate scheduled for mid-July.

But his confirmation is now in jeopardy.

Fiers, 52, the former head of the CIA's Central American task force, admitted in court that he and other senior CIA officials were fully knowledgeable of the activities of Lt. Col. Oliver North and his confederates for months before the scandal grabbed headlines in October and November of 1986. North was a key player in a secret operation which diverted funds to the Nicaraguan Contras that had been illegally obtained by selling weapons to the government of Ayatollah Khomeini. In exchange, the Iranians were supposed to put pressure on the Lebanese Hezbollah to release their American hostages. Fiers's guilty plea is the first uncontested proof that the CIA was intimately involved in Iran-Contra. It confirms the widely held belief that the failed covert operation dubbed "Project Democracy" was not the work of a "parallel government" directed by a rogue overzealous Marine, but was the official policy of the Reagan-Bush administration.

Fiers's plea of guilty to two misdemeanor counts of unlawfully withholding information from Congress came as part of an agreement with Independent Counsel Lawrence E. Walsh. He faces one year in prison and a \$100,000 fine for each count. In November 1986, before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Fiers lied about his knowledge of the covert operation. "In 1986, I was faced with some very difficult decisions," Fiers told reporters after he appeared in court. "At that time, I did what I thought was in the best interests of the country. . . . Today I was faced with equally difficult

decisions and today I have done what I think is in the best interests of the country and not only that, but what the Constitution requires of me."

The plea agreement includes a commitment from Fiers to cooperate fully with Walsh's continuing investigation. "It sure looks like Fiers has decided to rat us all out," commented a former senior CIA officer who recently testified before Walsh's grand jury. For four and a half years, Walsh's investigation has been frustrated by both the Reagan and Bush administrations, as well as by Congress. The *Washington Post* reported that CIA witnesses who have recently appeared before the grand jury "have been acting as though they've got Alzheimer's disease—they can't remember anything." Several observers of the investigation characterized the development as a "breakthrough," and Walsh himself called it a "significant advance" in the probe.

## Gates and the coverup

Fiers's pledge to "truthfully disclose" all he knows about Iran-Contra will further clarify Gates's acts of commission and omission in the affair. Four years ago, Gates's role in what some call "Iranamok" came under close scrutiny by the Senate when he was first nominated to head the CIA as William Casey's replacement by President Reagan. During his testimony, Gates admitted having a lunch with Colonel North and Casey, where "a cryptic remark about Swiss accounts and the Contras" was made by the Marine. Gates was asked why he had not pursued the comment by Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.). In an amateurish display of innocence, Gates responded that a congressional ban on CIA involvement with the Contras prevented him from asking further questions. After two days of intense questioning, Gates withdrew his nomination, saying he wanted to avoid stirring up further controversy. Now both the Senate and Walsh's investigators must determine if Gates also committed perjury. There is extensive documentation available from previous investigations by the Tower Commission and the Congress which clearly suggested that Gates coordinated the coverup with numerous Reagan administration officials.

Gates is not the only person feeling the heat. U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Donald Gregg and former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams both dealt with Fiers extensively over the Reagan years. Gregg was Vice President Bush's national security adviser and handled the matter involving Bush's close CIA buddy Felix Rodriquez, who headed North's operation in El Salvador. Abrams, who worked closely with Henry Kissinger on Central American issues, also met regularly with Fiers to coordinate both overt and covert policies in Central America.

Rumors have abounded in the nation's capital in recent months that Gregg would soon be indicted by Walsh. Should Fiers's revelations lead to an indictment, President Bush may well have to finally answer the question: "What did he know and when did he know it?"