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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates

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DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates from the Pentagon

SEC. GATES: Good morning. Admiral Fallon's unexpected decision to step down as commander of Central Command on March 11th created a vacancy at one of our most important combatant commands, one engaged in two wars and on many fronts in perhaps the most sensitive part of the world. The difficulty of filling this position is magnified by the number of changes that follow in other positions, as is usually the case, all of which is simply to explain why this process has taken nearly six weeks.

With the concurrence of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I have recommended and the president has approved and will nominate General David Petraeus as the new commander of Central Command. We will withdraw the nomination of Lieutenant General Ray Odierno to be the Army vice chief of staff and nominate him to return to Baghdad as the new Multinational Force Iraq commander, replacing General Petraeus. The president will nominate Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli as vice chief of staff of the Army.

I do not anticipate General Petraeus leaving Iraq until late summer or early fall. With respect to all these moves, I am especially grateful to Ray Odierno, his wife Linda and their family for his acceptance of another tour in Iraq, this time as overall commander. General Odierno has only been back from Iraq a little over two months, and it is, I think, his extraordinary sense of duty that has led him to accept this tough assignment. I am personally very grateful to him and to his family for their remarkable service to our country.

We expect to move the paperwork on these nominations to the White House and to the Senate very quickly. Because of the complexity of this series of moves, I respectfully ask the Senate to move on them expeditiously, hopefully by Memorial Day, so their families and we can plan appropriately.

Lolita?

Q Mr. Secretary, one quick thing. Have you spoken to any of the key leaders in the Senate to determine at least their initial support or not for these nominations? Do you anticipate any problems?

And then do you anticipate any issues with Iraq, in terms of interrupting the tenure of General Petraeus, and whether that might present a problem in losing momentum, as far as what he's been doing?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, I have talked with Senator Levin, Senator McCain and Senator Warner. I think they all have high respect for General Petraeus. He has clearly been successful in his current assignment. And so I don't really anticipate any problems.

With respect to a possible interruption of momentum, one of the reasons, for General Petraeus staying on for a while, is to ensure that there is plenty of time to prepare, and for a good handoff.

By the same token, the fact that General Odierno has just returned means that he is well-known to our brigade commanders. He's known to our troops. He's known to the Iraqis and has very current experience. He clearly was General Petraeus's right-hand man during this last year.

So I believe that this arrangement probably preserves the likelihood of continued momentum and progress.

Andrew.

Q Mr. Secretary, can you just explain the reasons for nominating General Petraeus in particular for this job, rather than bringing in someone who already has combatant command experience in another region?

SEC. GATES: I think that that is an easy one to answer.

I recommended him to the president because I am absolutely confident he's the best man for the job. The kinds of conflicts that we're doing, not just in Iraq but in Afghanistan, and some of the challenges that we face elsewhere, in the region and in the Central Command area, are very much characterized by asymmetric warfare. And I don't know anybody in the United States Military better qualified to lead that effort.

(Cross talk.)

Q Mr. Secretary, doesn't this -- besides momentum though, doesn't it raise questions about continuity at a very critical time?

General Petraeus just recently told Congress that at the end of the surge operation, when the fifth surge combat brigade is withdrawn, there would be a 45-day period to assess the situation on the ground and then decide whether more troops could be withdrawn.

At that critical time, doesn't that present a break in that kind of continuity?

SEC. GATES: Well, I would expect that General Petraeus would carry out that first -- carry out not only the evaluation but that first decision in terms of are we able to draw down another brigade combat team or not, depending on the conditions on the ground. At that point, that ongoing evaluation, that I expect to happen sort of on a weekly if not daily basis, will pass to General Odierno.

Q Well, with a new general in charge, though, would that -- is there a possibility that would change that 45-day waiting period?

SEC. GATES: No, I don't think so.

Q No?

SEC. GATES: Remember, I was talking about late summer or early fall, so I think it'll work out.

Q Mr. Secretary?

SEC. GATES: Yeah.

Q Is there a shortage of talent in the Army when it comes to counterinsurgency warfare? You seem to be using Petraeus almost as a finger in the dike, and then you're sending Odierno back.

SEC. GATES: There is -- there is no question that there are a handful of generals, like a lot of our captains and enlisted soldiers and the NCOs, who have had repeated tours in Iraq. Partly it is their experience. Partly it is the fact that they know Iraq. And so I think that it's -- look, I would have -- Admiral Fallon's decision to step down was

unexpected. I had intended that Admiral Fallon probably stay on for a third year. His second year would have ended in February. And when I reviewed all of these assignments through the -- through next January with the president and with Chairman Levin a few weeks ago -- two or three -- two-and-a-half or three months ago, I laid out where I thought the combatant commanders would be, and I -- and Admiral Fallon was one of those that I had intended to continue on for a third year.

So I'm faced with a critical combatant command where a commander is needed and a commander who knows what's going on in the region. I think that -- as I just indicated, I think General Petraeus is the best qualified.

Q Under your old plan, would the choice of commanders for these key positions been left to the new administration?

SEC. GATES: Well, I mean, every one of these commanders serves at the president's sufferance. And so all of these people would have been subject to review by a new secretary of Defense and a new president in terms of whether they continue on for their third year or whatever. I was just trying to provide some continuity for a new administration, but they always have the opportunity to make a change.

Q And just to get to the second point of David's question about General Odierno going to Iraq, are the possible candidates really that short of a list that a guy that just returned is going to go back?

And secondly, a lot of people looking at this might see this as kind of a for the foreseeable future a stay-the-course approach. I mean, basically you've got the same two guys that, you know, were so instrumental in implementing the surge and the current strategy will now effectively, you know, for the foreseeable future, be playing the central role yet again.

SEC. GATES: What was the first part of your question?

Q About General Odierno. It's really, you know --

SEC. GATES: The reasons are as I described. I believe in most parts of the world, but especially in the Middle East, personal relationships make a big difference. And General Odierno is known recently to the Iraqi leadership. He's known to the Iraqi generals. He is known to our own people. He has current experience. And so the likelihood of him being able to pick up -- for this baton-passing to be smooth is better -- the odds of that are better with him than with anybody else I could identify.

Q And the stay-the-course question?

SEC. GATES: Well, I don't -- you know, I think that -- first of all, I think that the course, certainly, that General Petraeus has set has been a successful course. So frankly, I think staying that course is not a bad idea. I would say it's a good idea, and I think that apropos of the comment about passing the baton, I think sustaining the success and building on it is important.

Q Mr. Secretary, both those -- both General Odierno and Petraeus have been very hard-line on Iranian involvement in Iraq in the last five or six months, General Petraeus earlier this month. There's a public perception that Admiral Fallon was less hard-line on Iran -- again, public perception; I don't know if it's true or not. But should the public and the world at large see this as a signal that the U.S. is beefing up not only for Iraq, but also as a signal to Iran that the United States means business about them staying out of Iraqi affairs?

SEC. GATES: Well, all these people can speak for themselves, but I would tell you it's my belief that General Odierno, General Petraeus and Admiral Fallon were all in exactly the same position when it came to their views of Iranian interference inside Iraq. And it is a hard position because what the Iranians are doing is killing American servicemen and -women. And -- inside Iraq.

And so I don't think there's any difference of view among them on that issue whatsoever.

Q General Petraeus has in the past alluded, in testimony on the Hill most recently, to Afghanistan but said

that it wasn't as of yet his purview. When his nomination is confirmed, as seems likely, it will be his purview. Do you have a sense of what these changes might mean for Afghanistan, when you have a general so closely linked to large-scale counterinsurgency in Iraq now having oversight for Afghanistan at a time when U.S. troop levels there are rising?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that it puts -- you know, Afghanistan was high on Admiral Fallon's list. It's an important theater of action right now. It will be -- I assume it will be very high on General Petraeus's list as well. He will have responsibilities there, as will EUCOM continue to have responsibilities there. So I think it will continue to receive high-level attention.

Q But Dr. Gates, do you hope that General Petraeus will sort of apply his lessons learned from Iraq into Afghanistan? Do you hope that he will overhaul -- help lead an overhaul of the Afghanistan strategy?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, you have to understand that the part of Afghanistan for which CENTCOM commander has responsibility is OEF, which is basically the U.S. forces operating in RC East. RC East already has been a successful exemplar of a successful counterinsurgency. And so the key there would be also to continue to build on success. The question is, how do we do a better job with our allies in RC South? But that's not in OEF's area of responsibility.

Q Mr. Secretary, this week key members of Congress are being briefed on what U.S. intelligence knows about North Korea's providing of nuclear-technical expertise to Syria. When, if ever, will it be appropriate for the American public to be told about what the U.S. believes was going on there?

SEC. GATES: Soon.

Q And can you say anything about it?

SEC. GATES: I think "soon" will do the job.

Q Mr. Secretary, do you anticipate any change in the command structure in Afghanistan to give the CENTCOM commander more authority, or do you anticipate that the current structure with NATO covering most of the country will continue, especially in view of the president's commitment to send more U.S. troops?

SEC. GATES: Well, the command structure, I think, is a sensitive matter in terms of the eyes of our allies. And so if there were to be any discussion of changes in the command structure, it would require some pretty intensive consultations with our allies and discussion about what makes sense going forward. There have been no such consultations so far.

Q Do you think they'd be warranted?

SEC. GATES: We're always looking at how -- whether there are ways to make what we do more effective. And there's been a lot of -- as I'm sure you all are aware, there's been a lot of discussion in this building about whether we have the best possible command arrangements in Afghanistan. I've made no decisions. I've made no recommendations to the president. We're still discussing it.

Yeah.

Q Mr. Secretary, you probably -- your remarks at Air University down in Alabama earlier this week were interpreted as a dig at the Air Force. Do you agree with that assessment? And if so, what were some of the challenges that you were trying to convey that were misinterpreted?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think if you read the text of the speech, you'll see that it's not a dig at the Air Force at all. In fact, a significant part of the speech was full of praise at what the Air Force has done in the Middle East, in Iraq in Afghanistan and the whole theater. And a lot of explicit comment about the fact that their operations, their C-17 operations, take the equivalent of 5,000 trucks a month of the roads -- total control of the air, the medevac capabilities and so on. So there was a lot in that speech that praised the Air Force.

The part that -- the part that has been interpreted as critical of the Air Force, if you go back and read it, you will see that the -- that I actually referred to all the services. And it really has to do with institutional barriers here to getting things done quickly. There is -- the thing that has concerned me is that in too many instances, there is a tendency to look out a year or two years or three years in terms of programs and so on and sort of processes as usual, and not enough willingness to think out of the box and how do we get more help to the theater now; how do we help the men and women who are on the front lines out there now?

And so that was my focus; it's focused on all of the services. It has to do with a lot of different areas. ISR was one was example. In asking the Air Force to think unconventionally, I mentioned several other examples yesterday of things they ought to think about that hadn't been done before. But the message, really, was to all of the services and it really was more about, frankly, the bureaucracy in this building and the Department of Defense as a whole; it really had nothing to do with the people downrange. They're doing an incredible job.

Yeah.

Q Sir, how do you expect the -- or how do you hope the ISR task force will break that? And what capabilities do you really --

SEC. GATES: Well, they really have two responsibilities.

One is to look worldwide at all the ISR resources we have. And it's not just unmanned vehicles, UAVs. I'm asking him to look at all of the ISR capabilities, piloted aircraft as well as UAVs and so on, and see what we have in the other commands here in the United States and so on.

And if we keep a certain number back here for training, if we look at training in a different way than we have been in the past can we maybe squeeze a little bit more of those capabilities over to Iraq or Afghanistan? So they're really looking kind of -- doing the -- the first part of it is to look at the inventory of what we have, and can we get it over there?

The second part -- get some more of it over there -- the second part of the effort is to go over to the theater, both Afghanistan and Iraq, and see if the commands are making maximum possible use of the assets they have. Are there ways in which, by changing the way they do business in some respects, we could squeeze more capability out of what they already have?

So it's really a combination of those two things, and again with some pretty short deadlines.

Q Can you sort of explain some of the deadlines you've set for the task force?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think I'm getting their first report in about a week. I think that I've given them 90 days to complete the entire undertaking. I've found that perhaps the most effective way to get things done around here is to put pretty short deadlines on things and then force them.

Q Mr. Secretary, you received an initial report on the Taiwan fuse incident about a week or so ago.

Can you give us a sense as to where you see that investigation heading? And what can you say about whether the military does indeed have proper controls over its nuclear and nuclear-related materials?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that the -- based on everything that I've seen so far, there are proper controls over nuclear and nuclear-related materials.

The area of concern at this point is the non-nuclear aspects of some of these weapons systems, such as the nose cones for example that didn't have any warheads. I mean, they didn't have any nuclear material. But there were sensitive electronics, sensitive materials and things.

And the initial report of Admiral Donald's effort has been several recommendations, mostly to try and get more information. And he is continuing, and I will accept his initial recommendations. I can't remember them in detail, but it

basically is there are some areas in terms of the handling of classified material where there can be some improvements.

Another issue that has come up that we're investigating is, are there areas where certain kinds of technologies may be classified secret, but don't have special handling. And so it may lead to things that are actually -- you know, maybe they're just secret, but maybe they're especially sensitive because they're missile technologies or something like that. And are there adequate controls on things that may be classified and in the classified system but in terms of special handling in some way. And I think that's part of the area that he's looking at as well.

Q And he made recommendations about that?

SEC. GATES: He made some recommendations on the processes for handling some classified material and documents, and there were two or three others. As I said, I don't remember them in detail right now, but I'll accept them all and then we'll move on.

STAFF: We have time for maybe one more, sir.

Q Mr. Secretary, when you named Admiral Fallon to CENTCOM, you brought someone from outside the region because of his strategic view. This time, you picked someone inside the region, you said, because of his expertise in asymmetric warfare. Do you expect General Petraeus to be a very different Central commander than Admiral Fallon was, focused more on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and perhaps less on regional security/diplomacy?

SEC. GATES: No. I think one of the real responsibilities of the CENTCOM commander is to make sure that he is covering the entire area of responsibility. I mentioned at Admiral Fallon's retirement ceremony he was the first CENTCOM commander to visit Lebanon. He traveled extensively in the region. I would expect General Petraeus to do that. I was told that when General Abizaid passed the baton to Admiral Fallon, he told him basically expect to spend half your time on the road.

And so it is a broad area of responsibility. It's -- I mean, we do have these two wars that we're fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the reality is there are a lot of other challenges in the Middle East, in that area, as well. And so I think that the Central Command commander has to be responsible for all of that, not just Iraq and Afghanistan. That's why we have a really good commander -- we're putting another really good commander in Iraq so that General Petraeus doesn't have to do that, and we have a good commander headed to Afghanistan to take General McNeill's place. So I think that -- I expect him to handle the job very much as both General Abizaid and Admiral Fallon did in terms of being involved and engaged in the entire region.

Q Speaking of continuity and staying the course, do you anticipate continuing to serve as Defense secretary through January 20th of next year?

SEC. GATES: Until January 20th?

Q Well, through the next -- the inauguration of the next president.

SEC. GATES: Well, I certainly expect to. Hope so.

Q How about after that?

SEC. GATES: The circumstances under which I would do that are inconceivable to me. (Laughter.)

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