



U.S. Department of Defense
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)
News Transcript

On the Web:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4037>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131/697-5132

Public contact:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/faq/comment.html>
or +1 (703) 428-0711 +1

**Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
Gen. Peter Pace**

**September 14,
2007**

**DoD News Briefing with Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen.
Peter Pace at the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.**

SEC. GATES: I have a statement today, and it's a little bit long. And they'll have copies of the text for you as soon as the availability is over. Earlier this week, we heard from General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker and last night from the president. Before General Pace and I take your questions, I'd like to offer my own perspective about the choices we as a country face in Iraq. General Pace also has some introductory comments to make.

At al Asad air base in Iraq at the end of the president's visit less than two weeks ago, I said that I was optimistic -- as optimistic about the situation in Iraq as I had been since becoming secretary. Given the fact that I became secretary last December when the situation in Iraq was deteriorating, my statement at al Asad was, I thought, a modest claim. The challenges in Iraq remain significant. The bloodshed, both Iraqi and American, is a daily source of grief. Reconstructing a nation, building a democratic nation, something far different from anything that has gone before in 4,000 years of Iraqi history, has been slower and more difficult than we had hoped. Part of that has been due to mistakes we made; part is due to Iraqi history and culture.

Even so, progress now is being made, however, slowly. I believe that General Petraeus's recommendations and the decisions announced by the president last night offer a path forward that allows that progress to continue and a way to avoid the disastrous consequences of an American failure in Iraq.

As the debate here in Washington proceeded in recent months, and more importantly as we considered future U.S. actions in Iraq, I have kept a fairly low profile in the belief that I could therefore be more effective inside the Pentagon and working with my National Security Council colleagues in advising the president and in dealing with the Congress. Now that the president has made his decisions about the next steps in Iraq, I would like to share some of my thinking with you.

It has been my view over the last several months that the next steps in Iraq had to address several or multiple objectives.

First, they would need to maximize the opportunity created by the surge to achieve our long-term goals of an Iraq able to sustain, govern and defend itself, and be an ally in the war on terror.

Second, the next steps had to avoid even the appearance of American failure in Iraq. Extremist Islam was

dramatically empowered by defeating the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The first attack against us by the extremists, the World Trade Center in 1993, was launched from Afghanistan just four years after the last Soviet soldier left there. Should the jihadists be able to claim a victory in Iraq over the United States, the sole remaining superpower, I believe it would empower them worldwide far, far more than their victory over the Soviets. The regional consequences would be significant and highly destabilizing.

Third, the next steps would need to reassure our friends and allies in the region that we will remain the most significant power there for the long term.

Fourth, the next steps had to signal potential adversaries that we are not leaving Iraq to their ambitions and that we will remain the dominant force in the region.

Fifth, those steps also had to signal the different factions in Iraq that we would not abandon them in the near term and are prepared to have a modest-size, long-term, residual military presence there as a stabilizing force, thereby also discouraging them from counterproductive actions predicated on their anticipation of possibly precipitous American departure.

Sixth, our actions would also need to signal the Iraqis that they must assume ever greater responsibility for governance and security.

Seventh, here at home, our next steps would need to create the best possible chance for broad, bipartisan support for a sustainable American policy in Iraq that protects long-term American national interests there and in the region.

And eighth, and finally, whatever we might do had to preserve the gains made possible by the service and sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, and thus reassure them that their service and sacrifice truly has mattered.

I spent the last several months working with the chairman, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Central Command commander and General Petraeus on the next steps to take advantage of the gains brought by the surge and other developments in Iraq, to give us the best possible chance to achieve each of these objectives to the maximum extent possible. I'd like to make three additional points.

First, months ago, I asked the chairman to begin examining our options going forward in Iraq.

I also asked Admiral Fallon to do the same.

I knew even then that General Petraeus was analyzing the future, because he and I privately analyzed and privately discussed his thinking about the next steps on each of my visits to Iraq. As I said in one congressional hearing, not to be thinking strategically about the future would have been irresponsible.

Above all, I wanted the president this month to have the benefit of more than one senior military voice as he considered the next steps in Iraq. I also did not want General Petraeus hanging out there all by himself.

While the analyses of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CENTCOM and General Petraeus varied in emphasis and approach, all of the president's senior military advisers are in full agreement with the recommendations made by General Petraeus. Let me repeat. All of the president's most senior military commanders and advisers are in agreement with what President -- with what General Petraeus has recommended and the president has approved. And I'm sure General Pace will elaborate on this.

Second, what General Petraeus has recommended is the beginning of a transition of mission in December. While some are concerned that his proposals, quote, unquote, "only" take us back to the 15 brigade

combat teams we had in Iraq last December, I would like to point out that in his testimony on Monday, General Petraeus made clear that force reductions will continue beyond July, with the pace of continuing reductions dictated by conditions on the ground.

Further, I want to point out that any long-term residual U.S. military presence in Iraq, which would have to be negotiated with the Iraqi government, would be a fraction of the size of today's deployed force.

Third and finally, the political debate and the debate among historians about this war will go on for a long time. However, the consequences of American failure in Iraq at this point would, I believe, be disastrous not just for Iraq but for the region, for the United States and for the world. No discussion of where and how we go from here can avoid this stark reality.

I believe that the recommendations General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have made, and that the president has approved, offer a sustainable path forward that deserves broad bipartisan support: that is, a continuing steady transfer of responsibility for governance and security to the Iraqis, a gradual drawdown of American forces, and negotiations of a long-term strategic relationship with the government of Iraq.

Some say the Petraeus strategy brings our forces out too slowly, that we must withdraw faster. Whatever one may think about how we got to this point in time in Iraq, I believe that getting the next part right and understanding the consequences of getting it wrong is critical for America. I believe our military leadership, including a brilliant field commander, is best able and qualified to help us get it right.

A final comment: President Bush is the seventh president I have served, beginning over 40 years ago. I have no record to defend on this war and no agenda to promote. What I've said here today is truly what I believe best serves the long-term interests and security of the United States and the American people.

General?

GEN. PACE: Thanks, Mr. Secretary.

I thought it might be helpful to describe the process that we went through -- senior military officers went through to determine our recommendations to the secretary and the president. As the secretary pointed out, for several months we've been working on the understanding of the environment, understanding where we want it to be, and making our recommendations about the way forward.

We started out knowingly and wanting -- and wanting to have three separate groups working on the problem: General Petraeus and his team in Baghdad, whose focus and view, properly so, was on what was best for the way forward in Iraq; Admiral Fallon and his team in both Tampa and Qatar, whose focus and attention are properly focused on his region, to include Afghanistan and Djibouti and other places; and the six joint chiefs here in D.C., who were helped by a bevy of really smart colonels and captains, whose responsibility is not only to ensure that the resources for the Central Command region were provided, but also to ensure that we were properly positioned should something else happen in the world that military force would be needed for. And we did that for several months, knowing that each was working on the problem, but not sharing our ideas so we would not get into some kind of a group-think as we were going throughout the options.

We went through at the joint staff level -- the Joint Chiefs level about nine different options, to include everything from plusing-up, to maintaining the current status through as long as we could see into the future, to things like going out to the borders and letting the Iraqis take care of the center, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So we took a very broad look at the -- at the options.

And then around the middle of August, General Petraeus briefed the Joint Chiefs and Admiral Fallon, Admiral Fallon briefed General Petraeus and the Joint Chiefs, and the Joint Chiefs briefed Admiral Fallon and

General Petraeus, so we could all understand from each other how we saw the current situation and the way forward.

Not surprisingly, we all saw the situation very much the same. And based on whose -- what your responsibility was, you might see the emphasis a little bit differently, but we were all basically in the grid square, if you will, with regard to the way forward. And then we started sharing with each other our thoughts and ideas, and we began picking "best of breed" and having our discussions.

At the end of the day, the mission that we recommended to the secretary and to the president, if you want to take the name "Petraeus report" and take the name "Petraeus" off it and put "Fallon" on it and say it's the Fallon report, if you want to take the name "Petraeus" off and put the name "Pace" or "Moseley," or "Conway" or any of the other chiefs, that report would be exactly the same, because we were unanimous that the next six months to nine months, as laid out by what General Petraeus spoke of to our Congress and what the president decided and announced last night, that that was in fact the best way forward to ensure, one, that we would continue to build on the success in Iraq; two, that there would be sufficient assets to Central Command for all of its region; and three, that we would still be positioned to handle any pop-up problem that might happen for the nation.

So what the secretary said about unanimity amongst the eight four-star officers -- General Petraeus, Admiral Fallon and the six Joint Chiefs of Staff -- is absolutely accurate.

Thank you.

Leah?

Q Mr. Secretary, you spoke about General Petraeus' plan, your hope that it would be the best hope for some bipartisan support behind it. Already Congress -- members of Congress have begun offering a lot of recommendations and proposals that would run counter to it, including proposals that would mandate troops get one -- get an equal amount of dwell time to the amount of time they serve and would mandate a change of mission. Can you say what impact -- and also General Pace -- can you say what impact would any of these have on the drawdown as it is currently mapped out? And secondly, can you address whether or not you think there's an opportunity next year to reduce the deployments from 15 to 12 months?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, I think that a lot of the amendments that are being considered are well-intentioned and that they -- sponsors have the well-being of our men and women in uniform at heart. The reality, though, I think, for us is that most of them would have a serious complicating factor, complicating consequences for us, and particularly on our ability to support U.S. combat operations and manage the force effectively. The complexity of managing the flow of units, individuals and capabilities to two active combat theaters is enormous and does not lend itself to simplistic -- or to simple legislative prescriptions. Many of the waivers that are in there are limited -- very limited to operational emergencies and things like that, and so it -- they're really not very much help.

So most of these amendments would, as best I understand them, basically face the president with two options: one is to accelerate the drawdown; the other is to comply through the use of force management options, that, in our judgment, would further stress the force and reduce its combat effectiveness.

Now, you've just heard us talk about the unanimity of the president's senior military advisors and commanders in terms of the pacing of the drawdown, and so I think that there would be very little likelihood that the option that we would recommend or that the president would accept would be to accelerate the drawdown. So that leaves us with the force management options, and let me give you a few examples of what we would have to look at in order to comply with some of these -- for example, the Webb amendment.

We would have to look at extending already deployed units beyond their scheduled rotation. We would have to accept gaps in capability as units that rotate home aren't replaced right away for periods perhaps of weeks. This would also put at risk our ability to overlap units that are rotating in with units that are rotating out in a way that helps improve their effectiveness, a smooth handoff and also, frankly, minimizing casualties.

We would have to look at increasing the in-lieu-of -- the use of in-lieu-of units that are either minimally or not normally trained for a particular mission -- for example, putting organizations and units that are artillery in military police roles or something like that. We think this would degrade combat readiness. We would have probably have to consider returning to cobbling together new units from other disparate units or unassigned individuals and personnel. We also think this would result in less effective units being deployed and would reverse the decision made -- that I made earlier this year to manage rotations on a unit basis.

And finally, we would have to look at significantly increasing the deployment of the National Guard and Reserve units due to tighter constraints placed on the active force.

But the cumulative effect of these kinds of things, we think, would, frankly, increase the risk to our men and women in uniform over there. It also would lead inevitably to a return to unpredictable timing on both deployments and return that we tried to get away from earlier in the year. So as well-intentioned as many of these proposals are, I think the reality is they become very difficult for us to manage, and end up imposing some real hardships on not only our forces but also potentially impacting combat effectiveness and risk.

The other message that I worry that some of the amendments send is that it sends a signal to potential adversaries that we're stretched so thinly and that we are so strained that we cannot adequately respond to crises elsewhere in the world.

And I -- that's not a correct view, if others should take it, but it is a worry. So these are all concerns that, I think, we have to take into account.

In terms of the last part of your question, the 15/12, and General, you correct me if I get this wrong. But my understanding is that by next summer, June, July, that period, there may be specific units that would be able to be brought home short of their 15-month tour -- maybe 14 months, 14-and-a-half months, 13-and-a-half months. We just don't know right now. It will all depend on a lot of ifs. But just looking at the mathematics of it, that's a possibility.

GEN. PACE: The secretary gave a very complete rundown. The math is fairly straightforward. Just take one segment, the ground combat brigades. We have 20 ground combat brigades in Iraq. You have 3 in Afghanistan. That's 23. You've got an inventory that has currently 38 Army brigades -- building to 48, but 38 available today, and 9 -- correction, 8 Marine regimental combat teams -- building to 9, but 8 available today.

So between the Army and the Marine Corps, we have the equivalent of 46 brigades. You're using 23 at a time right now, which puts you automatically into a port-and-starboard 12 months on, 12 months off, even before you start having overlap of turnover and before you count the brigade that's in Korea and the brigade that's in Kosovo, which is why we went to 15 and 12 for the Army and 7 and 6 for the Marine Corps, as far as deployment time. So those numbers, and that's just one example, are managed very carefully and very closely. And anything that puts further strictures or criteria on when and how to use ends up with the impact that the secretary -- what the secretary mentioned.

Q Mr. Secretary, what do you envision for this long-term presence of U.S. forces in Iraq? What would its mission be? How many forces might that involve? Would it be confined to operations in Iraq? Or might it become more of a regional presence? And how can you be so certain that troop withdrawals will continue beyond next July, when we've been hearing for four years now that any troop withdrawal is conditional upon the situation on the ground at the time?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think, to answer the second part of your question first, and I'll then ask General Pace to comment. The whole situation and recommendations at this point are based on an analysis by the commander in the field, plus the others that we talked about, of the situation on the ground.

And that's why we have the expectation that we will be able to take out the five combat brigades that General Petraeus has talked about.

But the inability or the difficulty of -- you all are as familiar -- more familiar than I am with some long-term projections that didn't turn out so well. I think General Petraeus' view is that six months is about as far out as he thinks he can plan or analyze, and that's why March has come up. And that's when he will re-assess and see then what will happen after July. But he seems to believe that the situation is moving in a direction in a variety of different places in Iraq that will allow him to continue moving toward further drawdowns, but the pacing of those drawdowns, as he said, would depend on the situation on the ground.

And what was the first part of your question?

Q How would you envision this long-term U.S. presence?

SEC. GATES: Right.

Q What would be the mission, how many forces? Would it become a regional force?

SEC. GATES: First of all, the role of this element would have to be negotiated with the Iraqi government, and so the precise form, precise size, precise mission would presumably all be a part of that negotiation. I think that -- and again, I'll invite the general to comment -- I think that the mission of that group, when you get to the final steady state, it probably looks a lot like Baker-Hamilton in terms of counterterrorism, in terms of providing support and training for the Iraqis, in terms of helping along the border. I think those are the kinds of roles that, at least in my thinking -- and the general may have a somewhat different view -- but I think it would have those kinds of roles. And I think -- my own view is that it also in a way provides a longer range safety net, if you will, to others in the region who are concerned about what will happen in Iraq, as well as to the Iraqis themselves.

And so, you know, as I say, we are at a very early stage in this. A lot would depend on what was negotiated with the Iraqis and what they've wanted us to do, what we thought we could do and so on. But those are some -- that's my thinking on it.

GEN. PACE: I would say with regard to being able to guarantee anything, Mick, that clearly there's no way in a fight like this to be able to guarantee other than that there are some tough work still ahead of us. But you can take hope from what's happened in Al Anbar in the last six months.

That is an incredible turnaround of events, primarily because the sheikhs and the people got fed up with the way they were being treated by al Qaeda.

The action within the last 24 hours, of Sheikh Sattar being murdered, is one more example of the way that al Qaeda operates. They killed his father. They killed his siblings. That caused him to understand what kind of ruthless organization they were. That caused him to look to the coalition, to try to find a better life for his kids and the families around him. Because the sheikhs in that area had in fact turned to a better way for their kids, they are now under attack by al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda has no promise of anything good for their children. And their way of enforcing their poor vision is to murder people. The Iraqis will see that as the sheikhs in Al Anbar have seen it over time. How long that whole process takes, I do not know, but there is value in learning the lessons of what has made a difference in Al Anbar,

and that difference has been made by the clear understanding of the local leaders that al Qaeda has no vision for them other than subjugation, and then their determination to lead locally to bring a better life. And that's beginning to take root in other places, like Diyala, for example, where some sheikhs there are starting to look at the Anbar example and coming together in a way that's very hopeful.

Q Mr. Secretary?

Q General, you're wrapping up your military career in a couple weeks, and your successor, Admiral Mike Mullen, was asked during his confirmation hearing about the most significant mistakes in Iraq. And he listed maybe a handful, and it included disbanding the entire Iraqi army and transitioning to stability operations with insufficient American forces. And he said, quote, "I believe many of these are still having an impact."

You were vice chief when these decisions were being made. First of all, I'm wondering, do you think these are significant mistakes? And where were you when the decision was made on disbanding the Iraqi army, and then questions of should more forces be sent over?

GEN. PACE: Fair enough. First of all, the Iraqi army was not disbanded, it disintegrated. One of the mistakes I made in my assumptions going in was that the Iraqi people and the Iraqi army would welcome liberation; that the Iraqi army, given the opportunity, would stand together for the Iraqi people and be available to them to help serve the new nation. They disintegrated in the face of the coalition first several weeks of combat. So they weren't there. And then the decision was made in country with regard to whether or not they should be recalled, try to regroup or how they were going to do that.

So as you look back on that, if I knew that the Iraqi army was not going to be available, then I probably would have made a different recommendation about the total size force going in, not forgetting that in 2003 when we were going in, we had almost 500,000 troops in the pipeline.

We had 150,000 going in, but we had that -- the whole pipeline, and also not forgetting that we were doing this in full view of television and radio. And everybody knew -- everybody knew -- that we would have 500,000 troops in Kuwait and that we would have a 45-day bombing campaign before we went in. And what we did, based on military judgment and recommendations that were done by military leaders, including me, with one across with 150,000, got to Baghdad in three weeks without all the death and destruction that a bombing campaign would have envisioned. But when we got there, we did not have the Iraqi armed forces available to help provide security.

So were there errors in assumption? I certainly made that error of assuming that the Iraqi army would be there. In retrospect, you say, you wish you knew. But you didn't know on the way in.

So it's fair to, and we should, have very close scrutiny, so we can learn the lessons and not repeat them. But I have gone back in the things that I have recommended. And I am comfortable in my own mind with the things that I knew at the time, the recommendations I had made.

Another example: Had you asked me in January of 2006, should we build the Army and the Marine Corps -- U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps? I would have told you, no. The reason was that by December of '06, we were going to build a 325,000-man Iraqi army, and we did. And we were going to equip them, and we did. And we were going to turn over the responsibility for security to them, and we did not.

And what happened in between was February bombing of the golden mosque, which ignited long-simmering hatred between Sunni and Shi'a, which created an environment inside of which then General [sic] Casey, who was the commander at the time on the ground, said, around July, not only am I not going to be able to get down around 10 to 12 brigades like I thought I was, but I may have to come back in and ask you all for more troops. Which then put us into the cycle of analysis, like I just briefed for this recommendation, that we

came forward to the president in December of '06 and recommended the surge and at the same time recommended the increase in the size of the Army and increase in the size of the Marine Corps.

So it is fair to go back and do the analysis to understand what you should have known and what you did know and to understand then how to not repeat those kinds of errors. But given what I knew at the time, I'm comfortable with the recommendations that I made.

Q Mr. Secretary, in terms of the long-term vision, realistically, assuming we don't have another Samarra bombing, and kind of a realistic best-case scenario, how many troops are going to be there for the next president of the United States, January 20th, 2009? Are we talking realistically 80 (thousand), 100,000?

And if I could just also question to General Pace, you heard Secretary Pace -- Secretary Gates say that, you know, he was at his most optimistic moment since taking the job, took the job at a pretty tough time. You've been here a lot longer, through some pretty optimistic times, some optimistic talk we heard right from there. What makes you think that this will be different and that we will be able to actually follow through on a plan to draw down and draw down beyond July and get to this? We've heard these drawdown plans before. Why is this different?

SEC. GATES: One of the sad aspect of war is there's no script. That history hasn't been written yet, and the enemy has a vote. I can tell you what my hope is. My hope is that the situation continues to develop as it has for the last several months, as we anticipate it will for the next several months, through the end of the year.

And my hope is that when he does his assessment in March that General Petraeus will be able to say that he thinks that the pace of drawdowns can continue at the same rate in the second half of the year as in the first half of the year. That's my hope.

But as you all are as aware as anybody, the -- those in the intelligence business, we always used to divide all the information we wanted to know into two categories -- secrets and mysteries -- things that were knowable and things that weren't.

What the situation in Iraq a year from now will be is a mystery, not a secret. And -- but I think that, as you heard the first two days this week, I think General Petraeus has a lot of confidence in our troops and a lot of confidence in the successes that we've had so far, and on that basis has been able to make his projections and plans for the first half of the year. We'll see how it goes from there.

Q But just to be clear, on that hope -- going at the same pace for the second half of the year -- that gets us down to about 10 combat brigades by January of 2009 and about 100,000 troops for the next president --

SEC. GATES: That would be the math.

GEN. PACE: The answer to the other part of your question, the -- I just drew a blank, I apologize. Repeat your question, John. I apologize.

Q (Inaudible) -- secretary say this was the most optimistic --

GEN. PACE: Thanks. Thank you. Remembering that the reason we had the surge in the first place -- we recommended the surge -- was to buy time for the Iraqi government to provide the kind of leadership that we knew and know was needed for the Iraqi people, that the national leadership has not provided as much of that plus-up in governance as we would have hoped. But on the other hand, the local politicians and local religious leaders have in fact taken advantage of the security environment and the bottom-up swell, like in Al Anbar, like in Diyala, has taken advantage of the opportunities.

So it's because of that that you can project -- again, though, it's -- as the secretary said, it's not a guarantee. The projection is that more and more local and national Iraqi leaders will lead their followers to a less violent, better life. You can have 100,000 more troops go in, and if you don't have the Iraqi leaders and the Iraqi people deciding that they love their kids more than they hate each other, you -- this is not going to turn around. But in Al Anbar and in Diyala, it is turning around because of that change in attitude. And that's why, I believe, there is an opportunity here to continue to provide security with size forces that General Petraeus and all the other chiefs and Admiral Fallon have recommended to the president to allow him to continue to provide that kind of security into next year and give the Iraqis the opportunity to build on the successes that they've had so far.

SEC. GATES: I would just add one thing. We've -- it's not only what we achieve, but we're always -- you're always helped if your enemy, if your adversary makes mistakes. Al Qaeda clearly made a mistake in Anbar. What's interesting is there are just -- you know, one of these things where you're just barely seeing the first ripples. But Jaish al-Mahdi may have made some mistakes in the Shi'a area. The violence at Karbala on the religious holiday, the assassination of the two Shi'a governors -- there are some signs that the Shi'a are perhaps beginning to have the same -- get the same kind of wake-up call with respect to their extremists that the Sunnis in Anbar did very early in the process. And who knows what will happen.

But it's those kinds of things that I think they're looking at and seeing if there are some opportunities.

Q You made a great point of unanimity on the recommendation, but the recommendation really seems like a product of the rotation schedule. As long as you weren't going to break 15 months on the ground, you were stuck with not being able to get a larger force. So it really was a question of how fast you were going to draw down. So is this really a unanimous decision looking at all the possibilities out there, or is this simply a product of the rotation schedule?

GEN. PACE: Yeah. I would say that the recommendations from all of us were informed by resource availability, not dictated by it. What I mean is, the current policies for rotation, the policies could change. So, first we looked at what made sense militarily, and then once we agreed on what made sense militarily, then how do you resource it? Part of what you want to be able to do is sustain a certain level of force for the nation. And this is an all-volunteer force. We need to pay respect to the fact that it's an all-volunteer force, that we have families who are sacrificing for the nation every bit as much as those of us who wear the uniform, so that we can continue to do what we're doing. So, of course we pay attention to the rotation schedule and the like, but that is not what drove the decision. What drove the decision is what was most likely to continue to build on success in Iraq.

And there was difference in emphasis. Clearly, General Petraeus, as he should, was focused on how many troops he needed inside Iraq to get the job done. And he should do that. And if I were him, I would do the exact same thing. Admiral Fallon focused on what he needed in his region, as he should. And if I were he, I would do the same thing. And as a member of the Joint Chiefs and as the chairman, I looked at what did the nation need not only for all that area, but also globally to have available to us to respond to unanticipated requirements.

When you lay all that on the table and you lay on the table the progress that was being made to date in the surge, it led us all to understand that the best way forward was the one that General Petraeus articulated, but again, you could put any of our names on that document and the recommendation was the same.

Q Can I just follow up on this? We've all been trying to do the math on how many troops are really going to be out of there by July, and General Petraeus has made it's pretty clear he's not talking about the supporting forces, he's talking about the combat brigades which add up to 21,500.

The surge has always been put at 30,000. How many troops are going to come home by July of '08?

GEN. PACE: Assuming that the conditions are such that he can in fact send the troops home that he's projecting sent home, you're talking between 20(,000) and 30,000. The math is exactly as you laid it out. When

we talked about adding the five brigades, we talked about 21,500 going in, and the request came in for the Aviation Brigade and for some of the combat service support that added upwards of a total of 30,000 going in as part of the surge.

As General Petraeus and we have looked at coming back out, the ground combat forces can come out for sure assuming that the conditions are such that as we predicted. The aviation assets and the combat service support assets are also extremely useful. When we turn over responsibility to the Iraqis and they call for help from us, it's those kinds of assets that can help.

So to be precise at a five-digit figure that you can put a period after, I can't do that for you, but it's going to be between 20,000 and 30,000 based on the conditions on the ground. And to be more precise would be guessing.

SEC. GATES: He left open what number of the combat support might be coming back.

David.

Q Just to take you back to the Webb amendment, you laid out a long list of steps that might be required if that was adopted, but the Army has already identified the units that are going to Iraq over the next year. And this is for General Pace as well, obviously. And so I guess my question is: If that amendment were adopted, would those steps that you laid out have to be implemented now, or would they -- would this amendment really only start to bite next year when this -- the next rotation begins to come out?

GEN. PACE: It really takes hold not at the combat brigade level, the 15 brigades, the 20 brigades -- the things that you properly point out the Army has in fact laid out for the next period of time, so that's as you described it -- below that, though, you've got all the combat support -- combat service support units, and these are the ones that we rely very heavily in many cases on the Guard and Reserve. And when you start mixing and matching them and get the right amount of time at home for individuals -- we want to respect the no more than 12-month mobilization time for the Guard and Reserve so that they have predictables as well -- when you look at all the things that you want to be able to do to provide the stability and predictability to the force, you turn -- it's like a kaleidoscope; when you just turn it, everything else around it turns.

And it's just not -- it's just not simple math. So when people start picking at pieces of the process, it impacts parts of the process that you really don't even see until you try to react to that and make it work.

SEC. GATES: Let me give you -- let me give you a couple of examples. The truth of the matter is it has been difficult for the -- particularly for the Army to meet my policy decision with respect to 12 months at home for the active force and a maximum of 12 months mobilized for the National Guard. And they spend a lot of time. I can't tell you how many hundreds of options they look at.

You all brought to our attention a company in Germany that hadn't had the dwell time that it was supposed to have. They were going to go. They didn't go, but -- thanks to finding it out and being able to pursue it.

Just to give you an example, I was signing the orders, going through the orders, two or three weeks ago. We were going to have to bring up a postal unit. There was no replacement. So they wanted to extend this postal unit for, I don't know, two months, a month, something like that. And we basically made them go back and try and find some other way to provide that service to the troops while they were there.

So I guess what I'm trying to say is legislation is one thing. It's a challenge for us just -- apropos of exactly what Pete is saying -- for us just -- for the Army to meet the policy requirements that I've levied on them.

GEN. PACE: That's an example -- that's an example also, if I may, of an answer that -- follow-on to what

David asked before, which is if I could go back to October 2001 and make a different recommendation, I would make a different recommendation about it, what and how we use the Guard and Reserve. Because when we went into Afghanistan, we needed X number of Guard and Reserve. And we had many, many more Guard and Reserve personnel volunteering to do that mission.

So we took all -- we took the volunteers, because it made sense. They were great Americans. They wanted to go, and we could take them and do the job properly. We had no clue that Iraq was going to be happening after that. Iraq happens. We need a lot of Guard and Reserve. And now we look at the Guard and Reserve, and you go to Unit A. And it's already been 25 percent of Unit A. They are great Americans who volunteered to go, and they went to Afghanistan. So now you have to replace that 25 percent, and you do that by borrowing some guys from Unit B. Over time, that built on itself to where you were -- we were using first two, then four, then eight, then 16 units to build one unit to be able to go, after being properly trained, to do the mission.

About a year ago, then, or whatever it's been since the secretary made his decisions, we were able to --

SEC. GATES: It just sounds like a year. (Chuckles.)

GEN. PACE: Yes, sir.

We were just able to stop that and say we need to get clarity and predictability into this, which is why the 12 months and the rotation cycle -- but that's -- and that's a place where if I could go all the way back to October 2001, I would have -- I would today recommend you have 2001 -- that we go in with whole units without regard to volunteering.

Q But just bottom line, the Webb amendment's impact in the near term would primarily be on combat support. Is that fair to say? Is that what you're telling us?

GEN. PACE: I have not read the -- I don't know, because I have not read the Webb amendment. All I can tell you is that right now, the places we're having the most difficulty abiding by all the current, proper rules and policies is in the support units. And any more tweaking of that is going to turn that kaleidoscope just that much more.

Q General Pace, we may not get see you before you leave. And while you're waxing reflective, I have a couple things. One, how does Iraq, September 2007, differ from the image you had Iraq would be at this point when you were planning the invasion in March of 2003? And I have a follow-up on something you told Bob Woodward for "State of Denial. (Pause.)

(Laughter, cross talk.) But one question: How does Iraq differ from what you assumed it would be?

GEN. PACE: Certainly I would have thought in 2003 that the -- as I mentioned, that the Iraqi army was going to be -- stay intact and be loyal to the Iraqi people and government; that the Iraqi people would welcome the liberation. And clearly, over time, A, the Iraqi army disintegrated and was not available; B, the sectarian violence has been stoked in a way that we did not predict. So it's very different than what I thought it would be by September 2007.

Q Well, Woodward asked you in time for the book, in the interview, "Do you have any doubts it was the right decision to invade Iraq?" And you said, "I have no doubts at all. None. Zero." Do you still hold by that, or do you have some doubts?

GEN. PACE: I absolutely do, absolutely do, absolutely do.

Q (Off mike) -- grow anymore?

GEN. PACE: Twenty-six million Iraqis are -- have the opportunity now -- they are working their way through three and a half decades of being trod upon, held down -- no opportunity at all for freedom of expression, for living their lives the way they wanted to, of picking their own leaders.

Is it frustrating that they aren't as far along as we are 230 years into our existence? Sure. But from the standpoint of threat to our country, please, read not only Woodward's book but read what al Qaeda has on their 'net about their intent, their hundred-year intent, for the destruction of our society.

The dialogue right now in our country -- some people misunderstand for -- whether or not we can vote our way in or out of this war. That's not the point. The point is, we have an enemy who has declared that they want to destroy us and they want to kill us. As long as we have that enemy, we are in a war. So the dialogue is about where are we going to stand and fight. And I'm proud of the fact that we stood and fought in Afghanistan and we are standing and fighting in Iraq.

And did we make mistakes? Yes. But are we on the right path? Yes. Is providing additional freedom for Iraqis and Afghans providing additional freedom for us at home? You bet. The more free people are in the world, the stronger our democracy is, and the safer our democracy is.

So I stand by those words to Bob Woodward, today and tomorrow.

SEC. GATES: I think that's a good place to stop.

Q On Israel, what was Israel targeting in Syria, sir?

SEC. GATES: You have to ask the Israelis. We don't comment on -- (off mike).

Q Did they use F-16s? (No audible reply.)

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call(202)347-1400