

Top US general ousted in Pentagon shakeup

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Marine Corps General Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, became the latest political casualty of the US crisis in Iraq when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced Friday that he was not recommending that President Bush nominate Pace for a second two-year term.

As the *Washington Post* put it on Saturday, “The surprise announcement yesterday at the Pentagon amounts to Pace being fired before a customary second two-year term.” Pace, the first Marine officer to serve as the chief military adviser to the president and defense secretary, became only the second joint chiefs chairman to leave after only one term, the other being Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who left in 1964, during the Vietnam War.

The decision on Pace followed the announcement last week by Adm. Edmund Giambastiani, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, that he would retire at the end of his current term. The terms of office for both Pace and Giambastiani expire September 30 of this year.

At a Pentagon press conference, Gates said he would recommend that Bush nominate the chief of naval operations, Adm. Michael G. Mullen, to succeed Pace, and Marine Corps Gen. James E. Cartwright, now head of the Strategic Command, to serve as his vice chairman.

The ousting of Pace is both an expression of the crisis facing the US in Iraq and a move to fashion a bipartisan political consensus with the Democrats on a strategy to continue the occupation of the country.

Neither Pace nor his designated successor was present when Gates made his announcement. Pace had let it be known that he wished to continue as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and unnamed associates told the press that he was “deeply disappointed.”

Gates told the press that he had made the decision to replace Pace “reluctantly.” He said he had canvassed senior senators from both parties on the prospects for Senate confirmation hearings on Pace’s reappointment. These would occur in September, at the same time as top US commanders in Iraq are scheduled to provide Congress with a progress report on the Bush administration’s “surge” of US troops in Iraq.

The defense secretary said that, based on reports from both Democrats and Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee, which conducts such hearings, the proceedings would have focused “on the past, rather than the future, and further, that there was the very real prospect the process would be quite contentious.”

Gates said that these political considerations had led him to abandon his previous intention of recommending Pace’s reappointment.

This is a diplomatic way of saying that he and the administration are intent in evading any public accountability for their political and military decisions in Iraq. The background to the ouster of Pace is a further deterioration of the military situation for the US in Iraq.

US military deaths are climbing rapidly as a result of the “surge” of some 30,000 additional troops and their deployment in an intensified drive to kill or capture insurgents and “secure” Baghdad. After an initial decline in the first weeks of the military escalation, which was launched in February, sectarian killings are once again on the rise in the capital city and the US has failed to gain control of most of Baghdad’s neighborhoods.

The *New York Times* on June 4 reported that an internal military

assessment of the “surge” completed in late May had concluded that American and Iraqi troops controlled less than one-third of the city’s neighborhoods, far short of the initial goal. The report complained that Iraqi police and army units have not provided the forces promised and largely failed to carry out their assignment to “hold” areas cleared out by US forces.

With the ouster of Pace and Giambastiani, virtually all of the top military commanders and advisers under former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have been removed. Rumsfeld, one of the chief architects of the Iraq war, was sacked by Bush within hours of the Republican rout in last November’s congressional elections.

Pace was intimately involved in the planning for the Iraq invasion and the conduct of the war, having become vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff shortly after September 11, 2001. He held that position until he was promoted to head the Joint Chiefs in 2005. Both Pace and Giambastiani were generally considered to be close allies of Rumsfeld.

In January, Gen. John Abizaid, the head of Central Command, which oversees US military operations in the Middle East, was forced to retire earlier than planned after he expressed opposition to Bush’s proposal to escalate US military operations in Iraq. He was replaced by Adm. William J. Fallon, the first Navy officer to head Central Command.

The top commander in Iraq, Gen. George W. Casey, who expressed similar reservations, was replaced by the current commander, Gen. David Petraeus.

Dissent within the military itself no doubt played a role in Pace’s ouster. Numerous press reports have cited complaints from officers that Pace and Giambastiani were too deferential toward Rumsfeld and failed to challenge his war strategy.

On the civilian side, all of the top officials involved in the planning and initial execution of the Iraq war are gone, with the exception of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Bush himself. Rice’s deputy and then successor as national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley, has been sidelined on Iraq policy by the creation of a new post to coordinate Iraq policy within the National Security Council. Last Thursday, Bush’s nominee for the position, Gen. Douglas Lute, testified at a confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee and said he would be reporting directly to the president, and not to Hadley.

Recent actions by Pace may have played a role in his ouster. In March he gave an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* in which he said he was opposed to gays in the military because homosexuality is immoral, a statement that contradicts the official justifications for the “don’t ask—don’t tell” policy of the military on gays. More recently, he sent a letter to the judge in the case of I. Lewis Libby, the former chief of staff to Vice President Cheney, who was convicted of perjury in connection with the investigation into the leak of the CIA identity of Valerie Plame Wilson. Pace’s letter flouted the principle of military neutrality in civilian political affairs.

However, more important was the effort of elements both inside and outside the Bush administration to ratchet down the public rhetoric on the war, suppress the massive popular opposition to its continuation, and seek

a bipartisan consensus to salvage Washington's basic war aims while averting an outright defeat. Gates is a former CIA chief and veteran political operator, who at one point associated himself with the Iraq Study Group. Widely praised by the Democratic leadership, he plays a central role in efforts to develop a bipartisan war policy.

Both Democratic and Republican members of the Senate Armed Services Committee echoed Gates' statements on the need to avoid an accounting for the Iraq disaster in confirmation hearings for chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Noting that the hearings will coincide with the promised September evaluation of the "surge," Sen. Lindsey Graham, Republican from North Carolina, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I don't think you have to be a political Einstein to figure out the confirmation proceedings would have been, rightly or wrongly, a trial of all past mistakes in Iraq. At a time when we need to figure out how to go forward, we would have been spending all of our time retrying mistakes of the past."

The Democrats are no less eager than the Republicans to avoid a confirmation process that would raise the history and origins of the war. Carl Levin of Michigan, the Democratic chairman of the committee, joined in supporting a 'forward-looking' process that did not dwell on the past. He said in a statement, "I found that the views of many senators reflected my own, namely, that a confirmation hearing on General Pace's reappointment would have been a backward-looking debate about the last four years."

Levin went on to say that Adm. Mullen was "well-qualified" for the Joint Chiefs chairmanship, indicating that Mullen will have an easy path to confirmation.

On Sunday, two days after Gates' announcement, the *Washington Post* published a front-page article by the newspaper's chief military reporter Thomas Ricks entitled "Military Envisions Longer Stay in Iraq." Saying he had interviewed more than 20 military officers in Iraq, including senior commanders, Ricks wrote, "US military officials here are increasingly envisioning a 'post-occupation' troop presence in Iraq that neither maintains current levels nor leads to a complete pullout, but aims for a smaller, longer-term force that would remain in the country for years."

He went on to describe a plan that would leave at least 50,000 US troops in Iraq for an indefinite period. The plan, he wrote, "is based on officials' assessment that a sharp drawdown of troops is likely to begin by the middle of next year, with roughly two-thirds of the current force of 150,000 moving out by late 2008 or early 2009."

However, 20,000 US soldiers would remain to "guarantee the security of the Iraqi government and to assist Iraqi forces or their US advisers if they got into fights they can't handle." A training and advisory force of some 10,000 would "work with Iraqi military and police units." There would be a "small but significant" Special Forces Operations unit "focused on fighting the Sunni insurgent group al-Qaeda in Iraq." Finally, "the headquarters and logistical elements to command and supply such a force would total more than 10,000 troops, plus some civilian contractors."

"I think you'll retain a very robust counterterror capability in this country for a long, long time," a Pentagon official in Iraq is quoted as saying.

Ricks adds that some officers in Iraq are "quietly saying" that they "really have until January 20, 2009—when President Bush leaves office—to put the smaller, revised force in place."

This report follows the statements by Gates and White House spokesman Tony Snow late last month that the US will maintain permanent military bases in the country.

Also last month, the *Washington Post's* foreign affairs columnist David Ignatius published a piece on a "post-surge" strategy for Iraq being discussed by Bush and his senior military and foreign affairs advisers "that they hope could gain bipartisan political support."

The plan outlined by Ignatius tracks that reported Sunday by Ricks in the *Post*. Citing senior administration officials, Ignatius wrote that the plan is "focused on elements that Democrats say they would continue to support, such as training the Iraqi military and hunting Al Qaeda, even as they set a timetable for withdrawing combat forces."

These plans virtually reproduce language that was included in the Democrats' various war-funding bills, all of which allowed for an indefinite continuation of the US occupation of Iraq involving tens of thousands of US troops.

With the current "surge" in Iraq failing to achieve any of its stated goals, the path is being cleared for a bipartisan compromise, perhaps to be implemented after Bush's departure, that would maintain the brutal US occupation of Iraq. This is the real content of the Democrats' posturing as opponents of the war.

Pace's ouster was ultimately carried out to smooth the way for such an outcome. However, there is no reason to believe that these plans will prove any more successful than the disastrous strategy pursued to date.

Nor do they imply any reduction in US military violence in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. The appointment of Naval commanders to the top posts both for the Joint Chiefs and at Central Command suggests an intensification of carrier-based air strikes and other bloody means of suppressing Iraqi resistance to US neo-colonial rule.

And the new strategies being contemplated in Iraq by no means rule out an expansion of the war to Iran or Syria or a buildup of American forces in Afghanistan, options that have been advocated by many leading Democrats. Significantly, Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democrats' most consistent and bellicose supporter of the Bush administration in Iraq, used an appearance Sunday on CBS News' "Face the Nation" program to call for a military strike against Iran.

"I think we've got to be prepared to take aggressive military action against the Iranians to stop them from killing Americans in Iraq," he said. "And to me, that would include a strike over the border into Iran, where we have good evidence they have a base at which they are training these people coming back into Iraq to kill our soldiers."



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