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A Shake-up at Defense

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By John Collins.

To many observers the President's nomination of Leon Panetta (an archetypal Washington Insider) to replace Robert Gates at [DOD](#), and the shuffling of David Petraeus to the CIA represent business as usual. Or, in the [words of](#) Stephen Walt: 'rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.' I believe this view vastly understates the significance of the change that has just occurred. Sure, to those critics arguing for a more minimalist foreign policy (Walt becoming something of a [standard-bearer](#) for this view of late), anything which doesn't bluntly hack at what they perceive as Washington's imperialist foreign policy [machine](#) will seem inadequate. But in terms of President Obama's own ostensible aim of realigning American military commitments to a post-hyperpower environment, this can be viewed as his most proactive step so far.



Farewell to the Ancien Régime:

For a start the shake-up rings the final death knell of the foreign policy establishment inherited from Bush II. As the young and inexperienced Democratic President came to Office in the midst of an economic meltdown, two wars and a federal bureaucracy recovering from a series of [cripplingly incompetent](#) leaders, President Obama chose continuity over change in the DOD as he sought to find his feet. Robert Gates was the most prominent example of this. Affectionately referred to as 'Yoda' within the Obama West Wing, he has won bipartisan [plaudits](#) as one of the greatest Defense Secretaries in U.S. history. He has also held enormous leverage over the new President and the mere spectre of his resignation arguably helped win the day for the McCrystal Afghan strategy, and later helped ensure that no U.S. boots would be stepping foot in Libya. The Obama administration's first two years were an exercise in crisis management and Robert Gates – straddling the divide between the administration that had wrought many of the crises, and the one now tasked with solving them – was the most integral member. His departure marks the end of the post-Bush Defense era and the beginning of the Obama Defense era proper.

The second major shakeup is of course the upcoming move of Gen. David Petraeus from ISAF to the CIA. His own motivations for taking the job appear puzzling and there is some [disquiet](#) about how well he will fit into the CIA culture. But for the President it is a veritable political coup. Petraeus has long been seen as something of a thorn in the President's side when it came to [relations with](#) the Pentagon. Most significantly perhaps, around the time of the Afghan Strategy Review when he was seen as stonewalling all efforts at providing an alternative strategy to [COIN](#). There were also the unending [rumors](#) of a possible presidential bid. With his political heft now removed from the halls of the pentagon, Obama [appears](#) free to nominate General James Cartwright as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Cartwright is supposedly someone whom the President trusts, and who famously sought to bypass the Mullen-Petraeus-McCrystal triumvirate and bring an alternative proposal to the President during the Afghan Review. Meanwhile, by moving Petraeus to the CIA, the President has kept one of America's leading strategic minds within his administration and neutered any talk of a 2012 run.

The Coming of the Obama Era:

The turmoil in the middle east has brought into relief many outlines of the Obama foreign policy [outlook](#) and [approach](#). The future of his defense policy has also become increasingly visible in the last few weeks of fiscal rhetoric. In particular, the spending free-for-all initiated in response to 9/11 is likely to be reined in. Getting the U.S. defense establishment to live within the nation's shrinking means is likely to be a major legacy issue for this president, and the appointment of Leon Panetta offers perhaps the clearest signal of where Obama wants to take the DOD. As Clausewitz writes on his [blog](#) for the Economist:

"Mr Gates' replacement, Leon Panetta, the current director of the CIA, is a vastly experienced operator who will have less compunction than Mr Gates in chasing down the savings implied by Mr Obama's ambitious goal of cutting \$400 billion from the defence budget by 2023. Mr Panetta is also a calming, consensual figure who will go about his work without frightening the horses too much."

Overall, as Clausewitz convincingly argues in his blog, it seems that the President's shake-up is a reasonably transparent effort to mould the defence establishment more to his liking. In a brilliant political two-step, Obama has undertaken a quite radical change yet presented it as continuity. In so doing he has laid the basis for a new era in American defense policy that can be made more responsive to his own world view. How he uses this new power remains to be seen. But one thing appears clear: when Petraeus and Mullen leave at end of this year the Pentagon will be losing two characters of enormous clout and importance. Meanwhile, the incoming Secretary and [CJCS](#) will be closer to the President and both willing and able to implement his vision. Change, it seems, is coming to the DOD.

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