

Carter's Coming Challenges

AT LEAST Ashton B. Carter knows what he's getting in to. If Carter is confirmed to be President Obama's fourth Defense Secretary, he can quickly and seamlessly take command of the Defense Department. He knows the ins and outs of the Pentagon and the job of SECDEF, having served for years in other top DOD positions. This includes as deputy Defense Secretary, the building's No. 2 position, as recently as December 2013.

This modicum of continuity is important because Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's surprise resignation late last year meant the Obama Administration has now burned through three Defense Secretaries in less than six years. Hagel, Leon E. Panetta, and Robert M. Gates (who also served under George W. Bush) combined to serve the same term under Obama as Donald H. Rumsfeld alone did for Bush.

Hagel was pushed out before Obama selected his replacement, and three names widely considered to be front-runners quickly declined interest in the job. Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), Homeland Security Secretary Jeh C. Johnson, and Center for a New American Security CEO Michèle A. Flournoy each asked not to be considered.

Carter may be Obama's fourth choice for Defense Secretary, but he is a safe pick who will likely sail through his confirmation hearings. He offers an in-depth knowledge of the Pentagon's politics, operations, finances, acquisition, and weapon systems. He also brings top-notch academic credentials. He is a Yale graduate who went on to earn a doctorate in theoretical physics at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He later taught at Harvard.

Carter may have just two years to lead the Pentagon, but the issues he must confront are many:

- The war against the ISIS terrorists, primarily in Iraq and Syria, requires deft leadership. The White House is reluctant to send in US ground troops, and the air war has been cautious and highly limited. At the same time, the Administration has been reluctant to just walk away from the fight against these brutal and ambitious terrorists.

- The US combat mission in Afghanistan is technically at an end, but the

drawdown will continue for some time. DOD needs to maintain a viable presence in the country so as to not leave a security vacuum. Iraq today is an obvious example of what can go wrong when the US leaves an unstable area to fend for itself.

- Vladimir Putin's Russia is increasingly aggressive and provocative. It has already acted out against Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine and is ramping up deliberately threatening combat flights near the US, northern Europe, and elsewhere. Russia has shown little

The predictable difficulties will be tough enough.

willingness to return to a cooperative relationship with NATO and the West.

- China continues to quickly and significantly bolster its military capabilities while simultaneously making territorial claims that threaten and intimidate its neighbors. It is difficult to understand China's military and national security desires—let alone ascertain how much the nation is actually spending on defense.

- The US is committed to helping defend South Korea from the aggressive dictatorship to its north, where North Korea goes through repeated cycles of quiet provocation—and sometimes overtly hostile action.

- On a more humanitarian note, relief operations must be assumed. Whether it is Ebola relief in West Africa, or helping nations recover after earthquakes, DOD will be called on to help those in need. The department needs to keep the requisite skills and equipment ready.

- Financially, DOD's equipment is old, overused, and in need of modernization and reset. The department must upgrade its gear while managing a shrinking defense budget that might become a whole lot worse in 2016. Absent congressional action few people assume will actually occur, sequestration will rear its destructive and arbitrary head again next year. The effect on DOD readiness and modernization would be devastating.

- The US military is still attempting to adjust its forces and relationships to better meet unique and rising demands throughout the Pacific. This "rebal-

ance" has been repeatedly pushed to the background as crises flared up worldwide.

These are just some of the known problems Carter will have to deal with. It is a certainty that things will not go according to plan over the next two years.

Hagel, for example, was expected to focus on managing a shrinking DOD budget while presiding over the end of the Afghanistan mission. He instead found himself dealing with major crises—Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a desperate-but-tepid battle against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The world rarely cooperates with America's plans.

Another unknown is just how much leeway Carter will actually have in dealing with these myriad challenges. After leaving office, both Gates and Panetta bitterly complained about being micromanaged by the National Security Council staff in the White House.

"I hope that Dr. Carter fully understands that, as previous secretaries of defense have strongly attested, he will likely have limited influence over the tight circle around the President who apparently control the entire strategic decision-making process," said incoming Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.). Carter may "be subject to incessant micromanagement by the White House on a level not seen since the Vietnam War," McCain said.

Asked after Hagel's resignation about the alleged micromanagement, White House spokesman Josh Earnest offered an interesting perspective. "I do believe that if you sort of look back at previous Administrations ... there's always some natural tension that exists between the Pentagon and the White House. The President is, after all, the Commander in Chief," Earnest said. "So he obviously has a significant say [over DOD]."

True, and Carter spent enough time as Panetta's deputy to know this is exactly what he signed up for. "If confirmed in this job, I pledge to you my most candid strategic advice," Carter said at the White House ceremony for his nomination. "I pledge also that you will receive equally candid military advice."

Hopefully this will be the case—and that Obama listens to his Secretary's counsel. ★