

# Kabuki in the E-Ring

## Ten Questions on the CJCS Decision

By Thomas L. Wilkerson

*“Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. That’s why Americans have never lost nor will ever lose a war.”*

— General George S. Patton, 1944

A hastily called press conference at the Pentagon, a grim-faced Robert Gates at the lectern, and another unexpected shake-up in the nation’s military leadership. This time Marine General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), was being given his walking papers after only a single two-year term. Secretary Gates made the announcement, citing the potential for a “contentious” reconfirmation hearing. A “reluctant” President Bush had agreed with the decision, the Defense Secretary reported.

Secretary Gates said he had recommended to the President that Admiral Mike Mullen, Chief of Naval Operations and Gates’ next-door neighbor, succeed General Pace as CJCS. That meant the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had to go; there could not be two officers of the same service in the top military posts. In a fortuitous bit of timing, Admiral Edmund P. Giambastiani earlier in the week had announced his intention to retire. Secretary Gates recommended Marine General James E. Cartwright, currently the Commander of Strategic Command, to succeed the admiral (no immediate word on the next CNO).

Further complicating accountability on war policy, Army Lieutenant General Douglas E. Lute announced in his Senate confirmation hearings that as the new “war czar” he would report directly to the President on all policy and military issues involving both Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, a lieutenant general still on active duty will have the capability to trump the advice of those who nominally outrank him—the national security adviser, the Defense Secretary, the new CJCS, and legions of four-stars—on matters related to the most important U.S. combat zones anywhere in the world.

Oh, really?

What to make of this Kabuki dance in the Executive Branch? Here are some dangling questions and potential answers.

### **Question 1: Why did Secretary Gates pass on General Pace?**

Conventional wisdom says that his confirmation hearing would end up a contentious media opportunity for those in Congress who disagree with the President’s war policy—a redux of the confirmation hearings for General George Casey to become Army Chief of Staff. Yet the Democratic-controlled Senate confirmed Casey despite his dismal record in Iraq, and Pace did not want to leave. What changed? Quite simply, General Pace was too closely identified with the failed war policies of Donald Rumsfeld, Gates’ mercurial predecessor, and of the President. Like it or not, Pace was no longer viewed as part of the solution, but rather as part of the problem.

### **Question 2: What are the precedents for such an action?**

Only 2 of 15 previous JCS chairmen departed after one term: Army General Lyman Lemnitzer left in 1962 to become Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR); General Maxwell Taylor left in 1964 to become U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam. All others served at least two full terms. Perhaps the strongest and most damning comparison, Army General Earle Wheeler was Chairman for



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six consecutive years during the bloodiest period of the Vietnam War (1964-70).

***Question 3: Why not let General Pace go for confirmation and fight for his job?***

The military services currently are the most admired institutions in our nation. When Gates nominated Mullen he effectively prevented our senior military leader from becoming caught in a political quagmire not of his making. Pace will retire with honor having provided his advice in private to his principal bosses, the Secretary of Defense and the President. But another question lingers; if presidential decisions on the war crossed his mental “line in the sand,” why didn’t General Pace retire of his own volition before now? He may have answered that a few days after his firing, telling a military audience in Norfolk, Virginia, that he equated quitting in wartime with letting down the troops.

***Question 4: Why nominate Admiral Mullen? Does his nomination remove the potential for a “contentious” confirmation hearing?***

First, he is Teflon-coated, having had no obvious impact on the war strategy. Second, he is widely recognized as an unflappable, jointly-focused military leader. In his

short tenure as CNO, Mullen has overseen an individual augmentee program that has brought more than 12,000 Sailors into ground duty in Iraq and Afghanistan—more Sailors on land in a war zone than at any time in recent memory. This action represents a significant sacrifice to Navy readiness and retention. Mullen engineered it over objections inside the Navy because he knew the Army needed help and the Navy could provide it. His mantra: Sailors march to the sound of the guns, too.

As for his nomination sidetracking a potentially nasty confirmation battle, absolutely not. The irony is that the Democratic majority in the Senate, if it chooses, can still use Mullen’s confirmation hearing as a challenge to Bush administration war policy.

***Question 5: For the second time in this administration the Army and Air Force were denied either of the top two military positions. Should these services feel snubbed, left out?***

Be careful what you ask for—you might just get it. The real question is could any military leader today from any service change the inevitable course of the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan? The answer is only one—and he is already Army, General David Petraeus. The Army and the Air Force brass should thank their lucky “stars” that their

services are not on the political front lines, save for newly anointed “war czar” Lute, and General Petraeus.

**Question 6: Many armchair generals opined that General Pace was too deferential to the civilian DOD leadership, read Rumsfeld. To what extent was this true and will Admiral Mullen be any different?**

CJCS under the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 is the principal military adviser to the President but has no command authority. To be effective in this role, the CJCS, whether Pace or Mullen, could never disclose in public what he advises in private to the Secretary of Defense and the President. Even General Colin Powell, who successfully implemented the new CJCS powers under Goldwater-Nichols, and was the principal architect of the U.S. victory in Operation Desert Storm, provided his advice in private.

Donald Rumsfeld took office determined to reassert civilian control over the U.S. armed forces without ever defining how or when his predecessors lost it. During his six-years as Secretary, Rumsfeld severely reduced the Chairman’s powers to perform his assigned duties and advise the President. He chose to interpret Goldwater-Nichols to mean CJCS would advise only him and, in turn, he alone would advise the President. In so doing, he all but eliminated advice from the other Joint Chiefs. The President in his capacity as commander-in-chief consequently received little direct professional military advice during Rumsfeld’s tenure.

**Question 7: Could any nominee for CJCS have a direct, positive influence on the current war situation in Iraq?**

Short answer—no. The President has charted a course with his “surge strategy.” Congress has deferred action at least until it receives a September progress report from General Petraeus. There are few alternatives left to the President absent support at home, which can only come with indications of success and a positive review from General Petraeus.

**Question 8: What makes Admiral Mullen better qualified than other potential candidates to serve as CJCS?**

Secretary Gates passed over all nine combatant commanders and thereby deemed none of them as capable as



**DAYS DWINDLE DOWN** The three men in the front row other than President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney at this December Pentagon press conference were nearing the end of their time on the job. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (far right) had already been fired by the President; Marine General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (to the left of Mr. Bush), lost his job in June. The Vice Chairman, Navy Admiral Edmund P. Giambastiani (to the right of the President), announced his retirement a few days before that. In the rear, visible between the President and General Pace, is Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Mike Mullen, Pace’s designated successor.

Admiral Mullen. This has not happened since the Goldwater-Nichols Act became law in 1986 and could be viewed as a repudiation of the joint military process. Among all previous CJCS nominees since 1986, Mullen has the least joint command time.

**Question 9: How much of this debacle is directly related to the CJCS position still being a two-year term when the service chiefs have four years and the Secretary of Defense, once confirmed by the Senate, serves at the pleasure of the President?**

The irony should not be lost that civilian secretaries and the service chiefs are relatively bulletproof once confirmed while the “apolitical” CJCS must stand for reconfirmation after two years of service. Why should he not gain at least the same four-year tenure that fellow members of the JCS enjoy? And would that change not serve to further remove the position from political infighting? If that were the case today, none of this would have happened unless the President chose to send General Pace home, as he did Secretary Rumsfeld.

**Question 10: THIS IS THE BIG ONE. With all the foregoing there remains the Patton constant at the top of this article, “Americans love a winner” and General Pace was seen to be part of a losing team. So, will the new players be able to build a winner?**

Inshallah.



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