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## California lawmakers praise Leon Panetta's nomination as Secretary of Defense

Written by

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Gannett

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WASHINGTON — The nomination of Monterey native Leon Panetta to replace Robert Gates as defense secretary drew favorable reactions Thursday from Democrats and Republicans in Congress.

Democratic Rep. Sam Farr, who represents the same California congressional district Panetta once represented, called Panetta "the right choice to serve in this very challenging role. At every step of his accomplished career, he has proven to be a capable and strong leader that has delivered results."

In announcing Panetta's nomination, President Barack Obama also said he will nominate Gen. David Petraeus to take over Panetta's job as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Gates plans to [retire](#) June 30. Panetta

would take the Pentagon job July 1, assuming the Senate confirms him in time.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco said Panetta has "the judgment and background to serve as a strong secretary of defense."

Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who chairs the Senate's intelligence panel and voiced concern two years ago about Panetta's nomination to head the CIA, said Panetta "may be the most skilled person in government."

Panetta's nomination also is supported by notable Republicans, including Rep. Peter King of New York, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

GOP Rep. Mike Rogers of Michigan, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, applauded Panetta's integrity and called him an "outstanding" CIA director.

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"His political and diplomatic skills have helped bring much-needed stability to the agency, and improved the agency's relations with its partners, both abroad and in the U. S. government," he said in a statement.

Not everyone was thrilled by the nomination.

Justin Logan, associate director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, said Panetta may not as well-equipped to cut the Pentagon's budget as people think.

"I don't think he has the gravitas with congressional Republicans that would be required to make big cuts," he said. "I think you would need a very hard-charging defense secretary to get things done."

Panetta's wife, Sylvia, said Thursday that family members and residents of California's central coast are "very proud" of Panetta.

"The folks here trust him, they feel good about him," she said. "They're always admired his tremendous forthrightness, his honesty, his depth of knowledge, and his loyalty to this area here."

She also said their son's military service in Afghanistan has provided Panetta with useful feedback about soldiers' needs and day-to-day life.

Obama called Panetta a "great public servant of our time," citing his patriotism, management skills and record at the CIA.

Panetta, 72, said he has felt increasing "respect and admiration" for the military since serving as a military intelligence officer from 1964 to 1966, after graduating from Santa Clara University.

Part of Panetta's appeal, experts say, is his long and varied career in Washington politics.

"He's already had just about every other job in town, so I don't think he's going to require an intensive amount of training," said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org. "What's not to like?"

The CIA chief began his career in politics as a Republican legislative aide in the Senate. He worked as an assistant to Mayor John Lindsay of New York and ran the U.S. Office for Civil Rights under Nixon.

Starting in 1977, Panetta served eight terms in Congress representing Salinas and the rest of what is now California's 17th District. He was President Bill Clinton's chief of staff from 1994 to 1997.

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Panetta also has plenty of budget-related expertise. He chaired the House Budget Committee for four years and ran the Office of Management and Budget in the 1990s — experience Obama said would "ensure that even as we make tough budget decisions, we'll maintain our military superiority and keep our military the very best in the world."

And tough budget decisions will certainly come.

Along with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and conflict in Libya, Panetta will inherit pressure to lower annual spending at the Pentagon, now at \$670 billion. Obama has called for \$400 billion in defense cuts over the next 12 years.

Experts say the easiest cuts have been made, leaving Panetta with daunting decisions such as whether to cut military personnel.

That may help explain why Panetta was initially reluctant to take the defense secretary's job, according to a senior administration official.

"He loves his current job, and he is very proud of the men and women there at the Central Intelligence Agency," said Sylvia Panetta, who with her husband founded the Panetta Institute for Public Policy at California State University, Monterey Bay. "So, yes, of course he would be reluctant. But his loyalty is to the president, and you don't say no to the president."

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