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The Washington Times

Panetta, Petraeus shuffled at the top

Obama unveils new security team

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President Obama has once again turned to an architect of President Bush's war strategy to fill a major civilian post in his administration - this time elevating Gen. David H. Petraeus, who oversaw the Iraq surge, to be CIA chief, and tapping current agency head Leon E. Panetta to become the next defense secretary.

But that experience seems to play better with the president's usual critics on the right than it does with elements of his liberal base that opposed troop surges in Iraq under Mr. Bush and in Afghanistan under Mr. Obama - both of which were led by Gen. Petraeus.

"Well it looks like two strikes and you're up," said Medea Benjamin, co-founder of the antiwar group Code Pink. "You run two losing wars and you get bumped up to head the CIA. I don't get it."

Mr. Obama himself wasn't always a supporter of Gen. Petraeus, whom he sharply questioned and even accused of punting on the big strategy questions when the general appeared before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in 2007 to discuss the surge. But Mr. Obama last June tapped the general to head the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan to replace Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal.

And now tapping two people who are already part of his inner circle worried others, who said the president needs to take bolder action to break a stalemated strategy.

"President Obama's decision to fill these positions from within his administration signals an unwillingness to rethink U.S. foreign policy," said Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

As for Mr. Panetta, the former Democratic congressman and White House chief of staff has proved to be as popular with Republicans as with Democrats. He is set to replace outgoing Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration who is leaving the Pentagon in June.

"The president is to be commended for choosing competence and continuity in asking Gen. Petraeus to serve as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and Leon Panetta as secretary of defense," Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said, echoing other members of the GOP leadership in Congress. "I have valued working with both of these leaders."

The moves, which Mr. Obama announced Thursday along with naming veteran diplomat Ryan C. Crocker

to become the next ambassador in Afghanistan, fill out the president's national security team as he heads into the latter half of his four-year term and leaves him with an experienced set of operators.

"I cannot think of a group of individuals better suited to lead our national security team during this difficult time," Mr. Obama said in an East Room announcement. "I'm grateful for the service that they've already provided, and I'm confident that they will continue to do everything that they can to ensure America's safety and security - not just today but tomorrow."

The three men and Marine Gen. John Allen, whom Mr. Obama picked to succeed Gen. Petraeus at the helm of ISAF, require Senate confirmation.

The shakeup of Mr. Obama's national security team comes as the nation is winding down the war in Iraq and set to begin drawing down troops in Afghanistan this summer. The country also is still involved in military operations in Libya, where it's part of a coalition enforcing a U.N.-authorized no-fly zone in the North African country.

Like Gen. Petraeus, Mr. Panetta has advocated increased use of unmanned drones to strike and special operations forces against terrorists in Pakistan and elsewhere - tactics that have been criticized by the antiwar movement.

Code Pink's Ms. Benjamin said it shows that Mr. Obama "is not the peace president that we had hoped."

"One of the few things we can say is we're withholding our votes and our energies - we're not going to be there for you" on election day, she said.