



Next SecDef: Familiar face, familiar problems

By Andrew Tilghman
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The White House on Friday formally announced its nominee to run the Pentagon during the final months of the Obama administration, tapping Ash Carter, a well-known technocrat who is expected to "hit the ground running."

Carter has held high-level Defense Department jobs under Presidents Obama and Clinton, most recently as deputy secretary, the Pentagon's No. 2, from 2011 to 2013. He likely will take over as secretary of defense early next year after a Senate confirmation.

"Ash is rightly regarded as one of our nation's foremost national security leaders," Obama said in the Rose Garden on Friday morning. "He knows the Department of Defense inside and out."

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel did not attend the Rose Garden announcement Friday, highlighting the falling out between the current secretary and the White House.

Hagel, a Vietnam veteran and the first former enlisted man to hold the Defense Department's top job, was reportedly pressured to resign because the Obama administration was not happy with his performance since taking the job he assumed nearly two years ago.

Carter will bring in a new management team, yet many experts say the change at the top will have limited impact on many of the most urgent challenges facing today's military.

The next secretary will face the same hurdles as Hagel and others, namely a gridlocked Congress that is putting caps on defense spending and a White House that likes to control — some say micromanage — decision-making about military operations and policies.

"His room for maneuver is extremely small, whether you're talking about the budget or the way the White House likes to run its wars," said Tom Donnelly, a defense expert with the American Enterprise Institute.

Compensation

Carter will exercise some influence in the upcoming debate about military retirement and compensation reform, which will ramp up in February when an independent commission created by Congress submits long-awaited recommendations and proposed legislation.

Big changes to military retirement and compensation is always politically dicey for lawmakers, and many experts say chances are slim that anything will ultimately change. If Carter balks at some of the proposed reforms, the odds of Congress approving them plummet even further.

"It depends on whether he will embrace all the reforms. I think that is the key issue," said Larry Korb, a former Pentagon personnel chief and now a defense expert with the Center for American Progress.

Carter's views on compensation issues are unclear because his career at the Pentagon has often focused on technology, acquisitions and hardware. He holds a Ph.D. in physics and never served in uniform. He would be the first defense secretary without military experience since William Cohen in the late 1990s.

Carter may have limited clout and ability to force change on compensation issues, which the Pentagon brass strongly supports despite concerns from the rank and file.

"If anybody had a better shot at it, would have been Hagel because of his NCO-regular guy persona," Donnelly said, referring to Hagel's experience as a Vietnam veteran who earned two Purple Hearts serving as an enlisted infantryman.

Battling the Islamic State

Carter will be immediately drawn into the Obama administration's debate about how to manage and articulate the military strategy to defeat the Islamic State group.

Yet many defense experts say it's unlikely that the new secretary will change the status quo. "I don't expect to see major changes, but that is not really a function of whether Ash Carter is a good secretary of defense," said Christopher Preble, a defense expert with the Cato Institute.

"The reality is that the public mood is not supportive of major military operations. ... If there were major changes, it would be driven not so much by who the defense secretary is. It would come from the president and his national security advisers at the White House," Preble said.

Carter will be a familiar face inside the Defense Department, but by the time he's confirmed next year, he'll have less than two years remaining before a new president takes over and most likely replaces him with his or her own pick.

"He's going to hit the ground running, which is good because there's not much time left to run," Korb said.