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How to build a national security team

By [Col. Charles D. Allen](#), Published: June 6

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This piece is part of a roundtable with Post columnist [Steve Pearlstein](#) and four of our [On Leadership](#) expert contributors about the leadership questions surrounding Gen. Cartwright's pass-over for promotion to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

A good friend of mine has often offered the old quip that journalism is the “first rough draft of history.” Indeed, there have been several news accounts of the circumstances that led to President Obama’s “favorite general” being supplanted by a relative newcomer. While the news accounts are attributed to unnamed Pentagon and White House officials, we may never know the totality of factors that went into the recommendation of the Department of Defense senior leaders for the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and its acceptance by the commander in chief.

It is not my role to be either an apologist for Gen. Cartwright or an advocate for Gen. Dempsey (currently the Army chief of staff). Over the past couple of years, both officers have spoken to students at the Army War College, where I teach. As one would expect, the generals were extremely bright, strategic in their grasp of complex issues and possessed great foresight. Above all, they were excellent communicators to audiences of great diversity. It is no surprise both rose to the rank of four-star officers (of which there are currently only 40 across all the armed services).

Yet as Eliot Cohen, professor of strategic studies and former counselor to the U.S. Department of State, offered in his book *Supreme Command*, “[m]uch of leadership is knowing whom to select, whom to encourage, whom to restrain, and whom to replace.” Bluntly, he also stated: “Generals are, or should be, disposable. Statesmen should not, of course, discard them thoughtlessly, nor need they treat them discourteously.”

The latter statement is clearly the position adopted by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who is principal assistant and adviser to the president on defense matters and who serves as the leader and chief executive officer of the Defense Department. Lest we forget, since 2006 Secretary Gates oversaw the firing or resignation of the chief of staff of the Air Force, the secretaries of the Army and the Air Force, plus several general officers, including the commander of U.S. Central Command and two successive senior American commanders in Afghanistan.

Secretary Gates has challenged the bureaucracy of the Pentagon in its structure, budgets, military programs and the conduct of war in two theaters of operation. In his speeches to service academies and

senior service colleges, Gates consistently emphasized to aspiring junior leaders and senior officers the need for innovative thinkers to break old paradigms.

Secretary Gates has earned the trust and confidence of the president and Congress, and accordingly is valued for his judgment. His recommendation for the replacement of senior military officers reminds us that senior civilian leaders have the prerogative to build the team they feel is best suited to develop and execute the national security strategy, including selection of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

It is a faulty assumption that the selection of Gen. Dempsey is a rejection of “free thinking and dissent” by Gen. Cartwright. Either officer would be a conscientious and loyal adviser to the president and Secretary of Defense. American military culture holds civil supremacy as sacrosanct in policy formulation and in the authority to issue lawful orders and direction.

Military leaders expect that civilian leaders will be inclusive in the decision-making process. This includes seeking the technical expertise of senior military leaders, giving due consideration to their advice and counsel, and maintaining engagement during policy execution. As the senior ranking member of the Armed Forces, Gen. Dempsey will become the principal military adviser to the president, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council and the Secretary of Defense. He will also be an integral member of the U.S. national security team, upon which the president relies for policy formulation and strategic decision making.

Still, military leaders understand that civilians are responsible for determining policy and approving military strategies for implementation. The rub occurs when military members perceive inappropriate civilian involvement in the method of implementation (ways) or a mismatch between the strategic goals (ends) and the resources (means) provided to attain the goals.

In an earlier piece about the presidential inauguration in January 2009, I wrote, “What is clear is that President Obama faces enormous challenges. We as citizens hope that the team that he assembles will be able to work with Congress and our international partners to address the myriad problems. That will be the first measure of success.”

This is still true, nearly two and a half years later. The president has to build and maintain the best national security team possible, aligned with his vision for the future. To do that, he has to rely on proven and trusted advisers.

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