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Petraeus to quit Afghanistan campaign

Giles Whittell in Washington and Michael Evans, Pentagon Correspondent

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General David Petraeus, the most celebrated American soldier of his generation, is to leave his post as commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan.

The Times can reveal that the Pentagon aims to replace General Petraeus, who was appointed less than eight months ago, by the end of the year.

Sources have confirmed that the search for a new commander in Kabul is under way. It forms part of a sweeping reorganisation of top American officials in Afghanistan, which the Obama Administration hopes to present as proof that its strategy does not depend on the towering reputation of one man.

“General Petraeus is doing a brilliant job but he’s been going virtually non-stop since 9/11 [and] he can’t do it for ever,” Geoff Morrell, the Pentagon press secretary, told *The Times*. President Obama and Robert Gates, the Defence Secretary, “are already thinking about that”, he said.

The reshuffle will involve the return to Washington of the top five US diplomats in Kabul, including its Ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, as well as the likely departure of Lieutenant-General David Rodriguez, deputy to General Petraeus.

The changes follow the appointment this week of Marc Grossman, a career diplomat, as Mr Obama's new special envoy to the region with the urgent task of rescuing US-Pakistani relations after the arrest of an American diplomat who is charged with a double murder in Lahore.

Many of the moves are expected to coincide with a reduction in US troop numbers, which Mr Obama has promised will start this summer, despite General Petraeus's objections.

The news that the general himself would be leaving Kabul stunned close observers of US strategy, but the Pentagon insisted yesterday it was a natural development, given the demands of running the war and Washington's need for fresh blood in a crucial role.

"This is a heck of a demanding job," Mr Morrell said of General Petraeus's central task of driving the Taleban from its strongholds in southern Afghanistan, which US commanders now claim is almost complete. "He will have to be rotated out at some point."

Lionised as the hero of Iraq and now of Afghanistan, the general will be a natural contender to become Chairman or Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — both posts fall vacant this year.

General Petraeus has consistently ruled out running for President, but as one of the most admired US generals since Dwight D. Eisenhower he has been urged to consider an attempt for the White House since leading the successful Iraq surge in 2007. His return to Washington this year would make possible a bid for the Republican nomination, although a former adviser told *The Times* yesterday: "He may find the idea flattering and even attractive, but I don't think that sort of work really speaks to him."

In Washington, speculation on his next move has even included talk of his succeeding Mr Gates as Defence Secretary. A regulation barring uniformed personnel from consideration for the top ministerial post at the Pentagon would normally rule this option out, but a presidential waiver could clear the way for the general to take over a role that Mr Gates is expected to leave within a year.

General Petraeus's success in bringing security to much of southern Afghanistan has defied gloomy forecasts from critics — including many in Mr Obama's inner circle — who insisted that the Iraq surge could not be repeated in such a different setting.

He will return briefly to Washington next month to testify to Congress on the transfer of security responsibility for certain districts to the Afghan army and police, and to outline options for the start of the US withdrawal before the July deadline set by Mr Obama.

The testimony will be a key test of General Petraeus's often strained relationship with the President, who insisted on "unity of purpose" when he accepted the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal for disrespectful remarks about the Obama Administration last year.

A month after being named as General McChrystal's replacement, General Petraeus publicly undermined Mr Obama's argument for a withdrawal this year, telling senators: "July 2011 is not the date where we race for the exits ... We have to be very careful with timelines."

He also clashed with Mr Obama in 2009 on the number of troops needed for a counter-insurgency campaign, demanding at least 40,000 reinforcements instead of the 30,000 sent.

Mr Grossman, who will be confirmed as successor to the late Richard Holbrooke this week, faces the challenges of building a relationship with President Karzai and soothing fury across Pakistan over the case of Raymond Davis, the US official who shot dead two Pakistanis whom he claimed were trying to rob him.

He has accepted a role that others including the former Clinton Administration envoy, Strobe Talbott, are understood to have turned down. He is expected to work closely with Karen Pierce, his opposite number at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.