



The next Army chief of staff: Who will it be?

Observers speculate on three top candidates for the position

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The next chief of staff of the Army is likely to be one of three four-stars who have distinguished themselves in markedly different ways over the past decade.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, head of Training and Doctrine Command, is viewed by several experienced observers of the Army — most of whom are retired senior officers — as the leading candidate to replace Gen. George Casey when his term ends in April. But Gen. Ray Odierno, chosen to head Joint Forces Command, and Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Pete Chiarelli are also leading contenders. Although President Obama can nominate any Army general officer to be chief, it's rare that the job doesn't go to a serving four-star general, and most observers do not expect that pattern to change in 2011.

The Army currently has 11 four-stars in addition to Casey, but generals like Keith Alexander, an intelligence officer who heads the National Security Agency, and Ann Dunwoody, a logistician who heads Army Materiel Command, aren't really in the running. "Generally, it is going to be a war fighter," said a retired senior general.

The Army's most celebrated war-fighter, Gen. David Petraeus, only recently took over the war in Afghanistan, making it highly unlikely that he would be selected. That leaves Dempsey, Odierno and Chiarelli as the leading warrior four-stars.

Gen. Martin Dempsey

"The frontrunner is Marty Dempsey," retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey said. "He may be the best combat division commander of the war over the last decade."

McCaffrey has made regular visits to Iraq and Afghanistan over the past several years to research the progress of the campaigns. "[Dempsey] turned a division around that was halfway home from Iraq [the 1st Armored], put them back into combat, suppressed a Shi'a uprising south of Baghdad — a remarkable performance," McCaffrey said.

Dempsey also was vigilant in ensuring his soldiers did not mistreat prisoners, said McCaffrey, who hailed his "tremendous battle leadership [and] tremendous understanding of the integrity issues."

But Dempsey has more to offer than just his wartime experience, according to McCaffrey.

"The challenge ... is setting up the Army that will exist as we come out of Iraq and come out of Afghanistan, and Dempsey's got a tremendous grasp of that, based on his service in TRADOC," he said.

Dempsey has very little time in the Pentagon — a three-year stint on the Joint Staff between 1998 and 2001. Another former senior Army leader agreed that Dempsey was "the most likely" to become the next chief, but not necessarily the best choice.

Gen. Ray Odierno

Dempsey is “OK, but he’s no Ray Odierno,” the former senior Army leader said. “He’ll be fine, but we’ve had a lot of guys who are just ‘fine.’ That’s our problem.”

“The most suitable” general to run the Army “is Odierno, who wants the job,” said the former senior Army leader, adding that Odierno is “the longest serving general officer in Iraq that we have, who pulled down three assignments there and [was] very successful, and clearly is the kind of guy that has the vision and the strength of leadership and is what you need.”

McCaffrey also praised him. “Odierno could do it tomorrow afternoon,” he said.

The reviews from Odierno’s first tour in Iraq were rough. “A couple of years ago, coming out of [command of] the 4th ID, he had a terrible reputation,” said a retired colonel with many years of Pentagon experience. He noted that in “Fiasco,” Tom Ricks’ book about the first three years of the Iraq war, Odierno was portrayed as a heavy-handed commander who failed to adapt his tactics well to cope with the growing insurgency.

“Odierno has always been perceived as a ‘my way or the highway’ kind of guy,” the retired colonel said.

But since then, he said, Odierno has “evolved a lot.”

“A lot of people who have served with him over the last couple of years say he’s really mellowed out and he’s become a more cerebral guy, a more user-friendly guy. He’s apparently turned a fairly large corner in his own personality.” Ricks’ second book on the Iraq war, “The Gamble,” makes much the same point.

Odierno appears to be a favorite of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who chose him to head Joint Forces Command only shortly before announcing his intention to shut down that organization.

In August, when Gates announced he was closing JFCOM, he said of Odierno: “I’ve told Ray that his assignment at JFCOM is essentially the same as his assignment in Iraq, and that is to work himself out of a job. And then I’ll find a new and better one for him.”

Gen. Peter Chiarelli

Neither Dempsey nor Odierno have held the job that has for the past two decades been an almost essential first step to becoming chief: vice chief. Four out of the past five chiefs served as vice, the position now held by Gen. Peter Chiarelli.

The vice runs the Army on a day-to-day basis, giving him a thorough knowledge of the Pentagon’s inner workings and providing the ideal preparation for assuming the chief’s role.

The retired colonel suggested Chiarelli’s star may be fading. “A year ago I would have thought that Pete Chiarelli was a shoo-in,” the retired colonel said. Now the word is that is not the case, he said. “I don’t understand that, really. ... Chiarelli is as smart as any of these guys,” has “impeccable downrange credentials with the division and corps commanders,” and is “tight with Gates,” he said.

McCaffrey also spoke glowingly of Chiarelli, calling him “a genius ... [who] thinks out of the box in a positive way” and has earned “enormous respect” from top Pentagon leaders, “starting with Bob Gates.”

The rest of the pack

If the Obama administration chooses to go outside this trio, the most obvious outside bets are Gen. James D. Thurman, head of U.S. Forces Command, and Gen. Lloyd J. Austin, who replaced Odierno as the senior commander in Iraq, observers said.

“They’re nuts to not look at Lloyd Austin,” McCaffrey said. “He’s young enough that he could do it four years from now, but he ought to be in the final mix also.” But although Austin is highly respected, “he’s not well known [and] it may be that he’s not seasoned enough as a serving four-star” to make the jump to chief, said the retired senior general.

Thurman “is a more user-friendly guy than Odierno is,” and would bring recent experience on the Army Staff as the deputy chief of staff for operations and plans, or G-3, said the retired colonel. But the rough-hewn general’s “tobacco chewing, bourbon drinking” persona might count against him inside the Washington beltway, he said.

Thurman “is one of my favorite unadorned soldiers,” McCaffrey added. “He knows, obviously, having been the G-3, how the Army works.”

There are three other four-stars who, by rank, also are contenders. They are Gen. Walter L. Sharp, commander of U.S. Forces Korea; and Gen. Carter F. Ham, newly appointed commander of Africa Command, replacing Gen. William E. Ward, who is expected to retire.