

Panetta Removes Ban On Women In Combat

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senior defense officials say Pentagon chief Leon Panetta is removing the military’s ban on women serving in combat, opening hundreds of thousands of front-line positions and potentially elite commando jobs after more than a decade at war.

The groundbreaking move recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff overturns a 1994 rule prohibiting women from being assigned to smaller ground combat units. Panetta’s decision gives the military services until January 2016 to seek special exceptions if they believe any positions must remain closed to women.

A senior military official says the services will develop plans for allowing women to seek the combat positions. Some jobs may open as soon as this year. Assessments for others, such as special operations forces, including Navy SEALs and the Army’s Delta Force, may take longer.

The official said the military chiefs must report back to Panetta with their initial implementation plans by May 15. The announcement on Panetta’s decision is not expected until Thursday, so the official spoke on condition of anonymity.

Panetta’s move expands the Pentagon’s action nearly a year ago to open about 14,500 combat positions to women, nearly all of them in the Army. This decision could open more than 230,000 jobs, many in Army and Marine infantry units, to women.

Israeli Centrist Raises Hopes For Peace Talks

JERUSALEM (AP) — The unexpectedly strong showing by a new centrist party in Israel’s parliamentary election has raised hopes of a revival of peace talks with Palestinians that have languished for four years under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Political newcomer Yair Lapid, the surprise kingmaker, is already being courted by a weakened Netanyahu, who needs his support to form a ruling coalition. Lapid has said he will not sit in the government unless the peace process is restarted.

But following a campaign in which the Palestinian issue was largely ignored, it remains unclear how hard Lapid will push the issue in what could be weeks of coalition talks with Netanyahu.

Tuesday’s election ended in a deadlock, with Netanyahu’s hard-line religious bloc of allies and the rival bloc of centrist, secular and Arab parties each with 60 seats, according to near-complete official results. Opinion polls had universally forecast a majority of seats going to the right-wing bloc.

While Netanyahu, as head of the largest single party in parliament, is poised to remain prime minister, it appears impossible for him to cobble together a majority coalition without reaching across the aisle.

Quirk In Medicaid Ruling Favors Immigrants

WASHINGTON (AP) — Governors who reject health insurance for the poor under the federal health care overhaul could wind up in a politically awkward position on immigration: A quirk in the law means some U.S. citizens would be forced to go without coverage, while legal immigrants residing in the same state could still get it.

It’s an unintended consequence of how last year’s Supreme Court decision changed the Medicaid provisions of President Barack Obama’s health care law. The overhaul expanded the federal-state program for low-income and disabled people. The Supreme Court made the Medicaid expansion optional for states, which complicated things.

Arizona officials called attention to the problem last week, when Republican Gov. Jan Brewer opted to accept the Medicaid expansion.

Brewer had been a leading opponent of the overhaul, and her decision got widespread attention. State budget documents cited the immigration glitch as one of her reasons.

“If Arizona does not expand, for poor Arizonans below (the federal poverty line), only legal immigrants, but not citizens, would be eligible for subsidies,” the documents said.

Debt

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in strategy by the GOP.

House Republicans cast the bill as a way to force the Senate to draft a budget for the first time in four years, noting that if either house fails to do so, its members’ pay would be withheld. They called the bill “no budget, no pay,” a slogan if not a statement of fact, since lawmakers would be entitled to collect their entire salaries at the end of the Congress with or without a budget in place.

With polls showing their public support eroding, the Republicans jettisoned, for now at least, an earlier insistence that they would allow no additional borrowing unless Obama and the Democrats agreed to dollar-for-dollar federal spending cuts in exchange.

The average American family “can’t buy everything they want every day; they have to make tough choices. It’s time to make Congress make the same choices,” said Rep. Dave Camp, R-Mich., underscoring the new Republican rallying cry.

Rep. Paul Ryan, the Wisconsin lawmaker who will be responsible for drafting the budget for Republicans, said Congress has “a moral obligation” to prevent a debt crisis that he said will hit hardest at seniors and others who depend on government the most.

As chairman of the House Budget Committee, Ryan will take the lead role in crafting a blueprint expected to rely heavily on savings from benefit programs. The budget he wrote last year before being picked as the party’s

vice presidential candidate was to take two decades to achieve balance.

Ryan’s 10-year-budget task will be eased in part by higher tax revenues resulting from the Jan. 1 expiration of a two-year payroll tax cut, and in part from an anticipated \$600 billion generated by raising rates on upper incomes. But given the sheer size of annual deficits in the \$1 trillion range, it will be impossible to meet his goal without taking large savings from benefit programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, farm and student loan subsidies, the federal retirement program and more.

House Democrats made no attempt to defend the Senate’s failure to draft a budget over the past three years, instead saying a mere four-month extension in the debt limit would not give business and the financial markets the certainty that is necessary for the economy to grow more quickly.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, his party’s senior Budget Committee member, said the good news was, “Republicans have finally recognized the government must pay its bills. ... The bad news is they only want to do it for three months.”

Beyond the rhetoric lay a political calculation on the part of Boehner and other House Republicans that they could not afford to set up an immediate confrontation with Obama. At a closed-door retreat last week, the rank and file was presented with polling that showed their support eroding since the election into the mid-to-high 20s, and indicating that increasingly the public believes they oppose Obama out of political motives rather than on policy grounds.

Clinton Takes On GOP On Libya Attack

BY MATTHEW LEE AND DONNA CASSATA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered fiery rejoinders Wednesday to Republican critics of the Obama administration’s handling of the deadly attack on a U.S. mission in Benghazi, facing off with lawmakers who included potential 2016 presidential rivals.

At times emotional and frequently combative, Clinton rejected GOP suggestions in two congressional hearings that the administration tried to mislead the country about the Sept. 11 attack that killed Chris Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, and three other Americans. She insisted the State Department is moving swiftly and aggressively to strengthen security at diplomatic posts worldwide.

In her last formal testimony before Congress as America’s top diplomat — but perhaps not her last time on the political stage — Clinton once again took responsibility for the department’s missteps and failures leading up to the assault. But she also said that requests for more security at the diplomatic mission in Benghazi didn’t reach her desk, and reminded lawmakers that they have a responsibility to fund security-related budget requests.

Three weeks after her release from a New York hospital — admitted for complications after a concussion — Clinton was at times defiant, complimentary and willing to chastise lawmakers during more than 5 1/2 hours of testimony before two separate committees. She tangled with some who could be rivals in 2016 if she decides to seek the presidency again.

Her voice cracking at one point, Clinton said the attack and the aftermath were highly personal tragedies for the families of the victims who died — Stevens, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty — as well as herself.

“I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews. I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters and the wives left alone to raise their children,” she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a packed hearing.

Clearly annoyed with Republican complaints about the initial explanation for the attack, she rose to the defense of U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, who was vilified for widely debunked claims five days after the attack that protests precipitated the raid rather than terrorism.

Clinton said, “People were trying in real time to get to the best information.” And she said her own focus was on looking ahead on how to improve security rather than revisiting the talking points and Rice’s comments.

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., pressed her on why “we were misled that there were supposedly protests and something sprang out of that, an assault sprang out of that.”

“With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans,” she said, her voice rising and quivering with anger as she and Johnson spoke over each other.

“Was it because of a protest? Or was it because of guys out for a walk one night decided they would go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator.”

If Johnson’s comments drew an irritated response from Clinton, she notably ignored Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., when he said he would have

Unfolding the events in Benghazi

The Obama administration has been criticized for ignoring signs of a deteriorating security situation in Libya, leading up to the Sept. 11 attack at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi that killed four Americans. After the attack, the White House initially blamed the events on protesters angry over an anti-Muslim video released earlier in the month, instead of a planned act of terrorism.

Attack in Benghazi



Killed in the attack

- U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens (shown left)
- Sean Smith
- Tyrone Woods
- Glen Doherty



Sept. 10, 9:40 p.m. (all times local) Attackers approach consulate from three sides; at the time building was not heavily guarded



9:45-10:30 p.m. Assaults gain access to compound; Libyan guards call for backup; consulate is set on fire; security officer finds Smith dead; guards unable to find Stevens



10:30-11 p.m. Americans retreat



After midnight Looters on grounds pull Stevens, unidentified, from burned building



1 a.m. Stevens taken to at hospital unidentified; declared dead 45 minutes later



1:30-2 a.m. American rescue team arrives from Tripoli, heads to annex; annex comes under attack a second time; Doherty and Woods killed



3-4 a.m. Stevens; body found at hospital by security forces



6:30 a.m. U.S. survivors and bodies of Americans flown to Tripoli

Source: Reuters, AP, BBC, Congressional Research Service, MCT Photo Service

Graphic: Melina Yingling

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Washington’s reaction

Attack blamed on video

Sept. 12 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirms four U.S. officials were killed in attack; President Barack Obama uses the word “terror” in his first address about the incident

Sept. 16 U.S. Ambassador to U.N. Susan Rice says attack was work of extremists; began as a spontaneous protest

Sept. 18 White House press secretary, Jay Carney, says this is no evidence the attack was preplanned or premeditated

Shifting blame to a terrorist attack

Sept. 19 Matthew G. Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, publicly testifies before Senate that Benghazi was a terrorist attack

Sept. 20 Carney refers to incident as “terrorist attack”; Clinton follows the next day

Sept. 27 Defense Secretary Leon Panetta says there is no doubt terrorists planned and carried out attack

Oct. 4 Team of FBI agents arrives in Benghazi to investigate

Oct. 10 State Department official Charlene Lamb, says she declined to approve more U.S. security as violence in Benghazi spiked; later Lamb and two other State Department officials resign

Oct. 19 AP reports CIA’s Libya station chief sent report within 24 hours of attack that there was evidence that militants were behind assault, rather than a mob upset about the anti-Islamic video

Getting to the bottom of it

Nov. 15 House and Senate Intelligence committees begin holding hearings on attack

Nov. 16 Former CIA director General David Petraus testifies al-Qaida link known early

Dec. 20 John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee says “mistakes were made” regarding security in Libya

Jan. 23, 2013 Clinton testifies before Congress

fired her if he had been in charge and found that she had not read cables from her team in Libya asking for more security. Paul is a potential 2016 presidential candidate.

“Had I been president and found you did not read the cables from Benghazi and from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post,” Paul said. “I think it’s inexcusable.”

Clinton and other officials have testified that requests for additional security did not reach her level, and a scathing independent review of the matter sharply criticized four senior State Department officials who have been relieved of their duties.

“I did not see these requests. They did not come to me. I did not approve them. I did not deny them,” she said.

Later, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republican Rep. Jeff Duncan of South Carolina repeatedly challenged Clinton’s claim to have looked at the tragedy with “clear eyes,” saying she should have personally ensured security at the mission.

He said Clinton had “let the consulate become a death trap” in denying requests for additional security and called it “malpractice.”

Clinton said she could have let the review board’s report remain classified and told Congress “goodbye” before leaving office. But she said, it’s “not who I am. It’s not what I do.”

Absent from the Senate hearing was Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., the man tapped to succeed Clinton, who is leaving the administration after four years. Kerry, defeated by George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election, is expected to win swift Senate approval. Clinton is to introduce him at his confirmation hearing on Thursday.

Politics play an outsized role in any appearance by Clinton, who was defeated by Barack Obama in a hard-fought battle for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. She is the subject of constant speculation about a possible bid in 2016.

A former New York senator and the wife of former President Bill Clinton, she is a polarizing figure but is ending her tenure at the State Department with high favorability ratings. A poll last month by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found 65 percent of Americans held a favorable impression of her, compared with 29 percent unfavorable.

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