

General Pace Was Forced Out; Refused To Resign In Wartime

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By Robert Burns, AP Military Write

WASHINGTON - In his first public comments on the Bush administration's surprise decision to replace him as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Gen. Peter Pace disclosed that he had turned down an offer to voluntarily retire rather than be forced out.

To quit in wartime, he said, would be letting down the troops.



General Peter Pace, USMC

Pace, responding to a question from the audience after he spoke at the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Va., on Thursday evening, said he first heard that his expected nomination for a second two-year term was in jeopardy in mid-May. Defense Secretary Robert Gates on June 8 announced Pace was being replaced.

"One thing that was discussed was whether or not I should just voluntarily retire and take the issue off the table," Pace said, according to a transcript released Friday by his office at the [Pentagon](#).

"I said I could not do that for one very fundamental reason," which is that no soldier or Marine in [Iraq](#) should "think — ever — that his chairman, whoever that person is, could have stayed in the battle and voluntarily walked off the battlefield.

"That is unacceptable as a leadership thing, in my mind," he added.

Pace, whose current term ends Oct. 1, said he intended to remain on the job until then. Navy Adm. Michael Mullen has been announced as [President Bush's](#) choice to succeed Pace, who is the first Marine ever to hold the military's top post.

The decision to drop Pace has fed the political debate in Washington over the Iraq war. On Thursday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid caused a stir when he said Pace had failed in his job of providing Congress a candid assessment on the war. Democrats typically have shied from stinging comments about military officers, instead focusing criticism on Bush and administration policies in Iraq.

Asked for comment on Reid's statement, a spokeswoman for Pace, Marine Col. Katie Haddock, said Pace "is focused on his duties as chairman and is not going to respond to press reports on who's saying what. He will let 40 years of service speak for itself."

A Vietnam veteran, Pace indicated in his Norfolk comments that his experience in that war colored his decision not to quit voluntarily.

"The other piece for me personally was that some 40 years ago I left some guys on the battlefield in Vietnam who lost their lives following 2nd Lt. Pace," he said. "And I promised myself then that I will serve this country until I was no longer needed — that it's not my decision. I need to be told that I'm done."

"I've been told I'm done."

"I will run through the finish line on 1 October, and when I run through the finish line I will have met the mission I set for myself," he said.

Pace was vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the run-up to the Iraq war and during the early years of a conflict that has dragged on far longer than the administration foresaw. In October 2005 he succeeded Air Force Gen. Richard Myers as Joint Chiefs chairman, and until recently had largely been spared the war-related criticism that senior civilian officials attracted.

The decision to sideline Pace came as a surprise, since Gates had previously indicated privately that he intended to recommend that the president re-nominate him. In his remarks in Norfolk, Pace confirmed that Gates had told him he preferred to keep him as chairman but in mid-May began to see signs of opposition on Capitol Hill.

When he announced the decision last Friday, Gates said that after consulting with members of the Senate he concluded that sticking with Pace would risk a Senate confirmation struggle focusing on the Iraq War.

"It would be a backward-looking and very contentious process," Gates said. At the same time, he made clear he had made his decision with reluctance, saying he wished it had not been necessary.

"I am no stranger to contentious confirmations, and I do not shrink from them," Gates said. "However, I have decided that at this moment in our history, the nation, our men and women in uniform and General Pace himself would not be well served by a divisive ordeal. ..."

In his remarks in Norfolk, Pace said Gates had accurately portrayed what transpired.

"He brought me in the office and sat me down and said `Pete, this is what's happening. I want to re-nominate you. I want you to know that this is what I'm beginning to hear, this is what I'm going to go do, this is how I'm going to go do it.'"

"He went out and did exactly what he said on television, and exactly what he's been saying in his interviews, which is he went out and pulsed various members of Congress and he heard back from them the things that he said that he heard," Pace said.

At that point, Pace said, he assured Gates that he was willing to go through even a contentious confirmation process.

"I also told him that what he needed to do, in my opinion, was what was best for the institution, and whatever he and the president decided was going to be best for the institution was what Pete Pace was going to do," he said. "Oh and by the way, I can read the Constitution, which says the president gets to nominate and the Senate gets to confirm, or not, and neither one of those two things is going to happen, therefore I'm not staying."