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With Blunt, Salty Talk, Panetta Era Begins

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

ERBIL, Iraq — The received wisdom in Washington when Leon E. Panetta took Robert M. Gates's place as defense secretary was that the Pentagon was exchanging one low-intensity Beltway professional for another. Well, yes and no.

Mr. Panetta may be Mr. Gates's friend and a longtime creature of the capital, but his inaugural trip to Iraq and Afghanistan this week and last proved that in substance and style — from a relentless focus on military intelligence and quashing Al Qaeda to salty remarks that left his aides scrambling to provide him cover — he is another species entirely. A new era at the Pentagon has begun.

“This damn country has a hell of a lot of resources,” Mr. Panetta boomed on Monday to American troops at Camp Victory in Baghdad, during 28 minutes of remarks that included, if you were counting, 16 cheerful “damns” and “hells” and one unprintable description of Osama bin Laden.

Later on Monday, when President Jalal Talabani of Iraq told Mr. Panetta that there are not insurgent attacks in his native Kurdistan like there are in Baghdad, Mr. Panetta chortled good-naturedly, “I’m sure that they’ve always decided that you’re not worth shooting.” Then he quickly added, “They would rather work with you than against you.”

On another day, as Mr. Panetta headed into his umpteenth official meeting, he joked to reporters that it was going to be “yada, yada, yada.”

Humor and bluntness aside (“I’m Italian, what the frick can I tell you?” Mr. Panetta said in an interview on Monday with NBC News), the new defense secretary’s focus in the job is in striking contrast to that of the self-contained Mr. Gates. While Mr. Gates’s priorities were stabilizing Afghanistan and concluding the war in Iraq, Mr. Panetta told the troops in Baghdad of a different top goal: “No. 1, quite frankly, is to defeat Al Qaeda.”

Mr. Panetta's focus on the terrorist franchise responsible for the 9/11 attacks naturally reflects where he hung his pinstriped suit jacket until last month: the director's office at the Central Intelligence Agency. But he also personifies the Obama administration's aim of shifting from a troop-heavy counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, where the United States sought to win over the locals by building schools and good government, to a narrower mission of hunting down insurgents in commando raids.

Mr. Panetta's aides say that this is how wars will be fought now, with the spy agencies and the Pentagon working together in the manner of the C.I.A.-led operation — run by Mr. Panetta — that killed Bin Laden on May 2. To complete the circle, Gen. David H. Petraeus, the top American commander in Afghanistan, will take Mr. Panetta's place at the C.I.A. in September.

For his part, Mr. Panetta is still making the transition from his old world. Sometimes he seems not to have left. He told a group of Marines in southern Afghanistan on Sunday that "my whole life has been dedicated to public service," including now, "as director of the C.I.A." Other times he spoke openly of supposedly secret C.I.A. activity, saying the C.I.A. has a "big presence" in Afghanistan, "a lot of bases" in Iraq and is conducting "a number of operations" in Yemen.

Although Mr. Panetta was once a member of Congress and served as budget director and chief of staff in the Clinton White House, by tradition he rarely spoke in public over his two and a half years at the C.I.A. At the Pentagon he has been unleashed to his natural state, schmoozing and holding forth, although his liberation — and new scrutiny of every word he utters as defense secretary — means his staff has to do some tidying up.

On Saturday night in Kabul he said that there would still be 70,000 American troops in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, considerably more than envisioned by President Obama, who would like them all out by then. His staff said that Mr. Panetta actually meant 2012, not 2014.

On Monday morning in Baghdad, Mr. Panetta told American troops that "the reason you guys are here is because on 9/11 the United States got attacked" — part of a narrative advanced by the Bush White House, a view now widely dismissed, that tied Al Qaeda to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Mr. Panetta later said he was not speaking of the Bush administration's justification for the invasion, just the reality that Qaeda fighters are now in Iraq. Doug Wilson, a Pentagon spokesman, told reporters that Mr. Panetta was not "going down that rabbit hole" of arguments over the war.

Despite the slip-ups, Mr. Panetta, 73, seemed happy to be out in the open. With a round physique, gray-flecked hair and skin burnished to the color of a nut from weekends at his Carmel Valley, Calif., farm, Mr. Panetta ambled around his Camp Victory guest house one night looking for reporters to talk to. Such behavior would have been unimaginable for the reticent Mr. Gates, who spent his down time at the guest house, part of a lakeside palace complex that belonged to Saddam Hussein, smoking cigars with his commanders on the veranda.

But like Mr. Gates, Mr. Panetta seemed moved by the troops he met, particularly the teenagers among them. "It's incredible to meet with these young people," Mr. Panetta said after talking with Marines at Camp Dwyer. He also met with a sober statistic: Not even two weeks into the job, he has written nearly 10 condolence letters for those killed in action.

Mr. Gates, who often choked up when he met with troops in his last months as defense secretary, became weighed down by the deaths on his watch. It is too soon to know how Mr. Panetta will react to ever more of those letters, even as he has the task of winding down both wars.

For now, he seems to be in his own kind of honeymoon. After his 747 hit turbulence on the way to Afghanistan on Friday, he used it to describe his new job: "It's a little bit like this plane ride. It's big, it's complicated, it's filled with sophisticated technology, it's bumpy. But in the end it's the best in the world."