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Pentagon's first female policy chief quitting

By ROBERT BURNS
AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Michele Flournoy, the most senior female Pentagon official in history, told The Associated Press on Monday she is stepping down as the chief policy adviser to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.

In an interview in her Pentagon office, Flournoy said she feels compelled to "rebalance" her personal life after three years in one of the most demanding national security jobs in Washington.

"By nature it is an all-consuming job and it does take a toll on the family," she said, adding that she considers her time as the undersecretary of defense for policy as "probably the highlight of my professional life." She is the most senior woman ever to hold the post when she started the job in February 2009, two years after co-founding and serving as the first president of the Center for a New American Security, a prominent think tank.

Flournoy, who turns 51 on Wednesday, said her resignation will be effective in February and that she intends to play an informal role next year in supporting President Barack Obama's re-election effort.

"I'm very much planning on giving the full measure of support to this president and this campaign, and I'm going to work as much as I can from the outside to do that," she said. While she has made no specific arrangements with the Obama campaign, Flournoy ticked off a list of possible informal roles, including public speaking and private advising.

Flournoy said she hopes to return to government service one day but that at this point her family needs her to take a break.

Her husband, W. Scott Gould, is the deputy secretary of Veterans Affairs, responsible for a nationwide system of health care services, benefits programs, and national cemeteries for veterans and their dependents. They have children aged 14, 12 and 9.

"Right now I need to recalibrate a little bit and invest a little bit more in the family account for a while," she said. "We've been going flat out for more than three years," including the period after the 2008 election in which both she and her husband were part of the Obama transition team - she at the Pentagon and he at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Flournoy said her children understand that their parents' hard-charging jobs are "once-in-a-lifetime opportunities" at an important juncture in American history, but it has required difficult trade-offs.

"You can make the sacrifice for a period, but at some point the cost becomes too high and you need to rebalance," she said.

Flournoy is a widely respected national security thinker. She earned a bachelor's degree in social studies at Harvard University and a master's degree in international relations at Balliol College at Oxford University. She served in the Pentagon in the 1990s as deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy.

In her current job she has kept a relatively low public profile while working on some of the most difficult and entangled national security problems facing the Pentagon, including concluding the war in Iraq, reinvigorating

the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan and adjusting American defense strategy as part of the coming reductions in the national security budget.

While the last U.S. troops are due to depart Iraq before the end of this month, the war's aftermath is likely to be a prominent issue for Flournoy's successor. During her interview with the AP, Obama was holding a news conference at the White House with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Obama heralded the end of the war and cautioned other countries not to interfere with Iraq's sovereignty - a reference to U.S. concerns about undue Iranian influence. Flournoy said she planned to meet later in the day with Iraqi defense officials to discuss the way forward.

"I am actually comfortable with where we are" in the relationship with Iraq, she said, adding that one of her first reports as president of the Center for a New American Security in 2007 was on how to responsibly end the war.

Asked what plans she has made for her life after the Pentagon, Flournoy said, "Absolutely none," other than catching up on sleep and spending more time with her children.

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