

By Dick Myers, TheBayNet.com

“This is a very unique facility. It is a national treasure that is important for us to maintain. These are world class facilities,” said U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta during a visit Friday to Patuxent River Naval Air Station.

“It is important that the U.S. military be on the technological edge of the future,” Panetta said during a visit with several hundred Pax River workers and community leaders at the Joint Strike Fighter facility. He added, “Because of you, because of the very unique testing and capability that are offered here we are able to maintain that technological edge.” Panetta toured Pax River’s facilities prior to the talk. During his talk Panetta praised the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and lifted the probation on the F-35B, the Marine Corps Short Take-Off, Vertical Landing (STOVL) variant. (See separate story www.thebaynet.com/news/index.cfm/fa/viewstory/story_ID/25925).

“In many ways we are at a turning point,” Panetta said about his department. “After ten years of war we have to be able to make that turn as we head into the future.” The Iraq mission is over and the country turned over to Iraqi control. Likewise, Afghanistan security is transitioning. There was successful NATO mission in Libya. And, “We have significantly impacted on Al Qaida,” he added.

“We are facing a crisis in terms of a deficit and debt situation in this country,” he said of the new challenge. “It is a threat to our national security. We have a responsibility to confront it.”

One of the realities is, he said, “That even as we are at that turning point and even as we have to confront these deficit issues, this isn’t like drawdowns in the past,” such as World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the end of the Soviet Union. “Then the enemy we were confronting was disabled and some were rendered ineffective. We now still face a number of threats.” He mentioned threats from North Korea, Iran, cyber space, rising powers in Asia, and turmoil in the Middle East.

“We still have to be strong to confront the threats we face in the world,” Panetta insisted. To do that in light of budget challenges, he said he told advisors, “We have to view this as an

opportunity to shape the defense system we need for the future.” He said there were four principles important in that process:

- Remain the strongest military in the world.
- “We can’t hollow out this force; we have made that mistake in the past.”
- Have to look at every area where savings and efficiencies can be achieved.
- “We cannot break faith with those who have served.”

He said the challenges weren’t easy but felt the Pentagon team working on it was up to the challenge. Key elements of the strategy for the future, he said, include:

- A smaller force, leaner, agile, deployable and flexible with the best technology.
- Re-evaluate “our global posture and figure out areas we have to focus on,” where potential conflicts in the future may arise
- Build new partnerships around the world and innovative ways “of maintaining our presence there.”

“We have to insure we can confront any aggressor, anywhere, at any time,” including more than one at a time

“We are going to protect our investment in technology and make new investments in technology,” Panetta said, including the JSF, and in space and cyberspace. “That’s the future and we are going to be there,” he said. Special operations were one way to get there, he added. Panetta said a strong reserve and National Guard were important in order to be able to respond to global challenges.

He said the people in the military and in the volunteer force were the country’s “greatest strength.” He insisted, “We are going to support them with programs and support the families that need the help.” Support from the American people was part of that mix, he said, which will allow the military to thrive in the new environment.

“We have to protect our research and development capability and we have to protect our industrial base,” Panetta said, which had to be good news for the area’s contracting community. “If we cut back on that industrial base it will weaken us for the future,” he concluded. “We need

the kind of research and development that goes on here. We need the kind of testing.”

Panetta in his introductory remarks praised the work of Patuxent Partnership and its director Bonnie Green, and also Bob Waxman, former director at Webster Field in St. Inigoes.

Panetta was introduced by Rep. Steny Hoyer (D: 5th). Hoyer said he had known Panetta for 30 years (including Panetta’s stint in Congress, as White House chief of staff and CIA director) and called him “a close and personal friend.”

Panetta, the son of Italian immigrants, said he was told by his father they came to the country because they believed they could give their children a better life. “That’s the American dream,” he said, “and, very frankly that’s the fundamental principal about what the United States is all about.” He said it was leaders like Hoyer who insure that will happen.

Hoyer said the Joint Strike Fighter was “an extraordinary system that is going to continue to make our country and the international community safe frankly for decades to come” and thanked those who worked on the program. “We owe much to the hard working military and civilian personnel serving here

“Pax River is a national and international asset to keep our nation and the free world safe,” Hoyer said. He said Maryland had been a prime beneficiary of previous BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) processes and also praised the work done at Webster Field and at the base in Indian Head. He said he hoped that Panetta would be able to visit Indian Head at another time.