

WASHINGTON, DC - Congressman Steny H. Hoyer (MD-5) delivered remarks today introducing Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at a town hall meeting with military and civilian employees at Naval Air Station Patuxent River. At the invitation of Congressman Hoyer, Secretary Panetta visited and toured the facilities to see firsthand the talent and world-class capabilities at Pax River and its role in supporting future weapons systems and providing direct support to troops engaged in combat today. Below are his remarks as prepared for delivery:

"I am always excited to be back at Pax River with some of the finest men and women in the Department of Defense. Today I am especially glad to be here with you to introduce a man I have known for over thirty years. We're proud to have him at Pax River today to demonstrate all of the great work being done here and the critical importance of this installation to our military readiness and operations.

"Secretary Panetta and I served together in Congress when he represented the people of California's 16th – and later 17th – District with distinction. He and I served together on the House Appropriations Committee before he left to become President Clinton's budget director in 1993. Secretary Panetta was Chairman of the Budget Committee in the House, and he was instrumental in passing the Balanced Budget Act in 1997 that brought us historic budget surpluses during the Clinton Administration.

"As White House Chief of Staff from 1994-1997, he participated in critical decision-making during a period that initiated some of our strongest economic growth to date and during our mission to bring peace to the Balkans. As Director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the first two years of the Obama Administration, Secretary Panetta oversaw the successful mission to kill Osama bin Laden. He also made it a priority for our nation to invest in many of the communications and unmanned aerial vehicle technologies you test and perfect here.

"Sworn in as our 23rd Secretary of Defense this July, he has been an outspoken advocate for our troops and for the continued readiness of our military to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

"I know that he appreciates the hard work you are all doing at Pax River. We have, I think, the best of the best here, and Marylanders are proud to be home to so many great military installations – here at Pax River – the headquarters for naval aviation, and Webster Field, which supports a diverse array of customers who keep coming back to them for communications and electronics support.

"Mr. Secretary, we are also proud of the folks at Indian Head, where we have the nation's premier expertise in energetics technologies. We're also proud that engineers and pilots at Pax River are testing the Navy's new F-35 Joint Strike fighter.

"Mr. Secretary, you have, assembled here before you, a team of military and civilian government employees and contractors, who work side-by-side every day on this important program, providing some of the best talent our nation has toward the success of the F-35. This accomplished team is working hard to make sure the Joint Strike Fighter is ready for its mission and is as safe for our pilots as it is lethal for their targets.

"We owe much to the hard-working military and civilian personnel serving here. Pax boasts a strong history of creating a seamless partnership between the government and prime contractors, while preserving the crucial role we play here at Pax – being the honest broker. These men and women are, in many ways, a front line in the fight to keep us ahead technologically and operating with safety and efficiency.

"The local community deserves great credit as well for supporting the mission of Pax River and helping to make it possible. This is a community where we refer to jet noise as 'the sound of freedom.' Area residents and civic leaders recognize that Pax River is both a key component of our defense and a job-creator for the local economy. It's a win-win that enjoys strong local support to forge a public/private partnership unparalleled in most military communities.

"We're glad Secretary Panetta understands the value Pax River adds to our military and the strong ties it has with the community. He is the first Secretary of Defense to visit Pax River, and I think it is telling that he has chosen to make this visit within his first six months in office.

"I think it speaks volumes about him that he was confirmed by the Senate 100-0 at a time when we have seen very highly qualified presidential nominees held up. Please join me in welcoming my good friend and our Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta."