

Neoconservatism jumps the shark

By: Adam Bates – January 7th, 2013

Some resistance to President Obama's selection of Republican Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense was to be expected. After all, in his distinguished career Chuck Hagel has come to represent so many qualities that Barack Obama's utterly prodigal administration has rejected: Sen. Hagel has shown a preference for deliberation and reason to rash action and politics, diplomatic and commercial engagement to wanton violence, and fiscal sanity to reckless, debt-laden extravagance.

So I expected those who support Obama's endlessly wasteful, ill-conceived, abhorrently violent policies to raise some resistance to Sen. Hagel's nomination. Frankly, I was surprised President Obama would nominate such a person in the first place. For a president who believes he has the authority to assassinate American citizens without charges, launch wars without Congress' permission on the grounds that firing hundreds of missiles into foreign cities does not constitute "hostilities," and wage legally and morally dubious drone campaigns against thousands of unidentified people in countries with which we're nominally allied, Chuck Hagel is a surprising pick.

I am more surprised, however, to find that the bulk of the hostility to Sen. Hagel's nomination is coming not from Democrats upset over Hagel's conservatism and restraint, but from Republicans whose entire party philosophy is supposedly based on the very principles they're now skewering.

Rather than embrace the sudden appearance of a voice of deliberation and restraint in the Obama cabinet, several prominent Republicans have responded with precisely the type of hyperventilated, poisonous indignation that has cost the GOP election after election. Sen. Lindsey Graham, Sen. Ted Cruz, and Bill Kristol took to their soapboxes to absurdly and indefensibly smear Sen. Hagel as an anti-Semite for his "radical" suggestion that the interests of the U.S. and Israeli governments are not inherently the same, a naïve appeaser for his "crazy" view that America should seek to engage its rivals peacefully before resorting to war, and a coward whose entirely defensible belief that sanctions on Iran are counterproductive is tantamount to surrender.

Has the neoconservative camp really jumped the shark so extensively that even run-of-the-mill political realism now earns one a public crucifixion for cowardice and anti-Semitic bigotry? If so, then this nomination fight may be, as the Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman points out, far more productive than it appears (and far more productive than most of the neoconservatives' battles), simply by shedding light on how ludicrous the foreign policy discourse has become within the Republican Party.

The purpose here is not to endorse Chuck Hagel, or even to establish his fitness for the office he seeks. Sen. Hagel is an interventionist, initially supported the Iraq War (though, unlike many of his colleagues, he came to acknowledge the error in that) and the Patriot Act, and he falls well within the mainstream of a national foreign policy discussion that

has gone far off the rails of logic and morality. But it is precisely Sen. Hagel's mainstream status that renders the neoconservative hysteria so galling.

How does the party that claims to champion the ideology of our founding documents and the men who wrote them find itself noxiously smearing a Republican senator and decorated war hero for having the audacity to advocate engagement as preferable to war, to suggest that we should be wary of passionate attachment for favorite foreign nations, and to counsel against going abroad in search of monsters to destroy?

If limited government, fiscal responsibility, and restraint from unnecessary foreign entanglements are now vile apostasies in the Republican Party, what sanctuary is left to conservatives and, more importantly, America's founding principles of peace, commerce, and independence?