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The Dishonorable Smear Of Chuck Hagel: A Warrior Who Despises War

Doug Bandow January 14, 2013

Politics is blood sport, and so it is with the nomination of Chuck Hagel to be Secretary of Defense. Washington's bipartisan War Party is horrified that a warrior who despises war might end up running the Pentagon.

For more than a decade the nation's capital has been overrun by the Sofa Samurai and Think Tank Warriors who believe in starting wars for others to fight. Vice President Richard Cheney, who used five deferments to avoid combat in Vietnam—"I had other priorities," he explained years later—epitomized the breed. For them there is no war too bloody or foolish to avoid.

In contrast, Chuck Hagel served, an enlisted infantryman in the Army. He received two Purple Hearts and rescued his unconscious brother in combat. For him war was up close and personal.

That didn't turn him into a pacifist. He later explained to Vietnam magazine: "I believe in using force, but only after a very careful decision-making process." Nor is the former Senator a noninterventionist like Ron Paul. He backed Bill Clinton's counterproductive attack on Serbia and George W. Bush's disastrous Iraq misadventure and supported John McCain for president in 2000.

However, unlike the Neoconservatives who dominated the Bush administration, Hagel opposed perpetual war. He was not constantly searching for nations to bomb, invade, and occupy. He said he told himself in Vietnam: "If I ever get out of this and I'm ever in a position to influence policy, I will do everything I can to avoid needless, senseless war."

Equally important, Hagel cared about results. When the promised Iraqi cakewalk did not materialize, he recognized his mistake. "It all comes down to the fact that we were asked to vote on a resolution based on half truths, untruths, and wishful thinking," he said.

Putting national interest before partisan loyalty, he criticized the Bush administration and its supporting Neocon Greek Chorus. For those Republicans who believe liberal Democrats to be more dangerous than Islamic terrorists, Hagel became a traitor to his party, reviled as an enemy of all that is good and right in an era of perpetual partisan war.

Hagel didn't seek reelection in 2008 and moved on to other endeavors, such as the chairmanship of the Atlantic Council. Now the president wants him to head the Pentagon.

The reaction of Washington's bipartisan War Party has been one of horror. Secretaries of Defense are supposed to be cheerleaders for war, promoting promiscuous global intervention, demanding increased Pentagon outlays, and supporting perpetual military commitments. Hagel does not fit the mold. Complained Sen. McCain, who claims the two still are friends: "My biggest concern is his overall attitude about the United States, our role in the world, particularly in the Middle East, and whether we should reduce the Pentagon further."

In this regard Hagel well-represents the American people. They are angry after being lied to about the Iraq war, which they recognize was a terrible mistake. Thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died as a result of a lie propagated by self-serving Iraqi émigrés and advanced by war-promoting Neocon activists.

Americans also are tired of Afghanistan. They supported destroying al-Qaeda for launching 9/11 and ousting the Taliban for harboring al-Qaeda. More than a decade later they have no idea why Americans are still dying, apparently in a dubious attempt to promote honest, competent, democratic governance in Kabul.

There was no popular enthusiasm for President Obama's questionable adventure in Libya. There is no citizen support for intervening in Syria. Backing for war with Iran likely would dissipate once the high costs became evident.

Moreover, military spending must come down. Hagel called the Pentagon "bloated" and said that spending needs "to be pared down." Which is true.

Military outlays have increased dramatically since President George W. Bush turned into a fiscal liberal. Today the U.S. spends almost as much as the rest of the world combined. Washington devotes more money in real terms to the Pentagon today than during the Cold War, Korean War, or Vietnam War. Few outlays go to the defense of America. Most goes to protect populous and prosperous allies, such as Europe, South Korea, and Japan. Much of the rest goes to foolish, counterproductive nation-building in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is hard to think of a better candidate to run the Pentagon under such circumstances than Chuck Hagel. While recognizing that war can be necessary, he understands—out of both personal experience and practical consequence—that war is best avoided, if possible. Unlike the war-happy Neocons, he sees military force as a last resort. For this reason he proposes negotiation, even with diplomatic untouchables such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

He also is likely to bring a jaundiced eye to Pentagon budget-making. Someone has to challenge the generals to rethink the status quo. Hagel, who could be the first enlisted

man ever to end up as Defense Secretary, isn't likely to be intimidated by someone with stars on his shoulders.

Nevertheless, as one would expect, opposition to Hagel is fierce. The overriding objection to him is that he is the living refutation of everything the War Party stands for. He fought in battle, understands the human cost, offers skepticism rather than enthusiasm for new interventions, and would be no Pentagon rubber stamp. A liberal with no military experience and little confidence in military matters might be cowed or, better yet, coopted. Not Hagel.

Of course, it wouldn't do even for the Neoconservatives to charge Hagel with being insufficiently enthusiastic for war. So they have come up with a number of other charges. For instance, he opposed some sanctions against Iran and even urged—shock, shock!—negotiations with Tehran. However, this makes eminent sense. If you liked war with Iraq, you would love war with Iran. Lighting a match to the Middle East, the likely consequence of an attack on Iran, should be a very last resort. After being lied into war with Iraq, Americans want to make sure the same does not happen again with regard to Iran.

Even more serious to Neocons is the claim that Hagel is anti-Israel. Never mind that he routinely voted for aid to Israel and backed Israel in other ways. And that Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. diplomat now at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, commented after interviewing Hagel in 2008: “Hagel is a strong supporter of Israel and a believer in shared values.” The latter didn't—the mind boggles at the thought!—sign every letter presented to him by AIPAC, the spear point of the Israel Lobby in America. Indeed, Hagel had the temerity to call some of them “stupid.”

Moreover, he did not automatically absolve Israel from responsibility for the consequences of its actions. To the contrary, he joined with many Israelis in recognizing that after decades of military occupation of millions of Palestinians, Israel shared responsibility for the tragic results: “Both Israelis and Palestinians are trapped in a war not of their making.”

Worse, Hagel understood that shared people and values did not mean that the U.S. and Israel always shared the same interests. This truth is anathema to Neocons, who insist that Washington policy should be defined by the demands of the most extreme parties in Israel. However, Hagel believed that the duty of American officials is to promote America's, not Israel's, interests. As Hagel explained: “I'm a United States senator. I support Israel. But my first interest is I take an oath of office to the Constitution of the United States. Not to a president. Not a party. Not to Israel. If I go run for Senate in Israel, I'll do that.” This same sentiment should apply if a legislator is a Polish-American, a Southerner, a fraternity member, or a Mason.

Since Hagel's positions fit well within mainstream support for Israel, some of his critics pulled out the Big Smear: he obviously is an anti-Semite. Normally one would expect the burden of proof to fall on those who made the charge, but his critics offer no personal

statements or actions that actually are anti-Semitic. They prefer innuendo. One of the more vicious pieces came from Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute who intoned: "I do not know that he is one, nor am I convinced that he is not." Among her evidence that he might be: "It could even be his questionable taste in friends around Washington, or the fact that the government of Iran has welcomed his nomination."

Others complain that he pointed out the obvious (that there is an Israel Lobby). He once referred to the "Jewish Lobby" (which he acknowledged was a mistake, and he referred to "Israel Lobby" elsewhere in the same interview). And he did all those other terrible things, such as refuse to turn on his autopen for whatever letters AIPAC sent his way. Oh my!

Were the smear not so vicious it would be worth a laugh. Just as anyone who dissents from liberal orthodoxy risks being called a racist, so too anyone who dissents from Neoconservative orthodoxy now risks being called an anti-Semite. Indeed, the definition of anti-Semitism has changed. It once meant someone who hates Jews. Today anti-Semitism means someone hated by Neocons.

There's a tragic danger of calling wolf once too often. There are anti-Semites. They should be shunned by polite society and denied political power. But Hagel is not one. By promiscuously using the charge to intimidate and bully for political purposes, the Neoconservatives are making it less likely they will be believed if a real anti-Semite arrives on the scene. Unfortunately, today no one can believe any charge of anti-Semitism coming from the usual suspects.

Perhaps the strangest assault on Hagel was launched over his criticism of a homosexual nominated to be an ambassador 14 years ago. Hagel has apologized for his stance then, which was hardly unusual, especially among potential candidates to head the Pentagon. No one has pointed to any subsequent complaints, and he has been endorsed by figures such as Steve Clemons, a leading gay foreign policy scholar who knows Hagel well. Those on the left who have joined in the anti-Hagel scrum have been played by Neoconservatives, who otherwise are not known for their interest in this issue. Observed Glenn Greenwald, who delved into the question of how the gay Log Cabin Republicans managed to afford a New York Times ad attacking Hagel: "Gay advocates are the exploited tools" in "the anti-Hagel smear campaign."

In some ways the confirmation fight over Chuck Hagel is much ado about nothing. Even if he takes over the Pentagon he won't change the world. The president will continue to determine military policy. Congress will continue to set the military budget. In authority Hagel will have to curb his penchant for speaking honestly, especially in publicly highlighting the foolishness of policymakers around him.

At the same time, the political battle means everything. Is there any room in Washington for diversity of belief when it comes to foreign and military policy? Can a leading policymaker be skeptical of Washington's policy of promiscuous military intervention? Can a government official believe that it is better to employ diplomacy before resorting to

war? Can a Cabinet member believe satisfying America's interests come before satisfying Israel's interests? Answering yes to these questions is what Hagel's nomination really is about.

On the most obvious measures, Chuck Hagel is the right person for Secretary of Defense. If his detractors want to prove otherwise, they should offer some evidence that he is unqualified for the position. So far they have provided none. No wonder they have turned to a dishonorable smear campaign as a last resort.