



The Neocons' Fight Over Chuck Hagel

By: Christopher Preble - January 14, 2013

By nominating Chuck Hagel to be the next secretary of defense, after an excruciatingly long period of uncertainty and speculation, President Obama has demonstrated that he is disinclined to follow the advice of the neoconservatives who have been his harshest critics. Bill Kristol's aggressive campaign to dissuade Obama from picking Hagel failed. Now the attention turns to a fight over his confirmation in the Senate. In the end, I believe he will be confirmed.

After all, such fights are rare. Presidents are generally granted wide latitude in picking members of their cabinet, and it is unlikely that many of the 55 Senators who caucus with the Democrats (including independents Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Angus King of Maine) will pick a fight with a just-re-elected Democratic president. Such a fight would erode Obama's political capital, capital that he will need to push through his—and their—domestic agenda.

The remaining unknown, therefore, is whether the neoconservatives' grip over the Republican Party has finally been broken. Kristol and the neocons will argue that Hagel should not be confirmed. Will Republicans, aside from the predictable voices in the Senate's interventionist caucus, listen?

It is remarkable that the party continues to consult with the same people who championed the wars that have so tarnished the GOP's once stellar brand. But consider the case against Hagel on its merits. Hagel is not a pacifist, and certainly not the dove that his critics have claimed he is. He remains firmly within the foreign policy mainstream in Washington, and has supported past wars that I have opposed. But his general inclination, hardened after the debacle of Iraq, is to avoid foreign crusades, and to resist pressure to send U.S. troops into harm's way in pursuit of unclear objectives that do not advance U.S. interests. That is a mindset that the neoconservatives cannot abide.

But there are broader principles at play, including traditional deference to a president's wishes with respect to nominees, a deference that is warranted when the person only serves at the discretion of the president (unlike, for example, judges who serve for life). Even conservative commentators who have questions about some of Hagel's views, including George Will, have signaled that Hagel should be confirmed. Other respected foreign policy hands who came out in favor of Hagel before the nomination was announced include: Brent Scowcroft and Anthony Zinni (and nine other retired senior military officers), nine former ambassadors, including Nicholas Burns, Ryan Crocker, Daniel Kurtzer, and Thomas Pickering. In a separate op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, Crocker reaffirmed the group's support for the Hagel nomination, praising Hagel "as a

person of integrity, courage and wisdom.” The neocons, therefore, by picking a fight over Hagel, have also taken on a distinguished roster of foreign policy experts. Republican senators wishing to put distance between the party and the neocons should be happy to confirm a nominee who shares their views on most issues, and who is supported by people who have not been so badly wrong, so often.

I don't believe that Barack Obama chose Chuck Hagel in order to humiliate the Republican Party. I don't think he intended to shine the light on the bitter divide between the neoconservatives and traditional foreign policy realists. I think he picked Hagel because he likes him, and trusts him. But I agree with an anonymous Obama administration official about what the Hagel fight could mean for the GOP (via BuzzFeed): “If the Republicans are going to look at Chuck Hagel, a decorated war hero and Republican who served two terms in the Senate, and vote no because he bucked the party line on Iraq, then they are so far in the wilderness that they'll never get out.”