

TIME

President Obama Taps Former GOP Senator Chuck Hagel to Run Pentagon

By: Mark Thompson - January 7th, 2013

For the third time in 15 years, a Democratic President has turned to a member of the Republican Party to run his Pentagon. On Monday afternoon, President Obama nominated former Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska to serve as Secretary of Defense. Approval in the Senate — where Hagel served for 12 years before retiring in 2008 — is likely but not guaranteed, given his pedigree. He follows in the footsteps of Bill Cohen (Clinton, 1997–2001) and Robert Gates (Obama, 2009–11).

“Chuck Hagel is the leader that our troops deserve. He is an American patriot — he enlisted in the Army and volunteered for Vietnam,” Obama said at the White House, noting Hagel was wounded in the war and would be the first Vietnam veteran nominated to run the Pentagon. “Chuck knows that war is not an abstraction. He understands that sending young Americans to fight and bleed in the dirt and mud — that’s something we only do when it’s absolutely necessary.”

“I’m grateful for this opportunity to serve our country again, especially its men and women in uniform and their families,” Hagel said, standing alongside Obama. “Mr. President — I will always give you my honest and most-informed counsel.”

That’s something that concerns those opposed to Hagel, who is 66. He’ll bring his own baggage to the Pentagon on every issue from the U.S.’s role in the world and the size and purpose of the U.S. military to striking a proper relationship with Israel.

The nomination comes a month after Administration officials floated Hagel’s name, only to see it batted around like a piñata by those against the pick. It’s apparent that the White House, already smarting over the pre-emptive derailment of U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice for Secretary of State, wasn’t about to let that happen a second time. Ash Carter, the Deputy Defense Secretary, and Michèle Flournoy — who stepped down as the Pentagon’s No. 3 civilian last year and would have been the first woman to hold the post — were also-rans.

Hagel has already run into a buzz saw of opposition, even from members of his own party. “I like Chuck Hagel,” Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina told CNN on Sunday. “He served with distinction in Vietnam as an enlisted man — two Purple Hearts. But quite frankly, Chuck Hagel is out of the mainstream of thinking, I believe, on most issues regarding foreign policy.” If confirmed, Hagel “would be the most

antagonistic Secretary of Defense towards the state of Israel in our nation's history," he said.

Foreign policy heavyweights are lining up on both sides of the nomination. Those supporting Hagel include Bush 41 National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, Reagan Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci and Ryan Crocker, the highly regarded former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Opponents include at least three GOP Senators — Dan Coats of Indiana, Tom Coburn of Oklahoma and John Cornyn of Texas — as well as vocal critics like Josh Block, who heads the Washington-based pro-Israel group the Israel Project, and William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*, a conservative opinion magazine. "The next secretary of defense should be a well-respected mainstream national security leader," Kristol wrote last week, "not an out-of-the-mainstream mediocrity."

On the deployment side of the ledger, Hagel is likely to push back against U.S. military commanders who want to pull the remaining 66,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan out as slowly as possible before all combat forces are due home by 2015. There's one Hagel quote already ricocheting around the Pentagon, concerning President George W. Bush's plan in 2007 to dispatch 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Iraq to try to quell the nascent civil war there. Hagel said it could be the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in the country since Vietnam if carried out.

Well, it was carried out, and by most accounts the so-called surge calmed things down in Iraq. "I'll have a hard time voting for anybody to be Secretary of Defense who believes that the surge was a foreign policy blunder," Graham said on Sunday.

How much such comments will detract from Hagel's time as a decorated infantryman in Vietnam remains an open question. But more important than his service there more than 40 years ago is the time he and Obama shared in the Senate from 2004 to '08, when they served together on the Foreign Relations Committee and traveled to overseas hot spots.

Hagel would be the first Defense Secretary since the late Caspar Weinberger, Defense chief in the Reagan Administration, to have worn a U.S. military uniform in combat — and the first enlisted man. That gives him instant credibility. Hagel "led an infantry squad in Vietnam during the bloody fighting following the Tet offensive," Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said of him at a Memorial Day service last May. "Like millions of our generation, he demonstrated bravery, patriotism and heroism on the battlefield."

With his Hagel pick following Panetta's Democratic interregnum, Obama gets Republican cover to try to retool the Pentagon. That will include its missions as well as its business dealings. If he wants to, with Hagel in charge of the Defense department, Obama will be able to press for more substantial changes than he could with a Democrat sitting in that huge E-ring office. (*Atlantic* contributing editor Yochi Dreazen recently wrote about this strange state of affairs.)

But Hagel has never seemed to harbor a sense that it is the mission of the U.S. — or its military — to spread democracy around the world. "Militaries are built to fight and win wars, not bind together failing nations," he wrote in 2006. "We are once again learning a

very hard lesson in foreign affairs: America cannot impose a democracy on any nation — regardless of our noble purpose.” That echoes Obama’s thinking on the topic.

Former Senator Cohen applauds Obama’s pick and dismisses concerns that he will make bad policy. “You want a Secretary of Defense to be strong-minded,” Cohen says. “But he has to understand that this is not about Chuck Hagel, because he is not going to determine policy in the Middle East or with Iran. That’s the call of the President.”

Cohen, a onetime GOP Senator from Maine, embraces the idea of having a Republican Defense Secretary in a Democratic President’s Cabinet, especially when military spending cuts are looming. “You’re picking the best person to handle the job who can build a consensus on Capitol Hill, basically,” he says of the key challenge Hagel faces. “Having a Republican when you’re downsizing sends the message that we’re going to do this on a nonpartisan basis, with this man who has a military background, a war hero, Purple Hearts, etc.”

Cohen adds that while the Democratic Party is unfairly portrayed as being weak on defense, the Hagel nomination gives Obama some political cover. “Having a Republican there when you’re downsizing really takes away the issue of, There go the Democrats again,” he says.

The nod could generate some opposition from Jewish groups who don’t see Hagel as fervent enough in supporting Israel. He has criticized loose talk about U.S. military strikes against Iran over its nuclear program. Iran, for its part, has been paying close attention to Hagel and his new assignment.

Hagel’s lack of traditional GOP ideology might give him an edge when it comes to weaning the U.S. military off the hundreds of billions of dollars in added funding Congress gave it following 9/11. The libertarian Cato Institute suggests he would preside over a slimmed-down, stay-at-home military.

But there are elements within the GOP who deem Hagel untrustworthy, based largely on the sense that his advocacy of noninterventionism represents an abdication of U.S. power from the world stage. “Hagel IS a Dem,” tweeted ardent GOP hawk Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute, relaying a tweet bemoaning the lack of Democrats in charge at the Pentagon recently.

The disdain is mutual. Hagel summed up the view of his party in a May interview with Josh Rogin on *Foreign Affairs’* Cable blog. “I don’t think you can lead by ideology. Ideology gets a nation into a lot of trouble,” Hagel said. “There’s a streak of intolerance in the Republican Party today, and that scares people.”

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