



Chuck Hagel's farcical hearings

Gene Healy, February 4, 2013

Last week's confirmation hearing for Defense Secretary nominee Chuck Hagel made clear it's past time to retire that hackneyed phrase "World's Greatest Deliberative Body." Eight hours of questioning by the Senate Armed Services Committee allowed plenty of bloviating, grandstanding and browbeating -- but, apparently, not enough time for serious deliberation over key policy questions facing any new Pentagon chief.

On Thursday, BuzzFeed.com tallied up the issues the committee prioritized. In a hearing transcript running to nearly 60,000 words, the word "drone" doesn't show up even once.

Meanwhile, Saturday's Washington Post reports, the drone war is expanding across Africa, turning "kill lists and drone bases into fixtures for a fight expected to last another decade or more. The U.S. military recently disclosed plans to build a drone base in the west African country of Niger to conduct surveillance flights over neighboring Mali," and it hasn't ruled out using armed drones.

"Drones over Timbuktu" sounds like a snarky reductio ad absurdum of terror-war mission creep, but it's fast becoming our policy, and with little or no debate. Indeed, the committee seemed less interested in the wars we're currently fighting than in making sure we don't miss any opportunities to fight new ones. Afghanistan got 20 mentions in the hearing; "Iran" got 144, with most members demanding Hagel reaffirm that bombing Iran is an option we have to keep "on the table."

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., pushed for "engagement" in Syria's bloody civil war. Shouldn't we arm the rebels (some of whom have ties to al Qaeda) "and perhaps, establish a no-fly zone?" he demanded, noting that "it's been 22 months" already.

You'd think our defense posture toward China is an important issue, but I count only five references -- four by Hagel himself and one by overeager freshman Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who asked whether Hagel was "part of a group that traveled to China" with a prominent critic of Israel. (Hagel says no).

The "special relationship" with Israel -- embraced by everyone at the hearing including the nominee -- was special enough to win Israel 166 references in the transcript, more than any other country. Is Israel really 33 times as important to the U.S. as an emerging superpower with 19 percent of the world's population?

Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., the committee's ranking Republican, might think so. In a 2002 speech on the Senate floor, he argued that Israel was entitled to the West Bank "because God said so," and that "the spiritual door was opened for an attack against the United States of America" on Sept. 11 because we'd pressured the Israelis to show restraint in the face of Palestinian terrorism. On Thursday, Inhofe accused Hagel of "appeasing our adversaries while shunning our friends." Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., professed to feel "chills up my spine" because Hagel didn't sign a 2006 letter expressing solidarity with Israel.

Unlike most of his GOP colleagues, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., favors "a constitutional conservative foreign policy" that avoids "prolonged conflict throughout the Middle East and around the globe." Yet Paul recently declared that we should "announce to the world ... that any attack on Israel will be treated as an attack on the United States." Sen. Paul has said he wants to restore Congress' power to declare war and keep Israel independent from U.S. interference. But both goals would be undermined by an explicit security guarantee.

Chuck Hagel admires Eisenhower's farewell address warning of a burgeoning "military-industrial complex." Lately he may be finding Washington's farewell address equally relevant. "A passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils," our first president cautioned -- chief among them, needless entanglement in foreign quarrels.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."