



Chuck Hagel Says He's Just Like Obama's Previous Pentagon Chiefs

By Spencer Ackerman January 31, 2013

Defense Secretary-nominee Chuck Hagel, left, with President Obama and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta at the White House, Jan. 7, 2013. Photo: Defense Department

Two years ago, Leon Panetta figured the surest way to get confirmed by the Senate as defense secretary was to sound a lot like his predecessor, Robert Gates, who was widely respected for overseeing the Iraq and Afghanistan wars while getting rid of questionable defense programs. Panetta won a full 100 Senate votes. Chuck Hagel, the man President Obama nominated to succeed Panetta, won't — he's already a political punching bag. But Hagel painted himself in the mold of Gates and Panetta during his opportunity before the Senate to punch back.

If Hagel sounded a major theme during his Thursday confirmation hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee, it's total continuity with the Obama administration's defense policies, as he pledged himself "committed to [Obama's] positions on all issues of national security." But since some of those efforts are ambiguous, Hagel's description of them carries meaning. On Afghanistan, Hagel sees no contradiction between "end[ing] the war there" in 2014 and continuing to authorize the U.S. troops that constitute an envisioned residual force to engage in "counterterrorism, particularly to target al Qaeda and its affiliates."

And while Hagel is wary of new troop commitments on the periphery of U.S. national security, he declared himself on board for shadow wars against al-Qaida spinoffs. Hagel vowed to "keep up the pressure on terrorist organizations as they try to expand their affiliates around the world, in places like Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa," throwing money and support behind "special operations forces and new intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies." If that sounds familiar, it's because you heard the same pledge, almost word for word, two years ago at Leon Panetta's confirmation hearing to the same job.

Iran? “Prevention, not containment” of a nuclear breakout, for which “all options must be on the table.” Israel? “Our friend and ally” will continue to receive U.S. military aid to “maintain its Qualitative Military Edge,” and particularly for the Iron Dome rocket-defense system and its successors. Nukes? Like Obama, Hagel wants sizable cuts to the nuclear stockpile, and, like Obama, he committed to “maintaining a modern, strong, safe, ready, and effective nuclear arsenal.”

While in the past Hagel has talked about putting the Pentagon on a budgetary diet, he said the automatic budget cuts called sequestration Congress has slated for March 1 are a “complete disaster.” And you’ll never guess how he phrased that opposition: “I have made it clear I share Leon Panetta’s and our service chiefs’ serious concerns about the impact sequestration would have on our armed forces.”

If all of this sounds like a lesson in political reassurance, it should. For weeks, right-wing groups have been slamming Hagel, an old adversary since he broke Republican ranks on the Iraq war (after voting for it), as too far left of the Washington foreign-policy consensus on all these issues. That line of attack got an endorsement from the mouthpiece of that consensus, the Washington Post editorial page, which fretted in December that Hagel was “well to the left of those pursued by Mr. Obama during his first term” and “near the fringe of the Senate.” The ranking Republican on the panel, Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, who opposes Hagel’s nomination, said, “Too often it seems, he subscribes to a worldview that emphasizes appeasing our adversaries while shunning our friends.”

Hagel’s none-too-subtle response at the hearing was to tell senators, “Like each of you, I have a record... [and] no one individual vote, quote, or statement defines me, my beliefs, or my record.” And someone who really does believe in the virtue of scaling back American military overreach, Chris Preble of the Cato Institute, blogged on Thursday, “the odds are long against Chuck Hagel being a truly transformative SecDef.”