



Former senator Hagel in mix to serve as SecDef

By John T. Bennett – December 13th, 2012

Susan Rice has withdrawn from consideration to be secretary of state, a move that could pave the way for former GOP Sen. Chuck Hagel to become defense secretary.

The White House announced Rice's decision in a statement Thursday, with President Obama praising her efforts as U.N. ambassador and blasting Republicans who have been sharply critical of Rice. The announcement set off a firestorm in Washington, with speculation flying about what the decision means for Obama's second-term Cabinet.

Obama praised Rice as an "extraordinarily capable, patriotic, and passionate public servant" who has played "an indispensable role in advancing America's interests."

The president also responded to recent criticism from GOP lawmakers about Rice, and comments she made after a deadly attack on a U.S. diplomatic facility in Libya that later were proved inaccurate: "I deeply regret the unfair and misleading attacks on Susan Rice in recent weeks."

Those GOP senators had vowed to block her nomination if Obama tapped her for secretary of state.

One, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., issued a statement minutes after the White House announcement expressing his "respect" for Rice's decision. Graham also said he is "determined to find out what happened before, during, and after the attack" at the Benghazi diplomatic facility.

Rice's withdrawal could set up a scenario under which Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., becomes Obama's pick for secretary of state. Kerry had been mentioned as a possible defense secretary pick, but if he goes to Foggy Bottom, insiders say Hagel likely would replace Leon Panetta as defense secretary.

The White House's announcement set off immediate buzz around Washington.

Christopher Preble of the CATO Institute, in a statement released shortly after the Rice news was revealed, said speculation that Hagel would become defense secretary "should be welcomed by anyone frustrated by years of war and foreign meddling, and out-of-control spending at the Pentagon."

Hagel, a former Nebraska senator, is now chairman of the Atlantic Council.

During his 12 years in the upper chamber, he served on the Intelligence and Foreign Relations committees, among others.

Hagel has the respect of both Republicans and Democrats, and insiders say his nomination likely would sail through the Senate with little resistance — unlike Rice.

In recent years, Hagel has been a co-chair of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board and is a member of the Defense Policy Board, which reports directly to the secretary of defense. Hagel also is member of several corporate boards for major corporations such as Chevron.