



## Hagel Confirmation Fight To Highlight Iraq War, Pentagon Cuts

By: John T. Bennett – January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013

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Former Nebraska Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel's nomination to replace Leon Panetta as U.S. defense secretary will bring something old and something new into the national spotlight: President George W. Bush's Iraq war and a shrinking Pentagon budget.

Senate Armed Services Committee members and staff are reviewing Hagel's decades-thick policy statements, votes and views ahead of a yet-unscheduled confirmation hearing.

But even as that deep dive is only in its infancy, it already is clear Hagel's sharp opposition to the 2007 surge of additional U.S. forces in Iraq — which many credit with turning around that conflict — will take center stage. And it's a safe bet that congressional proponents of avoiding deep Pentagon spending cuts will press the nominee over what he recently labeled a "bloated" Defense Department budget.

That remark came during a 2011 interview with the Financial Times, in which Hagel also said, "The Pentagon needs to be pared down. I don't think our military has really looked at themselves strategically, critically in a long time."

That comment is drawing the ire of national security-minded conservatives in Washington. Already, right-leaning think tanks and organizations are circulating white papers and talking points slamming a number of Hagel's past comments on issues, including about cutting the DoD budget.

"The current secretary of defense and the White House have suggested that sequestration will be a calamity for our national security," said Danielle Pletka of the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "How can you reconcile your demand for greater cuts and the rejection of those cuts by the incumbent?"

Such points inevitably will be picked up by Republican senators as they prepare to question the nominee in coming weeks.

Hagel's allies, such as Fred Kempe, president and CEO of the Atlantic Council, are not tipping their hand about how deeply Hagel might want to reduce military spending.

But in a Jan. 8 television interview, Kempe, who worked closely with Hagel in the nominee's post as Atlantic Council chairman, noted one of his heroes is former President Dwight Eisenhower. That U.S. wartime general-turned-commander in chief "had a very, very sober view of military spending and ... came in after a war and had to make some tough decisions.

"Ultimately, it's President Obama's decision in the end," Kempe said. "Certainly in this budget situation, you're going to have a real hard look at the defense budget. And I think he'll [Hagel] bring his business acumen and his toughness to play in this."

### **Iraq Payback?**

Whether the nation is aching for a new discussion about the still-controversial 2003-2011 Iraq war, it's about to get one.

The former GOP senator angered many in his own party in 2006 when he broke with the George W. Bush administration and congressional Republicans over the conduct of the Iraq war. Some sources and pundits say the attacks Hagel is experiencing now are, in large part, payback for doing so.

Hagel penned a controversial 2006 Washington Post op-ed that began: "There will be no victory or defeat for the United States in Iraq."

The then-senator took umbrage with what was at the time one of the top U.S. goals in Iraq.

"The time for more U.S. troops in Iraq has passed. We do not have more troops to send and, even if we did, they would not bring a resolution to Iraq. Militaries are built to fight and win wars, not bind together failing nations," Hagel wrote. "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."

The op-ed was deemed remarkable, in part, because of the sharp language Hagel used.

"We have misunderstood, misread, misplanned and mismanaged our honorable intentions in Iraq with an arrogant self-delusion reminiscent of Vietnam," Hagel wrote. "Honorable intentions are not policies and plans."

Hagel also raised concerns about the economic toll the Iraq war was inflicting on the United States.

"The United States must begin planning for a phased troop withdrawal from Iraq. The cost of combat in Iraq in terms of American lives, dollars and world standing has been devastating," Hagel wrote.

"We've already spent more than \$300 billion there to prosecute an almost four-year-old war and are still spending \$8 billion per month. The United States has spent more than \$500 billion on our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And our effort in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, partly because we took our focus off the real terrorist threat, which was there, and not in Iraq."

Many of his views appear to place him at odds with several Armed Services Committee members, and that committee would have to approve his nomination before it moves to a full upper chamber vote.

One is former anking member John McCain, R-Ariz., to whom some in the GOP Senate caucus will look for guidance on how to vote if Hagel's nomination reaches the upper chamber's floor.

The Obama administration opted against a tense confirmation process for Susan Rice, who on Dec. 13 withdrew from consideration to become secretary of state over fears that McCain and other GOP senators would either block it or turn the confirmation process into a major political fight.

Whether the Hagel-McCain split over Iraq policy will lead McCain to oppose his friend remains an open question.

In 2008, McCain said he and Hagel are "close and dear friends" who simply reached different conclusions about the Iraq conflict. In the same interview, McCain called Hagel a "respected leader in America" who "served his country admirably, with honor and distinction."

On Dec. 20, McCain told Defense News he had not yet decided how he would vote.

### **The Opposition**

An anti-Hagel campaign has sprung up since his name was floated by the White House.

Pro-Israeli lawmakers, organizations and pundits have seized on 2008 comments Hagel made about the "Jewish lobby" intimidating U.S. lawmakers. Hagel and his allies have struck back, saying the nominee believes in the American-Israeli alliance.

Conservative pundits have deployed to cable TV networks to criticize his views. One is former George W. Bush-era Iraq adviser Dan Senor, a close adviser to 2012 GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

Senor noted that some of Hagel's views, such as questioning whether the kinds of stiff sanctions the Obama administration has placed on Iran over its alleged nuclear ambitions actually work, place him out of synch with the president.

One website calls Hagel "too extreme to be secretary of defense," and lists his views on a range of issues.

The Republican National Committee, in a blog post, questions whether pro-Israeli lawmakers such as Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., ultimately can support the nomination. The blog post questions if the administration can secure the 60 votes necessary to avoid a filibuster and confirm Hagel as defense secretary.

For his part, Schumer, in the hours after Obama announced Hagel's nomination, is holding his cards close.

“Chuck Hagel, as a former colleague and a patriot with a decorated service record, has earned the right to nothing less than a full and fair process in the Senate,” Schumer said in a Jan. 7 statement. “I look forward to fully studying his record and exploring his views.”

Some conservative Washington hawks believe Hagel is too antiwar to advise any president on the use of American military power. Not so, say his allies.

“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,” said Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute. “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.

“I don’t believe ... Obama chose Chuck Hagel in order to humiliate the Republican Party,” Preble said. “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.”

As Washington awaits his nomination hearing, the issue to track as the nominee meets one-on-one with lawmakers, then answers hours of tough questions in a public hearing, is whether enough senators come to trust Hagel.