

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## Neocons Against Chuck Hagel: The Independent Senator Who Wouldn't Genuflect

By: Doug Bandow – December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012

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Chuck Hagel is the Neoconservatives' worst nightmare. A decorated combat veteran who disdains promiscuous war-making. A conservative Republican who rejects a foreign policy of wandering the globe bombing, invading, and occupying other nations. A supporter of Israel who won't subcontract his judgment to the demands of Israel's Likud Party.

No wonder the usual suspects responded in the usual way. By calling Hagel an anti-Semite.

There are anti-Semites in the world. They should be reviled and resisted. Israel's Yad Vashem illustrates the horrific consequences when genuine anti-Semites gain political power.

Chuck Hagel is no anti-Semite.

The former senator is under consideration for Secretary of Defense because he would be an excellent choice. He is more of an interventionist than I am. But he offers a thoughtful, realistic, and measured perspective that has been largely lacking in Washington, especially over the last decade. As my Cato Institute colleague Chris Preble put it, Hagel's nomination "should be welcomed by anyone frustrated by years of war and foreign meddling, and out-of-control spending at the Pentagon. Which is to say, nearly everyone."

In fact, it is Hagel's thoughtful, realistic, and measured perspective that most angers the Neoconservatives who believe war is the best way to solve every international problem. Observed the *National Interest's* Jacob Heilbrunn: "Hagel's independent streak derives from the fact that his deepest loyalty is to the soldiers who actually fight the battles that Washington politicians direct them to wage. And like Henry Stimson, a Republican who served in Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration as secretary of war, Hagel believes in bipartisanship and compromise. Those traits have not exactly endeared him to his former brethren in the conservative movement who thirst for martial glory, at least from the sidelines."

Hagel is a conservative who thinks. He has a lifetime 84 percent rating from the American Conservative Union, but ignored the talking points circulated by the increasingly influential right-wing war party. For instance, he came to criticize the Iraq war. He believes in talking to Iran and Hamas. Six years ago he warned that "until we are

able to lead a renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, mindless destruction and slaughter will continue in Lebanon, Israel and across the Middle East." As, alas, has happened.

Too bad his critics aren't pressing for a genuine debate over his foreign policy views. There isn't much doubt how the war-weary public would vote. "Let's bomb everybody and remake the world" was a hard enough sell in the aftermath of September 11. More than a decade later it's a sure political loser. Just ask Mitt Romney, who performed the Maori Haka whenever asked about foreign policy.

Hagel is being attacked for being independent. Unlike so many of his former colleagues, he was not willing to temper his views for political advantage. In this case, to satisfy the most extreme advocates of Israel.

As interviewer Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. diplomat now at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, explained in 2008, "Hagel is a strong supporter of Israel and a believer in shared values." Moreover, Miller tweeted in response to the current controversy: "Hagel's interview w/me reflected common sense; not anti-Israel bias." But lack of bias is not nearly enough.

**Charge One.** Hagel acknowledged the obvious, that there is an Israel lobby. This is hardly earth-shaking--there are active lobbies for Greece, Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, and other nations. That for Israel is simply far more effective. Yet, Horror!, Hagel commented in 2008 that ""The political reality is that ... the Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here."

It was bad phrasing--Hagel said he misspoke and, in fact, he used "Israel lobby" elsewhere in the same interview. Which was correct. There is an Israel lobby, and it scares legislators, as many admit privately. There's no insult in reporting what Hagel called "political reality." AIPAC, Emergency Committee for Israel, Christians United for Israel, and a multitude of similar groups are what if not elements of an "Israel lobby"?

Indeed, Christians United demonstrates one truly odd aspect about Israel's support. The most extreme viewpoints usually are promoted by Christians, few of whom care the slightest about the plight of Palestinian or Israeli Christians. Instead, these Israel backers are committed to advancing the most extreme eschatological views. (They look to the book of Revelation rather than the Mayan calendar for guidance on the end of the world.)

Some believe that the Jews have to be gathered together to be slaughtered in the battle of Armageddon for Jesus Christ to return. So they want to "help" Israel fulfill that role. Others believe that the U.S. government should enforce God's real estate grant to ancient Israel. (It actually includes part of Iraq but, surprisingly, they did not advocate turning occupied Iraq over to Israel, which would have solved two problems at once!)

Other "Christian Zionists" are convinced that God's promised blessing for helping Israel means the U.S. government should sign onto any policy advanced by Israel's Likud Party. For them, there is no difference between Mosaic Israel and a modern secular republic governed by atheists. Worse, they believe that the all-powerful God who created the universe is incapable of achieving His ends without a boost from the modern, secular American government.

**Charge Two.** Hagel said that the Israel lobby "intimidates." Outrageous, claimed Bret Stephens in the *Wall Street Journal*. This suggests "powers that are at once vast,

invisible and malevolent." Actually, I suspect more than a few conservatives have claimed that AARP "intimidates." A gaggle of liberals likely has charged that the NRA "intimidates." In fact, every influential, effective, consequential lobby "intimidates." None rely on intellectual argument alone.

Certainly not the Israel lobby. It can and will wreck careers. Just ask Rep. Paul Findley and Chas Freeman, among others. Robert Merry of the *National Interest* cited Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's treatment of the Obama administration last year as a form of intimidation.

**Charge Three.** Hagel failed to reflexively follow AIPAC's dictates. For instance, Bill Kristol cited Hagel's refusal to sign AIPAC-generated letters on a variety of subjects. Numerous writers and bloggers have circulated the same list. Outrageous! Indeed, Hagel offended even more by calling the missives "stupid."

This criticism is less about the specific issues than the general refusal to sign. For AIPAC any rejection is dangerous. Such independence might encourage others to think before they sign. And there goes the Israel lobby's power to intimidate.

In explaining his position Hagel stated the obvious: "I'm a United States senator. I support Israel. But my first interest is I take an oath of office to the Constitution of the United States. Not to a president. Not a party. Not to Israel. If I go run for Senate in Israel, I'll do that." This is precisely how every American public official should act. Clyde Prestowitz observed that Hagel's "job has been to think about what's good for America."

**Charge Four.** By emphasizing his responsibility to act on America's behalf, complained Stephens, Hagel "cast the usual slur on Jewish Americans: Dual loyalty." Of course, there's no evidence that Hagel believes Israel's U.S. supporters put Israel's interest before that of America. However, Israel's most extreme propagandists often seem to conflate America's and Israel's interests. That results from failing to explain why something supported or opposed by Israel also is in the U.S. interest. The fact that Israel's prime minister advocates a policy does not mean it automatically benefits America. Emphasized Miller, Hagel "is just independent enough to recognize that there are moments when U.S.-Israel interests don't always align."

Despite the Neocon crusade against Hagel, a number of former ambassadors have come to his defense, citing his "commitment to the security of Israel, as a friend and ally." Retired Gen. Stephen Cheney of the American Security Project ascribed the criticisms as coming "from a very small, clearly prejudiced minority." Friends of Israel also are supporting Hagel. For instance, Jeremy Ben-Ami of J Street told the *New York Times*: "It is simply beyond disturbing to think that somebody of Chuck Hagel's stature and significant record of national service is being slandered in this way."

Despite the Neocons' impressive smoke and mirrors, they have little hope of blocking his nomination. He obviously is not an anti-Semite. His foreign policy views are closer to those of the majority of Americans than are those of the Neocons. And Hagel's credentials are unassailable. A few hostile questions at his confirmation hearing would not be enough to stop him. Noted Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.): "We all know him up here. He'll be fine."

Instead, the Neocons are shamelessly attempting to, yes, "intimidate" President Barack Obama into dropping the appointment. They are "counting on Obama to fold up like a cheap lawn chair," wrote my colleague Justin Logan. Choosing Hagel "would confirm a

point I made in a column earlier this year, which is that Mr. Obama is not a friend of Israel," declared Stephens. But the president just won reelection after Mitt Romney repeatedly made the same ludicrous charge. President Obama has no reason to cave. Of all people Neoconservatives should eschew the easy smear. Many have been called racists by some on the Left in an attempt to similarly stifle debate. In September the *Weekly Standard* complained: "The more the GOP appears to be succeeding, the more baseless accusations of bigotry we start hearing."

Alas, in acting the same way the Neocons risk becoming the child who cried wolf once too often. Treating anyone to the left of Avigdor Lieberman, or at least Benjamin Netanyahu, as possibly anti-Semitic saps the charge of any meaning. People will be less likely to listen if a genuine and genuinely-dangerous anti-Semite appears in the future.

Maybe Chuck Hagel isn't the right man to head the Defense Department. If so, it isn't because he is an anti-Semite. Let's have an honest and civil debate over his qualifications for the office. Israel loses when its American supporters resort to demagoguery allegedly on its behalf.