

## 5 groups that could hamstring Hagel

By: Josh Gerstein – January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013

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President Barack Obama's selection of former Sen. Chuck Hagel to be the next secretary of defense sets off what's likely to be the biggest confirmation fight over a Cabinet nominee since Obama took office.

The battle over the contrarian ex-senator from Nebraska is shaping up to include some of the tools of combat usually reserved for Supreme Court nominations. Hagel's opponents have already taken to TV, albeit with a modest cable buy in the Washington area. And his supporters have returned fire with a paid advertising effort of their own.

The fierce opposition in some quarters is far from guaranteed to derail his confirmation since Democrats control the Senate and many senators in both parties say they're generally inclined to confirm whomever the president chooses. Hagel has his supporters among old colleagues in the Senate, as well as a coterie of former national security officials, think tank scholars and liberal pundits -- many of whom have emerged to denounce criticism of Hagel as misguided and unfair.

Here's POLITICO's look at five groups that could pose a threat to Hagel's confirmation:

### **The Pro-Israel crowd**

Hagel has drawn anger from pro-Israel groups over the years for opposing some sanctions on Iran, refusing to sign letters urging a tougher line toward Hezbollah and endorsing policy papers that urge moves toward negotiations with Hamas.

But the biggest challenge for Hagel may be the blunt comments he's made about advocates for Israel, like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

"The Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here," Hagel told former Mideast peace negotiator Aaron David Miller in a 2006 interview. "I have always argued against some of the dumb things they do because I don't think it's in the interest of Israel."

Those kinds of remarks have drawn strong attacks from pro-Israel groups such as the hawkish Emergency Committee for Israel, which took out a TV ad declaring that Hagel is "not a responsible choice." Hagel's Mideast views have also drawn scathing comments from Republicans such as Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.).

"Chuck Hagel, if confirmed to be secretary of defense, would be the most antagonistic secretary of defense towards the State of Israel in our nation's history," Graham said

Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union." "Not only has he said you should directly negotiate with Iran, sanctions won't work, that Israel must negotiate with Hamas, an organization, terrorist group that lobs thousands of rockets into Israel. ... This is an in-your-face nomination by the president to all of us who are supportive of Israel."

Criticism of Hagel hasn't been limited to neo-conservatives or Republicans. One of the most respected leaders in the U.S. Jewish community, Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, told POLITICO that Hagel has a "checkered record on Israel."

Some of Hagel's language "borders onto conspiratorial. ... At the very least, it's of concern to the American Jewish community, at the very most, it's very troubling," Foxman said last month.

Some who have worked with Hagel on foreign policy issues say the attacks are absurd and that his views on the Mideast are mainstream.

"He has never expressed a thought that could be considered even remotely hostile to the people of Israel or the State of Israel. ... The charges are simply absurd," said Henry Siegman of the U.S./Middle East Project, which prepared some of the policy statements that Hagel endorsed. "The charges of anti-Semitism are vicious, really ugly stuff."

Siegman suggested that many of Hagel's critics aren't advocating for Jews or for Israel but for the Likud Party-led government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"If criticizing certain policies of a particular government in Israel, particularly an extreme-right government, make one unfriendly to Israel, then, boy, there's a big world out there that can be accused of being unfriendly to Israel," he said.

Many Jewish Democrats have been notably silent -- at least publicly. The Jewish outreach director for Obama's reelection bid, Ira Forman, previously indicated he would oppose the administration elevating Hagel beyond his role as co-chairman of Obama's intelligence advisory board. Forman didn't respond to a message last week seeking his current views.

One Jewish Democrat close to Obama said Sunday that pro-Israel groups are unlikely to mount an all-out drive to defeat Hagel.

"I don't think they're going to go to the barriers over this. They will make enough noise to make for a difficult confirmation hearing," said the Obama supporter, who asked not to be named commenting on the nomination before the expected official announcement Monday.

"In the absence of anything dramatically disqualifying -- and I don't see anything out there in the record yet ... presidents should be able to select their candidates for the Cabinet," the Obama backer said. "I think almost all Democrats in the end, and I think many Republicans, will respect the president's right to choose."

Some analysts are even predicting that the attacks on Hagel could backfire on pro-Israel groups.

Les Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, said he expects that

Israel advocates who oppose Hagel will "lose hands down."

Hagel will "just storm right through an approval process, and the Israeli lobbies [will] be very sorry for having shown up their weakness," Gelb said last month.

### **Gay-rights advocates**

Talk of Hagel's potential nomination drew immediate outrage from gay-rights advocates -- and attacks he's already tried to parry with an apology.

In 1998, Hagel opposed President Bill Clinton's nomination of openly gay James Hormel as U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg. The Nebraska senator said an "openly, aggressively gay" man should not represent the U.S.

Though Hagel had not yet been nominated when the remark surfaced again last month, he issued a retraction and apology.

"My comments 14 years ago in 1998 were insensitive," Hagel said in a statement. "They do not reflect my views or the totality of my public record, and I apologize to Ambassador Hormel and any LGBT Americans who may question my commitment to their civil rights. I am fully supportive of 'open service' and committed to LGBT military families."

The nation's largest gay-rights group, the Human Rights Campaign, accepted Hagel's apology -- even before Hormel did. However, other gay advocates still oppose the nomination.

"Hagel has, time and time again, taken every opportunity to lambast and denigrate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans, and the Cabinet is no place for this kind of disrespect," Tanya Domi of the liberal gay rights group GetEqual said in a statement Friday. "Hagel's recent apology for his insulting comments about the nomination of James Hormel as U.S. Ambassador to [Luxembourg was] hollow, politically expedient, and nakedly gratuitous. ... Nominating Hagel to lead the Defense Department would be a staggering step backward for the LGBT community and an upheaval of President Obama's past support for the LGBT community."

While gay-rights advocates aren't happy about Hagel, many don't think this is the issue they want to fight over. Most gay advocates are pretty pleased with Obama's support for the gay community and, in particular, his backing for same-sex marriage. They have little reason to anger the president by trying to block a defense nominee over comments he made a decade and a half ago.

Instead, look for gay advocates to use Hagel's confirmation process and his difficulties to try to extract promises of better treatment for gays in the military and more benefits for their partners.

"It's just not enough to topple a nomination of someone who's a former senator," said one prominent gay-rights advocate, who asked not to be named. "It's just not all that big of a deal."

### **Senate Republicans**

One of the usual reasons a president crosses party lines to pick a nominee is to ensure easy confirmation in the Senate. But in Hagel's case, his Republican Party membership seems to be more of a liability than an asset among the GOP lawmakers who will vote on his nomination.

"He has long severed his ties with the Republican Party," Graham said on CNN.

On Twitter Sunday, Republican Jewish Committee executive director Matt Brooks called Hagel "a 'GOP' senator who's managed to antagonize most of [the] GOP Conference."

He "doesn't have many friends," Brooks added, slamming Hagel as a RINO -- a Republican In Name Only.

Still, some Democrats close to the White House are convinced that many Republicans will ultimately go along with the nomination. One person close to Obama said Sunday that when many liberals in his party lined up to oppose Condoleezza Rice's nomination as secretary of state in 2005, then-Sen. Obama stood with those who voted, 85-13, to give President George W. Bush his choice.

### **Democrats in the Senate -- and the base**

Just weeks ago, when Obama seemed poised to nominate United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice as secretary of state, Democrats were ready for a fight. Rice has been active in Democratic foreign policy circles for more than two decades, and the Republican effort to blame her for the mishandling of the Benghazi attack struck many Democrats as unfair scapegoating.

The specter of Republicans trying to take down a female, African-American nominee also had significant parts of the Democratic base ready to go to battle until Rice apparently decided to give up the fight.

There's no similar reservoir of enthusiasm for Hagel among Democrats. Sure, he's respected by important figures in the process like Vice President Joe Biden and Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.).

But many Democrats are puzzled by Obama's decision to embark on a knock-down, drag-out fight to win confirmation of someone who likely doesn't share their views or the president's on a variety of subjects and is not even a member of their party.

"Wonder why the President is willing to spend his precious political capital getting Chuck Hagel confirmed as Defense Secretary," former Labor Secretary Robert Reich said on Twitter Sunday.

Obama's best hope with Democrats may be that they see his nominee as a proxy of sorts for Rice. Some Democrats think Obama is pressing forward with Hagel in part to avoid backing down again in the face of attacks.

"Given what happened with Susan Rice, the harder groups like gays or Jews or whoever pushed back against Hagel, I'm not sure it didn't encourage the president even more to nominate him," one Obama backer said.

## **Advocates for U.S. involvement overseas**

The vocal opposition to Hagel among advocates for Israel and gay rights has grabbed the headlines, but there is also another vein of concern in some foreign policy and human rights circles. These supporters of international involvement fear Hagel's gut instinct is that the U.S. should avoid entanglement in messy and potentially dangerous situations abroad.

"Sen. Hagel has called himself a realist and is an outspoken anti-interventionist," said Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute, a centrist Democratic think tank. "The Pentagon is the organization the president turns to in a crunch. ... Hagel was critical of the Libya intervention, and it's reasonable to ask what happens in another case where wholesale slaughter and massive human-rights violations are happening and the question comes to the table about whether America can and should act."

Hagel's take on those issues does seem markedly different from that of other key Obama advisers, such as Rice and National Security Council official Samantha Power. Both have endorsed the notion of humanitarian intervention, though they recognize that the American public's appetite for such action has been greatly tempered by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Marshall noted that Hagel is so opposed to U.S. involvement abroad that his expected nomination has been hailed by scholars at the libertarian **Cato Institute**. "Sen. Hagel comes out of a very different foreign policy tradition than the one associated with the Democratic Party in recent decades. He's really more in the mold of realists like Brent Scowcroft, Condoleeza Rice and the first President Bush," Marshall said.

Marshall said Hagel's views as defense secretary "might not matter that much if his job is simply to execute the president's policies" but raises questions about where Obama is headed in his second term. "Does this kind of instinctual recoiling from intervention betoken some kind of shift in America's national security strategy?"