

POLITICO

Criticism of Hagel out of proportion

By: David Rogers - January 9, 2013

In saying his goodbyes at the White House this week, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta joked that he was going home to his California walnut farm after 50 years in public life to deal with "a different set of nuts."

It was classic Panetta: never able to resist a good line. But also an apt introduction to the heartbreaking, loopy debate over his would-be successor: Vietnam veteran and former Nebraska Republican senator, Chuck Hagel.

Heartbreaking in the sense that old Hagel colleagues in the Senate can seem so blinded by their sense of injury that they would throw him to the wolves to get back at President Barack Obama. Loopy because Washington's politics -- and its press -- appear to have lost all sense of context from which to judge the man before them.

Hagel has been loudly taken to task for speaking of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee as a "Jewish lobby." But former Connecticut Rep. Sam Gejdenson -- Jewish, born in post-war Germany in a displaced persons camp and the child of Holocaust survivors -- could be far blunter about AIPAC as the top Democrat on the House International Relations Committee a decade ago.

And wasn't it just weeks ago that the Senate was tripping over itself to praise the grace and courage of Hawaii Sen. Daniel Inouye, who died before Christmas? Does anyone seriously think Inouye, a decorated veteran of World War II and strong Israel supporter, would not be supporting Hagel, the first enlisted-man veteran given a shot to lead the Defense Department?

This reporter brings his own past to this debate as an infantry medic in 1969 in Vietnam. In more than 30 years covering Congress, it's been impossible to totally separate that experience from dealing with those few members who were also in combat: Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Nebraska Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.) or the late Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), for example. Hagel falls into the same mix: never a social friend but someone who extended himself to provide context for stories.

In this same context, no one is more important to the Hagel debate now than McCain, Obama's old adversary and often bitter critic.

In life, the Arizona Republican would castigate Inouye as a vaguely corrupt baron of appropriations. In death, he warmly praised the Democrat. Now McCain faces a similar choice regarding Hagel, who was once like a younger brother when the Nebraskan first came to the Senate in the mid-90's.

With offices across the hall in the Senate's old Russell building, the two Republicans could seem inseparable: McCain, a Navy flyer in Vietnam and decorated POW from an old military family and Hagel, born to less privilege and the Army infantryman from the same war.

That relationship wore thin with time--as relationships can. Differences over campaign finance reform may have been part of it. The divide over Iraq policy added its own punctuation point but can be overstated.

"Iraq had no affect on the relationship between Sens. McCain and Hagel," says Mark Salter, a top aide to McCain in this period. "They had different views about the best course of action in Iraq," he told POLITICO. "But their difference was respectful and without rancor."

McCain still speaks publicly of Hagel as his friend and his vote for confirmation is said to be a 50-50 proposition. Then again, McCain's new younger brother and Iraq ally, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), has been so outspoken against the Hagel nomination that many see McCain's hand behind the scenes.

One important check on all this is the 1989 Senate fight over the late Sen. John Tower's nomination to be President George H.W. Bush's defense secretary.

Tower's loss had huge repercussions for Republicans: expediting the rise of Dick Cheney and Newt Gingrich on the national stage. But for McCain it was a genuine, personal hurt to see his Texas mentor rejected by the Senate. Does he have the stomach now to do the same to Hagel?

In the past decade, the camaraderie among this Vietnam group has frayed-- almost as if a metaphor for the Senate itself.

McCain's first presidential campaign in 2000 was a source of shared pride. By 2004, he had embraced George W. Bush and Iraq, even as Kerry -- his old partner in rebuilding relations with Vietnam -- was being "swift-boated" over his war record. When McCain ran again in 2008, Hagel was counted more with Obama. This past fall in a matter of days -- Hagel came back to Nebraska to endorse Bob Kerrey's Senate bid while McCain flew into Omaha on behalf of Deb Fischer, the successful Republican candidate.

It's popular now to relegate the Vietnam War to the past -- something fit for a Ken Burns documentary. But Vietnam was also the last war fought with draftees and an important historic marker, as personnel costs have since exploded and become an ever larger part of the military's \$600 billion-plus budget.

For many in the defense world, Hagel is a quirky choice. He has business and bureaucratic experience but is more a maverick than manager without the proven skills of past defense secretaries like Robert Gates or William Perry. That said, having a leader "up from the ranks" could be useful in what seems certain to be a period of retrenchment for military personnel and troop levels. And Hagel's maverick streak -- if he can find a strong second-in-command from industry -- could help him take tough decisions about costly weapon systems.

Republicans talk boldly now of using the Hagel confirmation fight to "pay back" Obama

for humiliating them in the New Year's tax fight. Forget advice and consent: Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) had been in office less than a week on Sunday and had already made up his mind against Hagel.

But what does the party really gain -- after a divisive election-- from perpetuating this fight?

A Midwest Republican and Vietnam infantry veteran is denied the chance to lead the Pentagon because of what: Pro-Israel neo-cons who want a more aggressive policy toward Iran? Gay anger over a bigoted remark Hagel made 14 years ago and has apologized for?

Former Rep. Barney Frank, a gay Massachusetts Democrat, came out in favor of Hagel's nomination this week -- because of the larger stakes Frank sees in beginning to reduce defense spending. In fact, many of those gay activists still attacking Hagel were attacking Frank himself five years ago, when he dropped a transgender provision from a workplace gay-rights bill in order to get it through the House in 2007.

At one level too, the Hagel debate could be a minefield for the GOP -- opening up its own divides.

Since the New Year's tax bill, House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) have been insistent that any future deficit reduction come from spending, not more taxes. But time and again in talks with the White House, the GOP has had to walk away because of pressure from influential hawks upset with the prospect of just that-- cuts from defense appropriations.

In the case of Iran, the rap on Hagel is he has grown soft, too "Jimmy Carter-ish." Republicans say they fear as defense secretary he will steer Obama toward a posture of containing -- rather than destroying -- Tehran's nuclear weapons program.

But Tea Party star Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) opposed just such a non-binding resolution when adopted by the Senate last fall at Graham's urging to put pressure on the White House to take pre-emptive action to stop Iran from achieving nuclear-capability. With the Weekly Standard's William Kristol leading the charge against Hagel, the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble has staked out the opposite ground in what's billed as a fight of the "neo-cons" vs. "realists" inside the GOP.

"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," Preble writes. "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."

It's even a "Perestroika Moment" for Republican foreign policy, Preble says, borrowing from the Russian word Mikhail Gorbachev used in a December 1984 speech as he began to open up Soviet politics and society. For those counting that was just shy of 10 years after the choppers went off the U.S. embassy roof with the fall of Saigon in April 1975.