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As Hagel's tenure as secretary of defense ends, a look back

By Jon Harper

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WASHINGTON — Chuck Hagel's tenure as secretary of defense comes to a close Tuesday. During two turbulent years at the helm of the Pentagon, he won kudos for managing the Defense Department bureaucracy during a period of downsizing but may have been scapegoated for the policy disarray following the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East.

Defense analysts give the former Nebraska Republican senator high marks for managing the withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan, setting in motion the shift in military resources to the Pacific, and coping with the deep, congressionally mandated budget cuts known as "sequestration."

All those achievements, however, were overshadowed by the Obama administration's muddled response to the rise of the Islamic State group after the militants seized about a third of Syria and Iraq and routed the U.S.-trained Iraqi army last year.

The Associated Press reported this month that foreign fighters are streaming into Syria and Iraq in unprecedented numbers, including at least 3,400 from Western nations among the 20,000 from around the world.

In Iraq, efforts to retrain the Iraqi army are moving slowly, and the Islamic State has threatened one of the air bases where U.S. troops are training Iraqi forces. Meanwhile, the Pentagon program to recruit and train moderate forces to fight the Islamic State in Syria has barely gotten off the ground.

President Barack Obama has ruled out sending U.S. ground forces into combat in Iraq or Syria, which makes training local forces to retake terrain controlled by the Islamic State group all the more critical.

The White House has alluded to differences with Hagel over the Middle East, while at the same time denying he was pressured into resigning.

"The priorities of the department ... have changed (since Hagel took over), given changes in the international community," White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on Nov. 24, the day Hagel's resignation was announced. "As we consider the next remaining two years of the president's time in office, [we believe] that another secretary might be better suited to meet those challenges."

Hagel's personality might have contributed to the perception that he was not skilled at articulating policy. In unscripted remarks, he often rambled or delivered muddled responses to questions. During his Senate confirmation hearings, Hagel appeared ill-prepared to answer questions about his record and views.

"I think it did damage him in the eyes of the (Pentagon) bureaucracy ... but most of all the White House," said MacKenzie Eaglen, a defense analyst at the American Enterprise Institute. Eaglen said Hagel's tenure started off "with a whimper and an embarrassing one that contributed to the perception of him as a sort of weak and inarticulate Pentagon leader."

But Christopher Preble, a defense analyst at the Cato Institute, said Obama is ultimately responsible for the administration's policy in the Middle East.

"At the end of the day, the [secretary of defense] doesn't make big national security decisions, he implements decisions," Preble said in an email. "If Barack Obama was determined to [have a more aggressive Syria policy], Hagel would have been responsible for executing the mission."

Several analysts described Hagel as a "fall guy" who was the victim of politics. Shortly before Hagel's resignation was announced, Democrats suffered an embarrassing defeat in the midterm elections and the administration's approach in the Middle East was being widely criticized.

"I think they removed him because [of] the election and ... the fact that they had to go back into Iraq (to combat insurgents)," said Lawrence Korb, a senior national security fellow at the Center for American Progress. "They were looking for a scapegoat."

Nevertheless, defense analysts say Hagel had some significant achievements during his brief tenure:

- When Hagel took office, there were 68,000 troops in Afghanistan fighting what had already become America's longest war. At the end of 2014, the U.S. combat mission officially came to a close. It is now a train-and-advise mission, and there are about 10,000 American troops performing that role.

Korb noted that Hagel secured a deal with the Afghans to keep a sizable force there to continue the training effort and a limited counterterrorism mission.

- The U.S. signed major basing access agreements with countries in the Pacific, started rotational deployments and put forth cutting-edge platforms. There's also been at least some improvement in military cooperation with China.

"He sustained the rebalance to Asia at a time when some of the rest of the administration had a hard time focusing on that crucial region," Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution, said in an email.

- Analysts gave Hagel high marks for dealing with sequestration and force reductions on this front, especially compared with his predecessors. They noted the Pentagon was guilty of wishful thinking before Hagel took over. "(Leon) Panetta said "sequestration wouldn't happen [and the Pentagon] just didn't plan for it," Korb said.

Eaglen said the Strategic Choices and Management Review, which Hagel initiated, generated the first document that laid out the strategic, personnel and modernization implications of varying budget levels in the coming years.

In a recent interview in his office, Hagel noted that he was more burdened than his predecessors on the fiscal front.

“I’m the first secretary of defense who’s actually had to deal with sequestration and the consequences of sequestration. I’m the first secretary of defense who actually had to put together ... a real budget, a practical budget with the law of sequestration hanging over us,” he said.

Experts described Hagel as a guy who was dealt a bad fiscal hand but played it well.

“I think he was a very competent manager,” Eaglan said. “He may not have been the leader everybody wanted, but at this point in where we are with the drawdown, post-Budget Control Act cuts and sequestration ... I’d argue that Hagel was what the Pentagon needed at the time.”

- Hagel held regular meetings with junior enlisted and junior officers, away from commanders, to get candid views. He ordered more than 30 initiatives to combat sexual assault. He shook up the POW/MIA accounting offices plagued by incompetence and malpractice. He surged Defense Department personnel to Veterans Affairs facilities to help deal with the claims backlog. Also, he ordered officials to consider post-traumatic stress disorder as a mitigating factor for Vietnam veterans who received other-than-honorable discharges that prevented them from receiving care. After Hagel’s resignation was announced, John Stroud, the commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, praised “the close, unprecedented working relationship he (Hagel) built between the Pentagon and the VFW,” adding that “his leadership and his presence will be missed.”

Korb described Hagel, who was awarded two Purple Hearts in Vietnam, as a “soldier’s soldier” who cared deeply about the people he was leading.