

## Whatever Ashton Carter's Views On War Are, He Should Stick To The Pentagon Budget

By [Christopher Preble](#)  
December 3, 2014

The White House has apparently [settled](#) on Ashton Carter to replace Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense, after other leading candidates withdrew their names from consideration. It can never be a pleasant experience to come into a new job with the baggage of everyone knowing that you were the third or fourth best choice for the position. But that is the least of Carter's challenges.

He will be expected to manage several ongoing wars, at a time when the public [wants](#) to kill bad guys without necessarily using U.S. ground troops to do it. Carter must also oversee numerous major new and costly weapons programs (especially [nuclear weapons](#)) in an increasingly tight budgetary environment. The Pentagon's base budget (excluding the costs of the wars) remains near historic highs in inflation-adjusted terms, and personnel expenses are likely to remain high despite some reductions in the numbers of men and women serving in uniform. The just-released draft budget implements modest cost controls, but the [Military Times reports](#) that these "are likely to irritate outside advocates who pushed against any pay and benefits cuts." Absent significant reform, military pay and benefits will place additional downward pressure on both new weapon R&D and normal operations and maintenance.

On top of all this, the [rancor](#) surrounding Hagel's departure has shone new light on the White House's tendency to micromanage foreign policy from the West Wing. It is reasonable to ask, "Why would *anyone* want this job?"

On the surface, Carter is well-positioned to lead the world's largest bureaucracy despite all of these challenges. He has arguably been training for the job for well over two decades. He served in the Pentagon during Bill Clinton's first term, and had been studying security issues going back [at least to the 1980s](#). He has therefore won early praise from the *Wall Street Journal's* editors for being an experienced "[technocrat](#)" who can hit the ground running.

Carter is also presumed to be sufficiently [hawkish](#) to satisfy pro-war pundits – or at least more hawkish than Hagel, who was excoriated during a brutal nomination battle for daring to question whether the Iraq war was such a good idea and for seeming insufficiently enthusiastic about new wars. Those same critics, so far, have had only good things to say about Carter, who in the past appeared to favor a harder line against Iran and who [supported](#) "preemptive" (sic) military strikes against North Korea back in 2006.

But the hawks' celebration might be premature. Replacing Hagel with Carter doesn't necessarily make war with Iran or North Korea more likely. The national security elite remains reliably interventionist and Carter's ascension to the top ranks (even if third or fourth down the list) may merely signal that he is typical of the establishment. It isn't even clear that Hagel was as opposed to war as his critics claimed and his one-time supporters ([myself included](#)) hoped.

In recent months, for example, Hagel seemed more interested in sending U.S. troops to fight the so-called Islamic State than JCS Chair Gen. Martin Dempsey. One hopes that experience has taught Dempsey, even if others have failed to grasp it, that the U.S. military is ill-suited to fix Iraq and Syria's broken politics, the true source of the Islamic State's strength.

Given all of the things on Ash Carter's plate, a logical division of labor would put him in charge of managing the Pentagon's budget, and Dempsey in the forefront explaining how these resources should be deployed. The hawks in and out of Congress are reluctant to criticize the judgment of uniformed military personnel, and Americans remain wary of sending U.S. troops into the middle of distant civil wars. If Dempsey advises against greater U.S. involvement in such wars, he might have a bigger impact on the course of U.S. foreign policy than any of his civilian counterparts – Ashton Carter included.

*Christopher A. Preble is the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.*