

Hagel was meant to cut military; Islamic State's rise changed that

By Nancy A. Youssef and Anita Kumar
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WASHINGTON As the Pentagon absorbed the shock of Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's unexpected resignation Monday, another realization set in: Neither Hagel's departure, just like those of his two predecessors, nor the arrival of his successor promises major changes in the administration's approach to national security policy.

The U.S. military still will be tasked with degrading and destroying the Islamic State with minimal involvement of ground troops, a challenging task, military commanders concede. It will maintain a residual force in Afghanistan. It will still face budget cuts. And the White House's decisions on national security issues will remain dominated by President Barack Obama's closest advisers, not Cabinet secretaries or generals.

That reality led Hagel's defenders on Capitol Hill to charge Monday that the Vietnam veteran and former senator from Nebraska had become a "scapegoat for an administration's failed policies," as Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., put it in a statement. Hagel's critics charged that because the job has become so difficult, it demanded a more polished leader. Some in the Pentagon bluntly asserted that he wasn't up to the job.

The circumstances of his resignation remained unclear. At a White House ceremony, Obama said Hagel had resigned. Hours later, his press secretary, Josh Earnest, called it a mutual decision and the natural point to end a Cabinet posting. Some defense officials, meanwhile, told McClatchy that Hagel had resigned Thursday after White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough visited the Pentagon.

Hagel submitted his resignation Monday.

When Hagel's successor is installed, Obama will become the first president to have four secretaries of defense since Harry S. Truman, who was president when the National Security Act of 1947 created the Cabinet post. The two secretaries who already have served under Obama – Robert Gates and Leon Panetta – each wrote books upon leaving the Pentagon, leveling unusually candid criticism of the White House and how the administration made decisions about national security policy. Both charged that such discussions were often insular and guided predominantly by domestic politics.

Only on Nov. 15, Gates spoke at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library about his experiences under the White House, calling the management of national security issues “political.”

“We now have an NSC of nearly 350 people. It was 50 when Brent (Scowcroft) and I were there in the first Bush administration,” Gates said, referring to the National Security Council. “My concern in terms of this is the relationship between the White House and the military . . . the increasing desire of the White House to control and manage every aspect of military affairs.”

Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain said Monday that Hagel had told him in the last few weeks that he was “very, very frustrated” with the Obama White House. The Pentagon and the White House declined to comment on McCain’s claims.

Both Gates and Panetta said they’d wanted to leave sooner than they did. During Monday’s announcement, Obama said Hagel, 68, asked to leave a month ago. A senior defense official said Hagel had approached Obama in late October about departing and that after three such discussions “arrived at this decision.” The official spoke only anonymously because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Analysts said the fact the administration had had so many defense secretaries might be because Hagel and his predecessors had found the administration’s approach untenable or because the job was simply very difficult in a world of budget cuts and declining public support for overseas entanglements.

“It could be true there are challenges working within the national security team, but it is also tough to be secretary when wars are being fought and budgets are being cut,” said Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research institute in Washington. “Will the next secretary of defense be less reticent and more hawkish and advise we need to send troops to combat zones? If so, we can anticipate a change in policy. But it is not just the person but the mood of the country that shapes policy.”

Obama has always kept his deliberations confined primarily to his close circle of friends and advisers, rarely straying outside those comfortable confines to meet with his Cabinet or schmooze at parties, on Capitol Hill or among lobbyists and interest groups. He is, by his own admission, a loner. Those who know him say he prefers listening to trusted advisers and reading briefing books before making decisions.

The advisers includes senior adviser Valerie Jarrett, who was close to the president in Chicago, McDonough and National Security Adviser Susan Rice, both with ties to Democratic politicians.

Obama announced the departure Monday morning in the State Dining Room, flanked by Hagel and Vice President Joe Biden.

“Over nearly two years, Chuck has been an exemplary defense secretary, providing a steady hand as we modernized our strategy and budget to meet long-term threats while still responding to immediate challenges like ISIL and Ebola,” Obama said, using the government’s preferred

acronym for the Islamic State. “Thanks to Chuck, our military is on a firmer footing engaged in these missions and looking ahead to the future.”

Obama said Hagel had come to see him and “determined that having guided the department through this transition, it was an appropriate time for him to complete his service.”

Hagel called being the defense chief “the greatest privilege of my life – the greatest privilege of my life to lead and, most important, to serve – to serve with the men and women of the Defense Department and support their families.”

When Hagel assumed the post 22 months ago, the main Defense Department challenge was resetting an exhausted military force. U.S. troops had left Iraq and the United States was planning to end its war in Afghanistan. There were plans to tackle sexual assault in the military, introduce women into combat units and manage a shrinking defense budget.

Those plans largely disappeared as the White House decided to confront the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the result was differences between the White House and Hagel, who repeatedly fretted that the U.S. approach to combating the Islamic State in Syria would bolster the government of President Bashar Assad.

In August, when the Obama administration said the Islamic State wasn’t an immediate threat, Hagel told reporters group “is as sophisticated and well-funded as any group that we have seen. They’re beyond just a terrorist group. They marry ideology, a sophistication of strategic and tactical military prowess. They are tremendously well-funded.”

Last month, those differences became public when The New York Times revealed that Hagel had told Rice in a memo that U.S. policy on Syria was “in danger of unraveling” because of confusion over the position on Assad.

Even before the memo, however, there were published suggestions that Hagel would be out of office after the midterm elections, talk that only intensified when the secretary canceled a long-scheduled trip to Vietnam earlier this month.

Charlie Dunlap Jr., the executive director of Duke University’s Center on Law, Ethics and National Security, who retired from the military in 2010 as a major general, said the departure made sense.

“Mr. Hagel was brought on board to facilitate the downsizing of defense, but world events are causing a rethinking of the wisdom of doing so,” Dunlap said. “The skills required to address the range of today’s very serious threats do not, in my view, play to Mr. Hagel’s strengths.”

Hagel last talked about rumors of his departure to Charlie Rose last Thursday, saying: “I don’t get up in the morning and worry about my job.”

During his announcement Monday, Obama didn’t name a successor.

Within the Pentagon the leading names were Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy, who'd become the first female defense secretary, and Ash Carter, a former deputy secretary of defense.

Hagel will remain at his post until a successor is named, likely early next year, officials at the Pentagon said.