



Hagel's a Good Fight

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Chuck Hagel isn't the consistent dove his opponents say he is, and he's no civil libertarian. But his nomination as secretary of defense is still a fight worth having.

Hagel shouldn't have much trouble in the Senate armed services committee. Among the panel's Democrats, Chairman Carl Levin of Michigan is a Hagel booster, as is Rhode Island senator Jack Reed. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) seems supportive. Thus far the others have not commented or are noncommittal. On the other side, Roger Wicker (R-MS) has announced his opposition (via twitter), and John McCain (R-AZ), Lindsay Graham (R-SC), Ted Cruz (R-TX), and Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) seem likely to vote no. But the incoming ranking member, Jim Inhofe (R-OK), was positively inclined a month ago. Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) and Jeff Sessions (R-AL) appear open to persuasion. With broad Democratic support likely, it will take only a couple Republicans to get the majority Hagel needs to reach the full Senate.

But there may be only a few Republican yes votes. Senators John Coryn (R-OK), Tom Coburn (R-OK), and Dan Coats (R-IN) will vote no. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) threatens a hold. Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) is lukewarm. A few others, including both Nebraska senators, are noncommittal. The rest are silent, so far. Most Democrats should vote yes. Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) seem supportive. Senators Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Barbara Boxer (D-CA) offer vague non-endorsements. At this point, who knows what will happen in a floor vote, but with 55 Democrats, 60 needed for confirmation, and an engaged White House, Hagel's odds seem better than even.

As Chris Preble notes, one virtue of Hagel becoming secretary is that he is willing to cut the massive defense budget and is more skeptical than most Washington bigwigs about war. He has a tendency to offer sensible observations that count as apostasy in U.S. foreign policy circles. Examples include his claim that the U.S. trade embargo toward Cuba is senseless (a view shared by most people outside Miami, which brought Rubio's hold threat), the notion that diplomatic engagement with odious regimes is generally worthwhile, doubts about the utility of coercive sanctions on Iran (which academics that study the matter mostly share), and, of course, his willingness to admit the existence of an Israeli lobby (granted, he shouldn't have said "jewish") and a distinction between U.S. and Israeli interests.

As Hagel's more reasonable critics note, having never served on a defense committee, his qualifications are not ideal. Serving in Vietnam does not teach you much about how to run the Pentagon. But Hagel's military experience does seem to have encouraged his skepticism about the wisdom of generals and admirals—a useful tendency for a Secretary of Defense, especially one that may have to overcome the brass's resistance to ending a war and implementing a drawdown. Deputies like Ashton Carter can help with management.

Another virtue of Hagel's nomination is that it may show that the interests that police speech on these issues are not as powerful as they seem. As nearly everyone reading this knows, the most vocal opponents of Hagel's nomination are the familiar band of neoconservatives ever-eager for war, the editorialists that reliably agree with them, and some pro-Israel (really Likunik) lobbying

groups. Also opposed to Hagel are some gay-rights advocates angered by his voting record on that issue, including his 1998 comment calling an ambassadorial nominee “openly, aggressively gay,” for which he recently apologized.

If Hagel loses in the Senate, many will say that the Israeli lobby and their neoconservative friends did it. His loss, you might say, will enhance their perceived power and quiet those tempted to challenge the ideology they enforce. But since Obama floated his name and brought attacks, not nominating him would have had the same result. So why not now have a fight?

There may be some political benefit even in losing. Neoconservative attacks on Hagel come largely on matters where the public takes Hagel’s side—the military budget, bombing Iran, the occupation of Iraq, the wisdom of intervention in Syria. If Senators like McCain, Graham, and Kelly Ayotte (of the lately anti-war New Hampshire) attack Hagel on these grounds, they may harm themselves and their cause. Floor debate might allow a senator to ask Dan Coats how being anti-war means disrespecting the military. Even on Israel, there may be virtue in exposing a wider public to the irony of the Israeli lobby intimidating people by attacking someone for saying the Israeli lobby intimidates people.

If Hagel wins, it will demonstrate that his opponents aren’t all they are cracked up to be. Neoconservatives obviously lose regularly; various wars they said our security depends on never occurred, and those that did were generally smaller than they’d like. The Israel lobby, on the other hand, seems more successful. But they regularly win because there is rarely anyone strong pushing back—no Palestinian lobby, for example. Americans are so safe from Middle-Eastern trouble that, most of the time, few costs—blood, treasure, votes—come from doing whatever those most interested want. When their ambitions bring conflict with something powerful, like a lobby of similar heft, strongly anti-war sentiment, or a determined president just reelected, the other side can win.

I argued that Susan Rice was a bad choice for secretary of state because she is unfailingly pro-war, and that her ascension would show, again, that being pro-war is generally politically safer than being against it. In terms of perception, Hagel is now nearly the opposite. If he became secretary it would indicate that it’s not verboten for ambitious politicians to be realists that question the virtue of violent meddling in the Middle East and supportive of substantial military cuts. A few less people might bite their tongue for fear that someday the likes of Abe Foxman, Bill Kristol, and their PRflaks will call them anti-semites and keep them from getting an important job. One appointment may not unleash the perestroika needed to undermine the hawkish consensus that prevails on these issues, but it would help.