



Why Hawks Fear Chuck Hagel

By: Ted Carpenter - January 17, 2013

President Obama's nomination of former Republican senator Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense has ignited a firestorm of controversy. Most of the heat so far involves Hagel's views on U.S. policy toward Israel. His (relatively mild) apostasy on that issue has produced innuendos of anti-Semitism from *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol and other outspoken neoconservatives. That campaign of character assassination is one that would have made even Sen. Joseph McCarthy blush. Prominent political and policy figures familiar with Hagel and his views have ably rebutted such unjust accusations. Most recently, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, rebuked one of the council's own scholars, Elliott Abrams, for using the anti-Semitic smear against Hagel. On Tuesday, Sen. Charles Schumer voiced his support for Hagel, increasing the probability of his confirmation.

The underlying reason for the shrill opposition to his appointment, though, is that Chuck Hagel threatens a large herd of defense and foreign policy sacred cows. He dares to question the conventional wisdom on issues including the efficacy of economic sanctions (against Cuba, Iran, and other countries), the need to approve every item on the Pentagon's wish list, the prudence of reflexive U.S. support for the hard-line policies of Israel's Likud government, and the supposed benefits of nation-building ventures around the world.

Hagel is a realist and a bit of an iconoclast. That approach menaces a lot of vested interests, and it has led to ever more far-fetched allegations. The venerable *Washington Post* epitomized the trend in an editorial that not only accused Hagel of being insufficiently supportive of Israel, but argued that he was to the left of anti-war elements in the Democratic Party on a host of issues.

Decorated combat veteran Hagel is hardly a left-wing peacenik. The lodestar of his approach is whether a specific measure benefits the security and liberty of the United States—not whether it benefits the interests of other countries or perpetuates entrenched institutions and policies. One would think that such a commonsense approach would be the norm in foreign policy discussions, but sadly that is often not the case.

Alan Tonelson, who served as the associate editor of the prominent journal *Foreign Policy* in the mid and late 1980s, once voiced his surprise and uneasiness that most of the articles submitted for his review did not reflect a U.S. national interest standard. Article after article would focus on how a specific initiative would benefit NATO, Japan, South Korea, or some other U.S. ally or client. Most submitted articles discussed only as an afterthought how the proposed policy served American interests—if the authors bothered to mention that aspect at all.

That same "clientitis" permeated the reaction to the end of the Cold War and the future of NATO. For a majority of the political and foreign policy community, the highest priority was to preserve NATO as an institution. They rarely asked whether NATO, an alliance designed as one British statesman famously put it, to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down," made any sense for the United States in a very different post-Cold War environment. Instead, they searched frantically for alternative missions to keep NATO in business. Robert Hormats, an assistant secretary of state during George H. W. Bush's administration, achieved the summit of absurdity when he suggested that a transformed NATO could coordinate environmental policies and student exchanges.

Hagel's career suggests that his priority will be to determine whether a policy truly benefits the United States. He is not likely to have much respect for a foreign policy based on nostalgia or excessive solicitude for allies and clients. Nor is he likely to exhibit knee-jerk support for the notion of America as the global policeman—much less the more recent version that has made America the world's armed social worker. His views more accurately reflect the opinions of the American people than do the views of his hawkish adversaries.

An ironic aspect to the anti-Hagel campaign is that he is actually a very moderate realist. There are members of the realist camp who would go far beyond what he seems to favor in pruning the military budget and reassessing the global interventionist policy it implements. Hagel would merely view the conventional wisdom in Washington with well-deserved skepticism. Although he might not always come up with the right answers, he at least wants to ask the right questions. His opponents are unwilling or unable even to do that.