



Insight

Obama's Controversial Defense Choice

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President Obama's expected nominee for Secretary of Defense comes with a remarkable amount of baggage. Former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel may yet be confirmed, but his nomination has generated substantial opposition from both the left and the right. Senators need to get to the bottom of serious questions about Hagel's temperament, views on Iran and Israel, and commitment to adequate defense spending.

Under different circumstances, Hagel might have sailed to confirmation. A decorated Vietnam veteran with decades of foreign policy experience, Hagel carries an impressive résumé. Politically, he should have been able to count on support not just from Team Obama, but also from his fellow Republicans. And being a former Senator should have made him a shoe-in, since the Senate tends to support its alumni regardless of party. Hillary Clinton was confirmed on a 94-2 vote, and John Kerry appears likely to face little opposition to replace her.

Instead, President Obama's choice of Hagel sets up perhaps the most contested cabinet fight of Obama's second term.

Hagel's problems stem from his independent streak and from his outspokenness. Of course in the right doses, both are virtues not vices. In Hagel's case, they may be his undoing.

Demonstrating independence from one's party is not necessarily a bad thing – consider John McCain's rise from Senate maverick to Presidential nominee. But Hagel came across as peevish. When he left the Senate, Hagel's wife called his position among Senate Republicans “[a little like a skunk at a garden party](#).”

Hagel's pugnaciousness not only costs him personal ties that would be helpful during a Senate confirmation process. It also raises concerns about his temperament as Defense Secretary. Outspokenness is an asset for getting on Sunday morning talk shows, but for a national security principal, it can be disastrous. Indeed, part of the case against Susan Rice for Secretary of State was her frequent lack of tact.

Hagel's Senate record also reveals foreign policy views outside the mainstream for either party. Perhaps most alarming were his positions on Iran. Hagel was a vocal critic of Bush Administration efforts to isolate Tehran. He was one of just two Senators to vote against the 2001 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act. In 2008, he was on the wrong side of a 19-2 vote on Iran sanctions legislation in the Senate Banking Committee.

Hagel and Obama may share the naïve view that "engagement" will resolve the Iran nuclear crisis. But even Obama thinks sanctions must be part of the strategy. How odd to nominate someone for Defense Secretary with such divergent views on one of the most pressing national security challenges facing America.

Then there are Hagel's positions on Israel. As Senator, Hagel proudly distanced himself from numerous pro-Israel initiatives, calling himself "a United States Senator, not an Israeli Senator." He was not supportive of Israel's right to self-defense. Hagel was one of just four Senators to refrain from signing a 2000 letter supporting Israel during the second Palestinian intifada. In 2006 he called on President Bush to demand Israel cease operations against Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. Hagel also pushed for U.S. engagement with Hezbollah and Hamas.

Some accused Hagel of anti-Semitism for describing pro-Israel groups as the "[Jewish lobby](#)," an inartful phrase for which he later apologized. Today, pro-Israel groups are among the most vocal in opposing Hagel's nomination, and many pro-Israel Senators – Republicans and Democrats alike – are withholding their support.

Pro-Israel groups have been critical of President Obama too, and one of Obama's strongest rebuttals is the record level of defense cooperation with Israel under his administration. If defense cooperation with Israel is so important, why would Obama nominate for Defense Secretary someone notorious for his criticism of Israel?

Another hurdle for Hagel are anti-gay remarks he made about a U.S. Ambassador nominee in 1998. Hagel has apologized for the comments, and his views may have changed since then. Still, one is left to wonder how Defense Secretary Hagel would oversee continuing issues related to the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, a policy he strongly supported as Senator.

If Hagel is confirmed, he will have to deal not only with national security challenges in the Middle East and Asia, but also the threat of sequestration and other pressures to slash defense spending. Hagel's commitment to veterans and the troops is well-established, but it's not clear that he would fight for the resources needed to maintain a robust military. In fact, a year ago Hagel told the [Financial Times](#) the Defense Department was

“bloated” and should be “pared down.”

The Pentagon needs a champion who will fight for the funding necessary to keep America strong during times of budgetary constraint, an unlikely role for Hagel. Instead, Obama may hope Hagel will provide him Republican cover for devastating cuts to the military.

Hagel will have an opportunity to mend fences and clarify his positions during his upcoming nomination hearings. Whether he can undo the damage he has caused to his reputation remains to be seen.