



Hagel's Retreat

Some observers are mystified by Chuck Hagel's pathetic showing at his Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, but there should be no mystery about it. He performed as he did for one simple reason: He wants to be the next secretary of defense, and he (along with the White House) must have calculated that standing up for his past positions would have harmed his chances.



Only by establishment standards did the old Hagel look like a radical critic of U.S. foreign policy. For example, he once criticized the 2007 military surge in Iraq, but he voted to authorize President George W. Bush to send troops there.

He previously expressed concern about the drive to war with Iran over its alleged nuclear-weapons program. But he supported multilateral economic sanctions against the Iranian people, although he criticized unilateral sanctions and made favorable statements about negotiating with the Islamic republic.

Hagel also criticized Israel and what he called "the Jewish lobby" in the United States. Among his statements on this subject, he said the Israelis "keep Palestinians caged up like animals," complained that the lobby "intimidated" members of Congress, and accused his congressional colleagues of doing "dumb" things as a result. Yet in the Senate he voted for every aid bill for Israel.

But during his Senate hearing, Hagel retracted or considerably watered down every one of these statements. To many questions, he [responded along these lines](#): "I've said many, many things over many years.... If I — if I had a chance to go back and edit it, I would. I regret that I used those words."

The message that came out of the hearing is unfortunate: Deviation from the narrow range of opinion authorized by the ruling elite is forbidden. If you want respect from that elite, you'd better toe the line. (Whether one should want respect from the ruling elite is another question entirely.)

Bear in mind that Hagel is [no critic](#) of the American empire. During his two terms in the U.S. Senate, his actions rarely reflected the remarks that caused him so much trouble at his confirmation hearing. To his credit, Hagel had been in the wing of the establishment that fears the consequences of war with Iran. But now that the only thing that stands between him and the Pentagon is a Senate that includes neoconservative Sens. John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and others, Hagel feels compelled to say that "all options are on the table." "All options" logically includes, not only a conventional military attack, but also nuclear weapons. But as the hearing brought out, "all options" actually excludes one option: containment of a nuclear Iran. Some who believe that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon have suggested that the same policy the U.S. government followed throughout the cold war with the old nuclear-armed Soviet Union would be a better way to deal with the Islamic Republic than war. But Hagel felt compelled to say that containment is an unacceptable alternative to insistence, backed by a military threat, that Iran abandon its nuclear program. Here he echoed the Obama administration, as well as McCain and Graham. Since containment would forswear a military attack, the dominant wing of the establishment rejects it.



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on February 9, 2013

Unfortunately, the “independent” Hagel has never shown any skepticism about the unproven allegations that Iran’s rulers are developing a nuclear weapon. As a signer of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran is subject to inspections and has complied with the terms of the treaty. The wrangling with the U.S. government is over Iran’s wish to do what that treaty says it may do: enrich uranium for medical and energy purposes.

Finally, Hagel was grilled over his previous criticism of the surge in Iraq. Again he backed away from it. The surge has become part of the empire’s sacred faith, and doubting its success won’t be tolerated.

In fact, the success is a [myth](#). What diminished the violence in Iraq was the Shi’ite completion of sectarian cleansing in Baghdad and U.S. payments to Sunni leaders to [wipe out](#) the local al-Qaeda militants. The political goals of the surge were largely unachieved, and sectarian violence continues to this day.

Dissidents beware. Hagel’s treatment and performance indicate that even a little dissent from the establishment foreign policy can be a bad career move.

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