



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on January 13, 2013

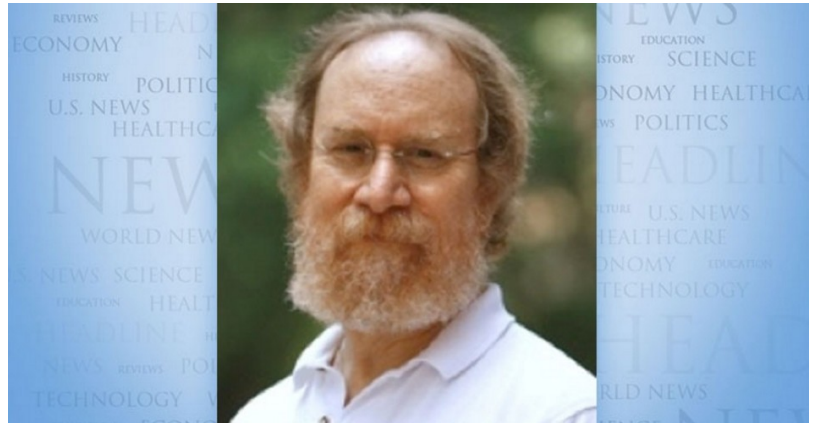
The Hagel Brouhaha

Washington is going through one of its regular melodramas with President Obama's nomination of former senator Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense. (In light of America's foreign policy, this is a title worthy of George Orwell; the position should be renamed the "secretary of war.")

To Hagel's credit, he has the proper enemies on the right. Neoconservative advocates of perpetual war and global empire couldn't tolerate Hagel running the Pentagon. To hear them tell it, he's a left-wing appeaser. The opposition isn't only from *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol and Sen. Lindsey Graham. The [Washington Post](#) has the same concerns: "Mr. Hagel's stated positions on critical issues, ranging from defense spending to Iran, fall well to the left of those pursued by Mr. Obama during his first term — and place him near the fringe of the Senate that would be asked to confirm him."

The anti-Hagel hysteria, however, carries a message different from the one getting all the attention: If Hagel is "out of the mainstream" of foreign-policy thinking, the range of permissible thinking is more narrow than many have suspected. True, Hagel has been critical of some of the overseas military policies pursued by Presidents George W. Bush and Obama, but to suggest he is a radical critic of U.S. militarism and hegemony is absurd.

What about Hagel brings forth this vicious campaign? He has "irresponsibly" suggested that the Pentagon is bloated and in need of a budget trim; had doubts about unilateral sanctions against Iran and about the futility of diplomacy; expressed concerns about a military attack on Iran; criticized the Bush troop surge in Iraq; opposed Obama's





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Afghanistan surge; intimated that the United States and Israel may not have identical interests; and spoke favorably of negotiations with Hamas and Hezbollah. (The last two things, although routinely voiced in Israel, can get someone in America accused of anti-Semitism, and this ugly label has shamefully been thrown at Hagel.)

I will concede that by comparison with the most prominent foreign-policy players, Hagel almost looks acceptable to a noninterventionist. Almost. He's actually far from a radical critic of the American empire who would close the hundreds of military installations around the world, bring home the troops, downscale the military, dismantle the nuclear arsenal, withdraw from the alliances, and radically shrink the Pentagon budget to one aimed at territorial defense and nothing more. (I won't go into what he might do the second day on the job.)

Instead, Hagel is from the so-called "realist" wing of the establishment, the same wing populated by Obama's first defense secretary, Bob Gates, and such establishment Republicans as Colin Powell, Brent Scowcroft, and James Baker III, all of whom worked for President George H. W. Bush. Hagel is a cost-benefit kind of guy, rather than a zealous militarist, but he is not in the principled anti-war camp.

Hagel is in no hurry to attack Iran (neither are current military leaders), but he still wants "all options on the table," and he supports cruel multilateral economic warfare against the Iranian people, just as he supported it against the Iraqi people in the 1990s. In a co-authored [op-ed](#) in 2012, Hagel enumerated many "benefits" of war with Iran, but cited vague costs also, never mentioning that Iran has no nuclear-weapons program. He turned against the



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Iraq war when it didn't work out so well, but he voted for the war in 2002. He supported the 1999 intervention in Kosovo and even was open to the use of ground troops. And during his two Senate terms, he voted for every Israel military-aid bill that came before him. He sounded like every other member of the foreign-policy establishment when he said, [for example](#), "The United States will remain committed to defending Israel. Our relationship with Israel is a special and historic one."

And where is Hagel's opposition to Obama's covert war in Africa, the PATRIOT Act, warrantless surveillance, indefinite detention, and drone warfare — that is, remote-control murder?

Hagel may be the "best" we can expect from Obama, but that's a very low bar indeed, and the interventionist Obama will still be making policy.

What America needs is not a cheap and cautious hawk, whatever his virtues. It needs a principled noninterventionist.

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