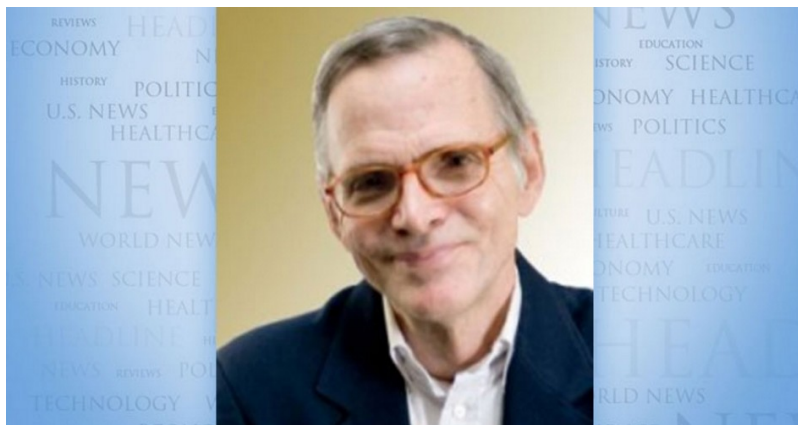




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 15, 2013

What's Behind the Fight Over Hagel for Defense?

Okay, so what's behind the battle over the Hagel nomination? With all the talk we have heard and all that has been written in recent years about uncompromising partisanship, the Republicans have fought to, in effect, make sure Democrat John Kerry would be the choice for secretary of state and now balk at the choice of a fellow Republican and former U.S. senator from Nebraska to head up the Department of Defense. In fact, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina has [called](#) this ostensibly bipartisan choice by the president an "in your face" insult to the Grand Old Party. Are Republicans really that easily insulted?



One would think not. They got ignored by President Clinton when "Bubba" decided to wage war in the Balkans. They were similarly ignored by Obama when "The One" decided to intervene in Libya's civil war. That didn't seem to leave them indignant at the insults, despite the fact that the U.S. Constitution, assigns to Congress, not the president, the power to "declare war." Indeed, there are times when you might wonder if it is even possible to insult members of Congress, Republicans or Democrats.

But there may be either more or less to the Hagel controversy than meets the eye. On the surface, the fight is over Hagel's allegedly tepid support of Israel and his less than wholehearted support for sanctions against Iran over that country's alleged efforts to produce a nuclear weapon. Republicans, and sometimes the headliners in Israel, like to accuse Obama of being insufficiently pro-Israel and not tough enough on Iran. The GOP reinforces that argument, of course, by making the same charges against the president's choice for defense secretary.

In fact, you would have a hard time fitting a facial tissue between the Republicans and Obama in their devotion to Israel. And Hagel would be carrying out Obama's policy choices, not the other way around. There may be another reason why the Grand Old Party regards the choice of Hagel at this juncture a form of "dirty pool." It may have more to do with Obama seeking political cover for deep cuts coming in defense spending. There are bound to be some serious battles ahead when the munitions for defense come up against the debt bomb in the budget debates. Is the nation's debt its biggest security problem as a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has [said](#)? Or is the larger threat the "hollowed out" military of which current defense chief Leon Panetta has [warned](#) if scheduled spending cuts take place?

Never mind that the military budget could be cut, without damaging defense or endangering the troops, if the United States were to end its policy of foreign interventionism and bring the troops home. What if there is no change in policy? Will the budget cutters take the blame if our next foreign military venture proves unsuccessful?

The GOP has for decades been the party of strong national defense. They may not appreciate the honor Obama has bestowed on them by choosing one of their own to preside over scaling back the military budget.



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There are precedents. It is easy to forget that Robert S. McNamara was nominally a Republican when he served for nearly eight years as secretary of defense under Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. And when the government of South Vietnam was under duress and ready to fall apart, President Kennedy chose Republican rival Henry Cabot Lodge to be the ambassador.

Chuck Hagel, whose war credentials include a pair of purple hearts from the Vietnam War, is hardly anti-defense. He has, however, shifted ground often enough to displease nearly everyone. He voted for the Iraq War before he turned against it. He will be presiding over an all-volunteer army, though he has called for a reenactment of the military draft, a red flag to libertarian-leaning Republicans as well as to a great many Democrats. He opposed the surge in Iraq, so beloved of Sen. John McCain. Though once a good friend and political ally of his Arizona colleague and fellow Vietnam War veteran, Hagel [did not support](#) McCain during the presidential primaries of 2008, nor in the general election when McCain ran against and lost to Barack Obama.

So Hagel's distinguished, but arguably checkered Senate career indicates he is not a standard-issue Republican hawk.

Perhaps it is twilight time for the hawks of either party. The days when a "Scoop" Jackson or a Tom Dodd could lead Senate Democrats into lockstep with a Republican president in support of a war of uncertain cause and unseen ends may be over. President George H. W. Bush was fond of saying, even as he was assembling a coalition to fight the first Gulf War, that we "have more will than wallet" when it comes to meeting the nation's domestic political and economic problems. The limitations of the wallet on the roving political will might also be felt by the next secretary of defense, whatever his political affiliation or ideological orientation.



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