



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 1, 2013

Hagel Grilled By McCain, Graham at Confirmation Hearing

Former Republican Senator from Nebraska Chuck Hagel came under intense questioning from his former colleagues Thursday, being cross-examined in prosecutorial style by fellow Republicans John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina as the Senate Armed Services Committee opened [hearings](#) on President Obama's nomination of Hagel for Secretary of Defense.



Perhaps the most contentious questioning came from McCain, a fellow Vietnam veteran and former political ally of Hagel, when McCain insisted on a “yes” or “no” answer from the former senator on whether he was wrong in calling the 2007 troop surge in Iraq the “worst foreign policy disaster since Vietnam.”

When Hagel began to respond with an explanation, McCain several times interrupted to insist on a “yes” or “no” answer, after which Hagel could “elaborate.”

“Well, I’m not going to give you a ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” Hagel said, insisting that the answer was much more complicated.

“Let the record show he refused to answer,” said McCain. Hagel said that some 1,200 more Americans lost their lives during the surge, which many have credited with reducing the level of violence and stemming the terrorist tide in Iraq, but that he was willing to “let history be the judge” of whether the benefits were worth the cost. McCain said history had already rendered its judgment.

“And you were on the wrong side,” he told Hagel. The Arizona senator and 2008 presidential nominee said Hagel’s opposition to the surge and his refusal yesterday to answer whether he was right or wrong at the time will weigh heavily on whether or not he will vote to confirm Hagel to head the Department of Defense.

McCain and Hagel are both decorated veterans of the Vietnam War. Hagel was wounded in that conflict and McCain, a Navy pilot, was shot down and imprisoned for five and one-half years in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” prison compound in North Vietnam. McCain was a Navy officer, while Hagel was a combat NCO. If confirmed, Hagel would be the first veteran from the enlisted ranks to serve as Secretary of Defense.

The two were friends and allies in the Senate, but a rift began when Hagel began to question the war in Iraq and opposed the surge. Though he campaigned with McCain when the Arizonan sought the GOP presidential nomination in 2000, he did not support him in either the 2008 primaries or in the general election campaign against Barack Obama. Hagel even traveled with Obama, then the junior senator from Illinois, to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lindsey Graham, McCain’s closest ally in recent years, also questioned Hagel carefully over the former senator’s comment that Congress had sometimes been “intimidated by the Jewish lobby” into doing dumb things. Hagel said he shouldn’t have said “Jewish,” but rather the “pro-Israel lobby.” He also retracted the word “intimidated” and said the word he should have used was “influenced.” Asked by



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Graham if he could name one “dumb thing” the United States had done because of Israeli influence, Hagel said he could not. Asked if Israel had been guilty of war crimes, Hagel said it had not.

That answer gave Israel an extraordinarily clean bill of health, since few, if any, countries have waged war without committing one or more war crimes. Surely, Hagel was saying more for Israel than he could plausibly say for the United States, whose abuse of prisoners, use of torture, and other violations of wartime ethics have been highly publicized and the subject of much controversy. When McCain was shot down over North Vietnam, he was bombing an electrical power grid, a war crime according to the Geneva Convention.

Like most members of Congress, McCain and Hagel both voted for the Authorization for the Use of Military Force in Iraq, preceding the 2003 invasion and conquest of that Middle Eastern nation. Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction, the main argument for the war, were never found and Hagel questioned the wisdom of the continued U.S. military occupation. When Hagel opposed the surge, the rift with McCain widened.

McCain, one of the early supporters of an increase in the troop force in Iraq, has always claimed something akin to pride of authorship for the surge and its apparent success, citing it often in his 2008 primary and general election campaigns for president. The Iraq War did not begin with the surge, Barack Obama reminded him during a presidential debate. Obama opposed the Iraq War from the beginning, speaking out against the “run up” to the war when he was a state senator in Illinois.

Hagel, seeking to appease and accommodate his critics, did not point out the inconsistency of McCain and others in criticizing his allegedly poor judgment in opposing the surge, without acknowledging their own highly questionable judgment in supporting the war in the first place. By contrast, Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) was quickly and easily confirmed as Secretary of State, without a questioning of his judgment in supporting the Iraq War. As the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004, in August of that year, after the United States and its allies formally gave up the search for the supposed weapons of mass destruction, Kerry said that if he knew in 2002 what he knew then, he would still have voted for the Authorization of the Use of Military Force. Kerry said he believed the president needs that kind of authority.

Kerry is far from alone in that belief, but it is contrary to the Constitution of the United States and the oath members of Congress take to uphold and obey the Constitution. The Constitution authorizes Congress to declare war. That is not the same as authorizing the Congress to authorize the president to decide. Congress has come to regard itself as the punting unit of the federal government.

Hagel’s soft tone and equivocal answers may have done less to appease his Republican critics than to weaken support among Democrats hoping to confirm President Obama’s choice for Secretary of Defense at a time when the nation and the department face a number of difficult decisions regarding military commitments and readiness in the face of severe budget cuts required to reduce the national debt. The consensus at the end of Thursday’s hearing was that Hagel had not helped himself with either group.

Photo of former Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) before Senate Armed Services Committee: AP Images



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