

The Sacking of Chuck Hagel: Rotten in the State of the Pentagon

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He may go down as one of the more invisible Defence Secretaries in recent times. Indeed, the very term Secretary of Defence seems out of step with Washington's attitude of global policing and moral correction. Chuck Hagel, being confused about what role he seemed to be fulfilling from the start, had the appearance of someone playing the diplomacy of catch-up and fumble.

It has now surfaced that Hagel did not wish to play along with the rules of resignation as dictated by the White House, even if the official, and spurious line, was that both the secretary and president had agreed that he had to go. The November 24 date was not what President Barack Obama had in mind. Hagel, by way of contrast, had no interest in being a seat warmer for his replacement, manning the firm while head hunters did their job. While unnamed sources quoted on CNN (Dec 2) are hardly probative of anything, the excited news outlet did claim how Hagel "wanted to control his departure".

Result: there is no nominee for the position. Nor are some touted figures keen to rush to it. Both Democratic Senators Jack Reed of Rhode Island and Carl Levin of Michigan have made their refusals very clear. The less than luminary Ash Carter is in line, and even then, the steering committee is still scouring for options. A true vote of confidence.

Hagel was not helped by the strategy of the Obama administration, which has made it something of a speciality to wander in a meditative gaze into conflict zones, stutter while doing so, and play the imperial game involving a mixture of amateurish concern and ruthless indifference.

At a point, it was very clear that Hagel was not doing the job of selling war well, even if he had been parachuted into it. He proved a good friend of the gaffe, beginning poorly at the Senate confirmation hearings. He was awkward, though those close to him never took this to be sign of weakness. Not being in the league of the outrageous Donald Rumsfeld, a mendacious fantasist who had few problems cloaking his policy descriptions with dissimulation and old school deception, Hagel fell between the stools, even if these had been placed before his time.

One of those stools was the near constipated management of his own portfolio within the administration by outside forces. According to GOP Senator John McCain, Hagel, "was frustrated with aspects of the administration's national security policy and decision making process" (CNN, Dec 2). Micro-management seemed to have been the unshakable problem, a form of paralysis endemic to the bureaucrat's world view.

Observers such as Elizabeth Drew in the *New York Review of Books* (Nov 25), with the keen

clarity of hindsight, claimed to always wonder whether a person presiding over an average staff size of 34 as a Senator could “make the leap” to governing the monster that is the Pentagon, with its 26,000 onsite personnel, plus a half-million overseas employees, and 1.5 million active military members.

As to whether he even had freedom of movement within the administration, Drew’s sense was that he was hamstrung by events, even more so than the man in the White House, or the culture of cabinet indecisiveness.

Another of those stools was a mixed product, broadly grouped under the administration’s policy towards the international strong men – brutes, for want of a better word. The first was Russia’s Vladimir Putin, whose frequency simply isn’t wired to the lines of cant in Washington. On that front, Hagel was hoping in his September letter that a firmer stance be taken, and European allies reassured that Russian boots were not going to find homes from the Baltic States to Prague.

The rebuke on Syria came by way of a two-page memorandum addressed to National Security Advisor Susan Rice. Attacking Rice was tantamount to going on the offensive against Obama, with whom she has become something of a policy appendage.

Hagel’s issue was one of fostering clarity – what, exactly, is Washington’s position regarding Syria’s leader Bashar al-Assad? It is a good question, and almost as fumbled as the administration’s stance towards Islamic fundamentalism. (In the argot of Washington’s foreign policy, the goodness of an Islamic fundamentalist seems to vary depending on what geographical locality – and which opponent – you are fighting.)

In the case of Syria, Assad serves a useful purpose, waging war against the very Islamic State forces that are the object of “degrading” Obama has been so insistent upon. But this is the same individual Washington, along with its allies, would like to see deposed, hung and quartered. To that end, funding is provided to a range of confused, and confusing groups, whose only common tie is a hatred of Assad. That common currency, however, tends to fluctuate in value depending on the mutual hatred between the various insurgents.

For Hagel, the taking of such an ambiguous position undermined efforts on the part of the Obama administration to deal with ISIS. It could not be seen to be shoring up Assad. And it did not seem to be a hallmark of good advertising for US policy in the Middle East for Sunni Arab populations within the orbit of ISIS rule.

There are a few meek nods in Hagel’s direction, one coming from Michael E. O’Hanlon at Brookings. The former secretary “was a fairly low-key but still effective promoter of the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, making the mechanics of the new basing and operational patterns work out smoothly and visiting a number of allied nations, as well as China, along the way” (*Up Front*, Brookings, Nov 24).

In one rather obvious way, Hagel seemed to be going back to the position that has long discomfited policy makers. The latest Iraqi-Syria crisis, in what is bound to be a generational one, does not so much have a solution as a temporary patch-up. US administrations have been rather good and breaking the machinery of states. They have proven rather inept in repairing them. In attempting to articulate his own version of repairing the broken machine of Middle Eastern politics, Hagel metaphorically lost his head.

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