

Hagel's Dilemma

The senator is vague about his political future but clear in his opposition to the Iraq War.

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

SOMETHING HAPPENED to Sen. Charles T. “Chuck” Hagel on the way to the press conference. The man of seemingly impenetrable defenses and unshakable disposition took the curious step of announcing on March 12 that he had nothing to announce about his much-anticipated run for president, making himself vulnerable to spurned reporters and snarky bloggers for days afterward.

The 60-year-old Nebraska Republican is known for playing it close to the vest but seemed to surprise even his staff with his non-announcement. Deflated supporters did not know what to think when he told reporters at the University of Nebraska event, planned days before, that he was still mulling his options.

Others say he was spooked.

There is a political web set to snare Hagel on the road to a Republican nomination, and it was no more evident than at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in March.

Throbbing with the conservative movement's old guard elite and college acolytes—who seem to spend most of their time waiting in line for autographs from Newt Gingrich or jamming into the ballroom to catch the likes of Ann Coulter flinging the customary red meat—this Washington confab had little time for Hagel. Questioned about a potential run, these self-proclaimed right wingers typically responded with a roll of the eyes and a shrug at best, at worst, a

blank stare. That Republican is just not one of us, they said.

Yet here at ground zero of the conservative movement were innumerable depictions of the late President Ronald Reagan, tons of literature and rhetoric about the sanctity of life, traditional values, constitutional correctness, limited government, states' rights, and self-determination. In his 11 years as a U.S. senator, Hagel has in some way defended them all, yet he is a pariah in what should be his political comfort zone.

“I've heard people joke that Chuck Hagel has a better chance at getting the Democratic nomination,” said Larry Sabato, political guru at the University of Virginia, of Hagel's “base problem.”

Simply put, it is the 800-pound gorilla that no one at CPAC wanted to talk about this year—the war in Iraq—that has come between Hagel and the conservative grassroots. It is why they are willing to overlook Republican Rudy Giuliani's anti-gun and pro-gay positions or Mitt Romney's mid-career conversion against abortion. Rewarded with rock-star treatment at CPAC, both of those presidential hopefuls eagerly brandished their support for President George W. Bush on the war—if they were forced to talk about it.

Iraq is something that Hagel likes to talk about—a lot. But it's not what the CPAC faithful wanted to hear. In a recent interview in his Senate office, he explained why being conservative and condemning the Bush administration's policy in Iraq—and in broader terms,

Bush's foreign policy in the Muslim world—aren't mutually exclusive.

“Conservatives, I've always known, like this guy up there,” he said, gesturing to a framed picture of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, “and Reagan, Goldwater, and others—[Sen. Robert] Taft, Mr. Conservative—were very protective in conserving our resources. And what is more significant in a country's resource inventory than its people, its army? I think we have used our military recklessly and carelessly. I don't think that's conservative.” He continued, “I find it fascinating sometimes when I am challenged on this. I think I am the real conservative on the Iraq debate here.”

President Bush's loyal congressional supporters, bolstered by the base, beg to differ. They find Hagel's brand of realist internationalism, his hammering away at the Iraq policy as a misbegotten adventure akin to the Vietnam War he nearly died in, quite noisome. They've called him an appeaser, a traitor even. A personally popular senator with 35-year-old ties to the Republican Party, his detractors have done everything to marginalize him.

“Talk about no good deed going unpunished. If you use voting record as the center of the senator's conservatism, he is in the charmed circle,” said Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University, who has taken several sabbaticals to work in the Senate, serving on Hagel's staff in 2000 and 2004. “As far as foreign policy is concerned, they [the conservative base] regard him

as an apostate,” he added. “These are people who believe that anybody who contradicts the president has to be cast out into the darkness.”

Just before beginning his March press conference, Hagel took a moment to acknowledge a man in the front row, his Washington mentor and longtime friend, former Congressman John Y. McCollister, who represented Nebraska from 1971 to 1976. Hagel served as his chief of staff.

The 85-year old Nebraskan knows all too well the obstacles facing his former protégé. He hears the complaints and reads the letters to the editor in the Nebraska papers criticizing Hagel’s public disagreements with Bush and the GOP.

“For many people I know, they think Chuck Hagel has departed from his conservative base and has now embraced the liberals—that’s not true,” he said in an interview. “[They feel] that some of his comments were not necessary. Well placed, but unnecessarily harsh.” He doesn’t disagree, and with obvious pain in his voice acknowledges that he and the senator had spoken less frequently since he confronted Hagel about what he saw as inappropriate political behavior.

So it may have been a surprise when Hagel invited him to the press conference. That might have been a calculated move to firm up political support from his old boss despite their differences, but it is clear a lot of affection and loyalty remain between the two.

“I think Chuck Hagel, except on Iraq, is the most conservative member of the United States Senate because he has a firm philosophical understanding—he’s a great reader—and a fascination for American history, for how our nation came into being.” Describing him as “incredibly bright” and a “delightful companion,” McCollister said Hagel always

had an “insatiable appetite for all the facts leading up to an issue.” That doesn’t always mix well with party politics.

“Members of Congress are supposed to take the long view, they’re supposed to ask the tough questions,” he said. “Chuck Hagel does that. I think he does it better than anybody I know. But it’s gotten him into big trouble with his Republican base. I’m sorry about that.”

McCollister may have unknowingly set Hagel’s rebellion into motion, or at least set a precedent. While in office, McCollister was one of the first Republicans to speak out against Nixon’s role in the Watergate scandal.

“John, he was very courageous, standing up to the Nixon people and saw through what was going on,” said Randy Moody, another Vietnam veteran who worked with Hagel as McCollister’s press secretary. He has been friends with Hagel since, and believes Nebraskans are still proud of him. “Not everyone understands what he is doing, and he has taken some heat,” said Moody, now a lobbyist at the National Education Association. “But I think he has their support as well.”

And then some, said Craig Safranek, head of the Custer County Republicans in Nebraska. To supporters like him, the so-called base didn’t do a very good job of protecting the party’s interests in the 2006 midterm elections. But there are plenty of hopeful libertarians, independents, and foreign-policy realists in the Republican ranks who believe Hagel can lead the party out of 15 years of broken pledges, bloated government, partisan chicanery, corruption, and war.

“I think Americans, and the Republican Party, need a thinker, rather than a party person or right winger who doesn’t care, doesn’t think,” said Safranek. Despite his bright red record, Hagel’s pragmatism on the war is attractive to the political middle, Safranek insists. In fact, Hagel already has a constituency among Democrats disillusioned with

their own party’s presidential prospects, who dream of Hagel running as a third party or “Unity ’08” candidate. “[Republicans] will see him as their shining hope,” Safranek cheerily predicted, “once they get to know him they will love him.”

To know Hagel is to know that he served alongside his brother Tom as an infantryman in the jungles of Vietnam. Given their dramatic story, it becomes clear that while McCollister may have provided the senator’s political compass, Vietnam likely forged his conscience.

“He’s the guy who has seen a great deal of combat, he knows what it’s like to be on the ground,” said Rick Weidman, a fellow Vietnam vet and head of government affairs for Vietnam Veterans of America. “I think much of his attitude [about Iraq] is colored by his wartime experience,” he added, noting of the strain on the Army and National Guard, the treatment of the veterans as they return home from Iraq, “it’s gotten to them all. Chuck is outraged . . . as he should be.”

In a caricatured political landscape where Democrats are always the doves and Republicans the hawks who get to wave the flag, Hagel has emerged as his own political animal, drawing strength from growing public unrest in the midterm elections and challenging his own party to pay attention to the consequences of their deference to the Bush foreign policy.

“Thank God, I say,” Tom Hagel, a law professor at the University of Dayton, enthused about his brother. “On this issue, he’s going against his party. And he’s taking an amazing amount of flak for it.”

People describe Hagel as confident, but he carries no swagger. Unlike many politicians of his stature, the weight of all the decisions he has made—and has yet to make—are visible on his face. A writer once described it a “sad face,” a

less tactful blogger suggested he get a facelift. But to many it's comforting to see worry lines on a guy who is sending their kids off to war.

By a stroke of bureaucratic fate, Chuck and Tom—nearly kids themselves—ended up in the same unit in the Mekong River Delta in South Vietnam in 1968. In March of that year, the brothers—Chuck, 21, was a sergeant and squad leader—were on jungle patrol when the men on point tripped a booby trap, sending shrapnel through the air. Tom told a Nebraska Educational Television special in 1999 that, after pulling himself from the ground, he went to his brother lying on the ground and tore open his shirt, “and that’s when geysers of blood went up.” Ripped from shrapnel himself, Tom, 19, stanching Chuck’s bleeding with bandages. They recovered together in a field hospital.

Less than a month later, Chuck’s face was set aflame as he was pulling fellow soldiers—including a bleeding and unconscious Tom—out of a convoy that had run over a landmine and was subsequently pinned down under enemy fire. It would take a decade for the burns on Chuck’s face to heal, and pieces of shrapnel in his chest still serve as a grim souvenir, but both brothers returned to Nebraska physically intact.

For his service, Chuck received two Purple Hearts and Tom was awarded three. University of Nebraska journalism professor Charlyne Berens, who wrote the 2006 biography *Chuck Hagel: Moving Forward*, said Hagel recalled to her his evacuation after the second incident, his face broiled and his ear drums ruptured. He thought, “If I ever get out, and if I ever can influence anything, I will do all I can to prevent war.”

To Berens, that explains why he chooses to place himself at odds with a party he has always been loyal to, even during grade school, where he was the only kid in a Catholic school wild about

John F. Kennedy who dared brandish a picture of Richard M. Nixon on his book.

“I think, on a very personal level, he feels responsible for putting anyone else in that kind of situation,” she said in a recent phone interview. “He seemed to me pretty much what he appears to be, I didn’t sense much artifice there.”

It was Tom Hagel, the second of four brothers in a humble working-class family in North Platte, Nebraska, who soured on Vietnam and the policy that sent them there. Upon their return, he openly protested and fought often with Chuck, who believed at the time that the mission was just. It wasn’t until years later, while devouring every book on Indochina and the war, and listening to the released tapes of then-President Lyndon Johnson discussing Vietnam with Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, that Chuck changed his mind. In those recorded echoes of history, he heard not a conversation about how to win the war and the mission but how to politicize and save face, Senator Hagel told the *Washington Post* in 2004. “I started connecting all the deaths and all the suffering and the chaos and wounds,” he said. “I started to sense a dishonesty about it all.”

“THAT’S A LESSON WE DID NOT LEARN FROM VIETNAM,” HAGEL SAID. “WE’VE GOT A SIMILAR SITUATION IN IRAQ TODAY.”

He not only believes now that the nation was misled into thinking the war in Vietnam was necessary but that ultimately U.S. policy in Vietnam failed because the American presence was an anathema to the people they were trying to protect. Furthermore, the U.S.-backed government there didn’t have the love of the people.

“That’s a lesson we did not learn from Vietnam,” Hagel said in his Senate office, artifacts of his military service all around him. His voice is a low rumble:

“The Vietnamese government we were propping up was losing the people. We’ve got a similar situation in Iraq today.”

There is a polished toughness about his manner that lends emphasis to every word. It made for good dramatic tension during a January Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, where he pinned down Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over her defense of the president’s surge.

Hagel doubts the long-term efficacy of sending 20,000 more troops—many of whom have already served one or two tours—into another internecine conflict. “You can’t work your way out of a problem by making it worse—we found that out in Vietnam—I mean year after year in Vietnam, month after month, we kept putting more troops in, and it turned out to be a huge fiasco for us,” he said. “It’s a huge fiasco for us in Iraq right now.”

He’s convinced that while the surge might provide a short-term exit strategy for American troops and an administration embattled by historically low approval ratings, it’s not a plan for permanent peace. Instead, he supports broader regional diplomacy, redeploying U.S. troops to the borders to prevent

terrorists from coming in and reducing the American footprint in population centers rife with sectarian tensions.

“They have a constitution, which we boast about, they have a freely elected government, which we boast about, it’s supposedly a unity government, which we boast about. Well, let them lead, let them govern,” the senator said, noting that he has never advocated a hasty withdrawal. “We’ll continue to help—we have to,” he said. “But we can’t govern, and that’s why we are seen now, by 80

percent of Iraqis found in any poll, as occupiers.”

Sen. James Webb, another decorated Vietnam combat veteran, has similar reservations about the war in Iraq. He also counts Hagel a friend. “I’ve known Chuck Hagel for probably 28 years,” he said in an interview. Webb, who was elected in November, had warned that invading Iraq would be a “strategic error” months before the 2003 bombing of Baghdad. He praised Hagel’s courage to disagree with his party before the midterm elections revealed the vast majority of Americans were on his side.

“I think, quite frankly, that the Republican loyalists were wrong, and Chuck Hagel was right, and I salute him for not being a lemming,” said Webb, who noted that the two “compare notes” from time to time. “We close the door, sit down, and talk about things.”

Another Senate colleague, Sen. John McCain, also a decorated Vietnam War hero, plays a more complicated role in Hagel’s life. While they both share the instinct to take unpopular positions, it is on Iraq that they part ways. As men they are close—photos of the two are part of Hagel’s office décor—but observers say Iraq has put a strain on the working relationship.

McCain has his own problems. The Arizona senator is running for president, but his maverick status has seemingly taken a backseat to supporting the surge strategy. Despite this, he too has problems with the conservative base, which considers him a fickle friend, and his once ardent fans among independents and moderates think he panders too much to the Religious Right.

Weidman said Hagel has always been more sympathetic to veterans’ issues than McCain. He believes Hagel’s family background and combat experience has something to do with it.

“I think the world of Chuck Hagel,” he said, recalling how Hagel quit his job as

deputy administrator for the Veterans Administration in 1982. His boss, then-Veterans Administrator Robert Nimmo, had a history of antagonizing Vietnam vets, calling them “crybabies” and seeking to cut off research into the physical effects of Agent Orange exposure, wrote Berens in *Moving Forward*.

Hagel quit and was unemployed at the age of 36; Nimmo soon resigned amid a threatening scandal over his use of the office for personal gain. To many, Hagel was a hero all over again.

“He resigned over principle, it was a wonderful scene,” Weidman said, noting that Hagel immediately became “our champion in the Senate” when he was elected in 1996. Despite resistance, Hagel pushed through the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act in 1998. He has co-chaired the Agent Orange Settlement Fund, served as co-chair of the Vietnam War Memorial Fund, and has most recently pushed for more benefits and compensation for soldiers and their families.

“I think he would make a hell of a president,” said Weidman. “He certainly wouldn’t casually send our sons and daughters into hell.”

Hagel’s March press conference did not produce the kind of stir a politician wants. One commentator called it “bizarre.” Reporters were irritated about being dragged to Omaha for what was billed as Hagel’s “announcement on his political future.” Many who had believed the senator was finally ready to make his move to primetime as the one GOP candidate for president who didn’t subordinate himself to Bush on the war were left puzzled.

“I guess nobody totally knows why. I think he’s doing what he believes is right for the country and as a senator,” said Safranek, who admitted Hagel’s supporters in Nebraska were “dazed” by the developments.

Hagel, who has two school-age children with his wife Lilibet, promised a real answer regarding his candidacy later this year and insisted that he had planned all along to make the “non-announcement.”

But others believe that Hagel, never known to shrink from a fight or cave to intimidation, had planned to throw his hat into the ring but was spooked at the last minute by a drumbeat of commentators saying he couldn’t win a Republican primary, by surveys showing that more than 70 percent of Americans don’t know what to think about him, by drowning at the bottom of every Republican primary poll out there.

“I can only believe that he had planned to announce and, at the last minute, had buyer’s remorse. I think the economists call it ‘terminal terror,’” said Baker.

People who know Chuck Hagel have said he never does anything without knowing all the angles and that he would never run without believing he could win. Perhaps, like any good tactician, he just needed to size up his obstacles first.

For example, he knows his vote for the 2002 Senate resolution authorizing the president to go to war will be an issue. “I laid out all of my reservations about the resolution,” he said, referring to his Oct. 9, 2002 floor speech. “In the end, I voted for it because I was told by the administration that the president would not use military force unless all diplomatic options were exercised—they were not—but I think it’s always dangerous not to give your president leverage and latitude, allowing him to deal with the international arena with unlimited powers.”

“Would I vote for it today? No, I wouldn’t,” he added flatly. “We went into Iraq based on flawed judgment, based on dishonest motives, based on flawed intelligence, and we have a very, very big problem today.”

Meanwhile, attacks from neoconservatives have been unrelenting, beginning

in 2002 when *National Review* labeled Hagel, “Sen. Skeptic, (R., France).” Just before the Iraq invasion, Bill Kristol of *The Weekly Standard* called Hagel a member of the “Axis of Appeasement.”

“They hate the idea of a morally grounded foreign policy that seeks aggressively and unapologetically to advance American principles around the world,” Kristol wrote in August 2002 of Hagel, former President George H.W. Bush adviser Brent Scowcroft, and others who hadn’t fully bought into the program and whose arguments against the war—destabilizing the region, getting bogged down in a bloody occupation, and undercutting the War on Terror on the basis of overstated threats—were “laughably weak.”

The reality on the ground in Iraq nearly four years later has not tempered their views. In fact, realists like Hagel and other congressional critics are emboldening the enemy, according to Vice President Dick Cheney and his surrogates on the talk-show circuit. Then there are the personal attacks: after Hagel’s March press conference, *National Review* contributor John Podhoretz dismissed him as a “megalomaniac.”

But on the issues, Hagel points out that he has voted with the president more than any other senator today and has a lifetime rating of 85 from the American Conservative Union.

He is pro-life, defends an individual’s right to bear arms, and supports a flag-burning amendment. A self-made millionaire—he started a cellular phone company that eventually became part of Vanguard Telecommunications in the ’80s—he draws high marks from pro-business and property-rights groups.

On the other hand, Hagel voted against the Republican-sponsored Medicare prescription drug bill and No Child Left Behind. He sides with the president on creating some kind of guest-worker program for illegal immigrants but does

not advocate a federal amendment to ban gay marriage.

It is no surprise, then, that some think he’s primed for a third-party breakout. If he can’t be the new face of the flagging, post-midterm GOP, then maybe it’s time to move on, the buzz goes. To his supporters, pragmatism is much more attractive than blind ideological genuflection.

“He definitely breaks the mold, his voice is so authentic in my view, and as a consequence he has great appeal,” said good friend and former Nebraska Sen. Bob Kerrey, a fellow Vietnam combat veteran who was one of the Senate’s most conservative Democrats until his retirement in 2001. “I’m sure it drives the White House crazy. If he ended up with the Republican nomination he would be a formidable candidate.”

Hagel’s conversational style is easy, even solicitous, but he doesn’t seem prone to name dropping or telling secrets, especially about himself. He

certainly won’t entertain speculation regarding his future, particularly where the conservative base “problem” is concerned. “I don’t let things like that worry me,” he said. “I just do what I think is right for my country.”

Baker said Republicans should worry about a liberated Senator Hagel. The current field of Republican candidates, according to recent surveys, are not endearing GOP voters. “If they could forgive his sensible and often prescient view on foreign policy,” said Baker, “he would probably be one of the few Republicans with a prayer of retaining the White House for the party in 2008.”

Safranek doesn’t think Hagel has been spooked for good, noting that supporters there in Nebraska are “ready to go all out” for him. “He has a plan,” he said. “He always does.” ■

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Hegemony Lite

How different would a Hagelian foreign policy be?

By James P. Pinkerton

CHUCK HAGEL has walked the walk. His experience in military service, not to mention his medal-winning heroism in Vietnam four decades ago, distinguishes him from most of those who make American foreign policy these days. But as for talking the talk—well, his talk about foreign policy isn’t ultimately much different from that of the foreign-policy establishment that got us into Iraq and that wants to keep us imposing martial hegemony in the Middle East forever.

So those who rhapsodize over a possible Hagel run for the White House might consider the question: if the Cornhusker

senator becomes the 44th president, would a Hagelian foreign policy represent a true change in direction, or would it be merely a slow-boat chug along the same route we are on now?

Indeed, that’s a good question to ask all of those who seek to replace George W. Bush in the Oval Office. Is the next president, whoever he or she might be, going to offer a bold-colors alternative to the Bush/neoconservative status quo, or will we get a pale-pastel continuation of Bushconism?

As far back as February 2002, in the days following the 43rd president’s “axis