

Mr. President, Now Is the Time to Withdraw Hagel Nomination

Former Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel's nomination to be secretary of defense should be withdrawn now. He delivered what may be the worst performance at a confirmation hearing ever given. He was described as "confused," "befuddled" and "self-contradicting." One of Mr. Hagel's own backers deplored the lack of "charisma" the nominee showed during the hearings.

Was this just a "bad hair day" for Mr. Hagel?

"Hagel, who can be hilarious, didn't show much of that today," said Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation. Let the record show that never before has "hilarious" been offered as a qualification for a Cabinet officer supervises America's nuclear arsenal.

Perhaps the lowest moment of the entire dismal day occurred when an aide helpfully passed Hagel a note. We are not privy to its contents, but it prompted the embattled nominee to correct himself.

He did not—as he had just testified under oath—support the president's containment policy toward an Iran with nuclear weapons. That was because the president has said over and over again: He favors preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, not containing a nuclear Iran. He does not have a containment policy.

In a chess game, you would turn over your king. In tennis, you'd hop over the net to congratulate your victorious opponent. In short, if you have to do something like that under the full glare of klieg lights, you've lost all credibility.

Before Thursday's hearings, the **Chuck Hagel nomination** was simply very controversial. He had made alarming statements and cast alarming votes during his Senate career. He had opposed economic sanctions against Iran. We have expressed our own skepticism about the efficacy of these sanctions.

But Hagel also opposed naming the Iran's Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization. It is common knowledge that Iran backs Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Both of these outfits are terrorist gangs, so described routinely by the U.S. government. Naming the home office of Mideast terrorism a terrorist organization should not be hard. But it was too hard for Chuck Hagel.

After Thursday's hearings, we have an entirely new set of concerns. Hagel has never administered any large organization—in private industry or in government. The Pentagon is a huge bureaucracy.

He seems to be telling us, "It isn't a problem, all the wild things I've said, because I will not be in a policy-making position." If he is confirmed and not making policy, that fact would speak volumes about this administration's lack of seriousness on national defense.

Since the creation of the Department of Defense in 1947, the civilian head of the Pentagon has performed a vital role in the highest counsels of government. In 1948, it was the new department's critically important task to integrate the U.S. Armed Forces—and to undertake the defense of encircled West Berlin through the now-famous Berlin Airlift.

Throughout the decades since, some Secretaries of Defense have been deeply controversial—like Robert Strange MacNamara during the Vietnam War. Some have been great and capable leaders—like Caspar Weinberger during the highly successful Reagan years. But we have never had a Secretary of Defense who promises, on entering office, to be inconsequential.

For **President Obama** to go forward with this deeply flawed nomination now is to take upon himself the responsibility for inviting chaos and confusion at a time of international peril. The prospect of nuclear weapons in the hands of the mullahs in Tehran who invented suicide bombing should concentrate the thoughts of even our distracted Washington policy makers.

Democrats should privately, or publicly if necessary, appeal to the president to reconsider this nomination. We are reminded of the brave stance of the late Paul Weyrich. This conservative leader testified against the nomination of former Sen. John Tower in 1989, not because of Tower's record on defense issues, with which Weyrich largely agreed. But Weyrich said he had seen the Texan's all-too-frequent inebriated state. It took courage for Paul Weyrich to put country above party then, and it's what we ask of Democrats now.

President Obama has successfully avoided serious questioning about his foreign policy. We have praised his raid to take out Osama bin Laden. We remain concerned that the president does not take seriously enough the menace of Iranian nukes.

Thursday's hearing makes clear why the Iranians might want Chuck Hagel leading the Pentagon; it does not make clear why most Americans should. It seems the president chose an old Senate chum who could be relied upon to rubber stamp the administration's social engineering of the military.

The first duty of the president of the United States is to safeguard the American people and our Constitution. If he goes forward with this flawed nomination, President Obama will be saying loudly on national defense: Whatever.

Mr. President: Now is the time to prevent future grief for our nation and our all-volunteer military. Now is the time to withdraw this nomination: Chuck Hagel.

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