

Hagel: The Neocons' Last Stand?

Exclusive: The neocons – stung by their loss of Washington influence are trying to reestablish their clout by disqualifying former Sen. Chuck Hagel to be the new Defense Secretary. But their haste in charging off after Hagel's scalp may lead the neocons into a dangerous last stand, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The year 2012 has been a rough one for Washington's arrogant neocons. Their political influence has waned since they threw in their lot with presidential loser Mitt Romney and then witnessed the ignominious resignation of their ally David Petraeus as CIA chief. But they are now mounting a fierce counterattack to reestablish their relevance by demonizing former Sen. Chuck Hagel.

Hagel has become the neocons' new target of opportunity after emerging as a likely choice to become Defense Secretary. He is a *bête noire* to the neocons because he is viewed as disturbingly independent of Israel's preferences for what U.S. foreign and military policy must be.

The former Republican senator from Nebraska also once made reference to Washington's powerful "Jewish Lobby" when he apparently should have said "Israel Lobby," though it's often been a firing offense in Washington to publicly acknowledge the existence of any lobby favoring Israel.

Hagel has indicated, too, a preference for real negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear program rather than simply a steady escalation of sanctions and hostilities leading inexorably to war, as Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and many neocons seem to prefer.

Another one of Hagel's alleged sins is that he believes the vast Pentagon budget "needs to be pared down." The Washington Post editorial page, which has long been the neocons' media flagship in the nation's capital, denounced that position as irresponsible and out of the mainstream.

"Mr. Hagel's stated positions on critical issues, ranging from defense spending to Iran, fall well to the left of those pursued by Mr. Obama during his first term and place him near the fringe of the Senate that would be asked to confirm him," the Post sniffed in a Dec. 19 [editorial](#).

But it is clear that Hagel's primary disqualification is that he has, at times, refused to sign on to hawkish neocon positions circulated by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC, such as piling on more anti-Iran sanctions and demanding that Europe designate Hezbollah, Israel's chief foe in Lebanon, as a

terrorist organization.

Thus, the neocons' campaign to intimidate Obama into pulling back Hagel's expected nomination has become a test of whether the neocons can still exert enough muscle to block disfavored American citizens from holding public office. Such hardball tactics succeeded during Obama's first term.

The War on Chas Freeman

Indeed, the neocons' current offensive against Hagel is reminiscent of their successful drive in 2009 to blackball former U.S. Ambassador Chas W. Freeman from getting a job as chairman of the National Intelligence Council. Freeman, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, was decried as a "realist" who was too friendly with Arab countries.

"Realist ideology pays no attention to moral differences between states," Jon Chait wrote in an op-ed for the Washington Post entitled "Obama's Intelligence Blunder." Chait, a senior editor at the neocon New Republic, added: "As far as realists are concerned, there's no way to think about the way governments act except as the pursuit of self-interest."

But Freeman's real crime was again a lack of sufficient ardor toward Israel and his recognition that an Israel Lobby actually exists in Washington.

"Realists tend not to abide the American alliance with Israel, which rests on shared values with a fellow imperfect democracy rather than on a cold analysis of America's interests," Chait wrote. "Taken to extremes, realism's blindness to morality can lead it wildly astray. Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, both staunch realists, wrote 'The Israel Lobby,' a hyperbolic attack on Zionist political influence.

"Freeman praised 'The Israel Lobby' while indulging in its characteristic paranoia. 'No one else in the United States has dared to publish this article,' he told a Saudi news service in 2006, 'given the political penalties that the lobby imposes on those who criticize it.'"

The right-wing Washington Times published its own smear job against Freeman, written by former Reagan administration Pentagon official Frank Gaffney, another neocon.

"The announcement that the Obama administration would turn over the job of preparing National Intelligence Estimates to a man whom Saudi Arabia, China, Iran and Hamas surely consider an agent of influence calls to mind an old axiom about Charles 'Chas' Freeman's new line of work, 'Garbage in, garbage out,'" Gaffney wrote.

Faced with this furious reaction to the appointment of Freeman, the novice President Barack Obama quickly retreated. Freeman was forced to step down, and the neocons celebrated their reassertion of political clout even in Obama's Washington. They also could still count as key allies much of Bush's old national security team retained by Obama, from Gen. David Petraeus to Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

In a later book, *America's Misadventures in the Middle East*, Freeman noted that the day after he withdrew his acceptance of the job, the Washington Post published "an unsigned editorial calling me a 'crackpot' for imagining that there was an Israel Lobby and that it had opposed me."

Funhouse Mirrors

It is in such a world of funhouse mirrors – where reality is endlessly distorted – that the neocons have amassed their extraordinary influence in Washington. They have long demonstrated a capacity to turn anything into anything, whether manufacturing a false reality about Iraq's WMD or delegitimizing loyal American public servants who somehow represent a threat to their power.

However, the neocons have gradually lost ground under President Obama, especially when compared to how they ruled the roost under President George W. Bush. In 2011, Gates finally was replaced at the Pentagon and Petraeus was moved from his high-profile role as a four-star military commander to the less public position of CIA director.

In 2012, with Obama suffering low approval ratings and congressional Republicans hounding him on the economy, the neocons saw their chance to reclaim control of U.S. foreign policy by helping Mitt Romney win the presidency. Up to Election Night, some were surely fantasizing about their new titles at the NSC or State or Defense or the CIA.

The neocons were as stunned as Karl Rove and other GOP operatives when their predictions of a Romney landslide evaporated as the actual votes of the American people were counted. Instead of cashing in their chits with President Romney, the neocons were facing four more years on the outside-looking-in under President Obama.

Then, just days after Obama's reelection, a second shoe dropped. One of the neocons' last senior allies in the U.S. government, CIA Director Petraeus, was forced to resign as a result of a humiliating sex scandal.

The stunned neocons suddenly looked out over a Washington where they no longer held key government positions and few possessed top-secret security clearances. They still held lucrative jobs at think tanks and had prominent space on op-ed

pages but their direct control of U.S. foreign policy was ending.

Thus, the significance of the neocon counteroffensive against Chuck Hagel, a generally popular Republican who served with distinction as a soldier during the Vietnam War. To demonstrate their continued clout in Washington, the neocons must show they can still claim some important scalps and can still frighten President Obama into retreat.

But the risk the neocons run is that their bold march in pursuit of Sen. Hagel's scalp may turn out instead to be something of the Neocons' Last Stand.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

The Why Behind the Benghazi Attack

From the Archive: A State Department inquiry found serious lapses in security at the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, where the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans died in an assault last Sept. 11. But the CIA's connection is still downplayed, as ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman noted last month.

By Melvin A. Goodman (Originally published on Nov. 4, 2012)

On the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, a group of militants attacked the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, killing the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three other Americans.

The Romney campaign has accused the Obama administration with a cover-up of the details of the attack, and various pundits have sown great confusion over a tragic event that points to a failure of intelligence analysis and operational tradecraft at the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The unwillingness of the White House's senior adviser on counter-terrorism, John Brennan, to play a public role in the aftermath of this tragedy left the Obama administration without an authoritative voice on the event.

It's now apparent that the U.S. consulate in Benghazi was no ordinary consulate; in fact, it probably was no consulate at all. The consulate's primary mission was to provide an intelligence platform that would allow the CIA to maintain an operational and analytical role in eastern Libya.

The region is home to myriad militant and terrorist organizations that threaten Western interests in North Africa and, more importantly, the creation of a stable state in Libya. In other words, the consulate was the diplomatic cover for an intelligence platform and whatever diplomatic functions took place in Benghazi also served as cover for an important CIA base. Both the State Department and the CIA share responsibility for seriously underestimating the security threat in Libya, particularly in Benghazi.

Any CIA component in the Middle East or North Africa is a likely target of the wrath of militant and terrorist organizations because of the Agency's key role in the global war on terror waged by the Bush administration and the increasingly widespread covert campaign of drone aircraft of the Obama administration.

U.S. programs that included the use of secret prisons, extraordinary renditions, and torture and abuse involved CIA collaboration with despotic Arab regimes, including Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. The U.S. campaign to overthrow Gaddafi didn't clean the slate of these abuses; it merely opened up the opportunity for militants and Islamists to avenge U.S. actions over the past ten years.

At home, Americans are devoting far too much attention to whether a so-called proper level of security in Benghazi could have prevented the attack, instead of trying to learn the motives and anticipate the actions of these militant organizations.

The CIA failure to provide adequate security for its personnel stems from degradation in the operational tradecraft capabilities of the CIA since the so-called intelligence reforms that followed the 9/11 attacks. Nearly three years ago, nine CIA operatives and contractors were killed by a suicide bomber at their base in Khost in eastern Afghanistan in the deadliest attack on CIA personnel in decades.

Virtually every aspect of sound tradecraft was ignored in this episode as an unvetted Jordanian double agent was allowed to enter a sensitive CIA facility (instead of a CIA safe house), where he was met by the entire base leadership (a breach of longstanding tradecraft).

The base commander in Khost had insufficient training and experience for the posting and had been promoted regularly by the CIA's Directorate of Operations despite having been cited in a CIA internal review on 9/11, according to the *Washington Post*, for failing to warn the FBI about two al-Qaeda operatives who had entered the country in 2000.

No reprimands were assessed in the aftermath of the 2009 bombing, although high-

level Agency officials had to approve the assignment of the base commander as well as the entry of the Jordanian double agent onto the Agency's most sensitive facility in eastern Afghanistan.

The security situation in Libya, particularly Benghazi, was obviously deteriorating; the consulate was a target of a bomb in June and the British consulate closed its doors in the summer, leaving the U.S. consulate as the last official foreign presence in the city.

Overall security for the consulate had been in the hands of a small British security firm that placed unarmed Libyans on the perimeter of the building complex. The CIA contributed to the problem with its reliance on Libyan militias and a new Libyan intelligence organization to maintain security for its personnel in Benghazi.

On the night of the attack, the CIA security team was slow to respond to the consulate's call for help, spending more than 20 minutes trying to garner additional support from militias and the Libyan intelligence service that never responded.

Although nearly 30 Americans were airlifted out of Libya in less than ten hours, there is no indication that these individuals were debriefed in order to get a better understanding of the militia attacks. The lack of such essential information from those who had been under attack contributed to the confused assessments in the wake of the attacks.

There were other complications as well. Ambassador Christopher Stevens was an extremely successful and popular ambassador in Libya, but he had become too relaxed about security in a country that had become a war zone.

UN Ambassador Susan Rice was too quick to pronounce judgments on the Benghazi attack before the facts were known, which could be attributed to her interest in assuming a public role in order to buttress her case for becoming Secretary of State in a second Obama administration.

The public role belonged to Brennan, but he had previously mishandled duties in the wake of the attempt of a young Nigerian to board a commercial airliner with explosives in December 2009 as well as in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011.

The systemic failures surrounding the Nigerian bomber involved the entire intelligence community, including the CIA, the National Counter-Terrorism Center, and the National Security Agency. The Benghazi tragedy points to continued systemic failures in the intelligence community as well as within the State Department. A failure to conduct proper threat assessments will

predictably lead to security failures.

The Benghazi failure is one more reminder of the unfortunate militarization of the intelligence community, particularly the CIA, in the wake of 9/11 that finds our major civilian intelligence service becoming a paramilitary center in support of the war-fighter.

Last year's appointment of Gen. David Petraeus as CIA director; the CIA's increased role in drone attacks in Southwest Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa; and the insufficient attention to providing strategic intelligence for the policymaker have weakened the Agency's central missions.

The success of the Bush and Obama administrations in compromising the CIA's Office of the Inspector General has ensured that the Agency's flaws have gone uncorrected. The politicization of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003 was the worst intelligence scandal in the CIA's history, but there were no penalties for those who shared CIA Director George Tenet's willingness to make phony intelligence a "slam dunk."

If more attention is not given to the biblical inscription at the entrance to the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, that only "the truth will set you free," the decline of the intelligence community will continue.

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The Smearing of Chuck Hagel

Former Sen. Chuck Hagel and his possible nomination to be Secretary of Defense are under fierce attack from Washington's neocons and the Israel Lobby. But the tawdriness of the smears creates a chance for President Obama to stand up to this public intimidation, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The effort to slander Chuck Hagel and to torpedo his potential nomination to be Secretary of Defense has reached such intensity that there is now much more at stake in this nomination than just who will be running the Pentagon over the next four years.

Robert Merry, writing at The National Interest, has portrayed well the

sordidness of the calumny-flingers who make little effort to hide their main reason for going after Hagel, which is that he does not believe in subordinating U.S. interests to the wishes of the right-wing Israeli government and its American backers.

Those in the anti-Hagel campaign who try to make it look as if there are non-Israeli reasons to shoot him down make arguments that move from the sordid to the ridiculous. The Washington Post's editorial on the subject is a good example.

It tries to portray the former Republican senator from Nebraska as some kind of leftist peacenik, because he suggests there is some trimming that could usefully be done to U.S. defense spending (which is greater than the next 14 biggest military spenders, friends and foes, put together, and is the highest in inflation-adjusted dollars that it has been since World War II) and expresses skepticism about going to war against Iran (which the *Post's* editorialists acknowledge they have also expressed skepticism about, but that doesn't stop them from portraying the skepticism as somehow a point against Hagel). For a more thorough dismantling of this absurd editorial, see Andrew Sullivan's exegesis of it.

To the extent the placing of Hagel's name in the kind of unofficial nomination it is in right now was the result of deliberate balloon-floating by the White House, it is hard to see exactly what the White House thought it was doing.

Making the nomination official and letting Hagel speak for himself would do a lot to puncture the falsehoods and smears about him. Maybe letting his name get out as the leading potential nominee was less a calculated act than plain old sloppy leaking.

If one wants to give the White House more credit than that, one might postulate that it floated the name so the opponents would have a chance to discredit themselves so much through the sheer outrageousness of their arguments that they would not only lose this political battle but also be weaker in later ones. That way the President might get not only the Secretary of Defense he wants but also some more running room on issues such as the Iranian nuclear program and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There is some valid logic to that. But such bold political jiu-jitsu does not seem to be this President's usual style. He is more likely to be thinking in the customary way, as discussed by Peter Baker in the New York Times, about conserving political capital, picking one's fights carefully, and keeping in mind all the other issues he may have to fight about (and he just got another one: gun control).

If the President applies to the nomination of a Defense secretary a cautious approach grounded in such thinking, he would be making a mistake. He would be acting without sufficient appreciation for how intimidation works. Intimidation feeds on itself, with successful intimidation encouraging more of the same and failures discouraging further attempts.

Neither Chuck Hagel nor anyone else has a right to any Cabinet post, but given how this matter has already evolved, if the President now does not nominate him for the defense job it will be universally seen as a caving in to the neocons and Netanyahuites. Mr. Obama will be politically weaker as a result. He will have lost political capital rather than having conserved it. And he will have encouraged more such intimidation in the future.

Conversely, standing up to the intimidators and pushing a Hagel nomination through to confirmation would improve his ability to battle against the same forces on other issues. Even if the White House did not plan it that way, it would be a political plus for the President. More importantly, it would be a blow for decency and reason and a setback for one of the more damaging and tawdry features of American politics.

It is hard to imagine any future issues offering a conspicuously better place to draw a line in the sand and to start pushing back than this one. Based on what has already been said, there is reason to hope that the tawdriness, as James Fallows puts it in an insightful piece on this subject, “has finally gone so far that it will impeach itself.”

It impeaches itself with arguments such as that a United States senator or cabinet member putting U.S. interests ahead of the interests of a foreign country or the wishes of a foreign government is somehow a bad thing.

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Slaughter of the Innocents

Americans are grieving over the 20 schoolchildren and six teachers mowed down in Newtown, Connecticut, by a deranged gunman with a semi-automatic assault rifle. But national grief may not be enough to overcome the cold calculations of profit and politics, says Danny Schechter.

By Danny Schechter

The late December holidays in America used to be known as “the season to be jolly,” with our streets festooned with bright lights, groups caroling, shopping galore, gift-giving and cheer.

This year, there’s a pall over the lightheartedness because of the horrific violence that claimed the lives of 20 young school children and their teachers in a still unexplained shooting incident in Connecticut, the latest of a string of similar events involving widely available deadly weapons often in the hands of mentally ill people.

At the same time, there’s fear and trepidation among those who believe there may be truth in ancient Mayan prophecies that predict the world will end this month. Perhaps that’s why music critics are reminding us of a country classic by singer Merle Haggard, “If We Make It Through December.”

This fear has spread worldwide with 100 arrests in China for people promoting apocalyptic scenarios. Dozens of those detained belonged to the Christian “Almighty God” cult and were spreading doomsday rumors to the Chinese public.

Worldcrunch reported that in Argentina, someone on Facebook was inviting people to “a spiritual magical suicide on December 21 at 21:12 on Uritorco Mountain.” That is a key day on the Mayan calendar.

Of course, the U.S. media treats all of these stories and trends as separate and distinct from each other and offers little analysis about why some people are preparing for the end of the world and may even be hoping it will happen. It has been reported that the slain mother of Adam Lanza, the suspected shooter at that elementary school in Newtown Connecticut, was part of a group (or cult) called “the preppers,” people preparing for the end.

Back on earth, in what we think of as the real world, there’s been a tendency by President Obama and others to discuss the shooting that shocked Americans and people around the world in cosmic and spiritual terms. “God has called them home,” Obama told grieving parents.

Most of the media treated Newtown as a tragedy that touched the hearts of millions. But, there was more to it, argues the World Socialist Web Site:

“The response of the American media and the political establishment to the latest shooting traces a well-worn path. There are the banal declarations of the incomprehensibility and senselessness of ‘evil.’ To the extent any broader response is offered, it is focused on the need for a ‘national conversation’ on gun control and empty promises to do more to address mental health (made by

politicians doing their best to slash health care programs to the bone).

“The American ruling class has lost the capacity for self-examination. It knows that any serious analysis of the roots of this and other tragedies points back to itself and the society it dominates.”

Meanwhile in a culture infested with violence, gun sales are surging, according to the Guardian: “That’s a picture replicated across the US from California to Louisiana, and even in Newtown where Robert Caselnova said his gun shop saw high demand for assault rifles in the days after the killings. The nationwide increase in sales was reflected in longer than usual delays for legally required background checks which in some cases took hours rather than minutes.

“The surge in sales is not unusual. Following a mass killing at a Colorado cinema in July, applications to buy guns rose more than 40% in a week. ... The increase in weapons sales also comes in a year in which the FBI reported a record number of background checks for gun purchases, with nearly 17m applications.”

The weapon used in the Connecticut killings, a Bushmaster AR-15, is a version of the U.S. military rifle, the M-16, though modified to evade some of the technical provisions of laws like those in Connecticut banning “assault rifles.” A similar federal ban was allowed to lapse during George W. Bush’s Administration, as historian Juan Cole noted:

“The Federal ban on weapons such as the Bushmaster, in place 1994-2004, was allowed to lapse by the George W. Bush administration and his Republican Congress, all of whom received massive campaign donations from the gun lobby.”

The Obama Administration is likely to push to reinstate the assault weapons ban next year.

The Bushmaster is manufactured by a subsidiary of the Wall Street hedge fund, Cerberus Capital Management, called the “Freedom Group,” which also owns Remington and DPMS Firearms. It is the largest single maker of semi-automatic rifles in the U.S., and are expected to be a major growing profit center in the coming years. The Freedom Group was sued over the Washington, DC, sniper attacks, and paid \$500,000 without admitting culpability.” (Stung by bad publicity, and under pressure from its own investors, Cerberus announced it would sell its gun holdings.)

The very presence of the Wall Street owned gun industry and the powerful NRA gun lobby, endorsed as it is by Democrats and Republicans, suggests, it is not likely much will change, even with a ban, in the aftermath of what happened in that school.

It's not even a "tragedy," argues Stephen Marche in Esquire Magazine. "Calling the massacre a tragedy makes everybody feel better. It purges the emotions. It lets out the rage that this horror causes deep in our souls. But it solves nothing," he writes.

"Newtown wasn't a tragedy; Newtown was a policy decision. We can do nothing for the children who are dead; weeping for them like they're our own is partly ridiculous, and partly obscene. What's even more ridiculous and obscene is not preparing for the next one. What's needed now isn't warmhearted empathy; it's cold-blooded reason. America needs its leaders to look at the numbers of mass murders, look at the most effective policies for reducing mass murder, and apply those policies."

And, also we need to recognize that our own military interventions are killing children the world over who are as innocent as the kids in Connecticut. The violent culture we spawn has a way of "blowing back" and killing our own.

Remember that famous line from a song that reverberates in American history, "Praise The Lord And Pass The Ammunition." Happy Holidays and Season Greetings.

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