

Chuck Hagel: Revenge of the “Paleocons”? Lefties Rallying in Support of an “Old-School Conservative Republican”

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Talk of former Republican Nebraska senator Chuck Hagel’s imminent nomination as Obama’s new Secretary of Defense has sparked all the predictable reactions—but they don’t neatly break down along lines of right and left. [MondoWeiss](#) says the pick is “setting up a battle between the left and right flanks of the Israel lobby and between realist supporters of Hagel and his neoconservative detractors.” We have, of course, pointed out that “realist” or “[pragmatist](#)” is a euphemism for what is more properly termed “[paleocon](#).” While the neocons harbor hubristic dreams of re-making the Middle East (and the rest of the world) along lines favorable to the US and Israel, the paleocons favor stability under authoritarian regimes. Neither position is even *remotely* progressive, and it is frustrating to see ostensible leftists get caught up in a Beltway intrigue between rival currents within the political right.

MondoWeiss favorably quotes an e-mail circulated by [Jewish Voice for Peace](#):

America’s Israel Lobby has unleashed a vicious smear campaign against former U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel, an independent thinker who President Obama wants for Secretary of Defense.

Unless we act now to counter thousands of emails that Israel lobby groups have already sent to the White House, President Obama may yield to pressure, sending the message that the Israel Lobby has veto power over all key positions in the Administration.

[Sign the petition now and send to everyone you know.](#)

Chuck Hagel is an old-school conservative Republican, unlikely to make major changes in foreign policy. But he is being targeted because he is reluctant to go to war with Iran, believes we should keep the door open to dialogue with groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, and doesn’t kowtow to AIPAC.

So, lefties rallying to the support of “an old-school conservative Republican.” This is another case study in why MondoWeiss is [problematic](#). Of course [Glenn Greenwald](#) (who is also [problematic](#)) is echoing this same line on Hagel. [J. Street](#), which presumably represents the “left flank of the Israel lobby,” is also supporting Hagel. Connie Bruck in the [New Yorker](#) provides some background to the brouhaha:

In his 2008 book, “The Much Too Promised Land,” Aaron Miller interviewed Hagel, whom he described as “a strong supporter of Israel and a believer in

shared values.” Miller also wrote, “Of all my conversations, the one with Hagel stands apart for its honesty and clarity.” He quoted Hagel saying that Congress “is an institution that does not inherently bring out a great deal of courage.” The American Israel Public Affairs Committee comes knocking with a pro-Israel letter, Hagel continued, and “then you’ll get eighty or ninety senators on it. I don’t think I’ve ever signed one of the letters”—because, he added, they were “stupid.” Hagel also said, “The Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here,” but “I’m a United States senator. I’m not an Israeli senator.”

Hagel has now said he misspoke, and should have said “Israel lobby,” as he did in other parts of the interview with Miller. But no matter—it has made great kindling for his antagonists. The Neocon Bill Kristol’s *Weekly Standard* ran a story with the headline, “SENATE AIDE: ‘SEND US HAGEL AND WE WILL MAKE SURE EVERY AMERICAN KNOWS HE IS AN ANTI-SEMITIC.’” The aide was unnamed, and the article pointed to Hagel’s statement about the “Jewish lobby” as evidence of his anti-Semitism. Jennifer Rubin, the far-right-wing columnist at the *Washington Post*, quoted Abraham Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, saying that Hagel’s “record relating to Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship is, at best, disturbing, and at worst, very troubling. The sentiments he’s expressed about the Jewish lobby border on anti-Semitism...” The *Wall Street Journal*’s Bret Stephens wrote that the odor of prejudice was especially “ripe” in Hagel’s reference to the “Jewish lobby.”

On the other side of coin, [Foreign Policy](#) notes:

A bipartisan group of former senators and national security officials [wrote to Obama](#) last week to express support for Hagel’s nomination. That letter was signed by former Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci, former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, and others.

Sounds to us like one roughes’ gallery versus another. Do we—meaning those on the left, broadly defined—really have a horse in this race?

Hagel is a leading light of the [Atlantic Council](#), an elite foreign policy think-tank with an emphasis on charting Washington’s posture vis-a-vis its NATO allies. He is also a close friend of Big Oil, it appears. [Political Guide](#) informs us that in 2003, he voted against an amendment that would have prevented “fast-tracking” of [oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge \(ANWR\)](#). In 2005 he voted against a bill to decrease oil dependence through such measures as increased [Corporate Average Fuel Economy \(CAFE\)](#) standards. In 2006, he voted for the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act, which would have opened up more areas of the Gulf to offshore drilling. [On The Issues](#) informs us that he also voted no on a measure that would have mandated unilateral US action on carbon emissions without waiting for similar action from India and China; voted no on removing oil and gas exploration subsidies; and voted no on a proposal to amend the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to make oil-producing and exporting cartels illegal.

Get the picture? As we have [long argued](#), the “pragmatists” or paleocons are that wing of the political elite most ensconced in the oil industry—who have the most invested in a stable Middle East where they can do business. They are thoroughly comfortable with thoroughly oppressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf mini-states. The pro-Israel neocons are more rooted in the policy think-tanks, and finance capital. Neither are friends of freedom—however much the neocons may appeal to pro-democracy sentiment, and

however much the paleocons may appeal to those concerned with justice for Palestine.

It is interesting that Obama's apparent pick of Hagel comes just as [David Petraeus](#) has been dethroned at the CIA amid a shake-up at the Pentagon to which the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. [John R. Allen](#), has also fallen victim. The shake-up, ostensibly related to the [Benghazi Affair](#), comes amid [rumors of an actual military coup](#) against Obama—rumors that originate from far-right circles that are obviously rooting for such a putsch. We think they are almost certainly pure fantasy, but the Hagel pick would represent a tilt back to the paleocons—who were an element of Obama's *de facto* electoral coalition in '08. We called them [neo-Mugwumps](#)—Republicans who crossed party lines after eight years of Mad Cowboy Disease had overstretched the empire. And we warned then that this was an ominous accommodation with the old-guard sector of the right establishment.

This warning remains.

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