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FROM FDR'S "MARTIN, BARTON, & FISH"* TO OBAMA'S HAGEL, BRENNAN & KERRY: POLICY OF RETRENCHMENT AND APPEASEMENT DEEPENS

* Isolationist Congressional figures opposing Roosevelt's foreign policy

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IN VIETNAM VETS HAGEL AND KERRY, OBAMA FINDS CHAMPIONS OF RETRENCHMENT

Fouad Ajami

Washington Post, Jan. 18, 2013

The men who fought in Vietnam, a war that symbolizes America's overreach and failures abroad, haven't ascended to the presidency in the way that the World War II generation did. But now, under President Obama, Vietnam veterans Chuck Hagel and John Kerry could get a chance to pull America back from its foreign entanglements.

Obama's nominations of these men, and the world's disenchantment with this president, signal that in his second term, the United States will have a less zealous mission in the world. The mantra isn't quite George McGovern's "come home, America," but we are not far from that Vietnam-era weariness of distant lands and causes. And who better than a president with a foreign pedigree and two combat veterans from the Vietnam War at the helm of the Pentagon and the State Department to give this retrenchment a sense of legitimacy?

All three men would disavow the charge that they are "declinists" who believe that American power is past its zenith, but there is an unmistakable pessimism at the heart of their worldview: We are flat broke, with pressing priorities at home. Foreign engagements begin well and end in futility. We don't know enough about the inner workings of these distant places to help more than harm. And besides, our embrace can suffocate those whose causes we might take up.

Syria burns, but we should hold steady and aloof, Obama's approach has made clear, because we have no way of divining the motivations of the rebellion — or the kind of society the rebels would build if and when the Assad regime falls. The law of unintended consequences haunts our deeds; we know well that American blood and treasure can be wasted at the altar of ideology.

The United States isn't that exceptional to begin with, this triumvirate believes. Hagel and Kerry have forthrightly said so on many occasions, while Obama has had to be more circumspect. In his first campaign for the presidency, he drew a distinction between good wars of necessity and bad wars of choice. But there is no mistaking the worldview of the politician who rose, unexpectedly, amid economic distress, to the height of political power....

To the extent that the ideology of such a nimble man can be divined, the mission of his presidency has been the redistributive state at home. His legacy, as he sees it, will be his signature legislation, Obamacare. Yes, Osama bin Laden was killed on his watch, but the rescue of General Motors seems closer to his heart.

Two years or so into his presidency, the world caught on: Underneath the exotic name and the speeches referring to American follies abroad was a president who holds the foreign world at bay. The spell of his stirring speech in Cairo, in June 2009, has been broken. Instead of being taken in by Obama's magic, Muslims are burning him in effigy in Karachi....Obama can live with the foreign world's disenchantment with him. He has a domestic agenda to focus on, and he has two combat veterans from the Vietnam War to scale back American commitments abroad.

"How many of us really know and understand Iraq, its country, history, people and role in the Arab world?" Hagel said on the Senate floor in 2002, in the debate that preceded and authorized the Iraq war. "The American people must be told of the long-term commitment, risk and cost of this undertaking. We should not be seduced by the expectations of dancing in the streets."

The Nebraskan was speaking of Iraq, but the war in Vietnam has haunted and defined him. He cast a vote authorizing the use of force for the new war, but it didn't take long before the former infantryman with two Purple Hearts gave voice to his disillusionment....

"We are each a product of our experiences, and my time in combat very much shaped my opinions about war," Hagel said in an interview with Vietnam Magazine last fall. "The night Tom [Hagel's brother] and I were medevaced out of that village in April 1968, I told myself: If I ever get out of this and I'm ever in a position to influence policy, I will do everything I can to avoid needless, senseless war. I never forgot that vow I made to myself, and I tried to live by it during my time in the Senate."

By Hagel's moral code, his vote on Iraq was clearly a lapse in judgment. The passion with which he would speak about the war two or three years later, and his attack on the troop surge as a monumental error, felt like the penance of a man who believed he should have known better than to ever have supported the invasion.

If Hagel for years remained convinced that the Vietnam War was a noble cause badly executed, Kerry's path after his service as a Navy lieutenant was markedly different — as different, perhaps, as Nebraska and Massachusetts. His 1971 appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has trailed Kerry ever since. He spoke of American soldiers who had “raped, cut off ears, cut off heads...randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan.”

It had been idle to launch that war, for there was “nothing in South Vietnam, nothing which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America.” The United States had gone there with lofty notions of freedom, but the South Vietnamese “only wanted to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bombs with napalm burning their villages and tearing their country apart.”

There would be no taking back these words. In the eyes of Kerry's detractors, combat, three Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star would not fully acquit him. Emotionally tighter and more inhibited than Hagel, Kerry has put Vietnam at a good remove from his public persona. He has become a trouble shooter, traveling to foreign places but mostly to the chancelleries, to meet leaders and heads of state. Discretion is his code, since the attacks on him by Vietnam veterans during his presidential bid in 2004 rendered him a more cautious man. From his perch in the Senate, he has avoided controversies and redefined himself as an experienced mediator.

Kerry promises to be no more powerful at State than Hillary Rodham Clinton has been. This president, in the mold of Bush, is the “decider” on the crucial issues of our engagements abroad. Kerry won't challenge or resist the White House's primacy. The world needn't worry about the assertiveness of U.S. power under Obama, Kerry and Hagel. It is people in distress — who might recall a different era when American armor and boots on the ground spelled the difference between rescue and calamity — who must come to terms with the near-certainty that the cavalry will not turn up.

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WHO'S AFRAID OF 'THE ISRAEL LOBBY'?

David Frum

National Post, Feb 2, 2013

“The Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here.” Those were the words of U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel, as quoted by Middle East expert Aaron David Miller in a 2008 book. “Up here” was Capitol Hill, of course. Five years later, Chuck Hagel has returned to the Senate, this time as Barack Obama's nominee for Secretary of Defense. At a confirmation hearing on Thursday, Hagel was asked about his dark reference to the “Jewish lobby.” Hagel said he regretted the phrase, and then added — just to remove any lingering doubts — “I think it's the only time on the record I've ever said that.”

The theory here seems to be that to mutter about the Jews off the record would be perfectly fine. Everybody does that. It's only when you go “on the record” that anti-Jewish muttering becomes problematic, at least in the mind of Chuck Hagel. And he only did that once! (At least as far as he can recall.) So what's the big deal?

Unfortunately for Hagel, the exchange got worse from there. Hagel was pressed by Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina to cite some real-world examples of “intimidation” by the “Jewish lobby.”

Hagel admitted he couldn't think of any. Hagel had elsewhere referred to "dumb things" into which the United States had been pushed by the "Jewish lobby." Could he be specific? No, again, he could not.

So it went. Rarely has a cabinet nominee for so high an office delivered such an awkward appearance before a Senate confirmation panel. True, Hagel's performance will not much matter. The Democrats have the votes to confirm Hagel, including those of the Democrats most associated with pro-Israel politics, such as New York's Chuck Schumer. It would be unprecedented for the minority party to filibuster a cabinet appointee. American politics has a strong presumption that a president is entitled to be served by the people he wants. So Secretary Hagel it will likely be....

From the point of view of Hagel's most ardent supporters, these hearings must present a terrible irony. From their point of view, the point of nominating Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense was to send a message: a re-elected president Obama had broken away from the Jewi ... er, from the Israel lobby. What one especially vehement Israel critic calls the "religion" of Capitol Hill would at last be overthrown. Only, the U.S.-Israel relationship hasn't been overthrown, not nearly.

President Obama was re-elected for many reasons, but scepticism/hostility to Israel was not one of them. To the extent that the Hagel nomination expressed the president's exasperation with Benjamin Netanyahu or a determination to downgrade the long and close U.S.-Israel relationship — well, to that extent the nomination was a peevish mistake. Hagel right now is paying the price of that mistake by his disavowal of, and apology for, a decade of poorly considered remarks.

Perhaps Hagel and Obama imagine that they can engage in payback once Hagel is confirmed. They can try: A Secretary of Defense has a lot of power. But the try will be expensive. The Senate and the Congress aren't going anywhere. They have made it clear these past few days that the kind of "Israel Lobby" talk you hear in some Washington think tanks is not acceptable to the American electorate.

Hagel inserted himself into a small bubble of people who have talked themselves into an ever more radical critique of Israel and American Jewry. Isolated inside that bubble, he lost sight of the real state of American politics. The "Israel Lobby" is powerful in U.S. politics for exactly the same reason that Mothers Against Drunk Driving is powerful: because the American majority supports motherhood and disapproves of drunk driving.

Hagel's distorted perception has led him into embarrassment, self-correction and apology. It's highly worrying to think where that distorted perception may lead the president who nominated Hagel in the first place.

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OBAMA'S CIA PICK AND HIS ROMANCE WITH ISLAM

Vic Rosenthal

Jewish Press, Jan. 22, 2013

One of the first things Barack Obama did after taking the oath of office was to submit a list of candidates for cabinet-level posts. One of these was Secretary of Defense, and his nominee was Chuck Hagel. I've had a lot to say about Hagel's views about issues related to Israel, all bad.

But this post isn't about Hagel. It is about another cabinet-level appointment, that of John O. Brennan, Obama's counter-terrorism adviser (actually "Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Assistant to the President") as head of the CIA.

What do we know about Brennan? He held several important posts in the CIA, including station chief in Saudi Arabia from 1996-99. His academic background includes the study of Arabic and Arab culture; he received a B.A. in political science from Fordham University, including a year abroad at the American University in Cairo, and an M.A. in Government specializing in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. He speaks Arabic ‘fluently.’

Now there is nothing wrong with having this kind of background. After all, insofar as the threat of terrorism is a major concern, and the fact that almost all terrorism today emanates from the Arab and Muslim world, the CIA director can’t know too much about it. But on the other hand, there is the phenomenon of the ‘Arabist’ — the Westerner who studies Arabic and is so taken by the culture that he adopts the Arab worldview and politics. T. E. Lawrence is probably the most well-known, but contemporary examples abound (for example, the academic Juan Cole).

If you believe that the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism is related to specific grievances held by ‘extremists’ who are exploiting the essentially peaceful religion of Islam for their purposes, then possibly having a CIA director who is an Arabist is not a problem. However, if you believe that we are experiencing the beginnings of a true conflict of civilizations between Islam and the West, then it could be a big problem indeed.

So is Brennan an Arabist in this sense? I’m not sure. In February 2010, Brennan spoke to Muslim students at NYU in a meeting ‘facilitated’ by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). In the [talk], he says that Islam is “a faith of peace and tolerance and great diversity,” something which I suspect the Coptic Christians of Egypt would dispute.... He describes meeting Muslim students from various countries including “Palestine,” and refers to “al-Quds, Jerusalem” — where, he says, the three faiths for whom the city is holy show that they can coexist despite tensions. (But he fails to note that this has only been the case since the city has been under Jewish control!)

Later, he discusses at length the problem of prejudice against Muslims in America and the need to protect their rights, but he does not mention the very real lack of rights experienced by non-male or non-Muslim populations in Muslim-controlled lands. He praises the Saudi monarchy for the stewardship of the holy cities of Islam and the haj, but does not talk about the brutal, medieval darkness of that kingdom where slavery flourishes and petty thieves have their hands cut off.

He praises ISNA and other Muslim organizations for working to protect the rights of Muslims, but does not mention their involvement in fund-raising for Hamas or other terrorist groups, or their connection to the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, he criticizes the U.S. government for interfering with the obligation for Muslims to practice zakat — charity.

Brennan is 100 percent on board with the Obama policy that our enemies consist only of “al-Qaeda and its extremist allies,” organizations that have distorted the peaceful nature of Islam. In fact, he opposes the use of the word ‘jihadists’ to refer to Islamic terrorists, because: They are not jihadists, for jihad is a holy struggle, an effort to purify, for a legitimate purpose. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing holy or pure or legitimate or Islamic about murdering innocent men, women and children.

As I argued in response to similar remarks in 2009 — Brennan misunderstands the nature of our enemy:

Doubtless Osama bin Laden believes that his jihad against the U.S. is a “holy struggle for a moral goal.” But Brennan’s definition leaves out the historical meaning of ‘jihad’ as an expansionist, offensive struggle against non-Muslims, an aspect which is still very much part of the concept in the minds of many present-day Muslims (for an exhaustive and persuasive analysis of this topic, see Daniel Pipes: “Jihad and the Professors“)... jihad in this sense was highly important in the past and has been reemphasized by modern Islamist thinkers like al-Banna and Qutb.

Brennan clings to the idea that we can somehow undercut the spread of violent Islamist ideology by employing economic development and education to fight the “ignorance” that allows al-Qaeda to recruit: I think Brennan underestimates the pull of the militant Islamist ideology itself, especially in Arab cultures. After all, the leadership of radical groups like al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hizballah, etc. are all well-educated, and in the case of bin Laden, quite wealthy. It can be argued that in some cases — like the Palestinian Arabs, who have probably been the recipient of more Western ‘development’ aid than any other similar group — there are religious/cultural pathologies that work against political stability and economic development, as well as making the culture fertile ground for radical ideologies.

So when Brennan suggests that we need to attack these ‘conditions’ as well as fight ‘extremists’, he misses two points:

The ‘extremists’ are not just a small group of crazies, but part of a significant faction of fundamentalist Muslims who — while they may not themselves engage in violent jihad — accept the ideology of militant Islamism which promotes it. As long as this is the case, there will always be a supply of ones who are violent.

Unless the cultural and religious issues that make it hard for societies to develop in what we Westerners see as a positive direction (democracy, economic development, fair allocation of resources, etc.) can be counteracted, Western attempts to ameliorate poverty, lack of education and political repression will be seen as so much cultural imperialism.

Since 2010, militant Islamism has made great advances in the Middle East, and it is becoming harder and harder for those like Brennan to claim that it is a distortion of the peace and beauty that is “mainstream” Islam. Has he changed his thinking?....

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ON TOPIC

[Will Kerry Search for His Roots in Israel?:](#) Tzvi Ben-Gedalyahu, *Jewish Press*, Feb. 3rd, 2013—No one was more surprised than Kerry himself in 2004 when it was revealed to him that his great-grandfather was Jewish. The new Secretary of State is a third generation “Irish Catholic,” but that is about as far it goes. His great-grandfather, a master brewer, was married to a nice Jewish girl. After her death, he married another nice Jewish girl, who moved from Moravia to Vienna after her husband passed away.

[Hagel Faces Barrage of Criticism During Tense Confirmation Hearing:](#) *Fox News*, Jan. 31, 2013—Defense secretary nominee Chuck Hagel endured a barrage of criticism Thursday during his all-day confirmation hearing on Capitol Hill, challenged repeatedly by Republican lawmakers about his past positions on Israel, Iran, Iraq and other issues he'd be sure to confront at the helm of the Pentagon.

[Sleepy Chuck Hagel Has Some Bigger Questions to Answer:](#) Jeffrey Goldberg, *Bloomberg*, Jan 31, 2013—During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, I interviewed then-Senator Barack Obama on the subject of the Middle East. Much of our discussion was pro forma -- he was trying to convince certain hawkish elements of the American Jewish community that he wasn't Yasser Arafat in mufti -- and so he expressed, at some length, his appreciation for Israel as a haven for Jews and as a friend of the U.S.

[Will Republicans Defend Defense and Live Up to Their Oaths?:](#) Jennifer Rubin, *Washington Post*, Feb. 3, 2013 —Bill Kristol writes: “Has there ever been a more embarrassing confirmation hearing than Hagel’s for a major cabinet position? For a minor cabinet position? For a sub-cabinet position? We don’t know of one. Yet so far liberals seem to be trying to pretend that all is well. Or they have simply averted their gaze from the ghastly train wreck. Or, they tell us (and themselves) — well, the secretary of defense doesn’t really make policy . . . Or, they grumble — well, we can’t give Hagel’s critics the satisfaction of acknowledging that this appointment is a disaster.”

[The New World Disorder:](#) Victor Davis Hanson, *National Review*, Jan. 21, 2013—2.5

John Brennan, Chuck Hagel, and John Kerry will be confirmed. The three will provide a force-multiplying effect on the Obama foreign policy of disengagement. The chameleon Brennan will be very different from David Petraeus at the CIA;

Hagel is no circumspect Leon Panetta; and there was a reason why the appointment of Hillary Clinton as secretary of state was greeted with praise in a way John Kerry's will not be

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