

# Possible Hagel Pick Raises Concerns In Senare GOP

BY DONNA CASSATA  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's possible pick of Republican Chuck Hagel to run the Pentagon raises serious concerns among some of his former Senate colleagues, who question his pronouncements on Iraq, Israel and the Middle East.

The reservations publicly expressed by a few Republicans and even a Democrat hardly rival the unyielding GOP objections to U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, who withdrew from consideration last week for secretary of state in the face of relentless attacks, mostly over her public statements about the Sept. 11 assault on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya.

But opposition was growing among Senate Republicans who held their weekly, closed-door meeting on Wednesday. Lawmakers harbor real doubts about whether Hagel is sufficiently supportive of Israel, the U.S.'s closest Mideast ally, based on his remarks.

"When he served here, he was willing to step on a lot of toes and I think some of those toes that he pinched are screaming right now," said Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo. "But we'll see how it goes along. It depends a lot on how much his Republican colleagues are going to cause problems for him."

As for the Democrats, "I haven't heard people really concerned," she said. "We have an awful lot of respect for his resume."

Hagel, 66, served 12 years in the Senate where he nurtured a reputation for moderation and independence, initially backing the Iraq War and then challenging President George W. Bush's policies. The decorated Vietnam War veteran broke with Bush and fellow Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., over sending an additional 30,000 troops into Iraq.

Hagel called it "the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam, if it's carried out." Yet, the so-called troop surge was credited with stabilizing the chaotic, war-torn country.

McCain was steadfast in his opposition to Rice and vowed to block her selection even before a nomination was made. The senator indicated Wednesday that he was holding off on any final decision about the former Nebraska lawmaker, Hagel.

"I've known Chuck for many years, I respect his views," McCain said. "Obviously we've had some different views on the surge. All these things will be talked about if he's nominated. There's no reason for me to make any judgments. He served his country with honor in Vietnam."

No senator is threatening to block Hagel's confirmation if it comes before the full Senate despite complaints from outside groups. Democrats have the votes to confirm him and would be reluctant to embarrass and weaken Obama at the start of his second term by joining Republicans to scuttle Hagel, especially after the Rice imbroglio.

At the moment, Hagel remains the primary candidate for defense secretary and is being screened for the position, but his

selection is not a done deal. He would succeed Leon Panetta, who has made it clear without announcing a date, that he intends to step down early next year.

Troubling for some lawmakers are Hagel's comments and actions on Israel, including his reference to the "Jewish lobby" in the United States.

"That comment is inappropriate," McCain said. "There's no such thing as a Jewish lobby. There's an Armenian lobby, there's not a Jewish lobby. There's an Israeli lobby. It's called AIPAC, very influential."

Hagel has favored diplomacy over military action with Iran, and criticized talk of a military strike by either the United States or Israel against Iran.

Opponents have pointed to his votes against sanctions on Iran and circulated letters that Hagel signed and ones he declined to add his name to, many of those favored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful pro-Israel lobby. In August 2006, Hagel refused to

sign a letter pressing the European Union to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization, one of 12 senators who balked. In 2007, he sent a letter to Bush urging talks with Iran.

Proponents counter by pointing to Senate votes for U.S. aid to Israel and his backing for

sanctions on Iran.

"The appointment of Chuck Hagel would be a slap in the face for every American who is concerned about the safety of Israel," said Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

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