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## The War Party Ascendant

By Tom Engelhardt

December 4, 2014

It was the end of the road for Chuck Hagel last week and the Washington press corps couldn't have been more enthusiastic about writing his obituary. In terms of pure coverage, it may not have been Ferguson or the seven-foot deluge of snow that hit Buffalo, New York, but the avalanche of news reports was nothing to be sniffed at. There had been a changing of the guard in wartime Washington. Barack Obama's third secretary of defense had gone down for the count. In the phrase of the moment, he had "resigned under pressure." Sayonara, Chuck!

With a unanimity that crossed political lines, the accounts read as if written by a single reporter. The story went something like this: two years earlier, President Obama had brought in Hagel, a decorated Vietnam War veteran and former Republican senator with a reputation for being leery about the overuse of American military power, to wind down the war in Afghanistan, rein in military critics, and put the Pentagon budget on something closer to a peacetime footing. After a bruising Senate confirmation hearing from which he never recovered, he proved poor at "messaging" the president's policies, had a "crappy relationship" with National Security Adviser (and Obama buddy) Susan Rice, proved a weak manager at the Department of Defense as well as a "weak link" in the Obama national security team, and could never break into the president's tight-knit circle of insiders who – everyone agreed – had a nasty habit of "micromanaging" America's wars (rather than, it seemed, letting the military do what needed to be done). In the end, the president "lost confidence" in him. It was a "mutual" firing or at least Hagel had advanced somewhat voluntarily toward the edge of the cliff before being pushed off.

A subcategory of Hagel reports also bloomed, again adding up to something like a single story. In them, various journalists and commentators offered instant speculation on whom the president would invite to fill Hagel's post. Topping everyone's "short list": Senator and former Army Ranger Jack Reed of Rhode Island, war fightin' liberal and former Pentagon official Michèle Flournoy (much beloved by neocons and Republicans), and hawkish former Pentagon "weapons buyer" Ashton Carter (the ultimate nominee). Unfortunately for the press, Reed and Flournoy promptly made mincemeat out of the collective wisdom of the moment, emphatically removing their names from consideration. *Politico* reported the Flournoy rejection this way: "Flournoy's withdrawal comes amid speculation President Barack Obama is looking for a candidate who would be deferential to a White House that's increasingly exerting control over Pentagon decisions." Nothing, however, could stop the march of the news, whose focus simply switched to other potential job applicants. Striking was the eagerness of assorted journalists and pundits to act like employment agency headhunters vetting exactly the same list of candidates for the president.

Such journalism, of course, qualifies as the very definition of insiderdom and it led, implicitly or explicitly, to the crowning of Barack Obama as a "war president" for the final two years of his term. In the end, however, the media was less reporting on developments than reproducing them. The result: a record as collectively claustrophobic as post-9/11 Washington itself.

These days, it's often pointed out by those who pass for Washington critics of the Obama administration that the crises are backing up like a Thanksgiving traffic jam across a remarkable swath of the planet – and that the president's national security team has proven "dysfunctional" when it comes to dealing with them. It's seldom acknowledged, however, that the most essential crisis isn't in Ukraine or Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan or Iran, but in Washington. There, a bankrupt 13-year-old policy of war to the horizon remains, unbelievably enough, in the ascendancy and "war fever" seems to be breaking out yet again.

In this context, it's curious that four crucial aspects of war, American-style, were missing from the blitz of Hagel reportage. Here's a rundown.

**1. The War Party Ascendant:** It's always best to start with the obvious, even if everyone prefers to ignore it. So let's begin with the simple fact that the recent midterm elections swept the Republicans into the Senate in dominating numbers and strengthened their already dominating control of the House of Representatives. In war terms, this has only one meaning: a flock of new (and old) hawks heading into Washington. In truth, though, on such issues there is really only one party in the nation's capital and that's the War Party. In addition, if Washington commentary is to be believed, the next secretary of defense will be an unmitigated war-fighter. The math for dummies explanation on that: no other candidate nominated by a Democratic president would have a hope in hell of making it through a confirmation process overseen by the assumed new head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, John McCain. Add in an occupant of the Oval Office resigned to war presidency status and you can already see the big picture coming into focus.

Recent moves have only emphasized the latest war trajectory. Just post-election, the president doubled the number of advisers in Iraq (with hints of more "boots on the ground" to come and

the possibility of actual combat troops lurking somewhere in the prospective future). Next came news that those advisers were being hustled into the country at a double-time pace. Soon after that came word that more air power – A-10 Warthog jets and Reaper drones – was being transferred to the Iraq/Syria theater.

Meanwhile, in a reversal of a long-stated position – that the American combat role in Afghanistan was to end this year – the president recently issued a secret directive green-lighting just such a role, both on the ground and in the air, for 2015. Soon after, the new Afghan president, clearly under American pressure, lifted a ban on controversial U.S.-supported “night raids” in his country, and reports began filtering out that the trajectory of withdrawal was about to end and extra U.S. troops would be added to the Afghan mix in 2015.

In other words, in the country’s two most active war zones, escalation and mission creep are already the order of the day. Meanwhile, the pressure of Congressional war hawks has only been increasing when it comes to the Obama administration’s single major, unwarlike diplomatic initiative that might stand some chance of success: the Iranian nuclear talks. At the same time, pressure to act more fiercely on Ukraine, including allowing the Pentagon to sell arms to its military, was on the rise.

Admittedly, the War Party has its factions and its disagreements. Its members are quite capable of savaging each other. (Just check out what Senator McCain did to Chuck Hagel at his confirmation hearings for secretary of defense and then what he did to President Obama in defense of Hagel after his removal from office.) One thing is evident, though: in the twilight of the Obama era, the power of the War Party is on the rise, along with that of the national security state.

And so far we’re only talking about surface manifestations of bedrock reality in Washington. After all, ever since 9/11, that city’s political denizens have considered themselves in an eternal “wartime.” Of course, part of everyday life in that “war capital” involves Republicans and Democrats scrambling for political advantage by squabbling endlessly over who’s rash and who’s a wimp when it comes to war policy.

The Republicans brand the president incompetent or far worse, while the president (the man who shot Osama bin Laden) endlessly thanks the troops for their valor and service while donning military paraphernalia to emphasize his strength and resolve. But underneath all the maneuvering, the War Party thrives. You simply can’t operate in Washington without in some fashion declaring your fealty to wartime thinking and the sanctified post-9/11 dead air that goes with it. No alternative possibilities, no other options are on that “table” on which “all options” are always said to sit in the nation’s capital. Should you not toe the line, the national security equivalent of excommunication is in order. “Washington rules,” in Andrew Bacevich’s phrase, do rule the day, while new thinking is unwelcome.

Recent exhibit number one: as November wound down, Rand Paul, the son of the country’s leading libertarian non-interventionist and a man who clearly has his eye on the White House, felt obliged to more or less literally “declare war” on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in order to pledge his fealty to the War Party.

On this issue, as the Hagel coverage indicates, Washington is a suffocating place when it comes to any thought that hasn't been thought before. (When, by the way, was the last time you heard someone in that town mention the word "peace"?) In the end, Hagel, who came to regret his reluctant vote to invade Iraq, evidently proved an uncomfortable fit.

**2. Election 2016 as an Intra-War Party Affair:** In the wake of the invasion of Iraq, Bush v. Kerry in 2004 was, of course, a war election; 2008, however, proved a curious rarity, an election about war in which Americans generally thought they had voted for an anti-war candidate (as, of course, did the Nobel Prize Committee, which – to use an ill-chosen phrase – jumped the gun in 2009 by awarding its peace prize to Barack Obama just as he was about to officially "surge" in Afghanistan). The 2012 election was a status quo one in which, thanks to the bin Laden raid, the president had inoculated himself from Republican charges of wimpism even as he had seemingly fulfilled his previous campaign promise to end the war in Iraq.

2016 is already shaping up as a War Party election all the way. It goes without saying that whichever Republican candidate emerges from the pack will be a war-firster, while the leading Democratic candidate of the moment, Hillary Clinton, is another war-fightin' liberal of the first order. No wonder Flournoy, who refused to be considered for secretary of defense now, would reportedly like to work for Clinton's future administration in the same capacity. Sign of the times: Clinton already seems to be gathering support from a crew of neocons who had their moment in the Bush years and evidently hope to have it again. Right now, no matter who wins in 2016, it's shaping up to be war to the horizon in Washington.

**3. The Military Rides Ever Higher:** Among the strangest aspects of the Hagel coverage was the picture painted of the relationship between the military and the White House in this period. Despite a mind-boggling infusion of funds since 9/11 and the exponential growth of the national security state, reading the Hagel stories you might be forgiven for thinking that the military was an essentially powerless, oppressed, and frustrated crew under the thumb of hopeless goof-balls at the White House. (Nor was it ever suggested that, constitutionally speaking, this is exactly what the relationship should be, no matter who occupies the Oval Office as commander in chief.)

In fact, there are signs that the military, while indeed frustrated – who wouldn't be given the last 13 years of American war and the prospects for the latest conflict in the Middle East? – is actually riding ever higher in the nation's capital.

In this context, the person to keep an eye on is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey. If Hagel lost the president's confidence, according to numerous reports Dempsey is the one who gained it. If Hagel wasn't much for messaging, the same can't be said of Dempsey. He's been testifying up a storm before Congress and commenting in significant ways on war policy in the Middle East. Though he's only the head of the "staff," he has increasingly sounded like a bona fide civilian secretary of defense, speaking out on foreign policy issues, including U.S. relations with Israel and the importance of making American troops available for actual combat duty in Iraq. (This is, of course, something the president had emphatically ruled out). He's also spoken in ways that have not been common for military commanders in our civilian system of government. He has politely contradicted the president on

a number of occasions. He is also credited with getting Obama to launch the first airstrikes of the new American war in the Middle East.

It seems clear that the military high command has struggled with this president over war policy since 2009, when a fierce set of arguments over how fully to “surge” in Afghanistan – the conflict the president had called the “right war” in his election campaign – burst into view. Generally, though, little has been seen of this struggle since then. Still, to believe that a military clearly frustrated by its wars and a high command that now fears another campaign on the road to nowhere in Iraq and Syria is under the thumb of the president and his insular national security team is to mistake a fantasy construct for reality.

**4. A Failed Experiment in War:** Above all, it’s a wonder that all those journalists and commentators writing about Hagel expressed neither amazement nor befuddlement when it came to accepted thinking in Washington about war, American-style. The nation’s capital has been conducting an experiment in war-making for more than 13 years now: there have been full-scale invasions and occupations, counterinsurgency struggles that lasted years, special ops raids of every sort, the application of overwhelming air power in a variety of ways, including an air intervention in Libya, drone assassination campaigns across the backlands of the Greater Middle East, the loosing of cruise missiles, even the first cyberwar in history. Trillions of dollars have been spent; American troops have been deployed to war zones over and over again; almost 7,000 American lives have been lost (while thousands of active duty soldiers and reservists have, in the same period, committed suicide); tens of thousands of Americans have been wounded in action, hundreds of thousands of civilians and enemy fighters in those war zones have died, and millions of people have been uprooted and sent into internal exile or forced out of their countries. In the process, significant parts of the Greater Middle East and more recently Africa have been destabilized in devastating ways.

Think of it as a radical experiment involving what our latest two presidents have called “the greatest force for freedom in the history of the world” and “the finest fighting force that the world has ever known.” Despite ongoing wars and operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia, among other places, the results of that experiment are in. No single war, intervention, or minor conflict in which the U.S. military has taken part in these years has even come close to achieving the objectives set out by Washington and most have proven outright disasters. In just about every case, armed intervention, whatever form it took, demonstrably made matters worse, increased the destabilization of whatever country or region was involved, and led to the creation of more extremists and terrorists.

Imagine for a moment a lab that ran a series of experiments for 13 straight years in almost every imaginable combination through one disastrous failure after another and then promoted the experimenters and agreed to let them repeat the process all over again. This would defy logic or simply good sense anywhere but in Washington.

To summarize: 13 years later, the War Party is ascendant. It controls Congress. The president is visibly, if with his usual reluctance, placing his bets on war. The military is riding high. The end of all calls for serious Pentagon budget cuts is clearly in sight. And more of the same is undoubtedly in the works, no matter who wins the 2016 election.

That's the "new" Washington. Peacetime? A fantasy creation of lefties, libertarians, and noodle heads. Peace? A dirty word that no self-respecting politician would be caught using.

Meanwhile, the war hawks are crying out for more. At the moment, all the pressure in Washington is focused on the ramping up of its various wars and crises. Iraq War 3.0 and Syria War 1.0 are to expand. Afghanistan seems again to be a war on the rise. The pressure is increasing to make Cold War 2.0 ever hotter and to ensure that negotiations with Iran over a nuclear deal will prove less than fruitful. Drone wars are ongoing. Special forces ops are raiding away. Thirteen years later, we are yet again floating on what seems to be a rising, not ebbing, tide of war and the one qualification for a new secretary of defense is that he or she be a hot, not a cold, warrior.

This is the working definition of a bankrupt policy and yet you could read about the latest changes in Washington's war establishment until you were goggle-eyed and never quite know it.

Congratulations, then, are in order for the War Party. In the face of a seemingly obdurate reality, it has somehow perfected a system of war boosterism that operates like a dream (though some might call it a nightmare). When it comes to war, in other words, Washington is now effectively insulated from failure. There may be 17 major interlocked intelligence outfits in town, but rest assured, there's no intelligence in sight. So party on!