

## A low-risk pick; The Iran card; Putin's risk; Pentagon shake-up, Part Two ....

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### GET CARTER

Ashton B. Carter was probably the safest choice President Obama could have made to succeed Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense. The 60-year-old technocrat already had been unanimously confirmed by the Senate twice—for the No. 2 and No. 3 spots in the Pentagon leadership—and Obama needed a quick, uneventful confirmation to offset what is expected to be bruising vetting battles for other new members of his leadership team.

With the new Senate majority, John McCain (R-Ariz.) is expected to take the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee and preside over Carter's confirmation hearings. As a minority member, McCain led a withering attack on former Senate colleague and fellow Republican Hagel during Hagel's own hearing. Afterward, Hagel was the first Defense Secretary nomination to be filibustered. In the end, he was confirmed with a slim 58-41 majority. However, McCain has taken to the Senate floor to praise Carter's intelligence and dedication, and ranking SASC member Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.) said he didn't expect Carter would face much opposition.

Carter has been in and out of government service for 30 years, going back to the Clinton Administration, when he was assistant secretary of defense for international security policy. In that capacity, he supervised implementation of the Nunn-Lugar law, which provided funds to remove fissile materials from former Soviet nations that no longer wanted to bear the cost and effort to have them. He was also deeply involved in negotiations over North Korea's then-budding nuclear weapons program.

At a White House ceremony announcing the nomination Dec. 5, Obama praised this work and Carter's efforts during Obama's Administration to rapidly deploy new body armor, mine-resistant vehicles, and other technologies to Iraq and Afghanistan to combat the signature enemy weapon of the last 13 years—the roadside bomb. Collectively, Obama said, Carter's efforts saved "countless Americans."

Carter spoke briefly after Obama, saying he pledged to the President and Congress "my most candid strategic advice and ... equally candid military advice." He took the job, he said, because of the "seriousness of the strategic challenges we face" and "regard for [Obama's] leadership."

Carter holds bachelor's degrees from Yale in both physics and medieval history. As a Rhodes Scholar, he earned

a doctorate in theoretical physics from Oxford, and in his early career worked at the Brookhaven and Fermilab national laboratories. He then advised investment firms, served on various corporate and government scientific advisory boards, and served as chair of the international and global affairs faculty at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where he also co-directed the Preventive Defense Project.

He came back to the Pentagon with the Obama Administration in April 2009 as undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics. He became deputy secretary of defense in October 2011, and departed the post two years later. During his five years as a senior Pentagon official under Obama, Carter directed the restructuring of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program and the KC-46 tanker project, and led several strategic reviews, including the one resulting in the so-called "Pacific Pivot."

At the White House ceremony, Obama said Carter's training as a physicist gives him a unique understanding of "how many of our defense systems work," as well as the insight to know which ones need to be terminated because they are no longer relevant. Given his five recent years of top-level involvement in running the Pentagon, Obama said Carter is amply prepared "on Day One to hit the ground running."

Obama said Carter will face "no shortage of challenges" and will have to juggle the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, building international partnerships, preserving old alliances such as NATO, managing the Ebola crisis, and shepherding a military that is "necessarily going to need to be leaner." He will have to "squeeze everything we [can] out of the resources" available, Obama said, hinting at the looming return of the budget sequester.

It will be Carter's job, Obama said, to ensure the US military remains "second to none." He asked Congress to act on the nomination "with speed and dispatch."

In his memoir, *Worthy Fights*, Hagel's predecessor Leon E. Panetta referred to Carter as a "wunk, a nuclear physicist, and author"; a Pentagon veteran "who understood both the policy and budget sides of the agency." Panetta also noted that Carter would make frequent unpublicized visits to wounded soldiers at the Bethesda and Walter Reed hospitals.

Hagel, in a statement closely following the nomination, called Carter "a patriot and a leader" who "has served 11 Secretaries of Defense. ... He is a renowned strategist,



Carter speaks to troops in Herat, Afghanistan, in 2013.

scientist, and scholar with expertise spanning from international security and counterterrorism to science, technology, and innovation. ... I relied on him to lead some of the Defense Department's most important initiatives."

He urged Carter's confirmation "without delay." Hagel had agreed to remain on the job until a successor is confirmed.

## NOW, WHAT SHALL WE TALK ABOUT?

Facing a Republican Senate Armed Services Committee for confirmation, Carter is unlikely to get the lashing Hagel did. It probably won't be a love-in, though, and Carter will likely be asked to explain the Administration's approach to dealing with Russia and ISIS, with which Republicans have found constant fault.

Of particular interest will likely be an extended interview Carter did with PBS' Charlie Rose in July, when he had been out of the Pentagon for more than seven months. A possible flashpoint from that interview could be Carter's assertion that Iran would have to be involved in resolving the crises in Syria and Iraq.

"We're not going to get a military solution to this," Carter said. "The ultimate solution has to be a political one." When Rose asked if Iran would have to be part of that solution, Carter answered, "Yes." Carter said Iraq fell into deep trouble when the Nouri al Maliki government failed to be even-handed in its treatment of Sunnis and Shiites alike, and the Sunnis in Western Iraq would not support the Iraqi security forces because of it. He said there was no intelligence failure on the part of the US that provided an opening for ISIS.

However, "it's undoubtedly true that ISIS surprised everyone with the rapidity with which they ... caused the collapse of the Iraqi security forces," Carter said. Moreover, he believed that leaving 15,000 US troops behind would have done nothing to quell the anger with the Maliki government by those who felt disenfranchised by it. In "the next phase" of the unfolding situation, it will be essential that the Iraqi government demonstrate it can be "inclusive." As for Syria, Carter said, "I don't think I ... knew [President Bashar] Assad would be as ruthless as he proved to be."

Carter also said that drone warfare will likely be a continuing feature of US foreign policy, but the government will have to constantly "articulate ... when their use is appropriate."

Addressing the prospect of a closer relationship between China and Russia, Carter said he doesn't think "it's something that ... needs to be feared" by the US because each country needs to develop new markets and suppliers. He warned, though, that some elements of the Chinese government have a chip on their shoulder about having been left out of shaping the world in the 20th century and it will be essential to encourage Chinese leaders who want to be full international participants to "prevail over the grudging and historical tendencies."

As for Ukraine, Carter said Russia may never get over the loss of its hegemony over the Warsaw Pact countries, and he hopes that President Vladimir Putin comes to understand that his moves in Ukraine are "tactical" and will have strategic consequences.

"Right now, it's popular [in Russia] for him to keep stirring this pot," Carter said. The economic damage from sanctions, however, is bad and getting worse, and the damage to Russia's reputation "may be irreversible."

## TOP-LEVEL TRANSITION

Despite his lengthy list of credentials, Ash Carter was clearly not Obama's first choice to be Defense Secretary.

Early contenders floated by the White House as possible Hagel successors—including Center for a New American

Security chief and former Pentagon policy guru Michèle A. Flournoy, Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), and Homeland Security chief Jeh C. Johnson—promptly and publicly removed themselves from consideration. Numerous press reports chalked up their reluctance to a perception that the Obama White House "micromanages" the Pentagon; a charge leveled to different degrees by both Panetta and his predecessor Robert M. Gates, who each talked about the problem in their respective memoirs.

The day before Carter's nomination, Hagel was asked at a press conference whether his abrupt tender of resignation on Nov. 24, immediately accepted by Obama, was due to micromanagement, or whether Hagel had differences of opinion with Obama over how to conduct the war against ISIS that led to him being fired.

Hagel responded that he was not fired, and that he and Obama had, in a one-on-one conversation, agreed that the last two years of Obama's Administration represent "another zone, I think, of kinds of challenges for this country." He said, "We both came to the conclusion that I think the country was best served with new leadership." There wasn't "some obvious issue" between them.

"I never said I would be here two years or four years," Hagel continued, insisting that he was on no set timetable, nor was his departure about "whether I thought I could do the job, whether it was ISIL or any other challenge ... or the budgets."

It was "a responsibility of also knowing when it is probably a good time to let someone come in ... and pick up where you have left off."

Several times Hagel referred to "the challenges that are coming," but he also noted that "most likely there's going to be a rotation" of leadership among the Joint Chiefs of Staff soon, with an expected change-out of the Chairman, vice chairman, and "some of the chiefs."

"That's the President's call, ultimately," Hagel said, "but ... this is probably the right time for a new team."

In his resignation letter to the members of the US military, Hagel said he was "immensely proud of what we have accomplished together." Among the achievements he listed was setting up Afghanistan for a "successful transition" to its defense by indigenous forces. Also, "we have taken the fight to ISIL and, with our Iraqi and coalition partners, have blunted the momentum of this barbaric enemy." He further noted the US military's assistance to "millions of people around the world" who suffered natural disasters during his tenure.

"We have worked tirelessly to sustain our all-volunteer force that has given so much during 13 years of war," Hagel said. "And we have bolstered enduring alliances and strengthened emerging partnerships, all the while setting in motion important reforms that will prepare this institution for the challenges facing us in the decades to come."

Obama chose Hagel because he saw him as a bipartisan Senate insider who could smooth relations with Congress, manage a measured withdrawal from Afghanistan, and shape the military for new world conditions. He was to continue the taming of the acquisition process, wean the military off war supplemental funds, and manage big changes to the Pentagon compensation system, which has ballooned to consume more than two-thirds of defense spending. He was also brought in to prepare the US military for the post-Afghanistan era—in which the principle threats would be terrorism and rising peer powers such as China and Russia—through international partnerships and shifting more of the burden of defense spending to friends and allies under greater direct threat.

Russia's grab of the Crimean Peninsula and proxy war for control of Ukraine, however, as well as the metastasizing Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS, rocked the Administration back on its heels. Hagel's departure may signal a new Administration tack in these conflicts. ★