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## **Hagel, Kerry, And The Combat Experience**

**By Lawrence J. Haas**

“War is hell,” is the popular phrase that dates back at least to William Tecumseh Sherman, and no one knows the reality of war better than the two prospective new members of President Barack Obama’s foreign policy team.

If confirmed, Chuck Hagel and John Kerry will bring to their positions as Secretaries of Defense and State, respectively, an unusual on-the-ground perspective on war-making from their days in Vietnam.

That could be a positive thing – maybe it will be – as Obama confronts a simmering Middle East, a metastasizing al-Qaeda, an unsettled Af-Pak, a confrontational China and Russia, and a terror-sponsoring, nuclear-pursuing Iran that seeks regional hegemony and a stronger presence in Latin America.

And yet – from the admitted comfort of my desk, with no military experience of my own – I wonder.

“The tide of war is receding,” Obama likes to say. He said it in mid-2011 when announcing troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, in late 2011 in announcing an end to U.S. combat operations in Iraq, and in early 2012 when unveiling a new defense strategy; his aides also inserted the phrase into last year’s Democratic platform.

The phrase refers to the winding down of America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the end of post-9/11 U.S. military aggressiveness.

But, it also reflects Obama’s more general belief that America should reduce its global footprint and shift its attention to domestic matters, that, as he has said, “it is time to focus on nation-building here at home.”

Upon taking office, the president was not predisposed to send more U.S. forces abroad. He promised, in Winston Churchill’s famous phrase, more “jaw-jaw,” less “war-war.” He pledged stronger ties with allies and a new “engagement” with adversaries. Though Obama joined with our European allies in military action to prevent Libya’s Muammar Gadhafi from wiping out his country’s rebels, he stood back as Syria’s Bashar al-Assad slaughtered his people in the most heinous fashion.

Force, however, has its place. So, too, does the threat of force. They are essential elements of a U.S. strategy for a dangerous world. Though, as President John Quincy Adams said nearly two

centuries ago, we do not go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy,” we do weigh the use of force to protect our interests.

Now, here come Hagel and Kerry.

The former, who is close with Vice President Joe Biden, earned two Purple Hearts in Vietnam while serving as a private and a sergeant. He enlisted and volunteered for Vietnam in 1967, where he served with his brother. They saved one another during separate firefights. He’d be the first enlisted man and first Vietnam veteran to head the Pentagon.

“I am grateful for this opportunity to serve our country again and especially its men and women in uniform and their families,” Hagel said of his nomination, making clear that he hasn’t forgotten from where he came. “These are people who give so much to this nation every day with such dignity and selflessness.”

The latter, who gave Obama the prime-time speaking slot at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that catapulted him to overnight fame, is a Vietnam veteran of more controversial vintage.

Testifying in 1971 to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he reviewed the on-the ground horror of combat and pleaded, “... how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

To be clear: Hagel and Kerry are war heroes. They volunteered for what became America’s most unpopular war. They served their country in a way that I have not, and I don’t take the distinction lightly.

Moreover, they bring a useful perspective to U.S. foreign policy. As former Senator Max Cleland, who was severely maimed in Vietnam, told the *Boston Globe*, “These are people who have been to war and are going to do their damndest to stay out of other stupid engagements in which young Americans are going to get blown up.”

Fair point.

Nevertheless, I think it’s also fair to ask whether, due to their gruesome experiences, Hagel and Kerry would be too reluctant to recommend force. Would they merely echo the dovish predisposition of our president?

Does the United States need, at the same time, a Secretary of Defense and a Secretary of State who share such a gruesome past? Will it make them unduly reluctant to send America’s soldiers, sailors, and marines into combat? Will that impair America’s ability to project its power and protect its interests?

I wonder.

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