

US News

Anti-war veteran may rally the Republicans



Washington diary

Ewen MacAskill

Chuck Hagel, the Republican senator from Nebraska, is one of the few senior figures in either Congress or the Bush administration to have been in combat. While many of them deferred their service, like the chief hawk, Vice-President Dick Cheney, or did a short spell on home soil in the National Guard, like George Bush, Hagel spent time in the mud of Vietnam as an infantry sergeant.

That experience explains why he is one of the leading opponents in Bush's own party of the Iraq war. When the president announced his decision in January to increase the number of US troops in Iraq by 21,500, Hagel's comment was one of the most widely quoted in the media. He called the troop surge "the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam".

Hagel, 60, has not yet announced that he will seek his party's nomination for the 2008 presidential race, but there were few people who heard him speak last week in Nora's, one of Washington's favourite political restaurants, who doubted he intends to run. He was speaking at one of the capital's best-known salons, run by Steve Clemons, head of a centrist thinktank, the New America Foundation. Clemons is one of the city's great networkers, with friends across the city and across the parties.

About 30 people joined Hagel and Clemons upstairs at Nora's: senate staffers, policy wonks, businessmen and journalists. It is an egalitarian salon: no reserved seating and questions open to anyone. Hagel spoke for about 20 minutes on the record and took questions, off the record,



Chuck Hagel condemns the Iraq 'surge' at a Senate foreign relations committee meeting Photo: Alex Wong/Getty

for the remainder of the dinner. He sounds like John Wayne and has the same brash self-confidence, but does not share the late actor's rightwing, gung-ho opinions. In fact, Hagel is an unusual Republican, with a complex set of views, conservative on many issues but so liberal on others he could pass for a Democrat.

The front-runner for the Republican nomination is Hagel's fellow senator, John McCain, also a Vietnam veteran, who spent five years in a communist prisoner of war camp. But McCain and the other front-runners, Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney, have so far not enthused their party in the way that the

'Hagel is so liberal on many issues that he could pass for a Democrat'

Democratic party has been lifted by the stellar trio of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards.

Almost any political analyst will say it is too early to write off the Republicans, in spite of the anti-Bush mood in the polls. The Democrats' problem is that almost every recent presidential race has been exceedingly close, and next year's could be determined not only by party, personality, campaign style and policies, but some chance remark. Or it could be the candidate's position on the Iraq war. McCain's problem is that he is too closely identified with the war, having long advocated an increase in troops. If the war continues to go badly, and there is little reason to believe otherwise, Republican support for the war could erode and they may look to someone with a record of opposing it, like Hagel.

Hagel is unusual in his party in other ways. He is liberal on many social issues that most Republicans

refuse to countenance, such as gay marriage. Hagel says he regards marriage as between a man and a woman, but is relaxed about homosexual or lesbian marriages. And on an issue that is too hot even for most Democrats, burning the Stars and Stripes, he voted for legislation making it a crime but said that he could still see why people might want to do it as a form of protest.

One of Hagel's strongest points is that people instinctively like him. A wealthy businessman at Nora's recalled the first time they had met. The businessman had been braced for a request for funding, as he would have expected from most candidates, but instead the two discussed foreign policy. He came away refreshed that Hagel seemed to be more interested in his opinion than his money.

Hagel's anti-war views are not confined to Iraq. During the Israeli war against Hizbullah in Lebanon last year, he urged Bush to call an

immediate ceasefire, something not only the president but Tony Blair refused to do. He also calls for the closure of the US detention centre at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, where more than 300 people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Muslim world have been detained without trial. He sees this as damaging America's reputation as a champion of human rights.

While Bush refuses to open dialogue with Iran, sent an extra aircraft carrier group to the Gulf and insists that all options remain on the table, including a military strike, Hagel spoke passionately at Nora's in favour of negotiating with Tehran.

His opposition to escalation of the Iraq war and avoidance of one in Iran can be traced to his still strong memory of Vietnam, from which he returned in 1968 with shrapnel in his chest and two Purple Hearts. Like the former secretary of state, Colin Powell, another Vietnam vet and one of the few members of the administration who cautioned against the Iraq invasion, Hagel has seen at first hand what happens in war.

In an interview with GQ magazine in January, he said: "Certainly, going through combat in Vietnam and seeing war up close, seeing friends wounded and killed in front of you, you cannot help but be framed by that experience. When I got to Vietnam, I was a rifleman. I was a private, about as low as you can get. So my frame of reference is very much geared toward the guy at the bottom who's doing the fighting and dying."

What are Hagel's chances of winning the Republican nomination? Some at Nora's, discussing him after he had left, thought he might make it, while others said that he might instead end up as vice-president or secretary of state. Others said that McCain is still the Republican to watch. But, whatever their thoughts on Hagel's chances, almost all seemed to be impressed by this anti-war senator from Nebraska.

Five years' jail for Korean in UN oil-for-food bribery case

Washington Post

Colum Lynch at the United Nations

The Korean businessman and influence-peddler Tongsun Park was jailed last week for five years over his role in the bribery scandal surrounding the United Nation's oil-for-food programme for Iraq a decade ago.

Park, 71, had been convicted in July of taking more than \$2.5m from Saddam Hussein's government to bribe senior UN officials to convince them to ease economic sanctions against Iraq after the 1991 Gulf war. He had been charged as acting as an unregistered agent of Iraq and was to have set up a back channel between the then UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and Tariq Aziz, who was then the Iraqi deputy prime minister.

The sentence was the maximum possible and US district judge Denny Chin also ordered Park to forfeit \$1.2m of his assets and fined him \$15,000. The judge said Park had acted "out of greed" and "blatantly disregarded the law". He told Park: "You either bribed a UN official or you were acting as if you were going to bribe a UN official." Park was taken directly into custody.

Park's trial and a UN investigation exposed a secretive network of businessmen, Washington politicians and other insiders who joined forces in the early 1990s to ease UN sanctions imposed on Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in 1990. Its work eventually led to the \$64m oil-for-food programme, allowing Iraq to sell its oil to pay for humanitarian goods.

Park's role in the scheme marked an extraordinary comeback — and another amazing fall — for a man indicted in the 1970s "Koreagate" influence-peddling scandal that shook Washington. He funnelled hundreds of thousands in cash from the South Korean government to influential members of Congress. After the case broke, Park fled to South Korea, but after bribery charges were dropped he agreed to return to the US and testify before Congress on his activities.

During the era Park was a fixture in Washington political circles, hosting parties at his George Town Club. His friends and clients included the late House Speaker, Tip O'Neill, and William Timmons, a Republican lobbyist who once joined Park in an abortive attempt to prevent the toppling of the Panamanian strongman General Manuel Noriega.

Clinton and Obama clash over film mogul's support

Ewen MacAskill in Washington

The 2008 US presidential race turned acrimonious for the first time last week when a personal spat broke out between Hillary Clinton and her main rival, Barack Obama.

Mrs Clinton turned on Mr Obama over jibes against her made by the Hollywood mogul David Geffen, who was a fundraiser for the Clintons but has switched his allegiance to Mr Obama. Mr Geffen, founder of Dreamworks, who has helped to raise \$1.3m funds for Mr Obama in Hollywood, told the New York Times that Mrs Clinton was a "polarising" figure who would not be able to bring the fractured US together "no matter

how smart she is and no matter how ambitious she is". He also described her husband, former president Bill Clinton, as a "reckless guy".

Mrs Clinton's war room called on Mr Obama to renounce Mr Geffen. Howard Wolfson, head of communications for the Clinton campaign, said: "How can Senator Obama denounce the politics of slash and burn yesterday while his own campaign is espousing the politics of trash today?"

But Robert Gibbs, communications director for Mr Obama, said: "We aren't going to get in the middle of a disagreement between the Clintons and someone who was once one of their biggest supporters."

Guantánamo pleas rejected

Detainees at America's Guantánamo Bay camp suffered a major setback when a US appeals court rejected their pleas to have claims against unlawful imprisonment heard. The US justice department will now seek to have hundreds of cases from prisoners pending in federal courts dismissed, writes Ewen MacAskill.

The decision is a victory for the

Bush administration, which has had to fend off legal challenges since the prisoners began arriving in 2001.

Shayana Kadidal, a spokeswoman for the Centre for Constitutional Rights, said: "The bottom line is that, according to two of the federal judges, the president can do whatever he wants without any legal limitations as long as he does it offshore."

Virginia offers an apology for slavery

Suzanne Goldenberg in Washington

The state of Virginia, the heart of the Confederacy during the civil war, has issued the first official apology for slavery and the exploitation of native Americans by white settlers.

In a resolution passed unanimously in both chambers of the state general assembly in Richmond, legislators offered "profound regret" for the enslavement of millions of Americans. "The moral standards of liberty and equality have been transgressed during much of Virginia's and America's history," it says. This was "the most horrendous of all depredations of human rights and violations of our founding ideals in our nation's history".

The display of contrition was timed to mark the 400th anniversary of the English settlement in 1607 of Jamestown; the first recorded instance of New World slavery was 12 years later.

Maryland and Missouri are considering similar measures, and other states have begun to compensate African-Americans for past wrong. Florida has paid compensation to the descendants of an all-black town destroyed by a lynch mob in 1923.