

Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>vi</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>vii</i>
1. Who Is This Guy?	<i>1</i>
2. The Early Years	<i>11</i>
3. Vietnam	<i>27</i>
4. Looking to Washington	<i>45</i>
5. Embracing a Political Future	<i>71</i>
6. Moving Forward in the Senate	<i>95</i>
7. Risking the Administration's Wrath	<i>145</i>
8. Going for the Big One?	<i>185</i>
Notes	<i>219</i>

1

Who Is This Guy?

IT'S LATE AUGUST 2004, and the Republicans are celebrating in New York City. It's a foregone conclusion that they will nominate incumbent George W. Bush for a second term as president. Not much to watch there.

But some other scenarios are playing themselves out among the delegates and party enthusiasts. After all, it's only four years until the Oval Office will be wide open, and it's not too early for potential Republican candidates to start positioning themselves to be anointed in 2008. The routine involves going to the right parties, meeting the right people, getting interviews with the top media—not just the hometown folks but those who can make a person's name a household word around the nation's collective dinner table.

Chuck Hagel, Nebraska's senior senator, is playing the game. Only a few weeks before the start of the festivities, he finally confirmed that he was considering taking a shot at the 2008 presidential nomination, something many observers had long expected he'd do. Now he's laying some groundwork.

He's been invited to speak at a morning gathering of the Iowa delegation and will drop in at an afternoon reception hosted by the New Hampshire delegation and make a few remarks there too. The potential candidate and the party leaders from the two states with the earliest caucus and primary election will size up each other's moves.

Hagel takes the opportunity to compliment his hosts. "You started the process, and you're going to have an awful lot to do with how it ends," he tells the Iowa delegates in the morning. "You shape and mold the outcomes from start to finish," he says to the New Hampshire delegates in the afternoon.¹

The senator may be making the required moves, but he's not always saying the expected things. Instead of gliding along, telling his audiences what he thinks they want to hear, he tends to talk about the things he thinks are important. Sometimes they do not reflect Republican orthodoxy.

Several days before Bush will make his speech to accept the nomination, for instance, Hagel is interviewed on the PBS *News-Hour with Jim Lehrer*. The topic is the role the war in Iraq is playing in the presidential campaign. Reporter Margaret Warner asks whether Iraq is a "real negative" for the president.

Hagel does a delicate turn. "It's a major issue." There are other issues, too, of course, but, "Yes, it's an issue."

Warner reminds Hagel that, back in June, he said the occupation of Iraq had been poorly planned and had actually spread terror cells throughout the world. Does he still think that's true?

Well, yes. "We didn't think about consequences. We didn't think about the long term," he says.

And when the president addresses the convention and America's voters, what should Mr. Bush say about the nation's involvement in Iraq?

Some careful footwork: "It is very complicated. And we are going to need relationships. We are going to need associations, seamless networks of cooperation with our allies. . . . And if he can clearly define that, then I think the American public will continue to give him the latitude that presidents must have in the imple-

mentation of foreign policy.” Some internationalist advice for a president who seems determined to be a nationalist.²

Earlier in the week Hagel surprised some observers by co-hosting a reception at Bob Kerrey’s home in Greenwich Village. The two men became friends when they represented Nebraska together in the Senate, and in 2004 Kerrey, the Democrat, is president of the New School University in New York. The reception is billed as a kickoff for a New School forum, a series of roundtable discussions on urban issues that, Kerrey says, both parties’ policy makers need to confront. Crossing party lines in the midst of a convention is not exactly commonplace, but Hagel takes advantage of the opportunity to promote some of his own policy views.

And he takes advantage of the convention’s media spotlight as well. He doesn’t get to make a speech to the convention this time, as he had done in 2000 when he nominated his friend John McCain. But he gets plenty of attention off the floor itself.

Hagel is interviewed live on CNN’s *American Morning*. The possibility that he will be the party’s chosen one in 2008 is discussed in stories in major papers like the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Boston Globe*, as well as in wire-service stories that run in papers around the nation.

Then, as the convention ends, Hagel becomes really blunt. “The Republican Party has come loose of its moorings,” he tells reporters. He doesn’t blame Bush for the mess, but he laments what his party has done during the previous four years. For one thing, the Congress, with Republican majorities in both houses, has run up the largest deficits in the nation’s history. For another, Republicans have embraced a foreign policy that has put the United States at odds with many of its longtime allies and fed Americans’ suspicion that multilateral institutions like the United Nations and NATO are a nuisance at best and a threat at worst.

Once upon a time, he says, the Republicans made a name for themselves as an internationalist party, reaching out to build consensus all over the world. Now they’re turning their back on their reputation and their friends. It’s a position he thinks is dead wrong.³

Well. In the wake of his party's party, Hagel is not in the mood to celebrate the GOP's condition or direction. Instead of joining the post-celebration euphoria, he contributes to the morning-after headaches. Is this any way to navigate the treacherous road to the White House?

Maybe, but it's risky. Most people who want to win delegates' support try to keep in step with those delegates, not challenge them to change their ways. But Chuck Hagel is not afraid of challenge—or risk. He may be jumping through mandatory hoops on the way to a possible presidential nomination, but he's leaping through some of them a bit sideways or even backward, pausing occasionally to stick his finger in his party's eye.

For all the frustration Hagel expresses about the Republican Party—and sometimes about politics in general—he is philosophically in tune with many of the party's traditional positions. The man who grew up in independent-minded Nebraska and made a fortune in the cell-phone industry believes ardently in free trade, in as little government intervention as possible, in fostering a climate that lets people do for themselves, and in a government that interferes in people's lives only when it has to. It is primarily on matters of foreign relations that he parts company with his party.

But he loves his job in the Senate—just as he has loved all the other jobs he's had: aide to a Nebraska congressman, lobbyist for Firestone Tire, deputy director of the Veterans Administration, cell-phone entrepreneur, head of the USO, investment banker. Quite a list for a man born in 1946. Hagel has not done much sitting around.

As one of his former employees said, “He's always pleased but never satisfied.” Cheerful and optimistic but driven and impatient. Eager to learn and create but also eager for the next thing. Loyal to friends and long-held values but ready to change things he believes have gone wrong. Defender of Republican principles and politicians but quick to speak out when he thinks they've gone awry. A true conservative in philosophy but a moderate in attitude and approach. As one observer put it, Hagel is that highly evolved political animal: principled but open for business.⁴

It's a philosophy grounded in both nature and nurture. Hagel grew up in small towns in Nebraska, the son of a committed independent Republican who communicated to his sons his interest in the nation's business and the way he thought it should be run. Hagel was sixteen when his father died of a brain aneurysm. The oldest of four boys, he became the one on whom his mother leaned and to whom his brothers looked for guidance.

Things were going well until he graduated from high school and headed to college. After several tries in four-year institutions, he finished a one-year degree from a broadcasting institution in Minneapolis and got a radio job in Lincoln.

By that time the United States was up to its armpits in Vietnam, and young men like Hagel who weren't in college were prime targets for the draft. His draft board gave him fair warning, telling him to get himself enrolled somewhere if he wanted to avoid Uncle Sam's beckoning finger. But Hagel took another route: he enlisted in the army before it could draft him.

Basic training went well, and Hagel was offered a special assignment in a top-secret missile program. Rather than becoming fodder for the Vietnam War machine, he was to be sent to Germany for an elite assignment. Instead he volunteered to go to Vietnam.

It nearly killed him, several times. But, in other ways, it gave him back his life. After a year of Vietnam's miserable heat, nearly constant danger, and violent campaigns like the Tet Offensive, Chuck Hagel came back to the United States ready to get on with things—and with both a loyalty to the U.S. military and a belief he should do all he could to prevent his nation's being involved in another war.

The young man who had floundered his way through several semesters at several colleges now earned a bachelor's degree in history then made his way to Washington where he talked his way into an almost-volunteer job with one of Nebraska's congressmen. From there on, his intellectual and political smarts, his Nebraska work ethic, and his charm took him steadily upward—with a few blips on the trajectory.

President Reagan appointed Hagel deputy director of the Vet-

erans Administration, but he quit in less than a year, frustrated by differences with a director he thought was indifferent or even hostile to Vietnam vets. It looked like political suicide, but in retrospect it seems perfectly in character.

Hagel was out of work and pretty much out of financial resources. But he sold his car, cashed in his insurance policies, and put everything he could scrape together into a “Dick Tracy” venture: cellular phones. It sounded like science fiction in the early 1980s, but Hagel convinced investors to commit to his firm, Vanguard, and the effort paid off enormously for the investors and for the firm itself.

The Wild West atmosphere of cell-phone franchise awards would later lead to questions about just how legal all Vanguard’s activities were, but no one was found guilty of breaking the law. And the boy who grew up poor in Nebraska ended up a millionaire after his company turned cellular science fiction into reality.

So then what? Hagel could have spent his career maintaining and building the company and quietly enlarging his personal fortune, but when the next opportunity knocked, the restless Hagel welcomed it with enthusiasm. He spent three years salvaging the United Service Organization (USO) which had been facing bankruptcy. It was risky. If he had failed, his reputation would have slipped in Washington’s power circles. But he took the chance and he succeeded.

After a few more years in Washington government-service jobs, Hagel moved back to Omaha and took a position with an investment bank. The job included revitalizing a small, struggling company that made vote-counting machines. That connection came back to haunt him.

Then he ran for the U.S. Senate, another risk. Outside Republican circles in Douglas County, not many residents of the Cornhusker State had heard of Hagel before he started campaigning for the 1996 election. Had he lost, no one would have been surprised. But by November enough Nebraskans were impressed with Hagel that they passed over a popular sitting governor and sent the

political unknown to Washington to take his place in the nation's legislature.

So there he was, a freshman senator in a body where seniority makes all the difference. We shouldn't have heard much from him besides the usual press releases issued by his office for the state's media. But the stars converged for Hagel, ensuring that his affinity for and skill in international affairs coincided with a series of circumstances that moved him rapidly into leadership on the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee.

Then, in 2001, the nation was attacked and went to war in Afghanistan and, later, Iraq. Foreign affairs were suddenly relevant again, and people like Hagel, who had both a background in and policy influence on America's relations with the rest of the world, were the darlings of the media.

Sure, a senator always runs at least a little risk in talking to a reporter or getting in front of a TV camera to talk about his work and his beliefs, but he can always give the pat answer, parrot the party line, mouth the official doctrine. Unless he's Chuck Hagel.

Hagel, the loyal Republican, has time and again taken shots at his party's and his president's engagement—or lack of it—with the rest of the world. Hagel the internationalist has been unafraid to scold his colleagues for their unilateralist tendencies. The media love this stuff, but a lot of Republicans don't.

So now he's considering a run for the presidency. Just how will his outspokenness affect that aspiration?

On the one hand Hagel's independence may draw support from people who have had enough of knee-jerk partisanship from both sides of the aisle. His belief that the nations of the world are interconnected and that the United States must not try to go it alone may draw support from those of both parties who agree with that internationalist position.

On the other hand loyal Republicans—both those in power and those who will vote in the primaries—don't always appreciate Hagel's very public poking and prodding of their heroes and their positions. Sure, he votes with them nearly all the time, but when

he disagrees he does it loudly and publicly and on some of the highest-profile policies.

Hagel says he knows it's a risk, but he says he's just being who he is. If he were to shut up and be a good soldier, he wouldn't be doing the job he was elected to do. And he says he learned a long time ago that people can accomplish a lot if they're not afraid to try—and to risk failure.

Despite the irritation he causes some of his supporters at home, he could probably get reelected to the Senate indefinitely. Nebraskans may be conservative, but they're also stubbornly independent, and many of them like the way Hagel often bluntly speaks his mind. They say his willingness to level with them makes them feel that he respects them.

But much as he loves his work as a senator, Hagel says he's not planning to make it his last career. He wants to see what else he can accomplish before the years catch up with him and dampen some of his stamina and energy.

Hagel's brother and some of his friends say the man does what he makes up his mind to do. If he decides to give his heart to a run for the nation's top spot, he'll win the job—just as he won election to the Senate in 1996, coming from out of nowhere.

It was that election that first drew my interest. How could someone who had been away from the state for most of his adult life move back home, enter the campaign as a long shot, and actually cross the finish line in first place?

It wasn't long after the election that Americans were first exposed to Hagel's criticism of his party's positions. Many Nebraskans, including some Democrats, seemed to like what they were hearing from this Republican who sees the world as a web of interconnections and isn't afraid to say it. Even those who disagreed with many of his policy positions often respected Hagel's willingness to take a stand on his principles and his willingness to consider changing his mind when the evidence suggested he should.

He is, of course, a skillful politician. But Hagel also seems genuinely interested in people and what they have to say. His friends and colleagues say he treats everyone with respect, including the

waitresses and security guards and mailroom clerks, who would be easy to ignore.

The senator seems genuinely concerned about his work and the nation and people he serves. And he seems genuinely unafraid to say what he thinks, even when that may rock the political boat. He has a commonsense approach to his work in Congress—and toward life in general.

Hagel has been involved in two circumstances that some have labeled scandals: the machinations by which Vanguard got some of its cell-phone franchises, and his work for and continued ownership of a small amount of stock in a company that makes voting machines. If Hagel becomes a serious candidate for the presidency, his opponents will look to use those incidents for political advantage. And journalists will try to unearth even more information than has already been found and published.

But where some see a rash businessman manipulating the cell-phone franchise system, others see an enthusiastic entrepreneur. Where some see a politician owning a conflict-of-interest share in the machines that count votes, others see an investor holding onto stock in a company he once helped run. But there's more to the story than that.

Chuck Hagel is a Nebraskan who has built on his midwestern ethic, taken advantage of opportunities as they arose—including those that posed risks to his personal and political reputation—and developed his political acumen along the way.

He is a complex person who has achieved some major successes in life and is poised to take a shot at another. He's moving forward. He's worth knowing.