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You have to do no more than watch this attack ad produced by the neoconservative pressure group the Emergency Committee for Israel (ECI) to understand the significance of Chuck Hagel's possible nomination as US secretary of defence. The former Republican senator from Nebraska is guilty of a cardinal sin which has cut short many promising careers in Washington. He has proved himself insufficiently loyal to Israel and less than enthusiastic about confronting Iran.

Signals from Washington are mixed. Barack Obama's myriad capitulations have earned him a well-deserved reputation for invertebracy; and some reports suggest he has caved already. But in the Byzantine world of Washington intrigue, one has to proceed with caution.

Since the beginning of Obama's presidency, some of his more sensible initiatives, such as the opening to Iran, have been sabotaged by officials within his administration speaking anonymously to the press. What better way to kill a controversial nomination than to convince everybody that it is already dead!

The ECI, a relatively new actor, has not been alone in targeting Hagel. It has been ably assisted by the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, AIPAC, the Republican Jewish Coalition, the National Jewish Democratic Council, The Israel Project, and the Zionist Organisation of America. Affiliates from both within and outside the government have gone on the offensive.

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