

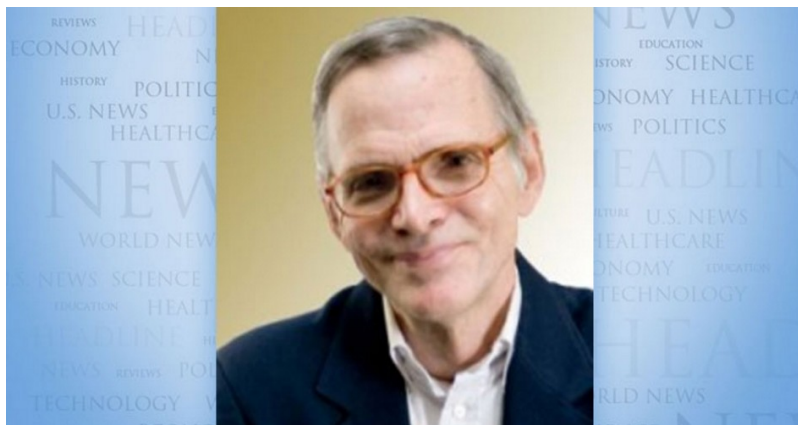


Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 6, 2013

McCain, “Off His Meds,” Plagues GOP

The Grand Old Party is far from grand these days and not much of a party. That it is old is beyond dispute. That the party is increasingly seen as not only old, but cranky and “off its meds” has largely been the work of Sen. John McCain of Arizona.

McCain has had a storied career in American life. The son of a Navy admiral, the young McCain was a Navy pilot when he became a celebrated POW during the Vietnam War, when, after being shot down in 1967, he spent five and a half years in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” prison in North Vietnam. He later ran for and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and then the U.S. Senate. He developed a reputation as both a leader of conservative Republicans and a maverick, breaking with party regulars on social issues such as immigration reform and government support for embryonic stem-cell research. At the same time, he gained nothing but respect from the “hawks” of both parties for both his war hero status and his consistent championing of a strong national defense and an interventionist foreign policy. He was an early advocate of war with Iraq and takes special pride in the role he played in championing the “surge” of troops in 2007 that appeared to have the effect of diminishing the violence that was plaguing the country and the American troops stationed there.



Now McCain has been railing against his former Senate colleague and fellow Republican Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, President Obama’s nominee for Secretary of Defense. Some of this is personal, as Hagel broke with McCain over the Iraq War, the authorization of which both supported in 2002, and Hagel opposed the vaunted surge. What’s more, Hagel — who supported McCain’s campaign for the party’s presidential nomination in 2000 — did not support the Arizonan’s White House bid, either in the primaries or in the general election in the 2008 campaign. He also accompanied Democratic nominee Barack Obama, a consistent opponent of the Iraq War and then the junior senator from Illinois, on fact-finding trips to the war zones. McCain demonstrates a case of “Irish Alzheimer’s”: He forgets everything but his grudges.



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Okay, maybe that's reading a little bit into his performance on the Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing on the Hagel nomination last week. But the intensity with which he grilled, in prosecutorial style, his former colleague suggests he was trying to settle a score. He created the same impression in his opposition to a nomination never made, that of Ambassador Susan Rice for secretary of state. Rice had spoken disparagingly about one of McCain's trips to Iraq, when he paraded about in Baghdad's Green Zone, heavily guarded and wearing a flak jacket to show how safe it was to walk about in Iraq.

McCain pressed Hagel as to whether the former Nebraska senator was wrong when he warned in 2007 that the troop surge in Iraq would be the nation's greatest foreign policy disaster since Vietnam. McCain and Hagel, both decorated Vietnam veterans, had a showdown over that question when the nominee refused to give his inquisitor a direct "yes" or "no" answer. McCain repeatedly interrupted when Hagel began to give a more nuanced response, then declared the record would show the witness refused to answer. Hagel noted some 1,200 Americans were killed during the surge and said he was willing to let history be the judge.

"I think history has already made a judgment about the surge, and you are on the wrong side of it," an obviously bitter and gloating McCain [shot back](#). The Arizonan also said that what he regards as Hagel's faulty judgment on that point, and his refusal to admit he was wrong now, would weigh heavily in his decision as to whether to vote to confirm.

McCain's Sancho Panza, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, weighed in by challenging Hagel's statement of some years ago that members of Congress had been intimidated by "the Jewish lobby" into doing some dumb things. Graham asked if Hagel could name a single dumb thing that the United States had been "goaded" into doing by the pro-Israel lobby. Hagel said he could not. Eager to pile on, freshman Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) asked the nominee if he believed Israel had committed war crimes. "No," Hagel said. The nominee was spared only the embarrassment of being forced — or "goaded," to use Graham's word — into swearing that Israel is a nation conceived without Original Sin.

If McCain were no longer there, the influence of his acolytes in the Senate would be diminished accordingly. By now, even McCain should be weary of his cheerleading about the surge in Iraq. He believes he showed foresight in supporting it and that those who opposed it showed poor judgment. But what kind of judgment did he and the vast majority of his colleagues, Hagel included, show when they allowed themselves to be stampeded into authorizing a war with Iraq in the first place? We heard McCain throughout the 2008 presidential campaign boast about the surge in both the primary and general election season. His Republican rivals for the most part went along with it, but finally, in one of the fall campaign debates, Barack Obama said what should have been pointed out long before. The Iraq War did not begin with the surge, said Obama, who had opposed the war from the beginning.

Recently during a Senate hearing on the anti-American attack in Benghazi, Libya, last September 11, as Republican senators were grilling outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about failures of intelligence, lack of preparedness, poor response time, etc., Sen. Dick Durbin, a Democrat of Illinois, pointed to the Republican double standard. When Dr. Condoleezza Rice came to the Senate for confirmation as George W. Bush's choice for secretary of state, she was not closely or harshly interrogated about her previous warnings, as the president's national security advisor, of weapons of mass destruction and the threat of a "mushroom cloud" from Iraq. As Durbin was talking about those mythical "weapons of mass destruction" that led us to war in Iraq, McCain was seen laughing.

Surely, with a fraction of the money congressional Republicans vote to spend on boondoggles such as



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Amtrak and space travel, they could fund a grand old retirement home where a cranky, vengeful 76-year-old man, now in his 27th year in the U.S. Senate and his 31st year in Congress, may retire and, in his dotage, die happy, laughing at things that are not at all funny.



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