

# Small-town roots shape Hagel's goals

**GOP candidate's upbringing and work ethic taught him to take challenges head on.**

By **MATTHEW WAITE**  
 Senior Reporter

In the days of high-tech politicking, Chuck Hagel is at home in a small-town coffee shop.

In a time of spin control and instant responses to attack, the Nebraska Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate speaks his mind and often says things that would make other politicians cringe.

For example, he freely says his votes would toe the Republican Party line during debates on partisanship. He says he has no problems with bringing in well-known Republican leaders and talking about his work inside the beltway at a time when the word "insider" is a dirty word in politics.

**Hagel's approach** to politics is, in these days, old-fashioned. Build an organization, round up a horde of canvassers, walk in parades, talk to the voters on their turf and hope it all works on Election Day.

It worked in the state's May primary, when he upset Attorney General Don Stenberg for the GOP nomination.

He has a site on the World Wide Web. He has spent thousands of dollars for television and radio time. His fax machine works overtime. He does what is required in modern politics.

But it is in places like Daddy's Country Cafe in Neligh or the Double L in Wausa where Hagel comes alive.

Small-town Nebraska is where Hagel was born and raised—in a place much like North Platte, Ainsworth, Rushville, Scottsbluff, Terrytown,

York and Columbus. On a three-day campaign trip through northeast Nebraska in early October, Hagel had stories to tell and memories to share in all the small towns where he stopped.

**Hagel's roots**—both political and personal—come from small-town Nebraska: from his work ethic, which he learned at his father's lumber yard in Ainsworth, to his values, which he took from his parents, to his politics, which he inherited from his family, friends and neighbors.

Hagel repeats at almost every campaign rally, or in every speech—as though it's a mantra—that his campaign is about people.

"That philosophy and that belief is reflected in our campaign," he says. "I have put my faith in people."

"On Election Day, it's people who vote," Hagel said. "It's not TV. It's not pre-spin nonsense."

The people Hagel has put his faith in are people like high school classmate Pat Puetz of Norfolk and Duane Reeves of Madison, a friend from the Vietnam War. Both have been campaigning for their longtime friend, and both are proud of Hagel's past work.

"He was a tremendous leader (in high school)," Puetz said. "He was probably not the best athlete or the smartest in the class, but he was a tremendous leader."

"You could just tell that he was special."

Hagel moved to Columbus after his father died. As the oldest of three brothers, he took the place of his father while still in high school.

**His leadership** was next needed in Vietnam, where Hagel and his brother Tom walked point for their infantry squad in 1967 and 1968.

Hagel and his brother were wounded in combat—victims of a booby trap that killed another, but was meant for them.



**CHUCK HAGEL**, born in North Platte and raised in small towns and cities around Nebraska, said America

The brothers had been walking point all day, and their squad leader decided to give them a break. Moments later, the new point man walked into a booby trap, killing him and wounding Hagel and his brother.

For their heroism, both were awarded purple hearts, a medal for those wounded in combat. Hagel also won another purple heart, three Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry, an American Spirit Honor Medal, an Army Commendation Medal and a Combat Infantry Badge.

It was after he was wounded that he met Duane Reeves. The young Nebraskan was going in as Hagel was leaving. Hagel told Reeves that he would go see his parents in Madison, near his home in Columbus, and tell them that their son would be safe.

"He didn't have to do that," said Reeves, who is now a Madison County Commissioner. "He did that on his own initiative."

"It was a real blessing to know we had someone who cared."

Hagel returned to Nebraska and worked several jobs, including being a bartender and a newscaster for several radio stations. In 1971, he graduated from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

**Then it was off to Washington** to work for Nebraska Rep. John Y. McCollister from May 1971 to December 1972. He started as an aide and was McCollister's administrative assistant in one year, a post he held for five years.

After working for McCollister, Hagel worked as associate manager of government affairs for Firestone Tire & Rubber from 1977 to 1980.

In 1980, Hagel was the vice chairman for the Reagan-Bush presidential campaign.

In September 1981, he started working for the Veterans Affairs office, where he was deputy administrator. It

was there that the groundwork was laid for his involvement in the Vietnam War Memorial.

When Lilibet Hagel met her future husband, both were working in Washington—she for a House of Representatives committee, he for the Veterans Affairs office.

They met at a picture-hanging ceremony. He asked her out and remained persistent by calling and sending flowers and gifts.

"He had a good sense of humor," Lilibet said. "He didn't take the silly side of Washington too seriously."

And he was also a little spontaneous. When she only ate the broth of her vegetable soup on one of their dates, he sent her a basket of vegetables the next morning.

Chuck Hagel went from the Veterans Affairs office to a post at a consulting group for cellular phone companies.

**Chuck and Lilibet Hagel** were married in 1985, a time when Hagel was starting his own cellular company, Vanguard. He was still busy with veterans' affairs groups traveling all over the nation.

"He has always been that kind of guy with his hands in many different things—worthwhile causes," Lilibet Hagel said. "It's made for an interesting life."

In 1987, Hagel took over the World USO, a company deeply in debt and near bankruptcy. He shored up the USO's accounts and returned it to solvency.

The couple moved back to Nebraska in 1992, where Chuck Hagel took over as president of McCarthy Inc., an investment banking firm in Omaha.

In 1993, Hagel was approached to run against Democratic Sen. Bob Kerrey, who was up for re-election in 1994. Hagel said no without hesitation because of his young children.

## Chuck Hagel



Age: 50  
 Hometown: Omaha  
 Occupation: Investor  
 Family: Married  
 Education: Brown University, 1966  
 Nebraska at Omaha  
 Military Experience: Vietnam War veteran; Purple Heart

Political Experience: Administrative assistant, 1971-77; deputy administrator, U.S. Veterans Affairs, 1977-81; director, Vanguard Cellular Systems and McCarthy & Co., 1992-present.

Since their children, Allyn Elizabeth and Charles Ziller, now 6 and 4 years old, were born, the Hagels have molded much of their lives around them. Their first child was much of the reason they moved back to Nebraska.

The Hagels are raising their children the way they were raised: with love, discipline, freedom to do what they want, high expectations for success in whatever they do and an emphasis on the spiritual side of life.

And Chuck Hagel says he will not let his campaign affect his family, which is something the Hagels have worked toward: keep home life at home and politics out on the campaign trail.

Now, when they are out campaigning, Lilibet Hagel usually stays home during the weekdays to be with the children. They only bring the children along when they know it is appropriate and the children will have fun.

And Hagel is having fun on the trail, telling people about his conservative Republican views.

Hagel's other campaign promises have been that he would "cut taxes, cut



**CHUCK HAGEL** greets shoppers in a grocery store in Wausa on a three day bus tour through Northeast Nebraska in early October.