

The Executive Departments

The day-to-day enforcement and administration of federal laws is in the hands of the various executive departments, created by Congress to deal with specific areas of national and international affairs. The heads of the departments, chosen by the president and approved by the Senate, form a council of advisers generally known as the president's "Cabinet." In addition to 14 departments, there are a number of staff organizations grouped into the Executive Office of the President. These include the White House staff, the National Security Council, the Office of Management and Budget, the Council of Economic Advisers, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and the Office of Science and Technology.

The Constitution makes no provision for a presidential Cabinet. It does provide that the president may ask opinions, in writing, from the principal officer in each of the executive departments on any subject in their area of responsibility, but it does not name the departments nor describe their duties. Similarly, there are no specific constitutional qualifications for service in the Cabinet.



The Cabinet developed outside the Constitution as a matter of practical necessity, for even in George Washington's day it was an absolute impossibility for the president to discharge his duties without advice and assistance. Cabinets are what any particular president makes them. Some presidents have relied heavily on them for advice, others lightly, and some few have largely ignored them. Whether or not Cabinet members act as advisers, they retain the responsibility for directing the activities of the government in specific areas of concern.

Each department has thousands of employees, with offices throughout the country as well as in Washington. The departments are divided into divisions, bureaus, offices and services, each with specific duties.

Department Of Agriculture

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) supervises agricultural production to ensure fair prices and stable markets for producers and consumers, works to improve and maintain farm income, and helps to develop and expand markets abroad for agricultural products. The department attempts to curb poverty, hunger and malnutrition by issuing food stamps to the poor; sponsoring educational programs on nutrition; and administering other food assistance programs, primarily for children, expectant mothers and the elderly. It maintains production capacity by helping landowners protect the soil, water, forests and other natural resources. USDA administers rural development, credit and conservation programs that are designed to implement national growth policies, and conducts scientific and technological research in all areas of agriculture. Through its inspection and grading services, USDA ensures standards of quality in food offered for sale. The department also promotes agricultural research by maintaining the National

Agricultural Library, the second largest government library in the world. (The U.S. Library of Congress is first.) The USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) serves as an export promotion and service agency for U.S. agriculture, employing specialists abroad who make surveys of foreign agriculture for U.S. farm and business interests. The U.S. Forest Service, also part of the department, administers an extensive network of national forests and wilderness areas.

Department Of Commerce

The Department of Commerce serves to promote the nation's international trade, economic growth and technological advancement. It offers assistance and information to increase America's competitiveness in the world economy; administers programs to prevent unfair foreign trade competition; and provides social and economic statistics and analyses for business and government planners. The department comprises a diverse array of agencies. The National Bureau of Standards, for example, conducts scientific and technical research, and maintains physical measurement systems for industry and government. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which includes the National Weather Service, works to improve understanding of the physical environment and oceanic resources. The Patent and Trademark Office grants patents and registers trademarks. The department also conducts research and develops policy on telecommunications; promotes domestic economic development and foreign travel to the United States; and assists in the growth of businesses owned and operated by minorities.

Department Of Defense

Headquartered in the Pentagon, the "world's largest office building," the Department of Defense (DOD) is responsible for all matters relating to the nation's military security. It provides the military forces of the United States, which consist of about two million men and women on active duty. They are backed, in case of emergency, by 2.5 million members of state reserve components, known as the National Guard. In addition, about one million civilian employees serve in the Defense Department in such areas as research, intelligence communications, mapping and international security affairs. The National Security Agency (NSA) also comes under the direction of the secretary of defense. The department directs the separately organized military departments of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force, as well as each service academy and the National War College, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and several specialized combat commands. DOD maintains forces overseas to meet treaty commitments, to protect the nation's outlying territories and commerce, and to provide air combat and support forces. Nonmilitary responsibilities include flood control, development of oceanographic resources and management of oil reserves.

Department Of Education

The Department of Education absorbed most of the education programs previously conducted by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, as well as

programs that had been handled by six other agencies. The department establishes policy for and administers more than 150 federal aid-to-education programs, including student loan programs, programs for migrant workers, vocational programs, and special programs for the handicapped. The Department of Education also partially supports the American Printing House for the Blind; Gallaudet University, established to provide a liberal higher education for deaf persons; the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, part of the Rochester (New York) Institute of Technology, designed to educate deaf students within a college campus, but planned primarily for hearing students; and Howard University in Washington, D.C., a comprehensive university which accepts students of all races, but concentrates on educating black Americans.

Department Of Energy

Growing concern with the nation's energy problems in the 1970s prompted Congress to create the Department of Energy (DOE). The department took over the functions of several government agencies already engaged in the energy field. Staff offices within the DOE are responsible for the research, development and demonstration of energy technology; energy conservation; civilian and military use of nuclear energy; regulation of energy production and use; pricing and allocation of oil; and a central energy data collection and analysis program. The department protects the nation's environment by setting standards to minimize the harmful effects of energy production. For example, DOE conducts environmental and health related research, such as studies of energy-related pollutants and their effects on biological systems.

Department Of Health And Human Services

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) probably directly touches the lives of more Americans than any other federal agency. Its largest component, the Social Security Administration, pools contributions from employers and employees to pay benefits to workers and their families who have retired, died or become disabled. Social Security contributions help pay medical bills for those 65 years and older as well, under a program called Medicare. Through a separate program, called Medicaid, HHS provides grants to states to help pay the medical costs of the poor. HHS also administers a network of medical research facilities through the National Institutes of Health, and the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration. Other HHS agencies ensure the safety and effectiveness of the nation's food supply and drugs, work to prevent outbreaks of communicable diseases, and provide health services to the nation's American Indian and native Alaskan populations. In cooperation with the states, HHS operates the principal federal welfare program for the poor, called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Department Of Housing And Urban Development

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) manages programs that assist community development and help provide affordable housing for the nation. Fair housing laws, administered by HUD, are designed to ensure that individuals

and families can buy a dwelling without being subjected to housing discrimination. HUD directs mortgage insurance programs that help families become homeowners, and a rent-subsidy program for low-income families who otherwise could not afford decent housing. In addition, it operates programs that aid neighborhood rehabilitation, preserve urban centers from blight and encourage the development of new communities. HUD also protects the home buyer in the marketplace and fosters programs to stimulate the housing industry.

Department Of The Interior

As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of the federally owned public lands and natural resources in the United States. The Fish and Wildlife Service, for example, administers 442 wildlife refuges, 150 waterfowl production areas, and a network of wildlife laboratories and fish hatcheries. The National Park Service administers more than 340 national parks and scenic monuments, riverways, seashores, recreation areas and historic sites. Through the Bureau of Land Management, the department oversees the land and resources -- from timber and grazing to oil production and recreation -- of millions of hectares of public land located primarily in the West. The Bureau of Reclamation manages scarce water resources in the semiarid western United States. The department regulates mining in the United States, assesses mineral resources, and has major responsibility for American Indians living on reservations. Internationally, the department administers programs in U.S. territories such as the Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands and Palau, and provides funding for development to the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia.

Department Of Justice

The attorney general, the chief law officer of the federal government, is in charge of the Department of Justice. The department represents the U.S. government in legal matters and courts of law, and renders legal advice and opinions, upon request, to the president and to the heads of the executive departments. Its Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the principle law enforcement body, and its Immigration and Naturalization Service administers immigration laws. A major agency within the department is the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which administers narcotics and controlled substances laws, and tracks down major illicit drug trafficking organizations. The Justice Department also gives aid to local police forces. In addition, the department directs U.S. district attorneys and marshals throughout the country, supervises federal prisons and other penal institutions, and investigates and reports to the president on petitions for paroles and pardons. The Justice Department is also linked to INTERPOL, the International Criminal Police Organization, charged with promoting mutual assistance between law enforcement agencies in 146 countries.

Department Of Labor

The Department of Labor promotes the welfare of wage earners in the United States, helps improve working conditions and fosters good relations between labor and management. It administers more than 130 federal labor laws through such agencies as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Employment Standards Administration and the Mine Safety and Health Administration. Among its responsibilities are: guaranteeing workers' rights to safe and healthy working conditions; establishing minimum hourly wages and overtime pay; prohibiting employment discrimination; and providing for unemployment insurance and compensation for on-the-job injury. It also protects workers' pension rights, sponsors job training programs and helps workers find jobs. Its Bureau of Labor Statistics monitors and reports changes in employment, prices and other national economic measurements. For job seekers, the department makes special efforts to help older workers, youths, minorities, women and the handicapped.

Department Of State

The Department of State advises the president, who has overall responsibility for formulating and executing the foreign policy of the United States. The department assesses American overseas interests, makes recommendations on policy and future action, and takes necessary steps to carry out established policy. It maintains contacts and relations between the United States and foreign countries, advises the president on recognition of new foreign countries and governments, negotiates treaties and agreements with foreign nations, and speaks for the United States in the United Nations and in more than 50 other major international organizations. As of 1988, the department supervised 141 embassies and 113 missions or consulates in foreign nations.

Department Of Transportation

The Department of Transportation (DOT) was created in 1966 by consolidating land, sea and air transportation functions scattered throughout eight separate departments and agencies. DOT establishes the nation's overall transportation policy through nine operating units that encompass highway planning, development and construction; urban mass transit; railroads; civilian aviation; and the safety of waterways, ports, highways, and oil and gas pipelines. For example, the Federal Aviation Administration operates more than 350 air traffic control facilities across the country; the Federal Highway Administration is responsible for the 68,000-kilometer interstate highway system; the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration establishes safety and fuel economy standards for motor vehicles; and the Maritime Administration operates the U.S. merchant marine fleet. The U.S. Coast Guard, the nation's primary maritime law enforcement and licensing agency, conducts search and rescue missions at sea, combats drug smuggling and works to prevent oil spills and ocean pollution.

Department Of The Treasury

The Department of the Treasury is responsible for serving the fiscal and monetary needs of the nation. The department performs four basic functions: formulating

financial, tax and fiscal policies; serving as financial agent for the U.S. government; providing specialized law enforcement services; and manufacturing coins and currency. The Treasury Department reports to Congress and the president on the financial condition of the government and the national economy. It regulates the sale of alcohol, tobacco and firearms in interstate and foreign commerce; supervises the printing of stamps for the U.S. Postal Service; operates the Secret Service, which protects the president, the vice president, their families, and visiting dignitaries and heads of state; suppresses counterfeiting of U.S. currency and securities; and administers the Customs Service, which regulates and taxes the flow of goods into the country. The department includes the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, the Treasury official who executes the laws governing the operation of approximately 4,600 banks; and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which, administers tax laws -- the source of most of the federal government's revenue.

Department Of Veterans Affairs

The Department of Veterans Affairs, established as an independent agency in 1930 and elevated to Cabinet level in 1988, dispenses benefits and services to eligible veterans of U.S. military service and their dependents. The medicine and surgery department provides hospital and nursing home care, and outpatient medical and dental services through 172 medical centers, 16 retirement homes, 228 clinics and 116 nursing homes in the United States, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. It also supports veterans under care in hospitals and nursing homes in 35 states. The veterans benefits department oversees claims for disability, pensions, specially adapted housing and other services. This department also administers education programs for veterans, and provides housing credit assistance to eligible veterans and active-duty service personnel. The memorial affairs department administers the National Cemetery System, providing burial services, headstones and markers to eligible veterans and their spouses within specially designated cemeteries throughout the United States.