The Cabinet

The Modern Cabinet

There are currently 15 departments in the Cabinet. The newest of these is the Department of Homeland Security, which was created after the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States. President George W. Bush signed the bill creating the department on November 25, 2002, after the Senate approved the bill with a 90-9 vote.

The Department of Homeland Security represents the largest reorganization of the federal government since World War II. It combines intelligence analysis, infrastructure protection, border security, and immigration, along with a response and recovery division. The department has authority over many agencies such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Coast Guard, the Border Patrol, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Secret Service, and the Transportation Security Administration.

Along with Homeland Security and the Departments of State, Treasury, and Justice, the other agencies that comprise the Cabinet are the Departments of Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Defense (replaced the Department of War), Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Energy, Health and Human Services, Education, and Veteran's Affairs. These agencies cover a broad area of concerns that affect many aspects of Americans' lives.

The Department of Interior, established in 1849, manages the nation's natural resources including its wildlife and public lands. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which is part of the Interior Department, manages lands held in trust by the U.S. government for Native American tribes and Alaska natives. The BIA also provides education services to native students.

President Lincoln founded the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1862. Lincoln referred to the agency as the "people's department," because at that time 48 percent of Americans were farmers. Today, farmers comprise less than two percent of the U.S. population. In addition to aiding farmers and managing farm programs, the USDA administers national food programs, such as the school lunch, school breakfast, and food stamp programs. The USDA is also responsible for ensuring the safety of the nation's meat, poultry, and eggs.

The Commerce Department was established as the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1903. The agency is concerned with the regulation, development, and promotion of domestic and international trade. It is also home to the Bureau of the Census, which conducts a comprehensive survey of the nation's population every ten years.

The Labor Department was founded in 1913. Following a lengthy campaign by organized labor to get a "voice in the Cabinet," its function was separated from the Commerce Department. The Labor Department manages labor programs, assists collective bargaining efforts, and administers labor laws.

On July 26, 1947, President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act, establishing the Department of Defense. It combined the War Department, the Navy Department, and the Department of the Air Force. The goal of the new department was to reduce rivalry among the service branches, which was believed to have reduced military effectiveness during World War II. Today the Defense
Department is headquartered at the Pentagon and includes the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard (during wartime only). It also includes such organizations as the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which directs housing and urban programs, was developed in 1966. HUD coordinates and administers programs that assist the development of housing and communities. It accomplishes this by making loans, insuring mortgages, and providing housing subsidies. It also promotes and enforces laws requiring equal opportunity in housing.

The Transportation Department was created in 1966 and administers the nation's transportation programs. It includes agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The Transportation Security Administration and the Coast Guard were once part of the Transportation Department, but both agencies were transferred to the new Department of Homeland Security in 2003.

The Energy Department is responsible for the nation's energy policy and nuclear safety. It oversees America's nuclear weapons program, nuclear reactor production for the U.S. Navy, radioactive waste disposal, domestic energy production, energy conservation and research. President Jimmy Carter proposed the department in 1977 in response to the 1973 energy crisis.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was originally established as Health, Education, and Welfare. HHS was created when President Jimmy Carter signed the Department of Education Organization Act into law in 1979. The legislation split the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare into the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education. Health and Human Services oversees the country's health and social service programs. The Education Department directs the nation's education programs.

President Ronald Reagan created the Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) in 1988 when he signed legislation elevating the Veteran's Administration to Cabinet level rank. The VA directs veteran's aid programs, which include health and medical services and educational programs.

The heads of each of the 15 departments form the Cabinet and members of the Cabinet meet as a group and individually with the president. They serve as his advisors on their respective department's area of concern. For example, the Defense and State Departments play a major role in advising the president on international policy. The Commerce Department may also be consulted on international issues, particularly when trade issues are involved.

In addition to the 15 regular Cabinet members, the president may include other top officials in the Cabinet sessions. Some presidents have invited the director of the Office of Management and Budget, the United Nations ambassador, or the White House Chief of Staff to Cabinet meetings. The vice president is often included in the Cabinet sessions as well.