



# CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

# The Cabinet

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

## Executive Departments



State - 1789



Treasury - 1789



War/Defense - 1789



Interior - 1849



Agriculture - 1862



Justice - 1870



Commerce - 1903



Labor - 1913



Health & Human Services - 1953



Housing & Urban Development - 1965



Transportation - 1967



Energy - 1977



Education - 1979



Veterans Affairs - 1989



Homeland Security - 2002



When George Washington **assumed the presidency** in March 1789, the grand federal experiment began. Relying on a document of 4,543 words (there are 7,591 words now thanks to the 27 amendments), Washington carefully and thoughtfully began putting the words of the U.S. Constitution to work through his actions as America's first president.

One of his most significant contributions to the workings of the new federal government was the creation of a **Cabinet**, a group of advisors the new president could rely upon to help him carry out his domestic and foreign policy agenda. However, the **U.S. Constitution** is silent on the creation of a Cabinet. So, how did President Washington establish his Cabinet, a tradition every subsequent president has followed since 1789?

**Article II, Section 2** of the Constitution states the president "may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices." For transparency purposes, the Framers expressly desired that the opinions of the "principal Officers" of the executive departments be written. However, Washington understood the importance of interacting with his advisors and having their immediate advice in helping him come to a decision. Hence, this practice of offering immediate advice, along with written material, became the purpose of the president's Cabinet.

SECRETARY OF STATE	SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY	SECRETARY OF WAR	ATTORNEY GENERAL
			
Thomas Jefferson (March 22, 1790 - December 31, 1793)	Alexander Hamilton (September 11, 1789 - January 31, 1795)	Henry Knox (September 12, 1789 - December 31, 1794)	Edmund Randolph (February 2, 1790 - January 2, 1794)

Since President Washington, the scope of the Cabinet has grown from four **executive departments** to fifteen. Each executive department is responsible for a specific area of public policy, so looking at the name of the executive department will give an idea of the type of public policy that department handles. For example, the Department of State is primarily responsible for handling foreign policy, while the Department of the Treasury is primarily responsible for handling economic policy. Over time, Cabinet positions have grown as the nation has grown and new national issues emerge. For example, the Department of Homeland Security was established as a response to the events of **September 11, 2001**. Even names may change; for example, by the mid 20th century, the Department of War had become the **Department of Defense**.

Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution also requires that any person **appointed** by the president to head an executive agency must be approved with the "**Advice and Consent of the Senate**." Once approved, the president may officially begin soliciting their advice in carrying out their domestic and foreign policy agenda.

**To Think and To Do:** Each of the fifteen executive departments has an official seal. Click on one of the department seals and learn more about what they do. See if you can identify which ones have the largest and smallest budgets. Why might they differ?

**Learn MORE** about the president's Cabinet. Free registration may be required.

- [The President's Cabinet was an Invention of America's First President](#), from Smithsonian Magazine
- [History of the Presidential Cabinet](#), from History.com
- [The Cabinet](#), from WhiteHouse.gov



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