

George Washington's First Cabinet

By Martin Kelly

The United States President's cabinet consists of the heads of each of the executive departments, along with the vice president. Its role is to advise the president on the issues related to each of the departments. While Article II, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution sets up the ability of the president to select the heads of the executive departments, it was President George Washington who established the "Cabinet" as his group of advisers who reported in private and solely to the U.S. chief executive officer. Washington also set the standards for each Cabinet member's roles and how each would interact with the president.

George Washington's First Cabinet

In the first year of George Washington's presidency, only three executive departments were established: the Departments of State, Treasury, and War. Washington selected secretaries for each of these positions. His choices were Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton, and Secretary of War Henry Knox. While the Department of Justice would not be created until 1870, Washington appointed and included Attorney General Edmund Randolph to serve in his first cabinet.

Although the United States Constitution does not expressly provide for a Cabinet, Article II, Section 2, Clause 1 states that 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." Article II, Section 2, Clause 2 states that the president "with the advice and consent of the Senate... shall appoint... all other officers of the United States."

Judiciary Act of 1789

On April 30, 1789, Washington took the oath of office as America's first president. It was not until almost five months later, on Sept. 24, 1789, that Washington signed into law the Judiciary Act of 1789, which not only established the office of the U.S. attorney

general but also established a three-part judicial system consisting of:

1. The Supreme Court (which at the time consisted of only a Chief Justice and five Associate Justices).
2. The U.S. District Courts, which heard mainly admiralty and maritime cases.
3. The U.S. Circuit Courts, which were the primary federal trial courts but also exercised very limited appellate jurisdiction.

This Act granted the Supreme Court the jurisdiction to hear appeals of decisions that were rendered by the highest court from each of the individual states when the decision addressed constitutional issues that interpreted both federal and state laws. This provision of the act proved to be extremely controversial, especially among those who favored states' rights.

Cabinet Nominations

Washington waited until September to form his first cabinet. The four positions were quickly filled in only 15 days. He hoped to balance out the nominations by choosing members from different regions of the newly formed United States.

Alexander Hamilton (1787–1804) was appointed and quickly approved by the Senate as the first secretary of the treasury on Sept. 11, 1789. Hamilton would continue to serve in that position until January 1795. He would have a profound impact on the early economic development of the United States.

On Sept. 12, 1789, Washington appointed Henry Knox (1750–1806) to oversee the U.S. Department of War. Knox was a Revolutionary War hero who had served side-by-side with Washington. Knox would also continue in his role until January 1795. He was instrumental in the creation of the United States Navy.

On Sept. 26, 1789, Washington made the last two appointments to his Cabinet, Edmund Randolph (1753–1813) as attorney general and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) as secretary of state. Randolph had been a

delegate to the Constitutional Convention and had introduced the Virginia Plan for the creation of a bicameral legislature. Jefferson was a key founding father who had been the central author of the Declaration of Independence. He had also been a member of the first Congress under the Articles of Confederation and had served as a minister to France for the new nation.

In contrast to having only four ministers, in 2019 the President's Cabinet consists of 16 members which include the vice president. However, Vice President John Adams never attended a single one of President Washington's Cabinet meetings. Although Washington and Adams were both federalists and each played very vital roles in the success of the colonists during the Revolutionary War, they hardly ever interacted in their positions as president and vice president. Although President Washington is known as being a great administrator, he seldom ever consulted Adams on any issues—which caused Adams to write that the office of vice president was the “most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.”

Issues Facing Washington's Cabinet

President Washington held his first cabinet meeting on Feb. 25, 1793. James Madison coined the term "cabinet" for this meeting of the executive department heads. Washington's cabinet meetings soon became quite acrimonious [nasty], with Jefferson and Hamilton taking opposite positions over the issue of a national bank that was part of Hamilton's financial plan.

Hamilton had created a financial plan to deal with the major economic issues that had arisen since the end

of the Revolutionary War. At that time, the federal government was in debt in the amount of \$54 million (which included interest), and the states collectively owed an additional \$25 million. Hamilton felt that the federal government should take over the states' debts. To pay for these combined debts, he proposed the issuance of bonds that people could buy, which would pay interest over time. In addition, he called for the creation of a central bank to create a more stable currency.

While northern merchants and traders mostly approved of Hamilton's plan, southern farmers, including Jefferson and Madison, vehemently [very strongly] opposed it. Washington privately supported Hamilton's plan believing that it would give much needed financial support to the new nation. Jefferson, however, was instrumental in creating a compromise whereby he would convince the Southern-based Congressmen to support Hamilton's financial plan in exchange for moving the U.S. Capital city from Philadelphia to a Southern location. President Washington would help choose its location on the Potomac River due to its proximity to Washington's Mount Vernon estate. This would later be known as Washington, D.C. which has been the nation's capital ever since. As a side note, Thomas Jefferson was the very first president to be inaugurated in Washington, D.C., in March 1801, which at the time was a swampy location near the Potomac River with a population that numbered around 5,000 people.

On loose leaf with a full heading in a paragraph of at least five complete sentences respond to these questions. Please include at least one piece of cited evidence with each response:

- 1. How did Washington set precedents in his first few years as President?**
- 2. How did compromise help things accomplished in Washington's cabinet?**