



# The Fine Art of Cabinet-Making: Five Ways to Build a Stronger Executive Team

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The job of the presidency has grown so large, so overwhelming in its power and responsibility, that no one human being can excel in all its many dimensions, from the ceremonial to the political, from making policy to managing a vast bureaucracy. In an atmosphere of bitter partisan division and a 24-hour news environment, presidents more than ever need help at the highest levels possible. Fortunately, there is a well-established yet greatly underutilized institution readily available to lend a hand: the presidential cabinet.

Although the cabinet and its role in government are not formally established in the Constitution, presidents since George Washington have convened a collective body of the heads of the executive departments. Washington used cabinet meetings to tap into the wisdom of such luminaries as Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton.<sup>1</sup> In her 2005 book *Team of Rivals*, Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin demonstrated how the strong and diverse cabinet assembled by Abraham Lincoln girded the nation at its time of greatest peril.<sup>2</sup> FDR convened his cabinet the day after the Pearl Harbor attacks,<sup>3</sup> while JFK famously relied on a subset of his cabinet during the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past half-century, however, the rise and expansion of the White House staff has centralized deliberation and decision-making increasingly within the confines of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Between this reliance on professional staffers and life in the ever-more restrictive “security bubble,” presidents have had less and less direct access to a range of views and opinions. Indeed, while the Kennedy and Johnson cabinets met monthly, the Obama cabinet has met less than one-third as often.<sup>5</sup> Today, cabinet meetings are often little more than occasional photo ops to bring together POTUS, the VP, the heads of the 15 executive departments and a few other “cabinet-rank” officials such as the heads of the Office of Management and Budget and the Environmental Protection Agency, the Ambassador for the United Nations, and the U.S. Trade Representative.<sup>6</sup> Virtually the only time they are seen together by the public is in the front row at the annual State of the Union Address.

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By contrast, many of America’s democratic allies benefit from the much more central role played by their cabinets, particularly in parliamentary systems where they are critical partners in the governance of their nations. In countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Germany, the executive leadership comprises an entire team of senior politicians who meet weekly to lay out political alternatives and strategize about policy implementation. In many parliamentary systems, the cabinet is considered so central that the members are all considered to share “collective responsibility” for the work of government.

Under the U.S. Constitution, the American president will always remain paramount, but both the president and the nation could benefit greatly by enhancing the role and strengthening the position of the cabinet. Below are five ideas to maximize the reach and impact of the president’s hand-picked first-string team.

## **1. Introduce the Executive Team at the National Party Conventions**

One of the major events at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions every four years is the announcement of the vice presidential running mate. This tradition could be expanded, and the party conventions made all the more significant, by also introducing all or most of the nominee’s team for executive leadership. Many cabinet secretaries – notably at State, Defense, Justice, Treasury, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security – play truly momentous roles in the governance of the country. Pre-designating the cabinet would give voters important insights into how the presidential nominee would govern and who would be helping her or him to do so. Introducing the executive team at the convention, then, would enable Americans to make a cast a more fully informed ballot.

Just as selection of the running mate can help presidential nominees to build an inclusive party coalition for the general election, designating the cabinet could energize and engage the full spectrum of each party. The president might also strengthen the tradition of having at least one cabinet member from the other party by inviting political opponents to join what would become a de facto executive ticket. The pre-designation of the cabinet would also help to smooth the transition to office, both in terms of designating secretaries for confirmation by the Senate and also for quickly executing new policy directions.

## **2. Employ the Cabinet as a Collective Body**

Today’s cabinet meetings are far from the consultative and deliberative events that they have been at times in the past. In recent decades, the heads of the executive departments have fewer and fewer opportunities to interact, consult, debate, and share expertise at the cabinet level. By contrast, cabinets in countries such as the United Kingdom meet weekly to assure that the entire team shares a common vision and is able to coordinate programmatically and politically among themselves. Much more regular cabinet meetings at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue could strengthen links not only across cabinet departments but just as importantly with

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the White House staff.” According to one book-length study of White House-cabinet relations, there is “a fragile relationship between the White House staff and the cabinet. The White House staff, whose loyalty is totally to the president, does not understand the non-presidential pressures on the cabinet officers and the cabinet officers view the White House staff as isolated from the realities of institutional and political demands.”<sup>7</sup> More regular cabinet meetings could do much to help bolster cooperation and diminish miscommunication between the two most critical branches of the president’s team.

If the full group of 23 cabinet-ranked officials was deemed to be unwieldy, it would be possible to create clusters of cabinet officials to work in subgroups around key themes. One model would be the “cabinet councils” first used during the Reagan administration, which brought together seven clusters of top officials around such themes as economic affairs, legal policy, natural resources and the environment, and commerce and trade. Each cabinet council was formally chaired by the president but included a cabinet secretary as chairman pro tempore who played a substantive leadership role among her or his peers in the cabinet. Such cabinet councils, focused on substantive issue areas, could serve as incubators for new ideas and forums for coordination of policy development and implementation. Reagan aide Martin Anderson described them as “...a place where new ideas could be introduced, good ideas encouraged, and bad ideas sunk.”<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Strengthen Links Between Cabinet Members and Congress

Although it is the norm in many parliamentary countries for cabinet members to also be sitting members of the legislature, such overlap is explicitly prohibited by Article I, Section 6 of the Constitution. The idea of amending the Constitution to allow such cross-branch fusion has from time to time been proposed, most famously in *Cabinet Government in the United States* (1879)<sup>9</sup> by Woodrow Wilson (who as president would later come to rely on his cabinet after suffering from a stroke). Such proposals would, for instance, allow congressional committee chairs to also serve as cabinet secretaries, in theory providing greater coordination between the legislative and executive branches. In practice, cabinet jobs and congressional offices are themselves demanding full-time jobs, even more than in the past; it’s unclear that any one person could effectively do both. Further, such a literal application of the parliamentary model would hopelessly tangle lines of accountability among cabinet members who are active members of Congress and thus answerable to the president but also responsible for representing their constituencies.

Still, separation of powers need not proscribe stronger and more direct links between the cabinet and Congress. After all, the vice president is a de facto member of both branches, and the executive and legislative branches work in tandem to produce laws and conduct oversight of the bureaucracy. Likewise, the congressional committee structure is already designed to roughly parallel the depart-

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ments of the executive, with each cabinet secretary linked to one or more committees in each house. Without violating separation of powers, cabinet secretaries could be given non-voting *ex officio* status as members of committees. They, or their high-ranking designees, could be empowered to work more closely in the crafting of legislation, actively participate in hearings and mark-ups, and be eligible, on their own initiative, to address committees, or even Congress as a whole.

#### **4. Deploy Cabinet Members as Presidential Proxies**

Countless ceremonial duties and foreign trips already tax the time and energy of presidents. The vice president and the first lady are sometimes able to step in to relieve this burden. Half a dozen or more higher-profile surrogates could help even further. Cabinet secretaries already share a critical association with the presidency – not only are they the president’s top appointees, but by law they are also all in the line of succession to the top office should the need ever arise due to some grave emergency.<sup>10</sup>

Cabinet secretaries announced before the election and given a more prominent role in the administration would naturally enjoy a higher profile and an enhanced public status. This would enhance their effectiveness within Washington and beyond, enabling them to serve as more effective proxies for the president. In particular, cabinet members could do much to share the time-consuming role of “head of state” by meeting with foreign dignitaries, presiding at ceremonial events, and presenting honors and awards. Cabinet designees could begin their roles as proxies as soon as they are announced at the conventions, thus becoming assets in the general election, and then continue it throughout their tenure in office.

#### **5. Cultivate the Next Generation of Executive Leadership**

Almost uniquely among Western democracies, in the United States a cabinet post can be more of a political grave than a cradle for ambitious emerging leaders. In parliamentary governments, a ministerial role in the cabinet or a comparable position in the “official opposition” (i.e., the second largest party in the parliament) is an essential proving ground for future leaders. For example, Germany’s very effective Chancellor Angela Merkel spent seven years in the cabinet in the 1990s,<sup>11</sup> while in the U.K., former Prime Minister Gordon Brown spent a decade as Chancellor of the Exchequer.<sup>12</sup>

However, no cabinet official has gone on to become a president in more than 75 years, and most have dropped out of government and politics after their tenures. In the past four decades, of more than 160 cabinet secretaries, only three have even mounted presidential candidacies (Elizabeth Dole, Lamar Alexander, and Bill Richardson) and only Dick Cheney made the leap to vice president.<sup>13</sup> Rather, most viable presidential contenders emerge from the ranks of vice presidents, senators, or governors (and, in fact, both Alexander and Richardson also held gubernatorial seats). Yet the insights gained running an executive department and

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learning the ways of Washington could fuse the best of the gubernatorial and congressional experiences, and thus offer greater continuity and expertise for future presidential candidates.

## Conclusion

There is a risk, of course, that a stronger cabinet could undermine the president. However, even if their roles were enhanced, cabinet officials would continue to serve “at the pleasure of the president.” The Constitution is explicit that the presidency is a singular office, and none of these proposals would diminish the president’s power to appoint, supervise, or replace cabinet secretaries. And while presidents could benefit from the collective wisdom of their executive team, they would still not be bound by it. As encapsulated in one famous anecdote, when Lincoln once was unanimously outvoted by members of his cabinet, he closed the meeting by saying, “Seven nays and one aye, the ayes have it.”<sup>14</sup>

A stronger cabinet still would not have its own independent mandate, but it could share more fully in the president’s – and thus advance that mandate more effectively. It would also allow for frank and creative deliberation among the nation’s highest executive officials. By choosing his rivals Joe Biden and Hillary Rodham Clinton for the top two positions in his administration, Barack Obama has strengthened his administration immensely. Faced with the overwhelming tasks of the presidency, future chief executives should make fuller use of one of the oldest – and most underutilized – institutions in American government.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> W. Craig Bledsoe and Leslie Rigby. “The Cabinet and Executive Departments.” In *Cabinets and Counselors: The President and the Executive Branch*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Washington DC: CQ Press, 1997, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin. *Team of Rivals: the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library and Museum. “FDR and Pearl Harbor Document 8” accessed at: <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/pdfs/pearlharbor.pdf>. Accessed on April 23, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> James P. Piffner, *Organizing the Presidency*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002, p. 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Compiled from records on [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov). Accessed on April 23, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/cabinet>. Accessed on April 23, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Anne Warsaw, *Powersharing: White House-Cabinet Relations in the Modern Presidency*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996, p. 232.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony J. Bennett. *The American President’s Cabinet: From Kennedy to Bush*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> Woodrow Wilson. *Cabinet Government in the United States* [1879] Reprinted by The Overbrook Press, Stamford CT, 1947.

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<sup>10</sup> 3 USC § 19 - Vacancy in offices of both President and Vice President; officers eligible to act. Accessed at: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/3/19>. Accessed on April 23, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Website of the Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. <http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Webs/BK/En/Angela-Merkel/angela-merkel.html;jsessionid=ED32C29795909BFE8E6C53E8A1A4FC60.s2t1>. Accessed on April 23, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Official Website of the British Prime Minister's Office. "Past Prime Ministers: Gordon Brown" <http://www.number10.gov.uk/past-prime-ministers/gordon-brown/#>. Accessed on April 23, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Grossman, Mark. Encyclopedia of the United States Cabinet, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. America, N.Y.: Grey House Publishing, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Blesdoe and Rigby. Op Cit. 1, p. 75.

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