

The Historic Role of the Secretary of the Navy

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Naval services of warships, skilled crews, well-trained ground and air units, backed by dockyards, hospitals and bases, are the most intricate organizations. Since their first establishment in 1775, running the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps has been a complex task. To manage such matters, in 1798 President John Adams appointed Benjamin Stoddert as his first secretary of the newly-formed Department of the Navy. Constitutionally, presidents command the armed services. Starting with Stoddert, and until 1946, secretaries transmitted such orders to commanders at sea, while building ships, recruiting Marines and Sailors, as well as supplying and paying the services' people.

The nineteenth-century Navy and Marine Corps were small services, growing only in wartime, but secretaries used them to spread American influence and develop new techniques. Under Stoddert, the Navy fought French Caribbean privateers during the 1790s Quasi-War, joined by Revenue Cutters, predecessors to the U.S. Coast Guard. Later, Marines amphibiously landed at Veracruz during the Mexican War tenure of Secretary John Y. Mason. Technology also made a Civil War impact, when Secretary Gideon Welles oversaw the Navy adding ironclads such as the USS *Monitor*. Welles sent his squadron commodores to enforce a blockade which strangled the Confederate economy. By 1865, America had the world's second-largest fleet, but the next two peacetime decades saw that strength fall.

The Marine Corps and Navy also played worldwide diplomatic roles. Operations against Barbary pirates meant the services stayed in the Mediterranean. In 1821, Secretary Smith Thompson ordered the U.S. Navy to embargo the African slave trade, a role lasting four decades. The Mediterranean Squadron remained a key focus, as in 1849 when Secretary William B. Preston assigned USS *Constitution* to deliver American diplomats to the Holy See in Rome. In 1854, Secretary James C. Dobbin similarly ordered Commodore Matthew C. Perry to lead the Pacific squadron assigned to open diplomatic and trade relations with Japan. These efforts durably linked America to the world, managed by naval forces.

In the 1840s, Secretary Abel P. Upshur formed bureaus (Yards and Docks; Construction, Equipment, and Repairs; Provisions and Clothing; Ordnance and Hydrography; and Medicine and Surgery) to professionalize administration, and founded an engineer corps for the steam Navy. That same decade, Secretary George Bancroft established the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, to educate prospective Navy and Marine Corps officers. Later, Secretary William E. Chandler created the U.S. Naval War College in 1884, to teach mid-career officers the art of strategy. In the twentieth century, Secretary John D. Long created a General Board for

advice on ship design, war plans, basing and personnel policy. Finally, in 1909 Secretary George v. L. Meyer created the Naval Postgraduate School, to advance officer engineering skills.

The world war in Europe prompted more changes. Seeing complexity rise as aircraft and submarines joined the fleet, in 1915 Secretary Josephus Daniels created a senior admiral's billet, the Chief of Naval Operations; the position of commandant had existed throughout the Marine Corps' existence. The Navy's enlisted force experienced a technical transformation under Daniels. While misguidedly limiting the roles African Americans could play in the fleet, mechanical specialization became his goal for petty officers and chiefs. To help find such people, Daniels created the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve, so that when America entered both world wars a larger pool of trained personnel existed.

Threat of another world war brought Frank Knox to the post of secretary in 1940 and, that same year, the first Undersecretary of the Navy, James V. Forrestal. Knox confronted the widening conflict in the North Atlantic, when German submarines attacked civilian merchant vessels and then-neutral U.S. Navy ships, sinking one in October 1941. Starting a month later, after the devastating Pearl Harbor attack, Knox oversaw the Navy and Marine Corps rapidly grow to nearly four million personnel, with six Marine divisions, tens of thousands of airplanes, and more than 6,000 ships and craft. After Knox's death in 1944, Secretary Forrestal witnessed the amphibious landings in Southern France and at Iwo Jima, and managed the department's greatest wartime victories.

After World War II, successors to the first Defense Secretary—Forrestal—began transmitting presidential orders to operating forces. Navy secretaries since then have been the civilians who recruit, organize, supply, equip, train and administer the fleet and force. That role meant the first Cold War decade saw Secretary Dan A. Kimball introduce nuclear powered submarines in 1952, while his successor Secretary Charles S. Thomas sponsored large aircraft carriers, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force concept, and ballistic missiles for nuclear deterrence. Mobilizing for Korea and Vietnam challenged both Secretaries Frances Matthews and Paul H. Nitze to modernize naval forces while America fought Asian land wars.

The Cold War tested the talents of Secretary John Warner to sustain deterrence while limiting the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict. As the national economy worsened, matching limited resources to wider commitments, now including the Arabian Gulf, stretched the Navy and Marine Corps to the limit. Secretary Edward Hidalgo consequently made difficult choices to balance the services following the Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Recovery began thereafter, as Secretary John Lehman led a growing flow of resources to rebuild the services, durably taking them to the Warsaw Pact's end in 1989. Adding more procurement oversight, the 1986 Goldwater-Nicholls defense reorganization further emphasized the Department of the Navy role in buying equipment, as Secretaries James Webb and Sean O'Keefe discovered.

In the last quarter century the sea services have intellectually moved from crafting a strategy to deter or fight a war against a similarly-organized opponent. Instead, the post-1991 world, marked by civil wars, ethnic strife, regional despots and terrorism, has become their operational foci. Secretary O'Keefe signed . . . *From the Sea* in 1992, a document showing how Marine Corps and Navy persistence, mobility, steady access and flexibility could manage such trouble spots. Following the 9/11 attacks on New York City and the Pentagon, both services played important roles in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Throughout these conflicts, the former Secretaries Gordon England, Donald Winter, and Ray Mabus provided needed leadership to ensure the services could keep fighting while innovating.

In 2017, the 76th Secretary, Richard V. Spencer, oversees an Undersecretary, the offices of four Assistant Secretaries (Financial Management and Comptroller; Research, Development and Acquisition; Manpower and Reserve Affairs; and Energy, Installations and Environment), and the General Counsel. They collectively support the Chief of Naval Operations and Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the services' staffs. In the early 21st century the 900,000 Sailors, Marines and civilians charged with planning and organizing America's maritime defense rely on Secretary Spencer's advocacy and guidance to create success. No other military organization can boast the depth and breadth of capabilities maintained by today's Department of the Navy, which are the product of more than two centuries of devoted and talented leadership.