Biden-Harris Administration Takes Shape

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INTRODUCTION

It’s Official — Transition Begins

The U.S. Constitution refers to “Heads of Departments” (Article II, Section 2, Clause 2) and 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 1).

George Washington took the oath of office on April 30, 1789. It was September when he appointed the first secretary of the treasury (Sept. 11), secretary of war (Sept. 12) and secretary of state and attorney general (Sept. 26). All were confirmed by the Senate. Washington’s “group of advisers” was complete. With their first meeting on Feb. 25, 1793, James Madison coined the term “cabinet” for the executive department leaders. Vice President John Adams never attended a meeting.

Lincoln appointed a team of rivals. FDR created a “brain trust” and also had a group of African American advisers who were informally called the Black Cabinet or Federal Council of Negro Affairs. President Harding invited Vice President Calvin Coolidge to regularly attend Cabinet meetings. President Eisenhower re-enforced this expectation.

Today the Cabinet is composed of the vice president and 15 executive departments plus cabinet-rank positions. The four original cabinet posts are still highly regarded, though when issues arise others may take center stage. President-elect Joe Biden grouped his nominees by national security, economy, health, domestic and justice categories — all assembled to represent the diversity of America and to meet the challenges on Day One. The importance of being ready to lead without disruptions was emphasized in 1963 with passage of the Presidential Transition Act. Once the president and vice president have been elected, the transition begins.
‘A cabinet of barrier breakers. A cabinet of firsts.’

President
Joseph “Joe” Biden

Vice President
Kamala Harris

The Cabinet
Nominations require Senate confirmation

Secretary of Agriculture
Tom Vilsack

Secretary of Commerce
Gov. Gina Raimondo

Secretary of Defense
Lloyd J. Austin III

Secretary of Education
Miguel Cardona

Secretary of Energy
Jennifer Granholm

Secretary of Health and Human Services
Xavier Becerra

Secretary of Homeland Security
Alejandro Mayorkas

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
Rep. Marcia L. Fudge (D)
The Cabinet

Nominations require Senate confirmation

Secretary of the Interior
Rep. Deb Haaland

Attorney General, Department of Justice
Merrick B. Garland

Secretary of Labor
Marty Walsh

Secretary of State
Antony Blinken

Secretary of Transportation
Pete Buttigieg

Secretary of Treasury
Janet Yellen

Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Denis McDonough
The Executive Branch

The George Washington administration consisted of secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, secretary of war, attorney general and postmaster general. Today an incoming administration has thousands of positions to fill. Executive departments, agencies and advisers have increased to meet the needs of the U.S. population and its international alliances. Other positions that have cabinet-level status have been added. Each has specific areas to lead and, at times, work together with other departments and agencies to meet needs of the public and goals of the administration.

Cabinet-rank Status

Chief of Staff
Ronald A. Klain

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator
Michael S. Regan

Small Business Administration Administrator
Isabel Guzman

Special Presidential Envoy for Climate
John F. Kerry

United Nations Ambassador
Linda Thomas-Greenfield

Council of Economic Advisers Chair
Cecilia Rouse

Office of Management and Budget Director
Neera Tanden

U.S. Trade Representative
Katherine Tai
Senior White House Roles and Advisers

There are more than forty staff and advisory positions working with the president, vice president and first lady in the White House. They cover a wide range of duties to keep the daily and special events running smoothly, to offer advice on issues and to communicate with the public. Those that are listed below provide a sampling of these roles.

Cabinet-rank Status

Communications Director
Kate Bedingfield

Chief Medical Adviser on COVID-19
Dr. Anthony Fauci

White House Climate Coordinator
Gina McCarthy

COVID-19 Response Coordinator, Counselor to the President
Jeff Zients

Domestic Policy Council Director
Susan Rice

National Economic Council Director
Brian Deese

White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs Director
Julie Rodriguez

White House Press Secretary
Jennifer Psaki

Chief Spokeswoman to the Vice President
Symone Sanders
Cabinet-rank Status continued

Communications Director for the First Lady
Elizabeth E. Alexander

Director of Digital Strategy
Rob Flaherty

Deputy Chief of Staff
Jen O’Malley Dillon

Senior Adviser to the President
Mike Donilon
Rep. Cedric L. Richmond (D)

Counsel to the President
Dana Remus

Counselor to the President
Steve Ricchetti

Oval Office Operations Director
Annie Tomasini

Chief of Staff to the Vice President
Tina Flournoy

Domestic Policy Adviser to the Vice President
Rohini Kosoglu

Chief of Staff to Jill Biden
Julissa Reynoso Pantaleon

Senior Adviser to Jill Biden
Anthony Bernal

For a complete listing of the White House Senior Staff visit the Biden-Harris Transition website https://buildbackbetter.gov
Track a Nominee

In addition to the vice president, the cabinet is composed of the leaders (known as secretaries and the attorney general) of the executive departments. There are also cabinet-level positions that have prominent roles to play in governing. President-elect Joe Biden, when introducing his nominee for Secretary of Transportation, called his nominees “people of the highest character, of varied experiences and backgrounds … They are experts in policy, leaders tested by crisis, and by the end of this process, this Cabinet will be the most representative of any in our history.”

Review the nominees for the Biden administration cabinet, cabinet-rank and other top positions in the executive branch. Select one nominee to track from nomination day to confirmation to the first 100 days holding that position.

Name ______________________________________________________   Date _______________________

Position for which nominated ______________________________________________________________

1. Will this nominee be a “first ever” in this position? Explain.

2. Confirmation date ____________________________________________
Discuss interesting confirmation experience and details.
If nominee is not confirmed, explain why.

Personal Background
3. Birth date and place ____________________________________________
   Parents _______________________________________________________

4. Education ____________________________________________________

5. Family ______________________________________________________

Professional Experience
6. First job(s) __________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________
Respond to the following on your own paper.

7. Work experience that qualifies the nominee for this position.

8. Statements made by the nominee that give insight into character, goals and/or perspective on facing the challenges of the office. Be sure to give the source and date of each statement (minimum three quotations).

9. Statements about this nominee made by three others. Include the name and position of the person who commented on the nominee and the source and date where each statement was published. One source could be The Washington Post (print, online or e-Replica edition); another source could be another publication or blog.

10. Actions taken in first week in the position.

11. Actions taken in the first month in this position.

12. Summarize the first 100 days of this person in office.

13. Evaluate how this individual in the first 100 days in office has begun to meet the challenges of the office, led actions and/or taken the first steps towards policy changes as promised.

14. As you have become familiar with this leader, what have you learned about the department or agency and its role in the workings of American government? Is it responsible for oversight, organizing and/or preserving more domestic and international programs than you realized?

15. Consider the first 100 days more.
   a. What issue or project do you think this department or agency is neglecting?
   b. Should be doing better?
   c. Believe it has done well in the first 100 days, but there are other steps to be taken?

   Write a letter to the individual you have tracked stating your ideas.
**Departmental Duties**

There are currently fifteen departments within the executive branch. Each one has distinct missions to realize and programs to implement. Still they do not work in isolation of one another with some projects requiring coordination and collaboration to find the best solution for the American public’s benefit.

A. In the blank before each description, write the name of the U.S. executive branch department that includes these areas of management and responsibility.

__________ 1. International travel advisories and passports; Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Abroad program; scholarships for critical language and vocational study; and Next Level beat maker exchanges

__________ 2. U.S. Census Bureau data — great for creating trivia questions, like number of federally recognized American Indian reservations (324) and percent of U.S. population that has only a high school or equivalent degree (26.9%)

__________ 3. Fuel cells, electricity or gas — what will power your vehicle in 2040? Will your home run on natural gas, solar, atomic or a new clean energy source?

__________ 4. What impact does a safe, affordable home have on the quality of life? Whether in the country or city, how can communities be free from discrimination? Just a few basic questions this department tries to answer.

__________ 5. Bee Better certification, My Plate specials, and policies and issues that might impact your farm, ranch and forest

__________ 6. Collecting taxes and paying the bills of the U.S., manufacturing coins and printing money, getting stimulus checks to the correct people

__________ 7. This is the home to OSHA, MSHA, ETA, ODEP and OWCP — agencies that affect your work experience

__________ 8. From preserving covered bridges to maintaining interstate highways to promoting use of waterborne vessels and railways to transforming transit systems and airports

__________ 9. GI Bill benefits, service-connected disability housing grants, member benefits during service and when separating or retiring

__________ 10. The U.S. Secret Service is under its charge. Cybersecurity, border patrols, air marshals, the U.S. Coast Guard and FEMA are also part of its duty.

B. Select one of the departments not described above.

1. Summarize its main areas of responsibility
2. If you were selected secretary of this department what program or project would you add or which existing one would you improve? How might this initiative influence your community?