II. Secretaries of Defense


The amendments of 1949, PL 81-216, 10 August 1949, established the Department of Defense (the NME of 1947) as an executive department, headed by a secretary of defense, with three military departments whose secretaries would separately administer their departments under the “direction, authority, and control” of the secretary of defense. The amendments specifically gave the secretary of defense the authority to perform any function vested in him, or with the assistance of any officials or organizations of the department. The amendments set up two new positions—a deputy secretary and a comptroller with the rank of assistant secretary. Three assistant secretaries, one of whom was the comptroller, were to perform duties as prescribed by the secretary, replacing the three special assistants created by the 1947 act.

The 1949 amendments also established an Armed Forces Policy Council (AFPC) to advise the secretary on broad policies regarding the armed forces. The secretary of defense served as chairman, with the power of decision. Members of the AFPC were the secretary; the deputy secretary; the secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force; the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and the uniformed heads of the three military services. The AFPC took the place of the War Council created by the National Security Act of 1947.

The Committee on Department of Defense Organization, usually referred to by the name of its chairman, Nelson A. Rockefeller, issued a report to the secretary of defense on 11 April 1953. It included a legal opinion regarding the power and authority of the secretary, holding that the National Security Act, as amended, granted the secretary of defense “supreme power and authority to run the affairs of the Department and all its organizations and agencies.” The legal opinion further emphasized the secretary’s authority: “The Secretaries of the military departments, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all officers and agencies and all other personnel of the Department are ‘under’ the Secretary of Defense. Congress has delegated to the Secretary of Defense not only all the authority and power normally given the head of an executive department, but Congress has, in addition, expressly given the Secretary of Defense even greater power when it made the Secretary of Defense ‘the principal Assistant to the President in all matters relating to the Department of Defense.’”

Reorganization Plan No. 6, 30 June 1953, transferred the functions of the Munitions Board, the Research and Development Board, the Defense Supply Management Agency, and the director of installations to the secretary. The Reorganization Plan added six new assistant secretaries and a general counsel.

PL 85-599, the Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, 6 August 1958, gave the secretary the authority to provide for “more effective, efficient, and economical administration and operation and to eliminate duplication.”

Executive Order 10952, 20 July 1961, assigned civil defense functions to the secretary, but subsequently they were transferred elsewhere.

Unified and specified commands are responsible to the president and the secretary of defense for accomplishing assigned military missions within the operational chain of command from the president to the secretary of defense to the commands.

The secretary of defense is the principal defense policy adviser to the president and is responsible for the formulation of general defense policy and policy related to all matters of direct and primary concern to the Department of Defense, and for the execution of approved policy. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) is the principal staff element of the secretary in the exercise of policy development, planning, resource management, fiscal, and program evaluation responsibilities.

JAMES V. FORRESTAL. Born 15 February 1892. Except for serving briefly during World War I in the U.S. Navy, was with Dillon, Read and Company from 1916 until 1940. Under secretary of the Navy, 1940-1944, and secretary of the Navy, 1944-1947. On 17 September 1947 took the oath of office as the first secretary of defense, a position he kept until 28 March 1949. Died less than two months after leaving office, on 22 May 1949.
LOUIS A. JOHNSON. Born 10 January 1891. Active service with the U.S. Army in France during World War I. Subsequently was a partner in the law firm of Steptoe and Johnson. Helped to found the American Legion and was its national commander in 1932-1933. Served as assistant secretary of war from June 1937 until July 1940. On 28 March 1949 sworn in as secretary of defense and served until 19 September 1950. Returned to law practice. Died on 24 April 1966.

GEORGE C. MARSHALL. Born 31 December 1880. Commissioned in the U.S. Army in 1902 and rose to chief of staff in September 1939, serving throughout World War II until November 1945. Secretary of state from 1947 to 1949. President of the American Red Cross, 1949-1950. Sworn in as secretary of defense on 21 September 1950. His appointment required a special congressional waiver because the National Security Act prohibited a military officer from serving as secretary if he had been on active duty within the previous 10 years. Served until 12 September 1951. Died on 16 October 1959.


