

IV. Secretaries of the Military Departments

The National Security Act of 1947 established three military departments--the Department of the Army (redesignation of the former War Department), the Department of the Navy, and the newly created Department of the Air Force. All three departments were executive departments, each headed by a secretary. The three secretaries administered their departments and had the right to report or make recommendations to the president, after informing the secretary of defense.

Under the amendments of 1949, PL 81-216, 10 August 1949, the secretaries administered their departments under the "direction, authority, and control" of the secretary of defense. The amendments changed the status of the departments from "executive" to "military," the secretaries thus giving up their seats in the Cabinet and the National Security Council. The secretaries received authority to present recommendations, after informing the secretary of defense, to the Congress.

The Committee on Department of Defense Organization (the Rockefeller Committee) in its report to the secretary of defense in 1953 stated its opinion regarding the responsibilities of the secretaries of the military departments: "The Secretaries of the military departments, subject to the direction, authority, and control of the Secretary of Defense, should be the operating heads of their respective departments in all aspects, military and civilian alike The Secretaries are the *principal civilian advisers to the Secretary of Defense on the entire range of problems within the Department.*" The report stated further that the committee believed it "essential to have a single channel of command or line of administrative responsibility within the Department of Defense and each of the military departments," not distinguishing between military and civilian affairs.

The Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, PL 85-599, 6 August 1958, codified many of the changes in the original National Security Act. The Department of Defense included the three military departments, "separately organized" under their own secretaries, with "unified direction" under the secretary of defense, but the act specifically stated that neither the departments nor their services were to be merged. *The combatant forces were to be provided with "unified" strategic direction and to operate under unified command although there was to be no single chief of staff nor an overall armed forces general staff. Combatant commands were responsible to the president and the secretary of defense for the military missions assigned by the secretary of defense.*

On 31 December 1958, the secretary of defense issued a directive establishing two command lines, one for operational direction of the armed forces through the JCS to unified and specified commands and the second for the direction of support activities through the secretaries of the military departments.

The secretaries of the military departments became members of the Defense Resources Board in 1982.