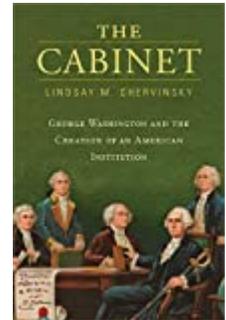


**Lindsay M. Chervinsky.** *The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 432 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-98648-0.



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As a grand epic but over a shorter period of history, Lindsay M. Chervinsky's *The Cabinet* chronicles George Washington and the creation of the first US presidential cabinet. In this expansive account of how Washington oversaw, constructed, and ultimately organized his cabinet, the author segments her book from his pre-presidency days, when he developed relationships and strategies, in the chapter "Forged in War," to the initial stages of the development of his cabinet in "The Cabinet Emerges," and all the way through to problems in "A Cabinet in Crisis."

As depicted, some of the brightest and time-tested minds from the Revolutionary War era were cabinet members, including Henry Knox, Edmund Randolph, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and William Bradford. Each of these cabinet members is given a short biography in this book. Knox was experienced and had tenacity in staying with the army. Randolph was Washington's personal lawyer. Jefferson, in addition to his many other accomplishments, was governor of Virginia. Hamilton had wartime experience and was a ma-

ajor author of the *Federalist Papers*. And Bradford served in the Revolutionary War and then went into law. The Virginia dynasty of presidents was in the making: Jefferson first served as secretary of state, James Madison in the House of Representatives, and James Monroe as an ambassador.

In the introduction, the author begins her narrative with the grandiose ceremony of the inauguration of Washington as the first president of the United States and then discusses many of his administration's initial tasks and strategies. Washington used the "advice and consent" clause found in the United States Constitution with respect to the US Senate, which states that the president "shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur; and he shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law: but the Congress may by Law vest the Ap-

pointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law, or in the Heads of Departments” (Article II, Section 2). His administration dealt with trying to determine which branch had more power, the executive or the legislative. The parameters and details of his office were of great concern to him as were the protocols of his position as president. One of his greatest tasks was the creation of his cabinet. Chervinsky asks, “So where did the cabinet come from?” (p. 5). The question of creating a large bureaucracy was raised and new ideas and new rules were required. As he did when he led the Continental forces, Washington relied on the men under him for advice. A good overall thesis statement of the book is, “The emergence of the cabinet is the story of a few individuals who operated under unique social pressures to build the beginnings of an influential new institution” (p. 9).

Washington used the method of obtaining advice from his officers, in this case his cabinet, over several years and through several issues, including the 1793 Neutrality Crisis and Jay’s Treaty in 1795 and 1796. Chervinsky provides an overview of the formulation in thought and actions of the first cabinet under the leadership of the first president. The Constitution did not provide any guidelines. Washington’s personality and leadership experience were often determining factors in the direction of the creation of a body of departments and people that would eventually become his advisors. And he would often have to ameliorate issues and temperaments of his cabinet members, including Jefferson and Hamilton.

Chervinsky repeatedly refers to Washington’s background as a soldier to highlight his leadership skills as a president. She notes that “he modeled cabinet meetings after his war councils” (p. 16). Four of his recommendations became the basis for cabinet positions. Even though he used advisors, there was no doubt that he, either as commander-in-chief or as president, was the authority figure.

Washington’s leadership style was humble and forthright at the same time. Sometimes he deferred to his officers’ judgment, sometimes he created his own solution. One of the mistakes noted by Washington is that he allowed initially for Congress to decide policies during the Revolutionary War. A debate about policy between him and his officers was held after the traumatic defeat of the Continental army at the Battle of Long Island, which was fought at Brooklyn Heights. Washington’s own rise in rank is noted beginning during the French and Indian War. He was ever the learner and absorbed skills from superior officers and learned from both wins and losses in battles from the French and Indian War to the Revolutionary War.

Chervinsky argues that Washington’s administrative skills were already evident before his presidency. “Washington created a process to manage the business of commanding and administering an army, which he would go on to recreate a decade later as president” (p. 33). As a general, he also elevated his writing skills through many correspondences to Congress, his officers, and citizens. Ever the detailed individual, these skills would serve him well as president. His relationship with subordinate officers and particularly his aides-de-camp was mostly cordial. Some of these men were considered his “ambassadors” (p. 38). He gave orders, asked for advice, and toggled between the two, expecting diligence, steadfastness, and attention to detail. He interacted with his troops while in the field and even slept in a tent with the army. He did have headquarters in the area, but as one soldier noted, “I only followed the example of our General.... I gave up soft beds” (p. 41). Valley Forge was a better environment for Washington because Martha, as well as wives of other generals, joined him, which created a lively social atmosphere. Washington’s aides-de-camp were unofficially required to be social hosts to supplement his own lack of general social skills. Socializing also occurred at dinners with his officers. Large affairs were part of his life not only at Mount Vernon and before, during, and after the Revolutionary War

but also during his presidency. This kind of interaction with his officers was a way to build socialization within his ranks.

During the war, the Continental Congress worked to set up a governing body in their midst using the Articles of Confederation while Washington was in the field. Their working relationship with Washington was fraught with pleas from him for supplies while coordinating administrative efforts. Congress created a Board of War to deal with supplies and other needs and also created a bureaucratic committee system. The overload, however, during the war stifled interaction with Washington, created logistical nightmares with supplies, and moved Washington on more than one occasion to rethink his position as general and commander-in-chief. However, “for Washington, serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army was the perfect training ground to be the first president of the United States” (p. 55).

Chapter 3, “Setting the Stage,” examines the backdrop of the end of the Revolutionary War and begins to set the stage for the rest of the book. The interim government was left with the post-Revolutionary question, “How would their nation differ from the empire they just left?” (p. 93). The Constitutional Convention was the answer. Washington was a delegate to the Continental Congress prior to serving as commander-in-chief and was not only a delegate but also now the president of the Constitutional Convention. He was a keen observer of the events before, during, and after the convention. Some of the issues discussed focused on absolute authority, taxes, monarchy, religion, past religious wars, and the relationship between Parliament and the people. There were noted changes from past wars, such as the Glorious Revolution, which produced constitutional examples for America after the Revolutionary War. Laws that resulted from the Glorious Revolution, such as the right to bear arms, would appear later in the United States Constitution. And there were struggles over what worked in the past and what did not. Washington

was a host to the colonies during the Revolutionary War and while commander-in-chief. “As Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, Washington interacted with Americans from all thirteen colonies” (p. 105). During the confederation period, the government and the national rule were examples to the world of a new style of government. In this chapter, the author discusses, however, issues of taxes, defense, overall economic support, and the handling of rebellion in the colonies. Chervinsky provides a good overview of the men and their backgrounds of the Constitutional Convention and their interactions with one another. The new cabinet members deferred to Washington but the power of the executive was a major concern. “Washington knew that the delegates rejected an executive council in favor of written advice and the Senate” (p. 117).

Citizens had many concerns about the new government. America was transitioning from a monarchy to a confederation to a republic—all from 1775 to 1787! They were concerned about the accessibility of the government when Congress was not in session and the new state constitutions for ratification. While ratification of the Constitution was progressing, Washington was diligent in keeping up with the news of the era and received his news from different sources, including orally through people. He was unsettled about what the American people were saying about the new government and his presidency.

During the cabinet’s early years, explored in chapters 4 and 5, Washington recognized that he “walked on untrodden ground” (p. 127). He was burdened with thoughts of his upcoming responsibilities and also public opinion, which was evident in pamphlets. Washington continually tried to construct a cabinet with no previous guidance other than his own successful military background. The cabinet, although not specifically mentioned in the federal Constitution, was necessary once the first administration was in place. He “sent questions” committed to “civilian authority” and relied

on “republican virtue” (p. 164). In 1789, the cabinet came about with departments and secretaries set in place by Congress. The first cabinet meeting was held on November 26, 1791, and the second one in December 1791. There were ongoing issues to discuss with the conflict with Native Americans in the West and the possibility of war with Spain. In these sessions, Washington had to perform two roles: president and commander-in-chief. Washington was careful not to emulate the British government in his authority.

Each of Washington’s cabinet members had notions of their own responsibilities. As the secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton, for example, developed the financial system. Contentions between cabinet members, though, also emerged. Some, such as Jefferson, developed ideas through friends outside of the cabinet. Issues that needed to be determined if they were democratic or monarchical developed. As mentioned by the author, the use of titles for members of the Society of the Cincinnati, a society of Continental army officers, was one such issue: a cabinet member like Henry Knox was a member of the society and was an example of leadership for other members who were not in the cabinet. This was an era of the transference of legitimate power, not hereditary, so the loss of royal titles and deference to authority without a tinge of monarchy were sought.

The civic aspect of the cabinet included a social calendar, weekly levees, Martha Washington’s formal levees, private dinners, weekly private dinners of cabinet members, and meetings with congressmen. George Washington also went on outings with Martha to the theater, which gave him the ability to make public appearances. One additional public appearance was Washington’s grand tours that he took of the states. Two tours are noted of the New England states and the southern states, but there were three trips, including one to Long Island.

Washington faced some difficulties in these early years, in the intricacies of leadership, past

close relationships, and the jockeying of power in the vortex of intellectual heavyweights of the era. Although Washington focused on his working relationships with his cabinet and with Congress, two rival groups or factions emerged in the 1790s. Political alliances with foreign nations were one of the issues that divided cabinet members. There was inter-cabinet rivalry and issues stemming from personal ideologies and alliances. Often Hamilton would be on one side and Jefferson and Madison on the other. Particularly notable differences developed between Madison and Hamilton on finance. Washington had worked with Madison prior to the cabinet members taking their positions. However, a political and social chasm developed in their relationship.

A particular issue in Washington’s second administration, which mirrored a major financial and military problem during the Critical Period, was the 1795 Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania, which Chervinsky considers in chapter 5. This rebellion, the first real threat to the government, had to be dealt with or the administration would lose credibility. The response to the Whiskey Rebellion by Washington addressed “the ability to collect taxes and enforce compliance with federal laws” (p. 237). While Washington sought public opinion, the rebels combatted the federal government. Farmers could not afford the excise tax on whiskey, which was to help pay the public debt. The cabinet compared the Whiskey Rebellion with Shay’s Rebellion and Washington obtained full support of his cabinet before exerting authority over the states. In August 1794, he sent out the militia to support the unconditional surrender sought from the rebels. The ability that the government had to tax its citizens was primary in financially supporting the new nation. As Washington finished his second administration, he determined to return to Mount Vernon and only serve two terms. He left a legacy of the importance of the cabinet and its advisory capacity to the president.

In critiquing this book, some readers might find the intricate details of the new government tedious to read. Additionally, the author mentions only two tours that Washington took in his first three years as president: New England in 1789 and the South in 1791. In fact, these two were the first and third tours he took. He also took a tour of Long Island from April 20 to April 24, 1790. His five-day tour of Long Island, according to historians, was to thank the Culper spy ring and to view the burgeoning commerce following Long Island's occupation for seven of the eight years of the Revolutionary War. The Battle of Long Island, which was fought in Brooklyn in August 1776, not only led to the occupation of Long Island but also contributed to the occupation of New York City afterward. New York City would then become the first capital for a year under the new Washington administration. This tour of Long Island in 1790 would be the first time Washington saw this region after the disastrous loss in August 1776. The epilogue includes lengthy writing about subsequent contemporary presidents, which makes the author's partisan support and bias evident. Finally, and mainly as aesthetics, the jacket cover of the book, listed as a cover of a 1910 cigar box, is almost cartoonish in look in its colors and portrayal of Washington and his cabinet.

Overall, though, Chervinsky provides just enough detail. Her characterizations of the cabinet give a sense of familiarity of political figures long in evidence in history. The author exhibits a deeply ingrained respect for these men whether addressing their failures or successes. The author's background in the White House Historical Association enables her to give a depth of detail and information not generally found in other books about Washington's cabinet. She provides new information along with a good mix of familiar information from the American Revolution and Washington's presidency. Her access to primary documents is evident and allows the reader to move along in reading the book with great interest. By the end of this book, the reader will have acquired a wealth of

knowledge about the first presidency, the first cabinet, and this period of history in general. The reader should also gain a deep respect for Washington who carefully organized the first cabinet as he considered different positions, secretaries, and responsibilities. His oversight of Mount Vernon as a foundation of his life is also evident in his cabinet structure. The chapter titles are clear and explained, which is a positive feature of the book.

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