

A HISTORY OF THE PRESIDENT'S CABINET

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**BY
MARY L. HINSDALE, Ph. D.**

**ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN
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PREFACE.

It was upon advice with the late Professor B. A. Hinsdale that the author selected *The American Cabinet* for the subject of an academic investigation. But the assistance that was to come from one who was both historical scholar and father was soon taken away. The prosecution of the work has been several times postponed. But the period of delay has been one of phenomenal activity among librarians and editors in the field of *Americana*. And the slow completion has perhaps been justified by the use of larger stores of critical biographies and private papers. The latter kind of material is specially important to the subject; and it is one that, at the best, lags a generation behind current events.

The investigation has been carried on partly as a seminary study at Radcliffe College, and partly by independent research at various libraries. Acknowledgments for many privileges and personal courtesies are due to the gentlemen in authority at the Library of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Lenox Library, the Library of the University of Michigan, the Library of Harvard University, and the Division of Manuscripts of the Library of Congress. For information about the inside operations of the Executive, cordial thanks are paid to Mr. Gaillard Hunt, formerly of the Bureau of Citizenship in the Department of State, and to Hon. James Rudolph Garfield, ex-Secretary of the Interior. Valuable academic assistance was received from Professor Andrew C. McLaughlin, both at the University of Michigan and the Carnegie Institution. The highest tribute of gratitude is reserved for Professor Albert Bushnell Hart, one of the most inspiring of instructors. It is through the generosity of the Hon. Wm. L. Clements, regent of the University of Michigan, that the publication of this work has been made possible.

MARY LOUISE HINSDALE.

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THE ORIGIN OF THE CABINET.

The use of the term *Cabinet* to denote a purely American institution is one of the misfortunes of political science. The Government of the United States drew upon the English nomenclature comparatively little. But this conspicuous instance has sufficed to make the English Ministry an almost inevitable point of departure for analyzing the functions of the President and his advisers. Writers have a fashion of seeking for resemblances that do not exist. And then they resort to negative and consequently disparaging definitions. The present study will try to determine what the American Cabinet is by bringing together the important facts of its own history, and attempting very little reference to English or Continental models.

We cannot ignore, however, the general background supplied by the political heritage that a group of English Colonies brought to the Government into which they entered as independent States. The Colonial charters were wont to provide for Governors and Councils, or Governors and Assistants; wherein the Privy Council appears in American Government from its beginnings. In the mingling of executive and legislative functions, these associates of the Governor combined, as a rule, the two characters of Council and Upper House. The ordinary Colonial Executive, therefore, was as though the President of the United States should sit in consultation with the Senate, except for the size of the latter body.

These Privy Councils of the original Governments survived the transition from Colony to State, though in various forms and under differing styles. The transitional Constitutions, laying hold of a different classification of governmental organs and functions, than had prevailed before, introduced the separation of Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. But this was not carried out so consistently as to break up all personal connection between Senates and Councils. On this point, a very few Constitutions retained the old arrangement, or modified it by providing for a smaller Council composed of specially chosen members of the Legislature; others were silent about

the matter; while a substantial group definitely stipulated that a member of the Council should not at the same time be a member of the Legislature. These Councils in the early States had no ex-officio connection with the administrative offices. Neither was their appointment by the Governor the vogue.

The root of the American Cabinet that is found in the Executive Departments naturally put forth its first substantial growth in American soil during the Revolutionary period.¹ A General Post Office had been established among the Colonies; but the Departments of War, Finance, and Foreign Affairs grew out of the exigencies of the struggle for independence. These establishments passed through the three forms of Committees of the Continental Congress, sometimes drawing members from outside, Boards, and finally, Departments with single Heads. This was a time when French examples were engaging the attention of some American publicists. And, when single Department Heads were agitated as the corrective for the divided responsibility and shifting membership of the Boards, the new feature was, to some extent, the substitution of French for English practice. Thus Alexander Hamilton wrote, in 1780: "Congress should instantly appoint the following great officers of State, a Secretary for Foreign Affairs, a President of War, a President of Marine, a Financier, a President of Trade. These officers should have nearly the same powers and functions as those in France analogous to them; and each should be chief in his own department; with subordinate boards composed of assistants, clerks, etc., to execute his orders."² Acting upon suggestions of the kind, Congress created the office of Secretary of Foreign Affairs, by a resolution passed January 10, 1781. And, in like manner, it provided, on February 7, for a Superintendent of Finance, a Secretary of War, and a Secretary of Marine. The designation, Superintendent of Finance, was an appropriation of a French title of office, defunct at the time.³

The Departments were not more vigorous than other branches of

¹ Jameson, *Essays in the Constitutional History of the United States*: J. C. Guggenheimer, *The Development of the Executive Departments*, 148-165.

² *Works of Hamilton*, (J. C. Hamilton ed.) 1, 158-159, Hamilton to James Duane. Also contemporary letters to Robert Morris and Isaac Sears.

³ *American Historical Review*, X, 565: Henry Barrett Learned, *Origin of Title Superintendent of Finance*.