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GUIDE TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CABINET

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INTRODUCTION

Congratulations and welcome to the Harvard Model Congress Presidential Cabinet! You are about to embark on a journey through both the hallowed halls of Congress and the conference rooms of the White House, which contain some of the nation's most influential powerbrokers. Please carefully review the material in this guide prior to the conference. Within this guide, you will learn how to provide expert testimony during Senate and House committee sessions. Additionally, this guide includes pointers on how to convey that you are the foremost expert on your topics and will assist you in handling difficult questions from members of Congress. Ultimately, this guide will help prepare you for your role as one of the United States' top policy experts.

History and Background

The United States Constitution enables the president to "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." From these words, the Cabinet was born.

Originally, the Cabinet consisted of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Postmaster General (removed during the Nixon Administration), the Secretary of War, and the Secretary of the Navy (the Departments of War and the Navy were combined to form the Department of Defense in 1947).

Over the years, new Cabinet positions emerged as the executive branch increased in scope and size. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior were added in the nineteenth century. During the 20th century, the Departments of Commerce, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Energy, Education, and Veterans Affairs were established. In September 2001, President George W. Bush added the post of Secretary of Homeland Security. After a great deal of controversy over a Secretary without a department (and a department many found unnecessary), Congress created the Department of Homeland Security.

Currently, the Cabinet is composed of the highest-ranking officers of each of the 15 executive departments, as well as other federal officials the president chooses to elevate to Cabinet rank (such as the Administer of the Environmental Protection Agency, the United States Trade Representative, and the White House Chief of Staff). Each of these executive officers advises the president on specific issues in which he or she has personal expertise and also on more general concerns that may impact their respective departments. At some points in history, Cabinet members were not among the president's closest and most trusted advisors. For example, President Andrew Jackson kept many of his political enemies in his Cabinet and relied on an informal "kitchen cabinet" of top advisors when making his most important decisions.

Today, the Presidential Cabinet is the top advisory board in the executive branch. Cabinet members hold a demanding position; they bear the great responsibility of advising the president on the nation's most pressing concerns. Members must digest information quickly and make difficult, informed decisions at a moment's notice. Cabinet members simultaneously perform many roles: engaging in policy debate during classified meetings, testifying before full Congressional committees, and approving actions of the National Security Council should a crisis threaten the safety of US citizens, just to name a few.

The members of the Cabinet make recommendations based on their expertise, the general principles of their departments, informed consideration of other departments' competing needs, and an intricate understanding of the practical implications of policymaking. Generally, even after close consideration of their political leanings, Cabinet members are supportive of the president's overall platform, largely because the president appointed all of them, and they serve "at the pleasure of the president." Yet Cabinet members often disagree with each other because resources allocated to one department are often granted at the expense of another. To further complicate matters, jurisdictions often overlap. Indeed, it is this dynamic that makes Cabinet debates exciting.

HOW IT WORKS

Prior to the Conference

1. Notification of appointment to the Cabinet

When you are notified about your selection to the Presidential Cabinet, you will receive:

- Your role assignment in the newly formed cabinet. You will take on this role and perspective for the duration of the conference.
- The list of issues on which you will focus your research and write position papers. Congressional briefings on these issues will be available to you through the HMC website.

2. Preparation of position statements.

Delegates to the Presidential Cabinet will receive a pre-conference assignment that will require them to prepare position statements on their assigned roles based upon the research that they perform. More information on the substance of the assignment will be released leading up to the conference.

3. Research and Preparation

At the conference, delegates will prepare short (two-minute) presentations on the relevant topics. These should summarize the major points of delegates' policy proposals, issues of contention, recent news, press releases, and anything else that could be important or would add substantially to the discussion. Delegates will share these presentations both with the rest of the Cabinet and with congressional committees when they request testimony or information. It can be helpful to come to the conference with some research done on all of the topics provided to aid in your discussions in committee.

In addition to learning about the various issues, you should also research the executive department that you, as a Cabinet member, direct. Cabinet officers are often fiercely loyal to the objectives and cultures of their respective departments. It is therefore crucial that you have a strong understanding of what is most important to your department. More guidance on preparation is given in the "Advanced Preparation" section below.

At the Conference

1. Call to order and roll call

2. Introductions

At the beginning of the session, Cabinet members will introduce themselves (education, former government positions, other relevant information), their departments, and critical issues (both policy-oriented and personal) that have arisen during their tenure. Please be prepared to make such a presentation.

3. Setting the Agenda

There are several criteria by which priorities should be determined, including but not limited to:

- Timeliness: Is the issue currently a "hot topic," or is it part of an extended, on-going debate?
- Necessity of executive influence: Does it appear that the issue faces a tough vote in congressional committees, or it is fairly clear that bipartisan politics will ensure victory for the Administration?
- Importance to the president: Is the issue something the president truly cares about or is it only tangentially related to his agenda?

It is your responsibility to work with the rest of the Cabinet to determine your collective priorities in light of the president's agenda.

4. Presentation of Issues by Cabinet Members

Cabinet members who are experts on the issues brought under debate will present an overview of the issue, review the main points of their policy proposals, and explain which policy is the best one. So, make sure that you are comfortable and familiar with the specifics of your position on any given topic.

5. Presidential Angle and Q & A Session

On sensitive topics, the president may brief the Cabinet on the political and bureaucratic considerations of an issue. This is a way of clarifying the official executive position as well as fine-tuning the administration's position on key issues.

6. Debate on Issues

Debate will be governed by the rules of parliamentary procedure. Please refer to the procedural rules for congressional committees to gain an understanding of the fundamentals of debate with parliamentary procedure. Although the staff members at Harvard Model Congress will briefly review parliamentary procedure at the conference, this review will not be sufficient in and of itself for delegates to gain a comprehensive understanding. Therefore, delegates must take it upon themselves to study parliamentary procedure prior to the conference.

7. Consideration of Policy Proposal

Delegates will discuss and debate a particular policy proposal on the floor. It is advised that a motion to caucus be entertained to finalize the proposals in order to most efficiently work out details of the proposal.

8. Vote on Policy Proposal

A simple majority is needed to pass an executive policy proposal, though the group must work to build consensus and establish a unified position for the Administration. The president can have only one opinion.

9. Testimony in Congressional Committees

As congressional debate rages during the conference, committees will request your expert testimony on your policy proposals. Once again, your policy proposals will be useful in preparing such presentations to integrate the agendas of the legislative and executive branches.

10. Advising the President

An important part of your role as a member of the Presidential Cabinet is to advise the president on a host of issues, including whether to sign legislation that has been approved by both the House and the Senate.

The Cabinet Member as a Lobbyist

Because you oversee the implementation of any law that is passed regarding your department, your words will carry extra weight as "expert" testimony. In discussing various proposals and ideas, members of Congress will look to you not only as an advisor to the president but also as an expert, under whose guidance carefully-crafted proposals could come to fruition.

Tips on Testimony

Part of being a spokesperson for the administration and your department is serving as an expert witness. You will act as a witness when a Congressional committee requests your testimony on an issue. When you are called to testify, you will have only a few minutes to speak to the committee. After you speak, they will question you about the issue and can recall you later during the debate for more questions. During your testimony, you should try to use the following strategies:

- Be organized. Prepare an outline or summarize your major points before you come to committee. No matter how well prepared and rehearsed you are, it is always nice to have something written down as a fallback plan.
- Use facts. During your speech you should refer to statistics from studies and/or polls that support your viewpoint; however, be wary of getting bogged down with the recitation of numbers. Your use of statistics should always be directly related to the argument you are making.
- Be clear and straightforward. Long-winded speeches are ineffective. If you speak too long on one point, you risk losing everyone's attention. Be concise.
- Address the questions that are asked of you. After your testimony, the committee may ask you questions. Be sure to answer their questions directly rather than reiterating your testimony. Don't fear questions; they present an extra opportunity for you to convince the committee of your position.
- Argue for your proposal. Remember, the committee will draft the actual law; you can only influence the direction of US policy by influencing the committee.
- Respect the committee. Even if you think all the members are wrong, always be polite while you speak. Remember, you represent your department and the President of the United States.

ADVANCED PREPARATION

There is almost no obstacle to a Cabinet member's success that cannot be overcome with proper preparation. Lack of experience, lack of self-confidence, and lack of knowledge about the legislative process can all be accommodated. It is most important to remember that to function as an effective Cabinet member requires a wealth of knowledge about assigned topic areas and the ability to speak confidently

about that knowledge. If you have not prepared in advance by learning about the topic areas, you will find that your testimony will have little influence on congressional committees. On the other hand, if you have taken the time to read and consider the issues, you will have no trouble acting as an effective proponent of the president's agenda. It is also important to familiarize yourself with the other issues facing Cabinet debate so that you will be able to make informed contributions to any discussion brought before the Cabinet.

Step One: The Basics

Your first step in research should be to read the briefings written by the HMC staff for the congressional committees. The briefings provide excellent outlines of the issues to be discussed and go into detail on the various points of debate that will be guiding the legislators. In these briefings, you should keep a particularly close eye on the "Focus of Debate" and "Possible Solutions" sections, since they will address your questions most directly. After you have read a briefing, you should have a reasonable expectation about what types of issues legislators will be addressing, as well as the concerns and goals of the executive branch regarding the topic. It is quite likely that while you are testifying in the House or Senate, the members of Congress will bring up points and arguments from these sections, so be sure you can address these quickly and accurately. As you read these briefings, you should take notes on the information for you to reference at the conference during debate and testimony.

For more information on any of the points addressed in the briefings, take a look at the bibliography. A frequent source of information for Harvard Model Congress briefings is Congressional Quarterly and Congressional Research Service (CRS) Issue Briefs/Info Packs. Congressional Quarterly is available in nearly any public or university library, but you will have to contact your senator or representative to get CRS materials. Make sure you give congressional staff plenty of time to obtain CRS materials because they are sometimes not readily available. The HMC staff members who wrote the briefings that you are assigned can also be of help to you. Feel free to reach out to us!

Step Two: Researching Opinions

The President's Opinion

You will often be able to glean a good amount of information from the briefing itself, which may even have very specific information on presidential opinion regarding an issue. If the topic you are researching is one that has been in the news recently, check newspapers and periodicals, especially The Hill, NPR, Washington Post, The BBC, Time, Newsweek, US News and World Report, and The New York Times. These sources will generally have excellent coverage of major news events, with a special emphasis on presidential opinion. Also, feel free to utilize the Internet and local libraries to aid your research.

If you have access to an online search facility, such as ProQuest, you can very easily do a word search combining (for example) "Bush" and "cable TV regulation," which will give you full text printouts from newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, and television shows from across the nation.

You can also receive information straight from the source by calling the White House Press Office at (202) 456-1414.

Your Department

The process of researching your department's opinion on an issue is similar to the process of ascertaining the president's view. All departments have homepages; these are valuable resources that often list the latest speeches, press releases, and departmental actions.

Again, a computer search combining your department's name or your Cabinet member's name with key words from the issue you are researching should yield some good information.

Some departments will have their own publications (the Department of State Dispatch, for example) which highlight key issues being discussed. You should check with your library for availability of such publications. If you find that they are not locally available, you may try to contact your department's press office directly.

Your Role

This may very well be the trickiest part of your research but also one of the most important. While information on a department's perspective on an issue may be available, it is often difficult to find an individual's opinion.

Much of your work in researching your opinion will be based on making inference from the attitudes and perspectives expressed by your Cabinet member. If it is available, a packet of role biographies will be made available to you following the first round of Cabinet appointments. It is important that you collect information on your education and occupation before being called upon by the president. You can and should use this information to deduce your political leanings. Keep this background in mind as you go back and reread the briefings a second time. Check Congressional Quarterly and the Congressional Record (a transcript of Congressional hearings) for information on your role.

What do politicians think were the strengths and weaknesses you brought to your office? Who were your friends and who were your adversaries in the Senate during your hearings? What controversies have clouded your nomination hearing? From these questions you ought to be able to get a fairly clear picture of how you—as an individual—may stand on a given issue.

PRE-CONFERENCE THOUGHTS

As you take the preceding steps to prepare for the conference and your important role as an informant, lobbyist, and policy-maker, ask yourself the following questions:

- Why is the law the way it is, or why is there no law on this issue?
- What reasons were used in the past to justify the existing law, or for not making any laws on this subject?
- Why has there been a call to change the situation, and who is pushing for change?
- Are there examples of the effects of a similar law?

- What are the strongest arguments for your side of the issue, and what facts or quotes support these arguments?
- How do your opponent's counter these arguments, and how can you be prepared to defend against these attacks?
- How can your department practically implement a particular policy?

Some Final Reminders

Remember, as you will be given a specific role, you want to play your part as convincingly as possible. Play your role with excitement. Because you have done your research and are well prepared, you will have senators and representatives listening to your every word; future legislation rests on your opinions. A good cabinet member will research both sides of the issue, learning both the strong and weak points of his or her argument.

In addition, you need to find out how certain members of Congress feel about your assigned issues. As you search through sources to learn about each topic, take notes on the positions and actions of individual members on the issue, particularly those on political extremes of the matter. Also, note which Congress members support a particular issue and which members oppose it. Finally, consult a reference guide like the Almanac of American Politics to learn some basic information about each Congress member. The Presidential Cabinet directors can supply you with the names of the congresspersons in each committee.

Once again, nothing can prepare you better for the conference than researching the issues the committees will debate. If you are a handy and reliable resource, senators and representatives will depend on you for vital information. And when they realize that you know more than they do on an issue, you will have a much easier time convincing them to vote in your favor or to consider the intricacies of the issue.

Remember, although you are in committee to lobby for a position, you are not a lobbyist. Be sure to distinguish yourself from zealous lobbyists with predetermined agendas. Rather, act like an expert who, after careful objective analysis, has arrived at a position. You do not represent any special interest groups or businesses; you represent the President of the United States and your department. Try to appeal to both Democrats and Republicans with your expert knowledge, and always be cognizant of the president's agenda.

When preparing to lobby, you should remember that you might also need to persuade your fellow Cabinet members, so try to understand their objections and positions as well. This will maximize your effectiveness. With a lot of research and a good argument, your effectiveness on behalf of the president and your department will be unparalleled.

Sample Cabinet Debate

Cabinet Directors: Welcome to the Presidential Cabinet. Congratulations on being selected and thank you for your memoranda. Now we're going to set the agenda for policy debate. We encourage you to discuss the highest profile, most critical issues being debated in the House and Senate first. Also, you may want to know that at this moment, committees have begun debate on the issue of nuclear waste disposal.

Housing and Urban Development: (interrupting) But won't that really tie us up in long debates?

Cabinet Directors: Though you should always formally ask for the floor or for points of order, you do make a good point. We also hope that all of you balance the agenda docket with issues that appear to have clear Cabinet consensus and that will require minimal debate. Now, you'll caucus to set the agenda, and then we'll survey your preferences to determine the order of policy issues.

(After a brief caucus and a vote, the agenda is set.)

Cabinet Directors: Great! We've determined the first five items on the agenda. Now, we'll proceed to the first issue: Drug Enforcement Agency reorganization. Briefing the Cabinet will be the Director of the ONDCP.

(Office of National Drug Control Policy Director presents policy proposal and answers questions.)

Cabinet Directors: Are there any other departments who have differing positions that they want the Cabinet to consider?

Attorney General: I believe we should consider the fiscal and law enforcement burden on the Justice Department by removing some officers from the DEA. If that is not possible, there should be an increase in our funding, or at least more formal authority and stricter laws for proper enforcement.

Health and Human Services: My department is also concerned with possible reductions in public health funding related to our drug prevention programs. We feel that what we do with regard to drug treatment is very different from what the ONDCP does and very necessary to our work. Basically, we feel that we can only support this if you can guarantee that our funding won't be cut.

CONCLUSION

You have been chosen to be part of a select group of people with the power to influence the president and Congress on the most pressing and crucial issues. Your arguments in committees are crucial for shaping and directing legislation in line with the president's agenda and will help assure well-written and informed bills. Your recommendations on whether to sign or to veto legislation passed by the House and Senate will be critical for a presidential decision. You have just read some detailed yet flexible guidelines for preparing for Harvard Model Congress Presidential Cabinet. Now, it is time for you to get to work, read your briefings, research the issues, contact your Cabinet member's office, and draft policy proposals. We look forward to meeting you at Harvard Model Congress!