

Defense Primer: The Military Departments

Departments within a Department

There are three military departments within the Department of Defense (DOD): Department of the Army, Department of the Navy, and Department of the Air Force. The authority, function, and organization of each military department is established in Title 10 of the United States Code. Since 1947, the military departments have fallen under the Secretary of Defense's authority, direction, and control. According to the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-433), the military departments are limited to primary responsibility for personnel, training, services, supply, and procurement. Under this Act, the authority to conduct military operations exclusively resides in the unified combatant commands, which directly report to the Secretary of Defense and the President.

Department

The authority to establish military departments constitutionally resides with the Congress, not the Commander in Chief. A military department provides and embodies traditional civilian control of the military. A military department consists of an executive headquarters and various agencies, installations, or field headquarters. Within the executive headquarters, the number of people authorized to serve in the Office of the Secretary is specified in law and varies among the military departments. **Table 1** includes the total number of civilian personnel and military officers authorized and the number of military officers authorized within the total for each military department. All civilians and servicemembers under the control or supervision of a service Secretary make up the personnel within a military department.

Table 1. Office of the Secretary Personnel Limitations
Number Authorized for Permanent Duty

ARMY		NAVY		AIR FORCE	
Total	Officer	Total	Officer	Total	Officer
3,105	1,865	2,866	1,720	2,639	1,585

Source: 10 U.S.C. §§7014, 8014, 9014 (FEB, 2020)

Note: Personnel limitations are not applied in time of war.

Secretary

Each military department is led by a Secretary whom the President appoints from civilian life with the advice and consent of the Senate. Each Secretary directly reports to the Secretary of Defense, who directly reports to the President. Among other things, the Secretary is responsible for organizing, equipping, and training the armed service or services in the military department.

The Office of the Secretary typically includes an Under Secretary and various Assistant Secretaries. Principal officials who directly report to the Secretary include the

military department's general counsel, inspector general, and chief of legislative liaison.

After first informing the Secretary of Defense, a Secretary may make recommendations to Congress relating to DOD. Other discretionary functions include the authority to assign, detail, and prescribe the duties of civilians and servicemembers. The Secretary also issues regulations that implement his or her duties, powers, and functions. Under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), the Secretary is the most senior final disposition official and general court martial convening authority within the military department.

Armed Service

There are one or more armed services in each military department under the authority, direction, and control of a Secretary. The armed services are the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force. Each armed service is led by a service chief and supported by a service staff.

The Coast Guard is an armed service that operates in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under the leadership of the Commandant of the Coast Guard and DHS Secretary, unless placed under the authority, direction, and control of the Department of the Navy.

Armed Service Chief

The President appoints a service chief from the flag or general officers of a service for four years with the advice and consent of the Senate. The service chief is responsible to the Secretary and Congress. Among other duties and responsibilities, the service chief exercises supervision over the civilians, servicemembers, and organizations of the armed service. The service chiefs are designated:

- Chief of Staff of the Army
- Commandant of the Marine Corps
- Chief of Naval Operations
- Chief of Staff of the Air Force
- Chief of Space Operations

These service chiefs serve as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and are directly responsible to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Secretary of Defense, and President regarding operational matters. Unless it conflicts with a service chief's position on the JCS, the service chief may disclose operational matters that affect the military department to the Secretary.

Armed Service Staff

The service staff assists the service chief in carrying out his or her responsibilities. Except as required by law, a Secretary determines a service staff's members, duties, and titles. The principal role of a service staff is to furnish professional assistance to the service chief and the Secretary, Under Secretary, and Assistant Secretaries of the military department.

The Military Departments

Under the leadership of its Secretary, each military department provides conventional, strategic, and special operations forces to conduct operations as defined by the President and Secretary of Defense. Each military department supports other military departments and the joint forces.

The Department of the Army

The executive headquarters of the Department of the Army consists of the Office of the Secretary of the Army and the Army Staff (see **Figure 1**). The Secretary's general powers and duties are set forth in 10 U.S.C. §7013. The Department of the Army includes land, aviation, and cyberspace forces of the Army, which is the principal land armed force. The Army or Armies referred to in the Constitution of the United States consist of the Regular Army, Army Reserve, and Army National Guard of the United States.

Figure 1. Department of the Army

Secretary of the Army	
Office of the Secretary of the Army	
Chief of Staff of the Army	
Army Staff	
The Army	

Source: CRS

The Department of the Navy

The executive headquarters of the Department of the Navy consists of the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, and Headquarters Marine Corps (see **Figure 2**). The Secretary's general powers and duties are set forth in 10 U.S.C. §8013. The Department of the Navy includes naval, land, air, and cyberspace forces of the Navy and Marine Corps, which are the principal maritime armed forces. The Navy consists of the Regular Navy, Fleet Reserve, and Navy Reserve. The Marine Corps consists of the Regular Marine Corps, Fleet Marine Corps Reserve, and Marine Corps Reserve.

Figure 2. Department of the Navy

Secretary of the Navy	
Office of the Secretary of the Navy	
Chief of Naval Operations	Commandant of the Marine Corps
The Navy Staff	The Marine Staff
The Navy	The Marine Corps

Source: CRS

The Department of the Air Force

The executive headquarters of the Department of the Air Force consists of the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, Air Staff, and Office of the Chief of Space Operations (see **Figure 3**). The Secretary's general powers and duties are set forth in 10 U.S.C. §9013. The Department of the Air Force includes air, space, and cyberspace forces of the Air Force and Space Force, which are the principal air and space armed forces. The Air Force consists of the Regular Air Force, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard of the United States. The United States Space Force consists of the Regular Space Force.

Figure 3. Department of the Air Force

Secretary of the Air Force	
Office of the Secretary of the Air Force	
Chief of Staff of the Air Force	Chief of Space Operations
The Air Staff	The Space Staff
The Air Force	The Space Force

Source: CRS

Note: P.L. 116-92 established the Space Force on December 20, 2019 by creating the Chief of Space Operations position and redesignating the Air Force Space Command as the U.S. Space Force.

Relevant Statutes

10 U.S.C. §§ 111, 7011, 8011, 9011
 10 U.S.C. §§ 113, 7013, 8013, 9013
 10 U.S.C. §§ 7014, 8014, 9014
 10 U.S.C. §§ 7031, 8031, 8041, 9031, 9081
 10 U.S.C. §§ 7032, 8032, 8042, 9032
 10 U.S.C. §§ 7033, 8033, 8043, 9033, 9082

CRS Products

CRS In Focus IF10543, *Defense Primer: The Department of Defense*, by Kathleen J. McInnis
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