



Defense Primer: The Military Departments

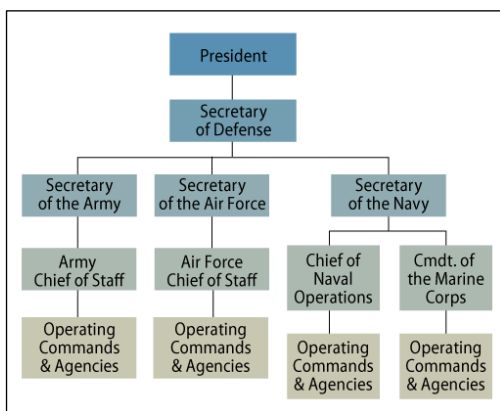
The Department of Defense (DOD) is comprised of three military departments: the Department of the Army, the Department of the Navy, and the Department of the Air Force. The organization of each military department is outlined in Title 10 of the United States Code.

The term *military department* refers to a department’s senior civilian official and senior military officer, as well as all departmental headquarters staff offices, field headquarters, armed forces, reserve components, civilian employees, installations, activities, and functions under the control or supervision of the department’s senior officials.

Each department is organized under the leadership of a *Secretary*, a civilian official appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. The three department secretaries all carry out the functions of their positions under the authority, direction, and control of the Secretary of Defense.

The term *armed forces* refers to the five U.S. military service branches: the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. While the Coast Guard is statutorily considered to be a military service, it generally operates under Title 14 authorities. Title 14 states that the Coast Guard “shall be a service in the Department of Homeland Security, except when operating as a service in the Navy” upon the declaration of war, if so directed by Congress in the declaration, or upon the direction of the President (see Section 3 of Title 14, U.S. Code).

Figure 1. Organizational Structure of DOD Military Departments



Source: CRS illustration

The Department of the Army

The mission statement of the Army is to “fight and win our Nation’s wars by providing prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict in support of combatant commanders.” The Army, operating as a military service within the Department of the Army, consists of the Regular Army; the

Army Reserve; the Army National Guard of the United States; and members or units of the state-level Army National Guard when ordered into the service of the United States.

The Secretary of the Army, as assisted by the Office of the Secretary of the Army, has responsibility for all affairs of the Army. The Chief of Staff of the Army, as assisted by the Army Staff, provides military advice to the Secretary of the Army.

The Department of the Navy

The Department of the Navy has authorities and responsibilities relating to two military service branches: the Navy and the Marine Corps.

The mission statement of the Navy is to “maintain, train and equip combat-ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression and maintaining freedom of the seas.” The Marine Corps is an “expeditionary force in readiness” statutorily tasked with using combined arms forces to seize or defend forward-positioned naval bases, and conducting land operations in support of naval campaigns.

Unlike the Departments of the Army and the Air Force, the Department of the Navy’s organizational structure is specifically defined by law to include:

- Senior civilian and military leadership and headquarters staff offices;
- All operating forces of the Navy and the Marine Corps;
- The reserve components of the Navy and the Marine Corps; and
- All functions, organizations, forces, activities, and facilities under the control or supervision of the senior civilian official of the Department of the Navy

The Secretary of the Navy, as assisted by the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, has responsibility for all affairs of the Navy and the Marine Corps. The Chief of Naval Operations, as assisted by the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, as assisted by the Headquarters, Marine Corps, both provide military advice to the Secretary of the Navy.

The Department of the Air Force

The mission statement of the Air Force is to “fly, fight and win” as it carries out operations in air, space, and cyberspace. The Air Force, operating as a military service within the Department of the Air Force, consists of the Regular Air Force; the Air Force Reserve; the Air National Guard of the United States; and members or units of the state-level Air National Guard ordered into the service of the United States.

The Secretary of the Air Force, as assisted by the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, has responsibility for all affairs of the Air Force. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force, assisted by the Air Staff, provides military advice to the Secretary of the Air Force.

Departmental Civilian Leadership and Staff

By law, a department secretary has the responsibility and authority to conduct all affairs of a military department, including recruiting, training, equipping, mobilization, and personnel administration. Each secretary has responsibility for developing department-specific policies and programs consistent with broader national security objectives, while also internally implementing all department-specific policy, program, and budget decisions of the President or the Secretary of Defense. Secretaries are also tasked with ensuring effective cooperation and coordination between the military departments and DOD agencies; supporting the current and future operational requirements of the combatant commands; and supervising and controlling the intelligence activities of a department.

An *Under Secretary*, and a varying number of *Assistant Secretaries*, report to and assist the secretary in managing the operations of a department. The Under Secretary is the second-highest ranking civilian official in a department. All Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries are civilian officials appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate.

While the exact number and functions of the Assistant Secretaries varies by department, each department has an Assistant Secretary to oversee manpower and reserve component affairs; an Assistant Secretary to oversee departmental comptroller operations, including financial management; and an Assistant Secretary to oversee acquisition-related matters.

The Under Secretary is the head of the departmental *Office of the Secretary*, a *civilian headquarters staff element* tasked with assisting the secretary in carrying out the responsibilities of the position. The Office of the Secretary is responsible for exercising functions such as acquisition, auditing, information management, comptroller operations, legislative affairs, and public affairs within the departmental military and civilian headquarters staff elements.

Departmental Military Leadership and Staff

A *service chief* is a senior military officer designated as the principal military advisor to a departmental secretary for matters relating to a specific armed service. While a service chief is appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, he or she performs his or her duties under the authority, direction, and control of the departmental secretary concerned, and is directly responsible to that secretary.

The four service chiefs – the Army Chief of Staff, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Air Force Chief of Staff – do not have operational command authority over their respective armed services. Nevertheless, as authorized by a departmental secretary, a service chief does exercise supervision over an armed service’s major commands and agencies, consistent with the

authority assigned to the combatant commanders of the unified or specified combatant commands.

Each service chief is also designated as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Led by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), the JCS offers advice to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense on military issues. By law, a service chief provides service-specific advisory support to the department secretary through functions such as:

- Overseeing the operations of military headquarters staff;
- Relaying the plans and recommendations of military headquarters staff to the secretary; and
- Acting as the executive agent of the secretary in carrying out such plans and recommendations.

A *vice service chief* and varying numbers of *deputy service chiefs* and *assistant service chiefs* report to and assist the service chief in formulating service-specific plans and recommendations. The vice service chief, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, is the second-highest ranking military officer in the department. A department’s deputy and assistant service chiefs, active-duty officers detailed to the positions by the secretary concerned, operate under the supervision of the vice service chief.

Within each department, the service chief leads a *military headquarters staff element* that reports to and provides professional assistance to the departmental secretary for matters relating to a specific armed service. A military headquarters staff element is responsible to the Secretary for functions such as training, equipping, and mobilization of the service’s operating forces; monitoring and reporting on the service’s operating efficiency; and coordinating the actions of service-level components.

Relevant Statutes

- Title 10, U.S. Code, Subtitle B, Part I
- Title 10, U.S. Code, Subtitle C, Part I
- Title 10, U.S. Code, Subtitle D, Part I

CRS Products

- CRS In Focus IF10543, *Defense Primer: The Department of Defense*, by Kathleen J. McInnis
- CRS In Focus IF10544, *Defense Primer: Department of the Army and Army Command Structure*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon and Andrew Feickert
- CRS In Focus IF10484, *Defense Primer: Department of the Navy*, by Ronald O’Rourke
- CRS In Focus IF10547, *Defense Primer: The United States Air Force*, by Jeremiah Gertler
- CRS In Focus IF10542, *Defense Primer: Commanding U.S. Military Operations*, by Kathleen J. McInnis

Heidi M. Peters, hpeters@crs.loc.gov, 7-0702