

# **PRESIDENTIAL CABINET**

## **Committee Guide**

**Edited by Graham Wyatt and Sean Ouellette**

### **Introduction**

Congratulations and welcome to the Harvard Model Congress Asia Presidential Cabinet! You are about to embark on a journey through the hallowed halls of Congress and the back rooms of the nation's most powerful dealmakers along with the chambers of the world's most influential international organizations. As you travel through the maze of paperwork that every Cabinet member must navigate, you should never be without your most important piece of equipment: the Guide to the Presidential Cabinet. This guide will help you prepare for your role as one of the United States' top policy experts.

### **History and Background**

The Cabinet was born from a clause in the United States Constitution that states that the President "may 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." Over the years, new Cabinet positions have been created as new departments have been added to the executive branch. The original Cabinet consisted of the Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, Attorney General, Postmaster General (removed during the Nixon Administration), Secretary of War, and Secretary of the Navy (the Departments of War and the Navy were combined to form Department of Defense in 1947). The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior were added in the nineteenth century, and the Departments of Commerce and Labor (originally a single department, but now two separate departments), Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Energy, Education, and Veterans Affairs were subsequently added as well. In January 2003, President George W. Bush signed the Homeland Security Act into law, creating the newest department, the Department of Homeland Security.

The Cabinet is composed of the highest-ranking officers of each of the fifteen executive departments, as well as other federal officials that the President chooses to elevate to Cabinet rank. Each of these executive officers advises the President on specific issues of their own personal expertise and also on more general issues which may impact their department. At some points in history, Cabinet members may not have been the President's closest advisors. For example, President Andrew Jackson kept many of his political enemies in his Cabinet, which he supplemented with an informal "kitchen cabinet" of top advisors, named after the place where they held their meetings.

Today, the Presidential Cabinet is the top advisory board in the executive branch. Cabinet members have to digest information quickly and make informed and difficult decisions quickly. Cabinet members will have to perform many roles simultaneously.

They will engage in policy debate during classified meetings, testify before full congressional committees, and even approve actions of the National Security Council should a crisis threaten the safety of U.S. citizens.

The federal government is too large for any one person to be an expert on every issue that faces the country, which makes the Cabinet an important resource for Congress and the President. Because each Cabinet department implements the policies that Congress and the President create, Cabinet secretaries should always consider such pragmatic concerns as the feasibility of implementation, costs and benefits of a policy, and departmental jurisdiction when evaluating legislation.

The members of the Cabinet make their recommendations based on their expertise, their department's general principles, their own informed considerations of departments' competing needs, and their understanding of the practical implications of policymaking. Generally, Cabinet members are supportive of the President's overall platform, since the President appointed them. However, Cabinet members can often disagree with each other because resources allocated to one are often taken from another and also because their jurisdictions frequently overlap. These disagreements are what make Cabinet debates exciting.

## **Research and Preparation**

### *Step One: The Basics*

Your first step in research should be to read the briefings written by the HMCA staff. The briefings provide excellent outlines of the issues to be discussed and go into a fair amount of detail on the various points of debate that will be guiding the legislators. While studying these briefings, you should keep a particularly close eye on the "Focus of Debate" and "Possible Solutions" sections, as they will address your questions most directly. By the time you have finished reading the briefing, you should have a good idea of the 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 when you are testifying in the House or Senate, the members of Congress will bring up points and arguments from these sections, so you should be sure you can address these quickly and accurately with well-crafted responses reflecting the administration's views. As you contemplate the best way to conform to administration policy, please pay special attention to the viewpoint your department would take.

For more information on any of the points addressed in the briefings, take a look at the bibliography; you may find it easiest to refer to the same sources used by the author. A very common source of information for HMCA briefings is Congressional Quarterly and CRS Issue Briefs/Info Packs. One way of finding these sources is the Internet. Typing in the title of CRS briefs into a search engine will lead you to websites that post the CRS briefs.

### *Step Two: Researching Opinions*

#### **The President's Opinion:**

You will often be able to find a good amount of information from the briefing itself, which may even have very specific information on the Presidential opinion regarding an issue. If the topic you are researching is one that has been in the news recently, check U.S. newspapers and periodicals, especially *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, and *The New York Times* (for financial issues, *The Economist* is a valuable resource). These sources will generally have excellent coverage of major news, with a special emphasis on Presidential opinion. Again, an Internet search may also be useful in determining the Presidential opinion on a topic. Searching “www.whitehouse.gov” will access the White House Press Office.

If you have access to an online search facility such as LEXIS-NEXIS, you can very easily conduct a word search combining (for example) “Obama” and “health care reform,” which will give you full-text printouts from newspapers, magazines, and radio and television shows from around the United States.

### **Your Department’s Opinion:**

The process of getting your department’s opinion on a particular issue is similar to the process of ascertaining the President’s view. All departments have homepages, which are great sources of information and often have the latest speeches, press releases, and department actions listed. You will find that even if the department has not enunciated a position on the specific issue in the brief, look for other similar topics (i.e. search for “drug policy” if “marijuana for medicinal purposes” does not yield results). You may very well find something written about your department in the mainstream media. Again, a computer search combining your department’s name or your Cabinet member’s name (“Hillary Clinton,” for example) with key words from the issue you are researching should yield some helpful information. Some departments will have their own publications which highlight key issues being discussed within the department. 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’s Opinion:**

This may very well be the most difficult part of your research. While information on a department’s perspective on an issue may be available, it is often much more difficult to find information on an individual’s opinion. Much of your work in researching your role’s opinion will be based on inference from your attitudes and perspectives. You will receive a packet of biographies of Cabinet members, including that of your role (“yourself”). There you will find information on your education and occupation before the President called on you. You should use this information to reduce your political leanings. Keep your own background in mind as you go back and reread the briefings for a second time. You may also find substantial information on yourself reported in the media during your confirmation hearings. If your confirmation was not widely reported, check CQ and the Congressional. Some questions to explore:

1. What did politicians think were the strengths and weaknesses you brought to your office?
2. Who were your friends and who were your adversaries in the Senate during your hearings?
3. What controversies clouded your nomination hearing?

From this you ought to be able to get a clearer picture of how you—as an individual—may stand on a given issue. You may also find articles discussing your opinions on particular issues in the popular media, especially if policy proposals pertinent to your department are currently being debated in public.

### *Step Three: Developing Policy Proposal Presentations*

Policy proposals should be one-page long (single-spaced), and they should outline the problem addressed, provide background information, consider Presidential interests, and ultimately offer a well-reasoned, well-supported solution. Your proposals should provide factual support for your arguments, explicitly state the steps the government should take to address the problem, and describe the critical issues relevant to the topic. It should not only be a policy “wish list”—what your ideal policy would be—but should also state which parts of the proposal are open to compromise. Remember, strong Cabinet policy proposals guide the hands of legislators. You thus have the power to shape legislation both before and after Congress considers it. Please see the attached model proposal at the end of the guide for a written example, and be sure to include your title and department on the proposal.

In addition to your written proposals, you should prepare short (two-minute) presentations on each of your topics. These speeches should summarize the major points of the policy proposal, issues of contention, updates, changes and recent news or press releases, and anything else you believe is important or would add substantially to the discussion.

As a final preparation, we would encourage you to familiarize yourself (i.e. read the newspaper, speak with your faculty advisor) with all of the issues to be discussed at the conference. While your testimony will be solicited for a few issues, your informed opinions will contribute to debate over all of the bills before the congress and proposals before the international organizations.

### *More Pre-Conference Thoughts*

As you take the aforementioned steps to prepare for the conference and your important role as an informant, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why is the law the way it is, or why is there no existing law on this issue?
2. What reasons were used in the past to justify the existing law or for not making any law on this subject at all?
3. Why has there been a call to change the situation, and who is making the call?
4. Are there other examples of the effects of a similar law?
5. What are the strongest arguments for my side of the issue, and what facts or quotes support these arguments? Remember that your opinion and arguments are shaped by administration policy, departmental perspective, and personal experience.
6. How do opponents of my side of the issue counter these arguments, and how can I be prepared to defend against these attacks?
7. Would implementation of a particular policy jeopardize other prioritizes for your department

## At The Conference

### *The Cabinet Member as Lobbyist*

Because you will oversee the implementation of any law that is passed regarding your department, your words will carry extra weight as “expert” testimony in other committees. In discussing various proposals and ideas, members of Congress and others will look to you and your expertise to see how those proposals will actually come to fruition.

### *Preparing Testimony*

Along with debate among Cabinet members, testimony will represent the greatest part of your responsibility during congressional sessions. Here are some questions you will want to keep in mind while you prepare for giving testimony to House and Senate committees.

1. Does your testimony reflect your departmental responsibilities? Are you striking a proper balance between these two roles? Are you representing the President’s view on the issue as well?
2. Who will be your friends and who will be your opponents in committee?
3. Are you effectively addressing the concerns of your political opponents while remaining true to the administration?
4. What are the overall implications of your plan? Are there short-term gains versus long-term loses, or vice-versa? While you are in front of a committee, remember that you represent the President of the United States. Your actions may reflect the president in a positive or negative light. Present yourself as a representative of the President and your office will be given the respect you deserve.

### *Tips on Testifying*

Part of being 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 tell the committee whatever you would like to tell them. After you speak, they will question you about the issue and can recall you later during the debate for more questions. During your testimony, there are some things that you should try to do:

1. Be organized. Prepare an outline or summarize your major points before you enter the committee room. No matter how prepared and rehearsed you are, it is always reassuring to have something written down to fall back upon.
2. Use facts and quotes. Periodically in your speech, use statistics that support your viewpoint, but be careful not to get bogged down reciting numbers. In addition, starting or concluding your speech with an effective quote can also help you. Some of the best quotes are ones that are emotional and can speak to the members’ consciences.
3. Be clear and straightforward. If you speak too long on one point, you risk losing everyone’s attention. Be concise and to the point.

4. Address the questions that are asked of you. After your testimony, the committee may ask you questions that are asked of you. After your testimony, the committee may ask you questions that you should answer directly rather than rehashing your testimony. Don't fear questions; they are an extra opportunity for you to convince the rest of the committee of the position you are advocating.
5. Argue for your proposal. Remember, the committee will draft the actual law; you can only influence the direction of U.S. policy by influencing the committee.
6. 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.

## **Final Reminders**

Since you will be given a specific identity, you want to be as convincing as possible. Play that role with fervor. Your research and preparation will be rewarded when you have the undivided attention of the senators and representatives. A good Cabinet member will research both sides of the issue, thereby learning both the strong and weak points of his or her argument. And, of course, enjoy your alter ego and have fun with your role.

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. Also take note of the types of members of Congress that support each side of the issue — the party affiliation, ideological or religious beliefs, or social or economic interests of members or their constituents that determine where they stand on the issues that you are researching.

Once again, nothing can prepare you better for the conference than research on the issues the committees will debate. If you are a handy and reliable resource, senators and representatives will come to 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.

Remember, you appear before a committee to lobby for a position, but you are not a lobbyist. Try and distinguish yourself from the extremist, vociferous lobbyists as an expert who, after careful objective analysis, has arrived at a position. You do not represent any special interest group or business; 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.

## **Conclusion**

You have been identified as an intelligent and motivated Model Congress Asia participant and have been chosen to be part of a select group of people with the power to influence the president on the most pressing and crucial issues. Your recommendations on whether to sign or to veto legislation passed by the House and Senate will be critical

for a presidential decision. Solid testimony given beforehand will also help promote more of the administration's legislative agenda. These detailed yet flexible guidelines for preparing for Harvard Model Congress Asia Presidential Cabinet are designed as a launching point for your work in this role.

Now it is time for you to get to work, read your issue briefings, research, contact your Cabinet member's office, and draft your policy proposal. We look forward to seeing you at HMCA 2012!