



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. A military department provides and embodies traditional civilian control of the military. The authority, function, and organization of each military department are 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), combatant commands are responsible for military operations, whereas military departments are responsible for personnel, training, services, supply, and procurement.

Military Departments

Under the leadership of its Secretary, each military department provides conventional, strategic, and special operations forces to conduct military operations within a combatant command. 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 military officers and civilian personnel authorized for each military department, and the number of military officers authorized within the total. 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
3,250	1,900	3,150	1,800	2,750	1,650

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

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

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.

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 1**). 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.

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 1**). 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 1. Military Department Structure

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

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

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 analysis based in Title 10 U.S. Code

Military Department Secretaries

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, each 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 of the military department, and various assistant secretaries with designated areas of responsibility. Specified 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.

Military Department Armed Forces

There are one or more armed forces in each military department. Each armed force is under the authority, direction, and control of the military department's Secretary. An armed force is led by a service chief and supported by a service staff. There are six U.S. armed forces, five of which are in the military departments: the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force. The six armed forces also comprise six of the eight U.S. uniformed services.

Armed Forces Chiefs

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 force. There are five service chiefs among the three military departments (see **Figure 1**).

The service chiefs serve as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), which is led by a presidentially appointed and Senate confirmed flag or general officer who serves as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), and is responsible to the Secretary of Defense and President regarding military operations. Unless disclosure conflicts with the service chief's position on the JCS, a service chief may disclose operational matters that affect the chief's military department to its Secretary.

Armed Forces Staffs

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, Secretary,

Under Secretary, and assistant secretaries of the military department.

The only armed force that is not in a military department is the Coast Guard. It operates in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under the leadership of the Commandant of the Coast Guard and the authority, direction, and control of the DHS Secretary. However, Congress and the President may transfer the Coast Guard to the Navy (14 U.S.C. §103).

After the six armed forces, the remaining two uniformed services are the commissioned corps of the Public Health Service (PHS Corps), which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the commissioned corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA Corps), which is part of the Department of Commerce.

The PHS Corps and NOAA Corps have a contingent role in the armed forces during wartime or if directed by the President. While serving in this role, the PHS Corps would become a military service in DOD and a branch of the land and naval forces (42 U.S.C. §217), and the NOAA Corps would transfer to any military department as considered to be in the best interest of national security (33 U.S.C. §3061).

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
 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
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