

Chapter 7

SECTION 2: Executive Departments and Independent Agencies

(pp. 196–204)

Main Idea

Executive departments and independent agencies provide key services and regulate important industries for the American people.

Reading Focus

1. What is the purpose of the executive departments?
2. What are the primary functions of executive departments today?
3. What are independent agencies?
4. What are some issues regarding power and accountability in the federal bureaucracy?

Key Terms

independent agencies
independent executive agencies
independent regulatory commissions
bipartisan
government corporations

Executive Departments (p. 197)

The 15 executive departments are the major units of administration and policy making in the executive branch. Their heads make up the president’s cabinet. There are smaller agencies within each department. Congress approves the budgets for the departments, while the president nominates the top officials in each one, with advice and consent from the Senate.

Early Departments George Washington created the first executive departments in 1789—the Departments of State, Treasury, and War. The attorney general was also established at this time. In the 1800s and 1900s Congress created new departments to meet new needs or to show the federal government’s changing priorities.

New Departments since 1950 In the post–World War II era, Congress created seven new departments to address the fact that government played an expanded role in Americans’ lives. For example, Congress created the Department of Energy in response to the 1973 Arab oil embargo,

which led to gasoline shortages and high prices.

Reading Check Identifying

Supporting Details What were the first executive departments?

The Departments Today (pp. 197–200)

Examples of the 15 executive departments include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Homeland Security. Homeland Security is the most recently created department.

Health and Human Services (HHS)

This department protects the health of the American people and provides social services. Key services include Social Security, Medicare (medical insurance for people age 65 and older), and Medicaid (medical insurance for low-income people). Other agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration, which inspects and sets

standards for food and drugs, work within the department.

Department of Defense (DOD) DOD oversees U.S. military forces charged with protecting the nation. It employs more than 1.3 million men and women on active duty in the armed forces and another 1.1 million in the National Guard and Reserve. These armed forces are supported by another 670,000 civilian employees. The DOD has a larger budget than any other department.

Homeland Security In 2003 Congress created the Department of Homeland Security, two years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Its goal is to refocus government efforts involving law enforcement, border security, transportation, immigration, emergency preparedness, and other issues, in order to prevent further attacks on U.S. soil.

Reading Check Identifying Cause and Effect Why was the Department of Homeland Security created?

Independent Agencies (pp. 200–202)

In addition to the executive departments and their many smaller offices and agencies, the federal bureaucracy includes about 140 **independent agencies**—government agencies that operate separately from the executive departments. Creating an independent agency requires an act of Congress. Independent agencies are created to cover specific issues, such as the environment. Congress retains power over independent agencies and approves their funding. In some cases, Congress gives the agencies the power to make regulations governing their area of interest as well as to decide disputes over their regulations. Congress keeps the authority to override any laws, however. There are three types of independent agencies: independent

executive agencies, independent regulatory commissions, and government corporations.

Independent Executive Agencies The purpose of **independent executive agencies** is to oversee and manage a specific aspect of the federal government. They have executive powers similar to those of executive departments. Congress creates them and has authority over them, but the president controls much of their operation, including the appointment of their top officials. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is an example of an independent executive agency.

Independent Regulatory Commissions The purpose of **independent regulatory commissions** is to regulate some aspect of the economy. Their job is to set and enforce rules that have the force of law. Most have the power to settle disputes that come from their rules. They are led by a three- to seven-person board whose members are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate. By law, this board must be **bipartisan**, or include members from both political parties.

Congress created the first regulatory commission—the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC)—because it believed a permanent panel of experts that were not elected would be better able to regulate the railroads. The ICC was abolished in 1995, but it created the framework for later commissions, such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable communications.

The powers of regulatory commissions have at times been controversial. The Supreme Court has occasionally been called in to review their actions.

Government Corporations The third type of independent agency is a government

corporation. **Government corporations** are organized and run like businesses but are owned in whole or in part by the federal government. Congress generally creates them to achieve a public goal that private businesses may not be able to address for a big enough profit. An example of a government corporation is the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Its goal is to see that all areas of the country have affordable and equal mail services.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What is the purpose of independent agencies?

Power and Accountability in the Federal Bureaucracy (p. 204)

There are many tools in place to ensure the accountability, or answerability, of the federal bureaucracy. The president has

appointment power for top officials. Committees and subcommittees in Congress monitor agencies' activities and can cut their funds, if necessary. Congress has also passed some laws, including the Administrative Procedure Act, to ensure that agencies are accountable. This law sets clear guidelines for agency rule making.

One danger that can occur is that agencies, their congressional oversight committees, and interest groups form an unofficial alliance with one another to achieve certain goals. This is not as common today because issues are so complex, and many different sides of an issue are competing for influences.

Reading Check Summarizing What are some of the ways independent agencies are held accountable?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

1. **Recall** How many executive departments are there today?
2. **Recall** Which department has the largest budget?
3. **Define** What are **independent executive agencies, independent regulatory commissions, and government corporations**?
4. **Explain** How are independent agencies held accountable?