Gehred on Chervinsky, 'The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution'

Review published on Saturday, February 19, 2022


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57010

The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution, by Lindsay M. Chervinsky, is the first book published on the history of the American cabinet since 1912. Unlike the earlier work, which compared the legislative origins of George Washington's cabinet to the British institution, Chervinsky's book uses specific examples from Washington's military and presidential career to examine how he shaped his cabinet and set a precedent for presidential counsel within the executive branch. In the process, she demonstrates "how George Washington and his cabinet asserted presidential prerogative, claimed authority over diplomatic and domestic issues, and rejected challenges from states and Congress that aimed to diminish executive authority" (p. 9).

Chervinsky does not claim to have unearthed any new incident that revolutionizes our understanding of the cabinet. Instead, she examines well-studied moments in American history, largely drawing on primary sources, with a focus on how these events shaped the cabinet and vice versa. By doing so, she demonstrates that while much scholarship assumes "that the cabinet existed from day one of Washington's presidency or that its development was inevitable," this was not the case (p. 10).

In her first chapter, "Forged in War," Chervinsky gives a brief overview of Washington's military experience. She uses specific examples from the Revolutionary War, such as the Battle of Harlem Heights, to demonstrate how Washington used councils of war to make difficult decisions. As Chervinsky argues, Washington's "presidential leadership cannot be understood without first analyzing his military experience" (p. 16). When necessary, she provides maps to aid in visualizing military engagements. Later in the work, Chervinsky persuasively argues that Washington's use of war councils directly influenced his management of the cabinet; she states that "he convened councils and the cabinet for similar reasons: to provide advice, to offer political cover for controversial decisions, and to build consensus among subordinates for one of his policies" (p. 164).

Washington first met most of the men whom he later chose for his cabinet during the Revolutionary War, and Chervinsky provides a brief biographical introduction to each of these men in chapter 2, "The Original Team of Rivals." In most cases, she also includes portraits of the men in question.

The next three chapters provide the backdrop for the creation of the cabinet during Washington's administration. In chapter 3, "Setting the Stage," Chervinsky digs into the history of the British cabinet to explain why Americans were skeptical of the institution: "they knew that a cabinet existed,
and the term 'cabinet' pervaded the political lexicon, but many colonists distrusted an institution they could not see or scrutinize" (p. 102). This leads readers directly into chapter 4, “The Early Years,” which describes the tense political scene Washington entered at the beginning of his presidency. Understanding the popular distrust of cabinets and advisors to the king, Washington, as Chervinsky shows, initially attempted to avoid creating a cabinet at all. However, after becoming frustrated with the inability of Congress to give him timely advice, and the refusal of the Supreme Court to do so, he eventually decided to create a group of advisors similar to his war councils. Chervinsky describes how Washington chose and organized his cabinet in chapter 5, “The Cabinet Emerges.”

The final three chapters before the conclusion describe how the newly assembled cabinet advised Washington through three significant moments in his administration. First, in chapter 6, "A Foreign Challenge," Chervinsky discusses Citizen Genet's challenges to Washington's authority and the budding disagreements between cabinet members Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. In chapter 7, “A Domestic Threat,” Chervinsky describes the Whiskey Rebellion from the perspective of the cabinet and Henry Knox's failure to assist Washington in military action, which drew a wedge in their formerly trusting relationship. Finally, in chapter 8, "A Cabinet in Crisis," Chervinsky discusses the Jay Treaty and its explosive consequences on Washington's cabinet, including the scandalous and public resignation of Secretary of State Edmund Randolph. In an epilogue, Chervinsky describes how John Adams and Jefferson both attempted to follow Washington's precedent for managing a cabinet, with varying degrees of success. She concludes that "Washington shaped the cabinet to serve his needs as president and left a legacy in which the president would select his own advisors and determine how they would interact" (p. 322).

While Chervinsky never goes so far as to give Washington sole credit for inventing advisory councils (she points out that his first experience with war councils was under the British, during the French and Indian War, for example, [p. 30]), there are certain moments in the book when one might be left with this impression. In her introduction, Chervinsky argues that "Washington designed the cabinet to provide advice and support during crucial diplomatic crises and constitutional conundrums," as though he designed the cabinet from scratch (p. 5). In chapter 4, she emphasizes that "the Constitution offered scant instructions and there was no precedent for Washington to follow" (p. 162). While it is true that Washington had no legal precedent to follow for his cabinet, in chapter 3, Chervinsky provides a strong description of the British cabinets and Privy Councils from whose examples Washington might have drawn. It would have been interesting in later chapters to go into more detail on how these examples shaped Washington's cabinet, intentionally or not.

The first half of the book sets up the necessary introduction and context to the cabinet, but it is in the final three chapters that Chervinsky is most able to clearly demonstrate her argument. Washington's conflict with Citizen Genet, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Jay Treaty are far from understudied, but Chervinsky's cabinet-centered perspective adds a new and valuable dimension to our understanding of the events. Chervinsky's ability to provide a clear and concise summary of these historical moments while maintaining her focus on the cabinet and her central argument is impressive. Through her examples one can see how Washington called on his cabinet for advice while striving to stay within his constitutional bounds and how the strong personalities and different backgrounds of the men in his cabinet shaped his decisions. It is clear from his actions during these challenges that Washington wanted a strong executive branch and that he called on his military experience to effectively wrangle his sometimes unruly cabinet. Chervinsky's writing style is both scholarly and
readable, which should appeal both to an academic audience and to history enthusiasts in general. *The Cabinet* is a well-written and much-needed addition to our understanding of the early American Republic.


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