Secretaries of Defense

1947 - 2019

Historical Office
Office of the Secretary of Defense

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"The Secretary of Defense's primary role is to ensure the national security . . . [and] it is one of the more difficult jobs anywhere in the world. He has to be a mini-Secretary of State, a procurement expert, a congressional relations expert. He has to understand the budget process. And he should have some operational knowledge."

Frank C. Carlucci
former Secretary of Defense

Prepared by Dr. Shannon E. Mohan, Historian
Dr. Erin R. Mahan, Chief Historian

James V. Forrestal is sworn in as the first Secretary of Defense, September 1947. (OSD Historical Office)

Secretary of Defense Neil H. McElroy briefs the press. (OSD Historical Office)

Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford's last day in the Pentagon. (OSD Historical Office)

Historical Origins of the Secretary of Defense

The 1947 National Security Act (P.L. 80-253) created the position of Secretary of Defense with authority to establish general policies and programs for the National Military Establishment. Under the law, the Secretary of Defense served as the principal assistant to the President in all matters relating to national security.

The 1949 National Security Act Amendments (P.L. 81-216) redefined the Secretary of Defense's role as the President's principal assistant in all matters relating to the Department of Defense and gave him full direction, authority, and control over the Department.

Under the 1947 law and the 1949 Amendments, the Secretary was appointed from civilian life provided he had not been on active duty as a commissioned officer within ten years of his nomination.

In order for General George C. Marshall to serve as Secretary of Defense in 1950, Congress passed P.L. 81-788 waiving the restriction against nominating an active-duty commissioned officer. This law was only effective for the duration of General Marshall's term as Secretary. General James Mattis received a similar waiver through P.L. 115-2 in 2017.

Several Defense Department reorganization plans, including Reorganization Plan No. 6 (1953), the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 (P.L. 85-599), and the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-433), strengthened the Secretary of Defense's authority.

Public Law 110-181, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008, amended the eligibility requirements for the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense. The Secretary and Deputy may not have been on active duty as commissioned officers within seven years of their nominations.

Secretaries of Defense

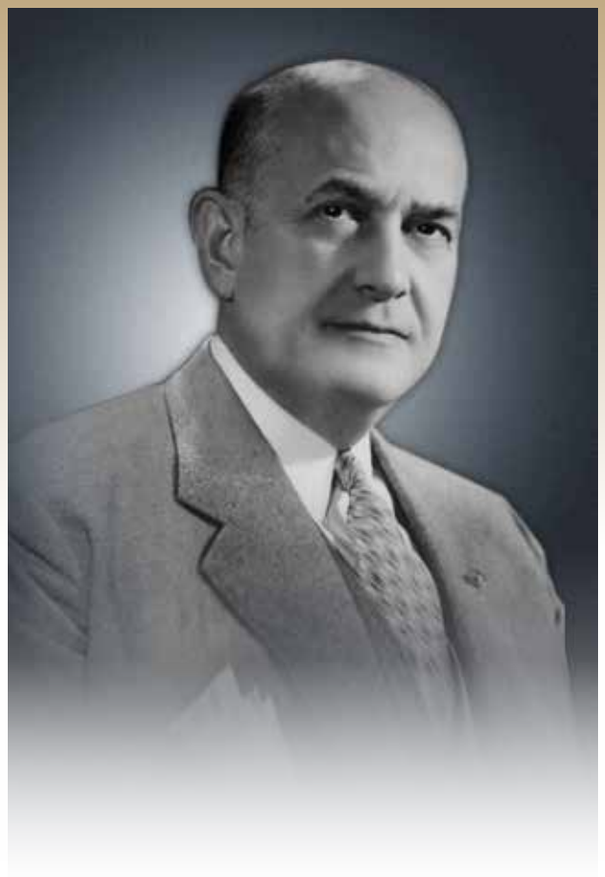
1947 - 2019

James V. Forrestal

1st Secretary of Defense

17 September 1947 – 28 March 1949

- Attended Princeton University
- Served in the U.S. Naval Reserve, 1917 – 1919
- Investment Banker, Dillon, Read and Company, 1916 –1917; 1919 –1940
- Special Assistant to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940
- Under Secretary of the Navy, 1940 –1944
- Secretary of the Navy, 1944 –1947
- Died, 22 May 1949

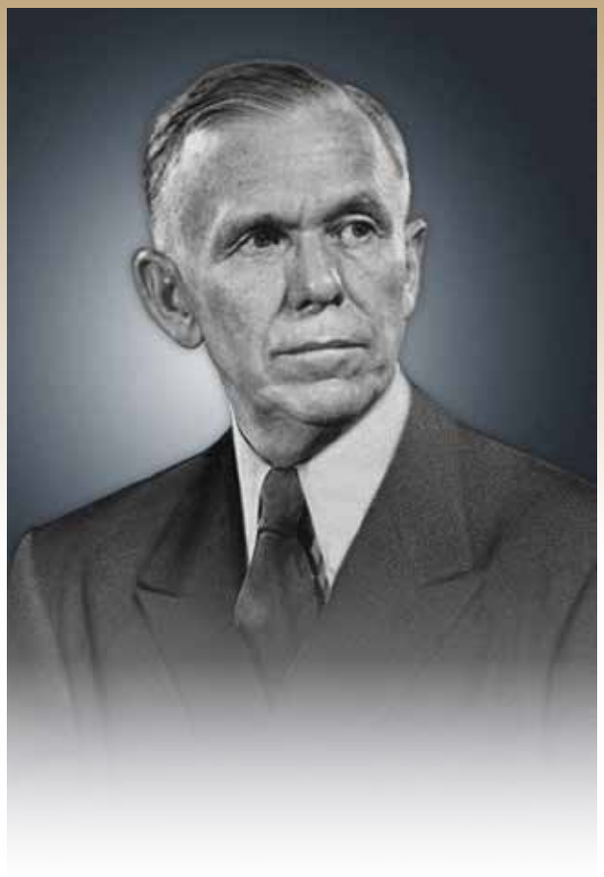


Louis A. Johnson

2nd Secretary of Defense

28 March 1949–19 September 1950

- LL.B., University of Virginia (1912)
- Founding partner, Steptoe & Johnson, 1912
- Delegate, Virginia House of Delegates, 1916–1917
- Served in the U.S. Army, 1917–1919
- Assistant Secretary of War, 1937–1940
- Practiced law, 1940–1949
- President Roosevelt's personal representative to India, 1942
- Died, 24 April 1966



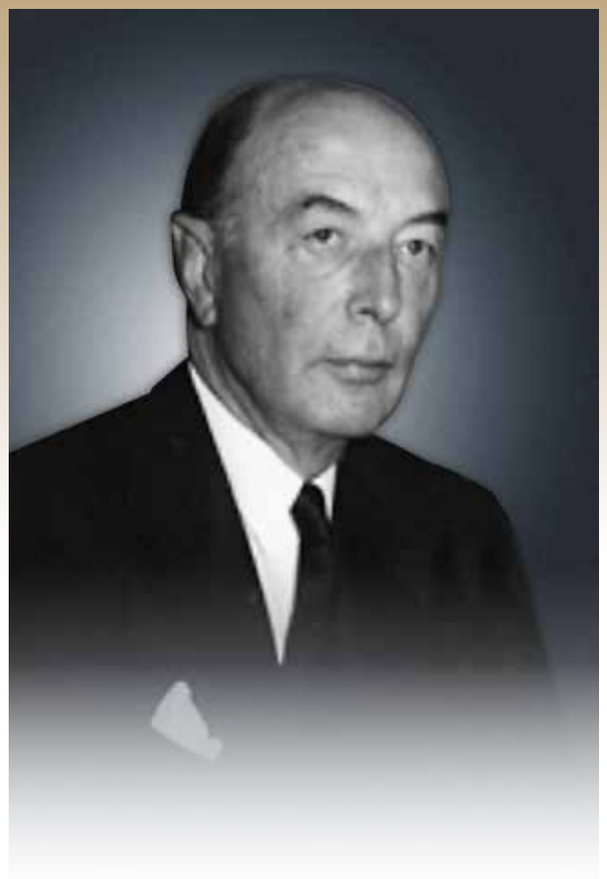
George C. Marshall

3rd Secretary of Defense

21 September 1950–12 September 1951

- Diploma, Virginia Military Institute (1901)
- Commissioned second lieutenant, U.S. Army, 1902
- Served in the Philippines and U.S. posts, 1902–1916
- Assistant Chief of Staff, American Expeditionary Force, France, 1917–1918
- Aide-de-Camp to Gen. John J. Pershing, 1919–1924
- Commanding Officer, 15th Infantry, Tientsin, China, 1924–1927
- Assistant Chief of Staff, War Plans Division; Deputy Chief of Staff, War Department, 1938–1939
- Army Chief of Staff, 1939–1945
- Special Representative of the President to China, 1945–1946
- Promoted to General of the Army, 1946
- Secretary of State, 1947–1949
- President, American National Red Cross, 1949–1950
- Died, 16 October 1959

Truman Administration



Robert A. Lovett

4th Secretary of Defense

17 September 1951–20 January 1953

- B.A., Yale (1918)
- Served in the U.S. Navy, 1917–1919
- Partner, Brown Brothers Harriman and Company, 1926–1940; 1946–1947; 1949–1950
- Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, 1940–1941
- Assistant to the Secretary of War for Air, 1941–1945
- Under Secretary of State, 1947–1949
- Deputy Secretary of Defense, 4 October 1950–16 September 1951
- Died, 7 May 1986

Eisenhower Administration

Charles E. Wilson

5th Secretary of Defense

28 January 1953–8 October 1957

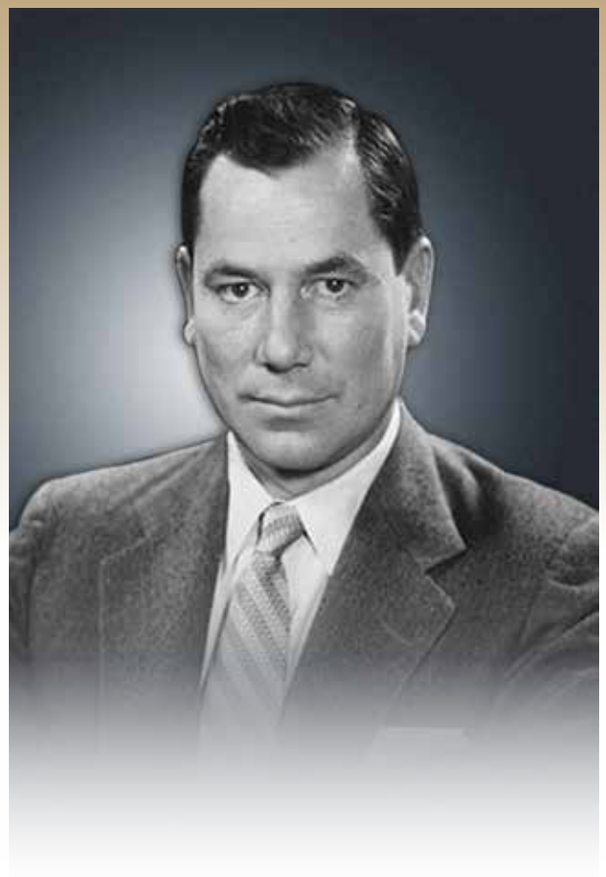
- E.E., Carnegie Institute of Technology (1909)
- Engineer, Westinghouse Electric Company, 1909–1919
- Chief Engineer; General Manager, Remy Electric, 1919–1924; 1925
- President and General Manager, Delco-Remy, 1926–1928
- Vice President, General Motors, 1929–1939
- Executive Vice President, General Motors, 1939–1941
- President, General Motors, 1941–1953
- Died, 26 September 1961

Neil H. McElroy

6th Secretary of Defense

9 October 1957–1 December 1959

- B.A., Harvard University (1925)
- Staff member, Advertising Department, Proctor and Gamble, 1925–1929
- Management positions, Proctor and Gamble, 1929–1948
- President, Proctor and Gamble, 1948–1957
- Chairman, White House Conference on Education, 1954–1955
- Chairman of the Board, Proctor and Gamble, 1959–1972
- Died, 30 November 1972

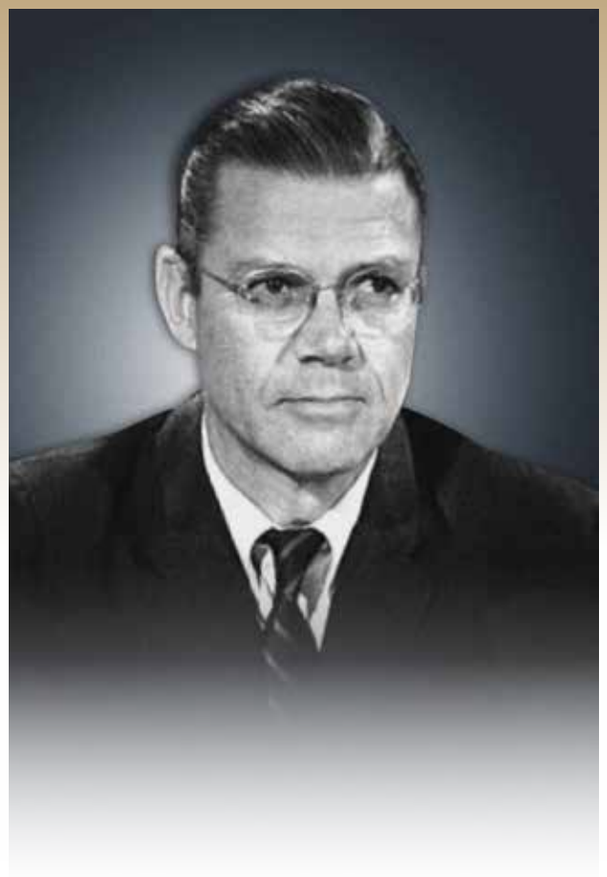


Thomas S. Gates, Jr.

7th Secretary of Defense

2 December 1959–20 January 1961

- B.A., University of Pennsylvania (1928)
- Partner, Drexel and Company, 1940
- Served in the U.S. Naval Reserve, 1942–1945
- Under Secretary of the Navy, 1953–1957
- Secretary of the Navy, 1957–1959
- Deputy Secretary of Defense, 8 June 1959–1 December 1959
- Chief, U.S. Liaison Office to the People's Republic of China, 1976–1977
- Died, 25 March 1983

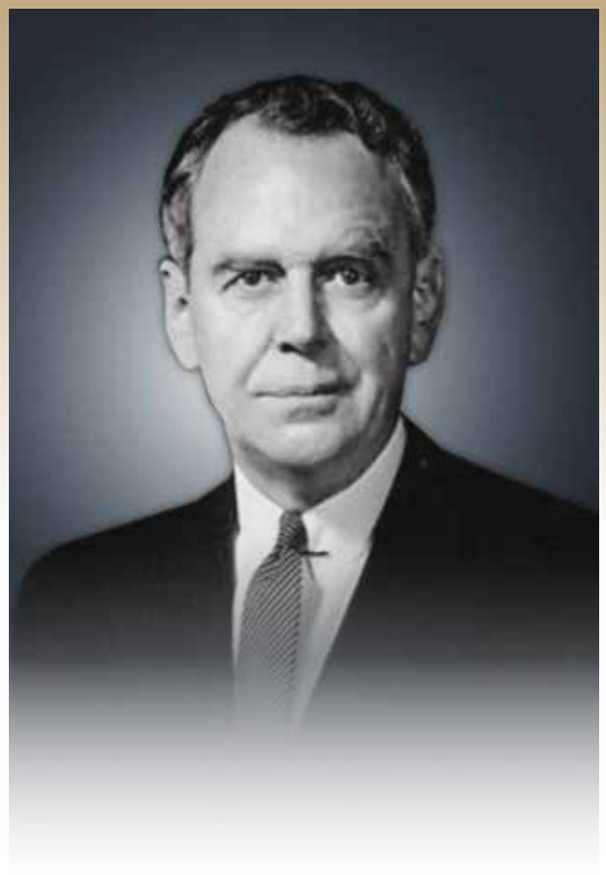


Robert S. McNamara

8th Secretary of Defense

21 January 1961–29 February 1968

- B.A., University of California at Berkeley (1937); M.B.A., Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration (1939)
- Faculty, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, 1940–1943
- Served in the U.S. Army Air Forces, 1943–1946
- Management positions, Ford Motor Company, 1946–1960
- President, Ford Motor Company, 1960–1961
- President, World Bank, 1968–1981
- Died, 6 July 2009



Clark M. Clifford

9th Secretary of Defense

1 March 1968–20 January 1969

- LL.B., Washington University (1928)
- Practiced law in St. Louis, 1928–1943
- Served in the U.S. Naval Reserve, 1943–1946
- Special Counsel to the President, 1946–1950
- Senior partner, Clifford & Miller, 1950–1968
- Member and Chairman, Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 1961–1968
- Senior partner, Clifford & Warnke, 1969–1991
- Died, 10 October 1998

Melvin R. Laird

10th Secretary of Defense

22 January 1969–29 January 1973

- B.A., Carleton College (1944)
- Served in the U.S. Navy, 1942–1946
- Wisconsin State Senator, 1946–1952
- U.S. Representative from Wisconsin, 1953–1969
- Counselor to the President for Domestic Affairs, 1973–1974
- Senior counselor for national and international affairs, Reader's Digest Association, 1974–2016
- Died, 16 November 2016

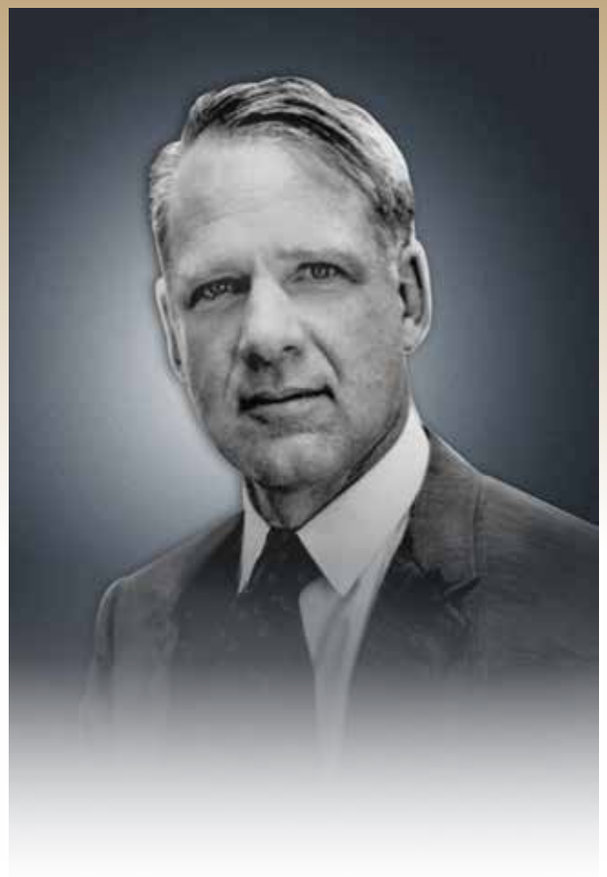
Elliot L. Richardson

11th Secretary of Defense

30 January 1973–24 May 1973

- A.B., Harvard College (1941); LL.B., Harvard Law School (1947)
- Served in the U.S. Army, 1942–1945
- Practiced law, 1947–1953; 1955–1956; 1961–1964
- Assistant Secretary for Legislation, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1957–1959; Acting Secretary, 1958
- U.S. Attorney, Department of Justice, District of Massachusetts, 1959–1961
- Lt. Governor; Attorney General, State of Massachusetts, 1965–1967; 1967–1969
- Under Secretary of State, 1969–1970
- Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1970–1973
- United States Attorney General, 1973
- Ambassador to Great Britain, 1975–1976
- Secretary of Commerce, 1976–1977
- Died, 31 December 1999

Nixon/Ford Administrations



James R. Schlesinger

12th Secretary of Defense

2 July 1973–19 November 1975

- B.A. (1950), M.A. (1952), Ph.D. (1956), Harvard University
- Professor of Economics, University of Virginia, 1955–1963
- Senior staff member; Director of Strategic Studies, RAND, 1963–1969
- Assistant Director, Bureau of the Budget, 1969–1971
- Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission, 1971–1973
- Director, Central Intelligence Agency, 1973–1977
- Secretary of Energy, 1977–1979
- Died, 27 March 2014

Ford Administration

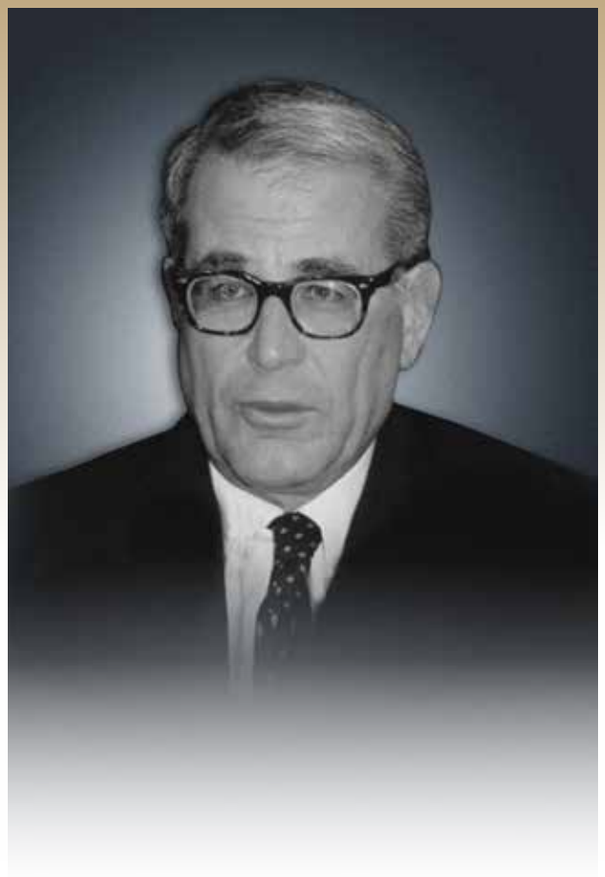
Donald H. Rumsfeld

13th Secretary of Defense

20 November 1975–20 January 1977

- B.A., Princeton University (1954)
- Served in the U.S. Navy, 1954–1957
- Administrative Assistant to Rep. Dave Dennison (R-OH), 1958–1959
- Staff Assistant to Rep. Robert Griffin (R-MI), 1959–1960
- U.S. Representative from Illinois, 1962–1969
- Assistant to the President; Director, Office of Economic Opportunity, 1969–1970
- Counselor to the President, 1970–1971
- Director, Cost of Living Council, 1971–1973
- U.S. Ambassador to NATO, 1973–1974
- White House Chief of Staff, 1974–1975

Carter Administration



Harold Brown

14th Secretary of Defense

21 January 1977–20 January 1981

- A.B. (1945), A.M. (1946), Ph.D. (1949), Columbia University
- Lecturer; research scientist, Columbia University, Stevens Institute of Technology; University of California Radiation Laboratory, 1947–1952
- Staff member; Director, Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, 1952–1959; 1960
- Director of Defense, Research and Engineering, 1961–1965
- Secretary of the Air Force, 1965–1969
- President, California Institute of Technology, 1969–1977
- Distinguished Visiting Professor; Chairman, Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins University Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 1981–1984; 1984–1992
- Counselor, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1992–2019
- Died, 4 January 2019

Reagan Administration

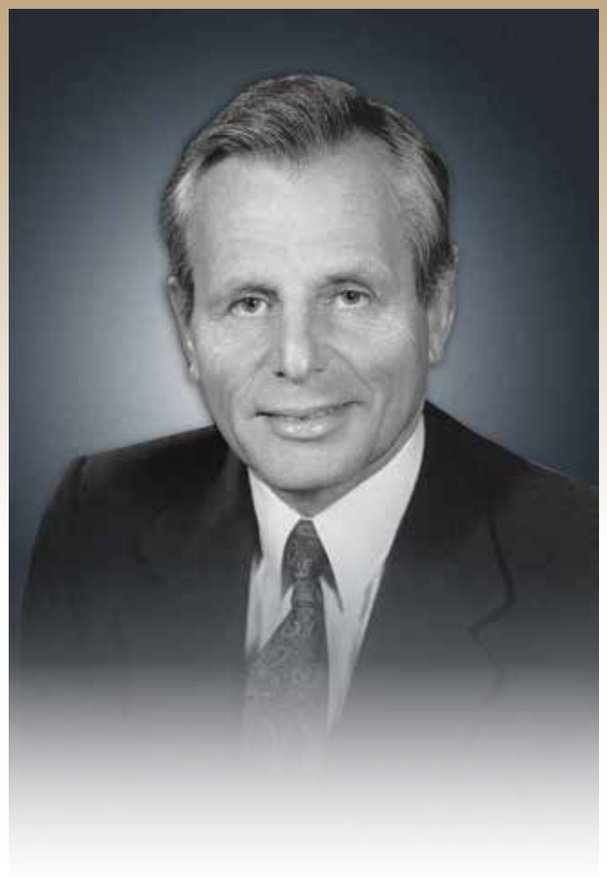
Caspar W. Weinberger

15th Secretary of Defense

21 January 1981–23 November 1987

- A.B., Harvard College (1938); LL.B., Harvard Law School (1941)
- Served in the U.S. Army, 1941–1945
- Law clerk, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 1945–1947
- Practiced law, 1947–1969; 1959–1969
- California State Assemblyman, 1952–1958
- Vice Chairman; Chairman, Republican State Central Committee of California, 1960–1962; 1962–1964
- Chairman, Commission on California State Government Organization and Economy, 1967–1968
- Director of Finance, State of California, 1968–1970
- Chairman, Federal Trade Commission, 1970
- Deputy Director; Director, Office of Management and Budget, 1970–1972; 1972–1973
- Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973–1975
- Publisher; Chairman, *Forbes*, 1989–2006; 1993–2006
- Died, 28 March 2006

Reagan Administration



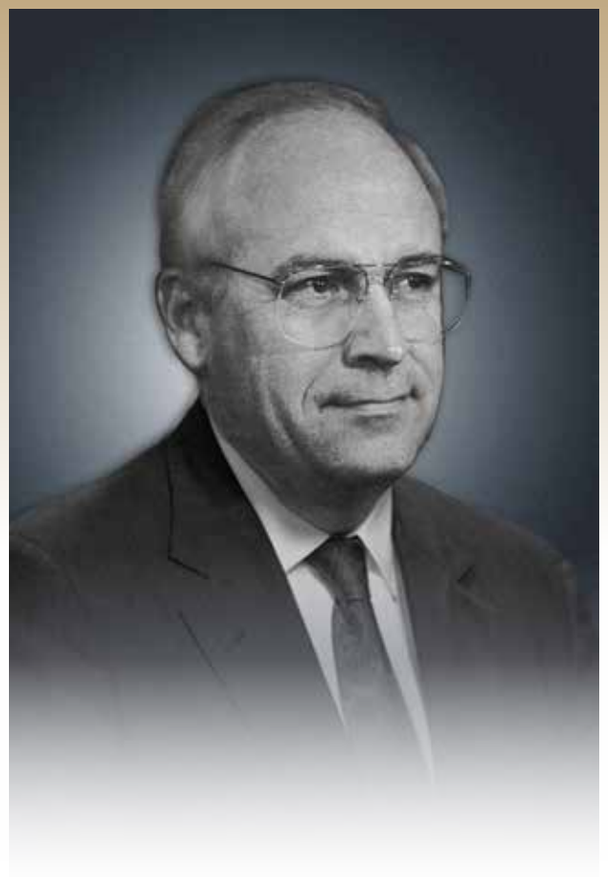
Frank C. Carlucci

16th Secretary of Defense

23 November 1987–20 January 1989

- A.B., Princeton (1952)
- Served in the U.S. Navy, 1952–1954
- U.S. Foreign Service Officer, Department of State, 1956–1969
- Assistant Director for Operations; Director, Office of Economic Opportunity, 1969–1970; 1971
- Associate Director and Deputy Director, Office of Management and Budget, 1971–1972
- Under Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1972–1974
- U.S. Ambassador to Portugal, 1974–1978
- Deputy Director, Central Intelligence Agency, 1978–1981
- Deputy Secretary of Defense, 4 February 1981–31 December 1982
- Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1987
- Managing Director; Chairman; Chairman Emeritus, Carlyle Group, 1989; 1993; 2003
- Died, 3 June 2018

Bush Administration

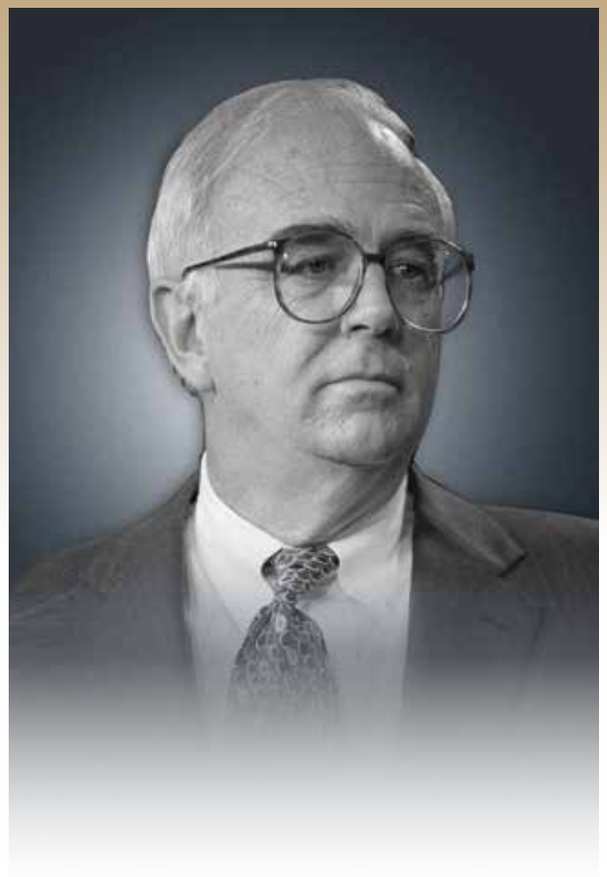


Richard B. Cheney

17th Secretary of Defense

21 March 1989–20 January 1993

- B.A. (1965); M.A. (1966), University of Wyoming
- Joseph E. Davies Congressional Fellow, 1968–1969
- Special Assistant to the Director of Economic Opportunity, 1969–1970
- Deputy to White House Counselor Donald Rumsfeld, 1970–1971
- Assistant Director for Operations, Cost of Living Council, 1971–1973
- Vice President, Bradley, Woods and Company, Inc., 1973–1974
- Deputy Assistant to the President, 1974–1975
- Assistant to the President, White House Chief of Staff, 1975–1977
- U.S. Representative from Wyoming, 1978–1989
- Republican Whip, U.S. House of Representatives, 1988
- Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute, 1993–1995
- Vice President of the United States, 2001–2009

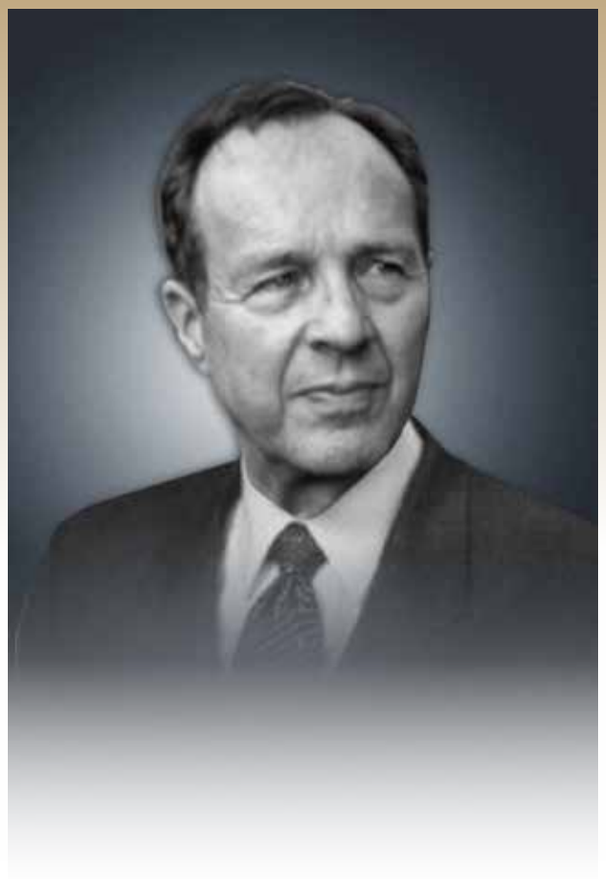


Leslie Aspin

18th Secretary of Defense

20 January 1993–3 February 1994

- B.A., Yale University (1960); B.A., M.A., Oxford University (1962); Ph.D., MIT (1966)
- Served in the U.S. Army, 1966–1968
- Assistant Professor of Economics, Marquette University, 1969–1971
- U.S. Representative from Wisconsin, 1971–1993
- Distinguished Professor of International Policy, Marquette University, 1994–1995
- Member, Commission on Roles and Missions, 1995
- Chairman, President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 1995
- Chairman, Roles and Capabilities of the Intelligence Community, 1995
- Died, 21 May 1995



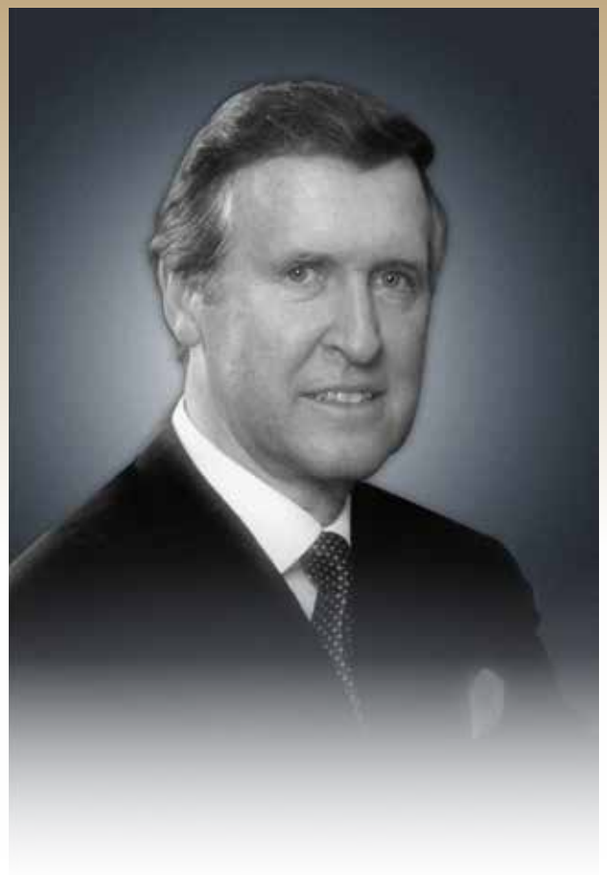
William J. Perry

19th Secretary of Defense

3 February 1994–23 January 1997

- B.S. (1949), M.S. (1950), Stanford University; Ph.D., Penn State University (1957)
- Served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1946–1947
- Served in the U.S. Army Reserve, 1950–1955
- Laboratory Director, General Telephone and Electronics, 1954–1964
- Founder; President, ESL, Inc., 1964–1977
- Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, 1977–1981
- Deputy Secretary of Defense, 5 March 1993–3 February 1994
- Michael and Barbara Berberian Professor Emeritus, Stanford University
- Senior Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute; Hoover Institution
- Director, Preventive Defense Project
- Founder, William J. Perry Project, 2013

Clinton Administration



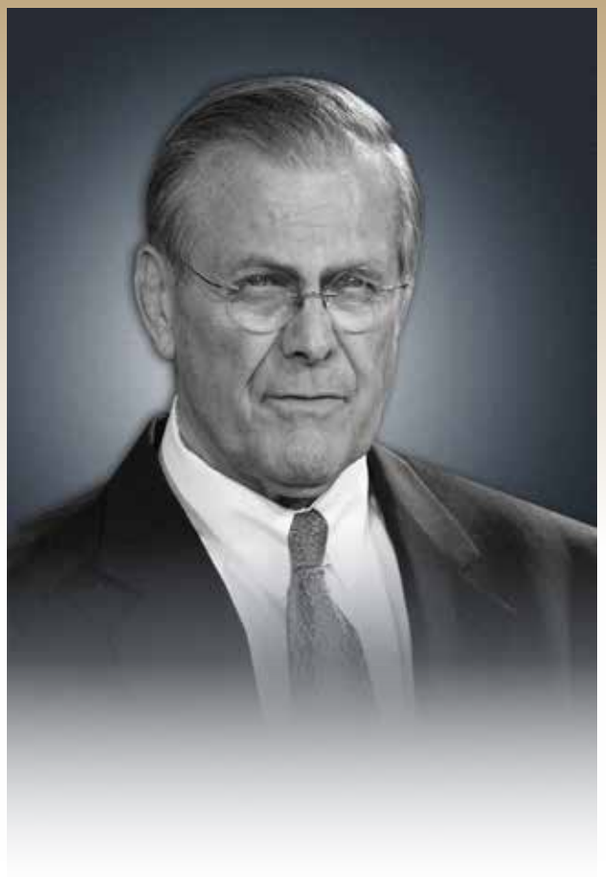
William S. Cohen

20th Secretary of Defense

24 January 1997–20 January 2001

- A.B., Bowdoin College (1962); LL.B., Boston University School of Law (1965)
- City Councilman, Bangor, Maine, 1969–1971
- Mayor, Bangor, Maine, 1971–1972
- U.S. Representative from Maine, 1973–1979
- U.S. Senator from Maine, 1979–1997
- Chairman & CEO, The Cohen Group, 2001–

Bush Administration



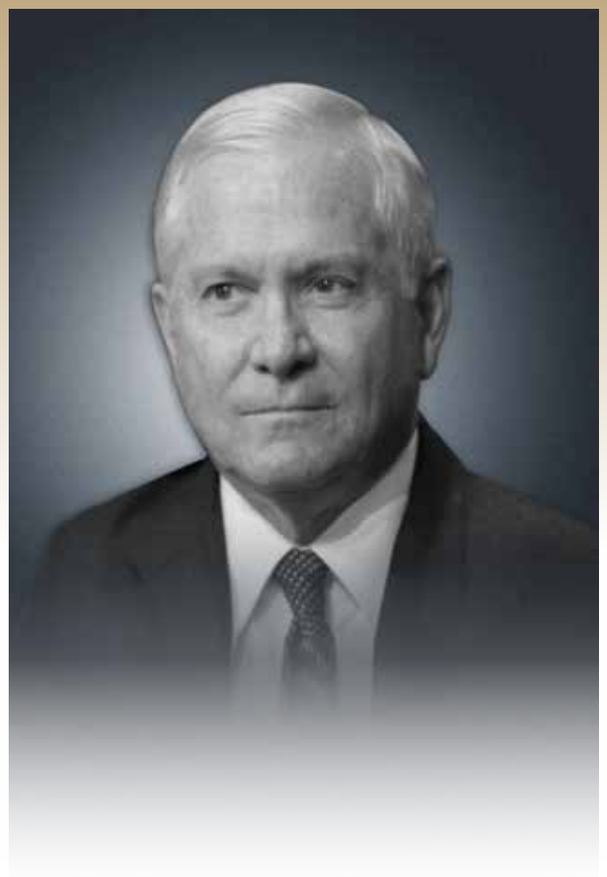
Donald H. Rumsfeld

21st Secretary of Defense

20 January 2001–18 December 2006

- White House Chief of Staff, 1974–1975
- Secretary of Defense, 1975–1977
- CEO; President; Chairman, G.D. Searle & Co., 1977–1985
- Chairman and CEO, General Instrument Corporation, 1990–1993
- Chairman of the Board, Gilead Sciences, Inc., 1988–2001
- Founder, Rumsfeld Foundation, 2006

Bush/Obama Administrations



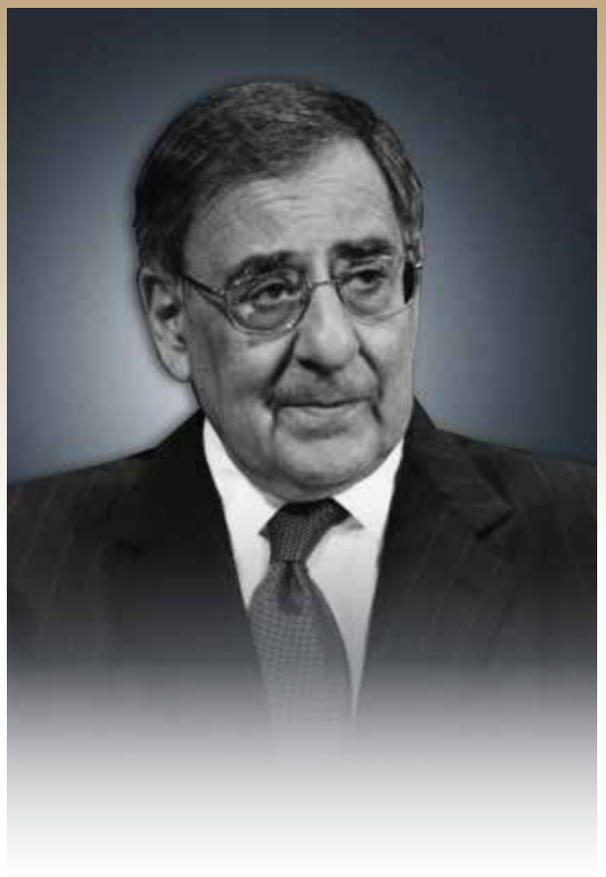
Robert M. Gates

22nd Secretary of Defense

18 December 2006–30 June 2011

- B.A., College of William and Mary (1965); M.A., Indiana University (1966); Ph.D., Georgetown University (1974)
- Served in the U.S. Air Force, 1966–1968
- CIA staff member for USSR and Europe, National Security Council, 1974–1976
- CIA staff member, Center for Policy Support Directorate of Intelligence, 1976–1977
- CIA Special Assistant to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, 1977–1979
- Intelligence official, Central Intelligence Agency, 1980–1986
- Deputy Director, Central Intelligence Agency, 1986–1989
- Deputy National Security Advisor, 1989–1991
- Director of Central Intelligence, 1991–1993
- Interim Dean, George Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, 1999–2001
- President, Texas A&M University, 2002–2006
- Chancellor, College of William and Mary, 2012–

Obama Administration

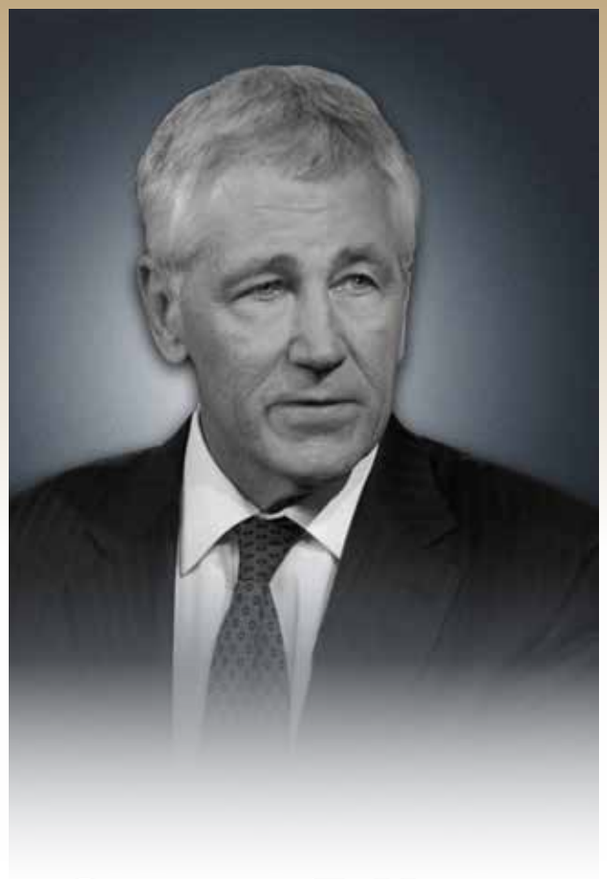


Leon E. Panetta

23rd Secretary of Defense

1 July 2011–26 February 2013

- B.A., (1960); J.D., Santa Clara University (1963)
- Served in the U.S. Army, 1964–1966
- U.S. Representative from California, 1977–1993
- Director, Office of Management and Budget, 1993–1994
- White House Chief of Staff, 1994–1997
- Co-director, Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy, California State University, 1998–2009; 2013–
- Director of Central Intelligence, 2009–2011



Charles T. Hagel

24th Secretary of Defense

27 February 2013 –17 February 2015

- Brown Institute for Radio and TV Broadcasting (1966), B.A., University of Nebraska (1971)
- Served in the U.S. Army, 1967–1968
- Deputy Administrator, Veterans Administration, 1981–1982
- Co-founder, Director, and Executive Vice President, Vanguard Cellular System, 1985–1987
- President, USO, 1987–1990
- President, McCarthy and Company, 1992–1996
- U.S. Senator from Nebraska, 1997–2009
- Co-chair, President's Intelligence Advisory Board, 2009–2013
- Professor, Georgetown University, 2009–2013
- RAND Corporation Board of Trustees

Ashton B. Carter

25th Secretary of Defense

17 February 2015 – 20 January 2017

- B.A., Yale (1976); D.Phil., Oxford University (1979)
- Director, Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1990–1993
- Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, 1993–1996
- Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, 2009–2011
- Deputy Secretary of Defense, 6 October 2011–3 December 2013
- Senior Executive, John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, Inc., 2014
- Belfer Professor of Technology and Global Affairs; director, Belfer Center, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2017–
- Innovation fellow, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2017–

James N. Mattis

26th Secretary of Defense

20 January 2017–31 December 2018

- B.A., Central Washington University (1971); M.A., National War College (1994)
- Commissioned a Marine Second Lieutenant, 1972
- Commander, 1st Marine Division, 2002–2004
- Commander, Marine Corps Combat Development, Quantico, 2005–2006
- Commanding General, I Marine Expeditionary Force; Commander, U.S. Marine Forces Central Command, 2006–2007
- Commander, U.S. Joint Forces Command; NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, 2007–2010
- Commander, U.S. Central Command, 2010–2013
- Davies Family Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Hoover Institution, 2016–2017

Mark T. Esper

27th Secretary of Defense

23 July 2019-Present

- B.S., U.S. Military Academy at West Point (1986); MPA, Harvard University (1995); PhD, George Washington University (2008)
- Served in the Army; District of Columbia Army National Guard; Army Reserve, 1986-2007
- Senior Staff for International Affairs, National Security, U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1998-2002
- Policy Director, U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, 2001-2002
- Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy, 2002-2004
- Policy Director for National Security Affairs, Senate Majority Leader William Frist, 2004-2006
- Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President of Defense and International Affairs, Aerospace Industries Association, 2006-2007
- National policy director for Presidential Candidate Senator Fred Thompson, 2007-2008
- Vice President; Executive Vice President; Vice President for Europe and Eurasian Affairs, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2008-2010
- Vice President of Government Relations, Raytheon, 2010-2017
- Secretary of the Army, 2017-2019
- Acting Secretary of Defense, June 24- July 15, 2019

Secretaries of Defense Demographics

Number of Confirmed Secretaries since the post was created in 1947: 27

Donald H. Rumsfeld became the first individual to hold the position twice

Average age of the Secretary when entering office: 57 years old

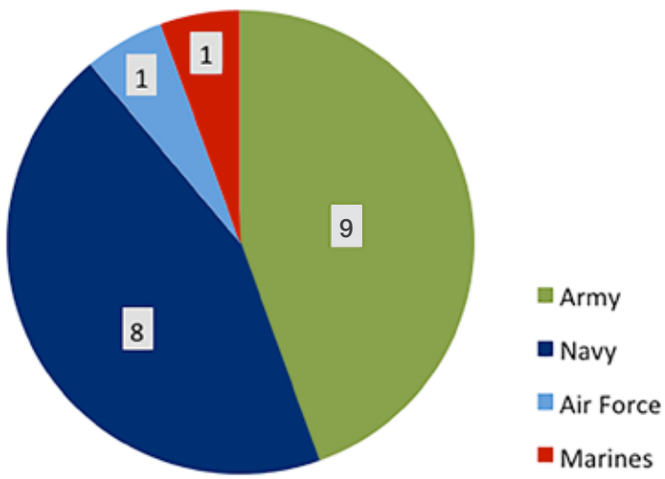
Youngest Secretary of Defense: Donald Rumsfeld: 43 years old when sworn in on 20 November 1975

Oldest Secretary of Defense: Leon Panetta: 73 years old when sworn in on 1 July 2011

Average tenure for 26 Secretaries of Defense who completed their terms in office: 997 days or 33 months or 2.7 years

Four longest tenured Secretaries:
Robert S. McNamara, 2,596 days
Caspar W. Weinberger, 2,498 days
Donald H. Rumsfeld (2001–2006), 2,159 days
Charles E. Wilson, 1,715 days

Military Service: 19 of 27 Secretaries served in the Armed Forces



History of the Positional Colors for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Section 202(c) of the 1947 National Security Act directed the Secretary of Defense to "cause a seal of office to be made for the National Military Establishment, of such design as the President shall approve, and judicial notice shall be taken thereof."

In October 1947, President Harry S. Truman approved the design for the seal for the National Military Establishment and the flag for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The emblem of the American eagle facing to its right with horizontal wings, clutching three crossed arrows and bearing a red, white and blue shield, was part of the design for the seal for the National Military Establishment and the re-designated Department of Defense in 1949.

The Secretary of Defense's flag is medium blue with the embroidered eagle in its center and with a white, five-pointed star, with one point upward in each of the four corners. The flag is trimmed on three edges with a knotted fringe of white silk. Cord and tassel are of blue and white strands.

According to the 1947 press release from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the eagle facing to its right indicates honor. "The eagle is defending the United States, represented by the shield of thirteen pieces. The thirteen pieces are joined together by the blue chief, representing the Congress. The three arrows are collectively symbolic of the three component parts of the National Military Establishment."

The Heraldic Section of the Office of the Quartermaster General of the Army, under the supervision of Arthur E. DuBois, Mrs. James Forrestal, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air John Nicholas Brown, Miss Elizabeth Will of the Heraldic Section, and personnel in the Office of the Secretary of Defense contributed to the development of the basic theme, color scheme, and preparation of the final designs for the seal and the Secretary's flag.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara briefs the press, June 1965. (DoD)

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outside of his Pentagon office, January 1977. (DoD)

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta pauses during his testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, October 2011. (DoD)

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has lunch with chief petty officers on the USS Tennessee *at Naval Base Kings Bay, GA, July 9, 2014. (DoD)*

Secretary of Defense Ash Carter looks at Hawaiian scenery during a visit to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, September 30, 2016. (DoD)

Secretary of Defense James Mattis hosts a press conference at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, February 16, 2017. (DoD)

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