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The Department of State

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The Department of State

Most people know of the workings of their Federal government because of mail service, payment of income taxes, visits to national parks, military service, and reading about the FBI in the newspapers. However, the Department of State, the oldest department of the Federal government, is probably less well known than almost any other government agency.

Most Americans rarely have had any firsthand contacts with the State Department. Comparatively few people have needed passports to travel abroad or have availed themselves of assistance from American consulates when stranded in foreign countries. Exporters interested in trade opportunities and others who need the type of information gathered by the Foreign Service are limited in number. Diplomatic relations with other nations are left to the President, the Congress, the Secretary of State, and the Ambassadors.

On July 27, 1789, Congress established the Department of Foreign Affairs with the Secretary

performing those duties given him by the President. Primarily he was responsible for directing United States ministers and consuls abroad and negotiating with other countries or their representatives on foreign affairs matters.

Since 1789 many laws have been passed which affected the Department. The first of these, passed on September 15, 1789, changed the name to the Department of State, which is still used after 167 years. Other laws added to or changed to some extent the responsibilities of the Secretary of State and his staff. Basically, his primary function in the field of foreign affairs has remained the same through the decades. However, the Department of State has at times performed other duties quite unrelated to foreign relations. These have included the issuance of patents, applying the copyright laws, taking the census every ten years, and recording land patents.

Although established in 1789, the Department of State can trace its ancestry back to the Committee of Secret Correspondence. Set up by the Continental Congress in 1775 with Benjamin Franklin as chairman, the Committee's function was to correspond with persons abroad who might be of service to the American colonies in seeking independence.

Thomas Jefferson was the first Secretary of State under George Washington. The beginnings were indeed humble. In addition to himself,

Jefferson's staff consisted of a Chief Clerk, four lesser clerks, and a part-time French translator. The budget for 1790 was a modest request for \$7,963, of which \$691 went for office rent, firewood, newspapers, and stationery. The rest was for salaries.

For many years the growth of the Department was gradual. At the outbreak of the Civil War there were only 28 employees in Washington, exclusive of messengers and watchmen. International problems were not complex enough to require large staffs to keep the President informed on the details of foreign relations. Participation in World War I brought more difficult problems. At the time President Wilson attended the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 the Department had a total of 788 persons on the rolls. Emphasis on foreign affairs decreased during the early 1920's with a comparable decrease in personnel. During the depression years, domestic problems engaged the attention of Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt. With war again imminent, international events during the late 1930's became of greater interest to the United States government, and the Department had a larger task to perform.

The beginnings of the Foreign Service were equally unpretentious. In 1791 the United States had diplomatic representation in five countries — Great Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands — with a budget of \$40,000. In 1790

Jefferson had appointed sixteen consular officers who received their pay from the fees they collected. These consuls furnished the Government with information on all American ships entering the ports of their districts, information on all military preparations and other indications of war, and any political and commercial intelligence thought to be of interest to the United States.

Since then American foreign service personnel have been stationed in more than 850 cities and towns. The list ranges from Aarau to Zanzibar and includes many strange and exotic sounding places such as Cape Gracias á Dios in Nicaragua, Tahiti, and Whitehorse in Yukon Territory.

The total number of posts in existence at any one time has been considerably less, usually not more than 300. Wars, changes in foreign trade, lack of recognition of other nations, different methods of communication and transportation, the changing pattern of immigration, and many other factors have led to the opening and closing of posts. At the present the United States has diplomatic representation in 76 capitals and consular representatives in some 190 other cities.

The position of world leadership in which the United States suddenly found herself following World War II has led to the greatest change in the size, organization, and functions of the Department of State since its beginning. Of necessity, the Department could no longer carry on all as-

pects of foreign relations with only a few hundred people.

The end of World War II found American forces occupying the defeated countries — Germany, Japan, and Austria. The Department established the offices of the High Commissioner for Germany and the Commissioner for Austria and expanded the embassy in Tokyo to assist in, and later direct, the tasks of occupation and the encouragement of democratic forms of government in these countries. In 1945 the United Nations was organized because of a need for closer cooperation among nations. In addition to participation in the UN, the United States is represented at some 300 international conferences every year. The subjects discussed at these meetings range from fishing to cotton seed, from leprosy to labor conditions.

Expanded workloads in the political and economic areas of the Department have been caused by such things as promotion of trade between this country and the rest of the free world, the campaign to weld the anti-Communist governments together, and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In addition, the sharp increase in Americans traveling abroad meant more passports to be issued and more people for whom the consulates would be concerned.

To tell the story of America and democracy to other peoples, the overseas information program

was set up in the State Department in 1946. The best known of these operations is the Voice of America. Equally important are the distribution of books, films, photographs, and exhibits that explain our culture, industry, scientific advancement, and education; the establishment of United States information centers in dozens of cities; and the exchange of many American and foreign students, specialists, and technicians. In August, 1953, President Eisenhower established the United States Information Agency to handle most of the information program. The State Department has continued to be responsible for policy guidance and administrative support.

The Technical Cooperation Administration was created within the State Department in October, 1950, to handle the Point Four program. This program is intended to provide technical assistance to underdeveloped areas throughout the world. From August, 1953, to July, 1955, the program was carried out by the Foreign Operations Administration, becoming the International Cooperation Administration on July 1, 1955.

Thus from 1790 to 1956 the Department of State has grown from a handful of employees and a few posts overseas to a world-wide organization comprised of some 20,000 professional, technical, and administrative personnel, specialists in many subjects, masters of many skills.

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