

# U.S. Secretary of Agriculture

Role in the 21st Century Food System

First in a Series

## USDA Secretary Report Highlights

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was created in 1862, but the position of U.S. Secretary of Agriculture did not attain Cabinet status until nearly three decades later. At that time, half of the nation's workforce was farmers. Today, less than 2 percent is involved in farming.
- USDA Secretary is considered less partisan than other Cabinet positions. The department has a solid reputation among other departments, and is steeped in leadership, tradition and influence. The men who have held the position are highly esteemed.
- Iowa has produced the most Secretaries at four, but the last Iowan to fill the position was Henry A. Wallace during the Depression. Missouri and Nebraska each contributed three Secretaries and several other Midwest states had two. California, as the biggest ag state, has produced only one Secretary.
- The first "watershed moment" of change in the Secretary's position came with Secretary "Tama Jim" Wilson (1897-1913), who served under three presidents and pushed USDA from seed distribution into science and built the office into more of an active role.
- Politics played a role in early Secretary selections. Nearly all of the appointees had served in local, state or even national politics as governors, or in Congress or had other appointments within USDA.
- From the first Secretary named in 1889 through the early 1960s, most of the men appointed were leaders in their fields and held at least an undergraduate college degree. At least five Secretaries taught or held administrative positions at land-grant universities or agricultural experiment stations. Only half of the 15 Secretaries prior to President Kennedy's Administration were full-time farmers or had farm or land holdings.
- Prior to 1933, the Secretary's position was not viewed as controversial. But the appointment of Henry A. Wallace marked the second watershed moment in Secretary history and shifted the Secretary's role from passive and non-intrusive to greater involvement.
- By the 1960s, the resumes of men appointed to the position also changed somewhat. Political service and management capabilities were evident in candidates chosen for the job. While agricultural experience remained in the background of most Secretaries in some form, it was not a prerequisite for selection.
- More Secretaries started coming from Congress than from other areas beginning in the 1970s, which caused difficulty with regard to effective administration. Insiders say such Secretaries were used to negotiating policy, rather than carrying out policy.
- Experts predict future Secretaries will have standing politically with the President's natural constituents, with farmer organizations and commodity groups, as well as major agribusinesses and trade organizations.
- Experts predict the next Secretary will have administrative talent, know production agriculture and issues, and have a vision about USDA's role. Agricultural background may become less important.



## Introduction

The position of U.S. Secretary of Agriculture has a long, rich history that began several years after creation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1862. The department was created by President Abraham Lincoln, "to distribute seeds and agricultural information" to U.S. citizens. Lincoln referred to USDA as the "People's Department" because 90 percent of the population was farmers and farm families who needed "good seed and information to grow crops" for their own food and fiber.

Farmers still require good information, but the landscape of the department that provides it has changed dramatically. USDA did not attain cabinet status until nearly three decades after Lincoln established it. At that time, half of the nation's workforce were farmers. Most farm commodities were used on the farm or sold domestically. Today, more than 100 years after the first Secretary was named, less than 2 percent of the U.S. labor force is involved in farming. Most Americans now live in metropolitan areas of more than one million people. Farm commodities still are used on the farm and sold in domestic markets, but about one-third now is shipped overseas.

USDA still serves farmers' needs, but the department also is responsible for other programs. In fact, about 40 percent of USDA employees work for the U.S. Forest Service, and more than half of the annual budget is spent on domestic food and nutrition programs, such as school lunches and food stamps.

"The constituency remains more 'farmer' than anything, but as Secretary you have to view the needs of the whole department," says John Block, USDA Secretary from 1981-1986. "There are less politics within the Secretary of Agriculture's office than in other Cabinet positions, but still some politics."

Wayne Rasmussen, retired, long-time USDA historian whose first encounter with a USDA Secretary was during Henry A. Wallace's term (1933-1940) notes, "Few Secretaries would tackle conflict with the Forest Service. It was a powerful, semi-independent agency. Similarly, Secretaries have always said they want better nutrition for everyone, but when it came to pushing for programs, there was always more interest in farm programs."

Current USDA Secretary Dan Glickman in a 1995 speech noted, "USDA has an annual budget of some \$63 billion, assets of around \$145 billion, a workforce of about 109,000, and offices in virtually every non-metropolitan county in the U.S. There are only 15 nations with larger budgets," he notes. "If USDA were a private company, it would rank fourth among U.S. corporations—smaller than General Motors, Exxon or Ford, but larger than IBM, General Electric and Wal-Mart. In 1994, USDA spending by state exceeded half-a-billion dollars in 40 of the 50 states! Some 60 percent of

our budget goes to feeding programs. We have a housing loan portfolio of over \$30 billion. We are the largest caretakers of recreation land in the nation.”

### **The Brass Ring**

Long-time USDA staffers say the department has a solid reputation among other departments, and is steeped in leadership, tradition and influence. “With very few exceptions, the men who have served as Secretaries of Agriculture have always tried to do the right thing,” says Neil Harl, Iowa State University economist and Charles F. Curtiss Distinguished Professor in Agriculture.

“Most USDA Secretaries were thought of as top-notch men by other Cabinet officers,” adds Hal Taylor, deputy director of information under Secretary Clifford Hardin (1969-1971). Taylor first went to work at USDA during Ezra Taft Benson’s reign as USDA Secretary (1953-1961). “I know that because I observed most Cabinet officers and Supreme Court members with whomever was USDA Secretary at the time, from Orville Freeman forward.”

Rasmussen says, “Secretaries have always been knowledgeable about their work and given attention to agriculture. They ranked high as people.”

Even after Secretaries leave office, their influence remains powerful within Washington, D.C. For example, during the spring of 2000, eight of the most recent Secretaries, as a group representing both political parties, publicly supported Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status for China because of the benefits PNTR would bring to U.S. agriculture. The endorsement was praised by farm groups and highlighted in several media outlets.

“Secretaries had to get along with leaders from both parties to get good farm legislation passed,” says Rasmussen. “They had to be on reasonable terms with everybody even if agriculture was not in the headlines like other issues.”

That influence comes from USDA’s roles in the past, Taylor explains. “USDA is considered to be an ‘old-line’ agency. Many of the programs now operated by other departments began within USDA,” he says. “USDA also started several managerial approaches, probably even set forth many of the standards by which the OMB (Office of Management and Budget) now operates.”

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Even today, Taylor says USDA officials advise the Secretary of State on activities. “The first head of information for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) came from USDA. For that matter, the idea for EPA originated within USDA, as did the idea of making the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) into a separate agency,” Taylor remembers. “Housing, Energy and many other agencies of government had similar beginnings.”



"Most politicians thought and still think USDA has considerable importance for all people. Politicians understand the importance of food to life and to our economy," Taylor continues. "I always heard that all eventual appointees to be Secretary had more or less indicated early on they wanted the job and wouldn't have necessarily opted for another Cabinet position when they were obviously qualified for Agriculture."

Interestingly, Iowa has produced the most Secretaries at four, although the last Iowan to fill the position was Henry A. Wallace during the Depression. Missouri and Nebraska have both contributed three Secretaries and several other Midwest states have had two. California, the largest agricultural state, has produced only one Secretary, Richard Lyng (1986-1989), although many Californians have filled positions in USDA's top echelon.

"If you look for watershed moments when the role of the Secretary changed, then you have to look first at 'Tama Jim' Wilson (1897-1913), also known as 'Wilson the Irremovable.' He served under three presidents and pushed the department from seed distribution into science. He built the office into more of an active role," says Otto Doering, Purdue University agricultural economist who has worked with USDA on several farm bills.

### **A Certain Stature/The Early Secretaries**

From the first Secretary named in 1889 through the early 1960s, most of the men appointed to the position were leaders in their fields. Most held at least an undergraduate college degree and several had graduate, doctorate and/or law degrees. At least five Secretaries taught or held administrative positions at land-grant universities or agricultural experiment stations.

Only half of the 15 Secretaries prior to President Kennedy's Administration were full-time farmers or had farm or land holdings, including Wisconsin's Jeremiah McLain Rusk (1889-1893), and Indiana's Claude Raymond Wickard (1940-1945), a 1927 Master Farmer. After serving as USDA Secretary, Wickard was appointed administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), but eventually returned to his farm in Indiana.

Secretaries outside the realm of farming were commonly lawyers, businessmen or insurance industry executives. David Franklin Houston (1913-1920), for example, served as president of Bell Telephone Securities Co., vice president of American Telephone & Telegraph Co. and for many years also served as president of Mutual Life Insurance Co. He also was president of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas and the University of Texas and chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis.

Others in that category included Missourian Arthur Mastick Hyde (1929-1933), a lawyer, businessman, and insurance executive who was Governor of Missouri prior to becoming Secretary. Charles Franklin Brannan (1948-1953) served as general counsel for the National Farmers Union after his term as USDA Secretary.

Six of the first 15 Secretaries were journalists, including Julius Sterling Morton (1893-1897), a farmer who edited the Nebraska City News. *Successful Farming* magazine founder Edwin Thomas Meredith (1920-1921) served the Wilson Administration as Secretary. Meredith was followed by fellow Iowan Henry Cantwell Wallace (1921-1924), who later joined the staff of his family's paper, *Wallaces Farmer*. His son, Henry Agard Wallace (1933-1940), was Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary. Like his father, Henry A. worked for *Wallaces Farmer*, later edited the paper and founded Pioneer Hi-Bred seed corn company.

Politics most certainly played a role in early selections. Nearly all of the appointees had served in local, state or even national politics as governors, or in Congress or had other appointments within USDA. Howard Mason Gore (1924-1925), for example, worked in the Bureau of Animal Industry and the Packers and Stockyards Administration before his appointment as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in 1923. Gore later was Commissioner of Agriculture for West Virginia and ultimately returned to federal service in the Farm Security Administration.

"Prior to 1933, the Secretary's position was not viewed as particularly controversial," says Iowa State's Harl. "President Roosevelt's appointment of Wallace was the onset of a more activist role."

Doering agrees, adding that 1933 marked the second watershed moment in Secretary history. "Until Henry A. Wallace, the role of government in agriculture was passive and non-intrusive. Wallace took the department 180 degrees from where it had been and carved a new role for Ag Secretaries," he says.

By the time Ezra Taft Benson (1953-1961) was appointed, Harl notes the political agenda had become one of getting the government out of agriculture as soon as possible. Benson was assigned the task of cutting price supports and production controls in favor of a more open system, but that did not really happen by 1961 when the Democrats took the election and shifted the position of Secretary back to a more activist role.

Don Paarlberg, staff economist for Secretary Benson, notes that agricultural policy, controlling production and fixing prices of farm products were once the central issues. "What once was zeal for such programs has much abated. Other farm-policy issues have arisen: the future of the family farm, the structure of agriculture, ecological questions, food safety, rural development, trade matters, civil rights, matters of equity. A new agenda has arisen ..."



### **A Shift in Emphasis/Modern Day Secretaries**

As the complexion of USDA reached another watershed moment during the 1960s, the resumes of men appointed to the position also changed. Political service and management capabilities were evident in candidates chosen for the job. While agricultural experience can be found in the background of most Secretaries in some form, it was not a prerequisite.

“Presidents choose Secretaries with experience, demonstrated interests, versatility and the drive to be a team player,” says Alphonso Michael Espy (1993-1994). “The Secretary is an emissary of the Administration on a myriad of matters. They want to have confidence that each Secretary can represent the Administration and its program and political interests across the country.”

Perhaps it was Orville Lothrop Freeman’s (1961-1969) non-ag background that landed him the job during the transition of government’s role in agriculture. Freeman was a law graduate of the University of Minnesota and a Marine officer in World War II. He participated in Minneapolis municipal affairs and served three terms as Governor before serving as USDA Secretary.

“The only experience Freeman ever had with agriculture was as a youngster on his grandfather’s farm,” remembers Hal Taylor. “But he did his homework and became a very effective spokesman.”

Conversely, both Secretaries who followed Freeman were active in agricultural education at the university level. Clifford Morris Hardin (1969-1971) was President Nixon’s Secretary and Earl Lauer Butz (1971-1976) was Secretary for Presidents Nixon and Ford.

A career university man, Hardin earned his bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate degrees in agriculture at Purdue University. He taught agricultural economics at the University of Wisconsin and Michigan State before becoming Chancellor of the University of Nebraska. Hardin later joined the Purina Corporation.

“Hardin was well known in educational and agricultural circles, but he was not active in partisan politics,” notes Claude Gifford, USDA director of communications at the time.

Butz was an Indiana native with bachelor and doctorate degrees from Purdue University. He taught at Purdue before joining the Brookings Institute as a research economist. Butz also served as USDA Assistant Secretary for Marketing and Foreign Agriculture and returned to Purdue as Dean of Continuing Education and Vice President of Purdue’s Research Foundation. Butz again returned to Purdue after serving as Secretary.

“Butz was a candidate because he served as Assistant Secretary under Benson, was active politically in the Indiana Republican Party and was well known nationally by Republicans as the dean of an agricultural school,” says Gifford.

Virginian John Albert Knebel (1976-1977) served as Secretary only briefly during the Ford Administration. Knebel had served as Assistant Counsel for the House Committee on Agriculture and also as USDA General Counsel during the 1970s. He returned to his law practice until chosen in 1975 as Undersecretary. The following year, he became Secretary for about two months.

"Knebel had White House connections. He was the logical choice for a short-term fill in," says Gifford.

"Beginning with Bob (Robert Selmer) Bergland (1977-1981), we began to see more Secretaries coming from Congress than from other areas, and that caused some Secretaries difficulty in becoming effective administrators," notes Purdue's Otto Doering. "They were used to negotiating policy, but were coming into Cabinet positions where the role is to carry out policy and they were bringing Congressional staffs inexperienced in administration with them."

**"The only experience Freeman ever had with agriculture was as a youngster on his grandfather's farm ... But he did his homework and became a very effective spokesman."**

Bergland, who owned a farm in Minnesota and worked for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) during the 1960s, served four terms in Congress in the 1970s. Likewise, Edward Rell Madigan (1991-1993) served Congress before USDA. The Illinois native owned and operated the Yellow Lincoln Cab Co. before being elected in 1966 as a member of the Illinois House of Representatives. In 1972, he was elected to the U.S. Congress and eventually served as ranking Republican on the Agricultural Committee from 1983 to 1991. Madigan was chosen as Chief Deputy Whip of the Republican Party in 1986.

"Madigan and President Bush went back a long way and politically, Madigan was more experienced than any of his immediate Republican predecessors. He had a longer tenure in Congress and greater responsibilities," says Chuck Hilty, Madigan's Assistant Secretary of Administration. "He served nine terms and had been re-elected to serve a tenth when he resigned to become Secretary."

Similarly, Mike Espy was a Congressman and served on the Agriculture and Budget Committees. But when he did not receive an assignment to the House Appropriations Committee in 1992, he pursued the Secretary appointment. The Mississippi lawyer was the first African-American to hold the office.

"I had a relationship with President Clinton and wrote him a note that I would like to be considered for the position," Espy says. Observers note Espy's Delta connection and his early support for Clinton made him a perfect fit.



Replacing Espy and serving as the current Secretary is Daniel Robert Glickman (1995-present), another Congress transplant and lawyer by trade. Glickman previously served in the U.S. House of Representatives for 18 years from Kansas, having been a member of the House Agriculture Committee. He contributed to the farm bills of 1977, 1981, 1985 and 1990.

"When Espy resigned under an ethics cloud (though he was later exonerated), Glickman had been defeated for re-election to Congress," notes one observer. "Three things made Glickman attractive: he was from a farm state, he had served on the House Ag Committee and his background was 'squeaky clean.'"

Between Bergland and the last three Secretaries from Congress came John Rusling Block (1981-1986), Richard Edmund Lyng (1986-1989), and Clayton Keith Yeutter (1989-1991), three men Doering notes had closer ties to production agriculture.

"The Secretary of Agriculture appointment was always less political than other Cabinet appointments," remembers Block. "Geography played a role in my case, but there were other factors Presidents weighed when making selections."

Block, an Illinois farmer, was serving as Illinois' director of agriculture when asked to serve as President Reagan's Secretary. Block had graduated from West Point and served three years in the Army before returning to his family farm in 1960.

"I didn't aspire the job. But when asked to interview first for the Illinois director's position and then for Ag Secretary, I questioned whether it was a good idea to put the burden of the farm all on my dad," he says.

Block learned he was a candidate for the job from an article in the Wall Street Journal. "I was on Sen. Bob Dole's list for the next Secretary," he says, noting that Dole had sent a map to President Reagan showing where his other Cabinet appointments were from. "Senator Dole suggested a Midwesterner. I flew to President Reagan's place in Pacific Palisades for an interview and within hours was contacted at my hotel and asked if I would accept the position."

"Richard Lyng was thought to be a 'shoe-in' for the job, since he was from California and had been state ag secretary when Reagan was Governor. But there was a concern that the Reagan Administration would become too top heavy with Californians," says Gifford. "Block asked Lyng to be his deputy and Lyng moved into the Secretary's job four years later."

Richard Lyng was a Notre Dame graduate and president of the Ed J. Lyng Company, a family seed and bean production and processing firm, before being appointed chief deputy director of the California State Department of Agriculture. Lyng held various positions in Washington prior to Secretary.

As with Block and Lyng, Clayton Yeutter, hailed from a farm. The Nebraska native held a law degree and a PhD. in agricultural economics and had held a number of positions within USDA before being appointed U.S. Trade Representative and then Secretary of Agriculture. Yeutter later served as Chairman of the Republican National Committee.

One long-time Washington observer notes, "In 1980 when Dole was insisting on a Midwesterner for Secretary of Agriculture in the first Reagan administration, Yeutter was most likely one of the names mentioned. Nine years later his nomination surprised no one. He had been a long-time Bush supporter and being Secretary was reportedly one of Yeutter's 'lifetime goals.'"

### **Superheroes as Secretaries?**

Future men or women who want the Secretary's job may need traveling at the speed of sound on their list of talents. In light of issues facing agriculture, many observers expect future USDA CEOs may require "superhero" stature.

"Selecting Secretaries has not been easy for the last 70 years, and it is going to become more difficult," predicts Harl. "Agriculture is not in a stable part of its history. We will see enormous change. The Secretary will have to have standing politically with the President's natural constituents and with commodity and farmer groups because they are becoming more powerful. But they also will have to satisfy big money players like the grain companies, and organizations like the American Meat Institute and National Grain and Feed (Association)."

Some of the contentious issues Secretaries will face include the structure of agriculture, biotechnology and environmental issues. "The next Secretary will have to be someone who knows production agriculture as well as these issues or they will have a tough time accomplishing anything," says Purdue's Doering. "The next Secretary also should have administrative talent and a vision about USDA's role and lead it in that direction, or they will be whipsawed around."

Former Secretary Block agrees. "One of the qualities that is not always considered is that you have to choose someone who is a good manager for your team. With 100,000 employees, you have to quickly evaluate issues and move on. You need a good political antenna and you need



to be a good people person,” he adds. “You need established Hill relationships and credibility with constituent groups and a global view of agriculture.”

Harl says ag background, however, may become less important. Former USDA historian Rasmussen adds, “There will need to be a greater emphasis on domestic food programs. Secretaries must recognize that 100 percent of the people in this country are consumers and only 2 percent are farmers.”

Whatever candidate emerges in 2001, former Secretary Espy says the person should have an enthusiasm for travel, a penchant for debate, some degree of technical aptitude and patience. Add to that list open-mindedness, empathy, insight, wisdom, decisiveness and resolution, adds Paarlberg.

“The Secretary will need a thick skin and stamina,” Harl says. “Once a presidential candidate emerges as a likely winner, names will be considered for USDA Secretary and emerge after the election. ‘Wanna-bes’ already are tying in with the candidates, although that doesn’t always produce success.”

#### Pre-Kennedy Secretaries at a Glance

- Missouri Democrat Norman Jay Coleman was named Commissioner of Agriculture in 1885. He served as the first USDA Secretary for less than a month in 1889 during the first Cleveland Administration.
- The only Secretary to serve three presidents was Republican James “Tama Jim” Wilson. He was Secretary for Presidents McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt and Taft from 1897 to 1913. Wilson was a farmer who served the Iowa and U.S. Houses of Representatives, directed the Iowa Agricultural College experiment station, wrote for farm journals and edited *Agricultural Digest*.
- William Marion Jardine, a Kansan, served as U.S. Minister to Egypt following time as Secretary in the mid 1920s. He graduated from Kansas State Agricultural College where he later served as dean of agriculture, director of the agricultural experiment station, and finally president. He was later president of the University of Wichita.
- Clinton Presba Anderson is the only Secretary from New Mexico, where he was an insurance executive, newspaper reporter, editor, and farm operator. Anderson was president of Rotary International.

## Secretaries of Agriculture

[SOURCE: ERS, USDA]

Norman Jay Coleman	Feb. 15, 1889 – March 6, 1889	Missouri
Jeremiah McLain Rusk	March 6, 1889 – March 6, 1893	Wisconsin
Julius Sterling Morton	March 7, 1893 – March 5, 1897	Nebraska
James Wilson	March 6, 1897 – March 5, 1913	Iowa
David Franklin Houston	March 6, 1913 – Feb. 2, 1920	Missouri
Edwin Thomas Meredith	Feb. 2, 1920 – March 4, 1921	Iowa
Henry Cantwell Wallace	March 5, 1921 – Oct. 25, 1924	Iowa
Howard Mason Gore	Nov. 22, 1924 – March 4, 1925	W. Virginia
William Marion Jardine	March 5, 1925 – March 4, 1929	Kansas
Arthur Mastick Hyde	March 6, 1929 – March 4, 1933	Missouri
Henry Agard Wallace	March 4, 1933 – Sept. 4, 1940	Iowa
Claude Raymond Wickard	Sept. 5, 1940 – June 29, 1945	Indiana
Clinton Presba Anderson	June 30, 1945 – May 10, 1948	N. Mexico
Charles Franklin Brannan	June 2, 1948 – Jan. 20, 1953	Colorado
Ezra Taft Benson	Jan. 21, 1953 – Jan. 20, 1961	Utah
Orville Lothrop Freeman	Jan. 21, 1961 – Jan. 20, 1969	Minnesota
Clifford Morris Hardin	Jan. 21, 1969 – Nov. 17, 1971	Nebraska
Earl Lauer Butz	Dec. 2, 1971 – Oct. 4, 1976	Indiana
John Albert Knebel	Nov. 4, 1976 – Jan. 20, 1977	Virginia
Bob Bergland	Jan. 23, 1977 – Jan. 20, 1981	Minnesota
John Rusling Block	Jan. 23, 1981 – Feb. 14, 1986	Illinois
Richard Edmund Lyng	March 7, 1986 – Jan. 21, 1989	California
Clayton Yeutter	Feb. 16, 1989 – March 1, 1991	Nebraska
Edward Rell Madigan	March 12, 1991 – Jan. 20, 1993	Illinois
Mike Espy	Jan. 22, 1993 – Dec. 31, 1994	Mississippi
Daniel Robert Glickman	March 30, 1995 – Present	Kansas



**USDA Timeline**

- 1766 George Washington suggested to Congress the establishment of a National Board of Agriculture.
- 1820 U.S. House of Representatives Ag Committee established.
- 1825 U.S. Senate Ag Committee established.
- 1862 U.S. Department of Agriculture established, but without Cabinet status.
- 1870 U.S. population totaled 39 million people. The farm population comprised 18 million of that total. Farmers made up 53 percent of the labor force and the average annual value of agricultural exports was \$453 million.
- 1889 First Secretary of Agriculture named.

**Notes**

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