

■ HOW WE CAME UP WITH THE GRADES

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Pick up the paper, and you'll probably see a mention of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld or Secretary of State Colin Powell. But Education Secretary Roderick Paige or Interior Secretary Gale Norton? Weeks might go by. The same goes for other members of the Cabinet.

We thought it would be useful to devote an issue of *National Journal* to assessing the performance of President Bush's Cabinet—both the high-profile stars who regularly turn up in the news and the lower-profile secretaries who toil outside the spotlight. But what's the best way to examine performance? We didn't want to pass judgment on the merits of a Cabinet secretary's policy proposals or regulatory actions. And we wanted to avoid measuring a Cabinet secretary against some idealized notion of what his or her job should be.

In the end, we settled on four ways of looking at their performance: 1) their influence within the Bush administration on matters related to their departments, 2) their clout on Capitol Hill, 3) their success in helping the president politically, and 4) their management of their departments.

As you've probably noticed already, we didn't limit ourselves to writing about how they fared in these four categories. We also graded them—in the four categories and overall. Why? Our feeling was that grades, backed up by extensive reporting, would give the project the clarity it needed to be useful. Does grading involve subjective judgments? Of course. Can reasonable people disagree with the grades we've assigned? Absolutely.

Recognizing the limitations of any grading system, we want to be as open as possible about how we ended up with these report cards. Here's how the process worked: A team of three reporters was assigned to each Cabinet secretary. Each team interviewed upwards of 30 people—administration officials, members of Congress, Capitol Hill aides, interest-group representatives, and others. Working from a common set of instructions (more on those in the following pages), the teams graded the Cabinet members, then justified the grades to a panel of *National Journal* editors and reporters. In some cases, the review panel adjusted grades slightly to try to ensure that grading standards were consistent from one team to another.

We examined the performance of the 14 Cabinet secretaries, and of the heads of three agencies with Cabinet-level status (Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Management and Budget, and U.S. Trade Representative). We added the director of the CIA to the list because of the agency's increased importance in the wake of 9/11. We did not grade three other officials with Cabinet-level status (Vice President Dick Cheney, Office of National Drug Control Policy Director John Walters, and Office of Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, although we did write about Ridge), because their responsibilities inside the White House placed them outside our four categories.

We invited the 18 officials we graded, plus Ridge, to sit down with us to discuss their records. As you'll see, 17 of them took us up on the offer.



Charles Green
Editor

OVERALL GRADE

Of the five grades *National Journal* is giving each Cabinet official we evaluated, this is the one that will get the most attention; it is also the one that is the most subjective.

We could have made the overall grade an average of the grades in the four categories described on the next two pages. We decided against that approach on the grounds that the importance of any one category varies, depending on the Cabinet secretary.

For example, is it more noteworthy that Education Secretary Roderick Paige has relatively little clout on Capitol Hill or that he's seen as a fairly effective ambassador for President Bush's education bill when he travels around the country? In the White House's view, the latter attribute is probably more important. Mindful of that, we attached some weight to what the White House expects out of each Cabinet secretary.

Finally, these grades should not be viewed as an endorsement or rejection of the policies of a Cabinet secretary. We looked at effectiveness, not ideology.

Here are some of the questions we asked ourselves and our sources before coming up with this grade:

- Why was this person picked for the job?
- What did the White House expect this person to bring to the post?
- Has the secretary lived up to expectations?
- What major challenges has the Cabinet secretary faced during his or her first two years in office?
- How has the secretary responded to those challenges?
- What does the secretary see as his or her main responsibilities?

Colin Powell	State	A
John Ashcroft	Justice	A-
Donald Evans	Commerce	A-
Anthony Principi	VA	A-
Donald Rumsfeld	Defense	B+
Spencer Abraham	Energy	B
Mitchell Daniels	OMB	B
Norman Mineta	Transportation	B
Tommy Thompson	HHS	B
Robert Zoellick	USTR	B
Elaine Chao	Labor	B-
Gale Norton	Interior	B-
Mel Martinez	HUD	C+
George Tenet	CIA	C+
Roderick Paige	Education	C
Christie Whitman	EPA	C-
Paul O'Neill	Treasury	D
Ann Veneman	Agriculture	D

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INSIDE INFLUENCE

In this section, we look at a secretary's influence within the Bush administration on matters related to his or her department. To gauge a secretary's influence, our reporters talked with officials in the White House and the administration, as well as with members of Congress, congressional aides, interest-group representatives, and others.

In grading the Cabinet secretaries, we were mindful that some departments naturally have more interaction with the White House than others. So the fact that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Labor Secretary Elaine Chao both got B's doesn't mean that we consider them equally influential. It does mean that we consider them equally influential on matters related to their departments.

The questions we asked before assigning a grade included the following:

- Does the secretary have clout with the White House on issues related to his or her department?
- How does the secretary's department fare in turf fights or policy disputes with other Cabinet departments?
- Do the secretary and the department come up with policy proposals on their own, or does the department react to what others propose?
- How has the department fared in President Bush's budget submissions?
- How often does the secretary meet with President Bush?
- Does the secretary have especially close relations to anyone in the White House?
- Whom does the secretary typically deal with in the White House?

John Ashcroft	Justice	A
Mitchell Daniels	OMB	A
Donald Evans	Commerce	A
Anthony Principi	VA	A
Spencer Abraham	Energy	B
Elaine Chao	Labor	B
Mel Martinez	HUD	B
Norman Mineta	Transportation	B
Colin Powell	State	B
Donald Rumsfeld	Defense	B
George Tenet	CIA	B
Tommy Thompson	HHS	B
Gale Norton	Interior	C
Ann Veneman	Agriculture	C
Robert Zoellick	USTR	C
Paul O'Neill	Treasury	D
Roderick Paige	Education	D
Christie Whitman	EPA	D

HILL CLOUT

This category looks at a Cabinet secretary's effectiveness in pushing the administration's agenda on Capitol Hill. It's *not* a measure of whether people on the Hill agree with the administration's policies or priorities. The key interviews for this category were with members of Congress and their aides.

Determining grades in this category turned out to be more difficult than we had expected. In some cases, people on the Hill told us that a White House-backed bill was passed *despite* a Cabinet secretary. This is why we gave D's to former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, even though a major tax bill and a major farm bill were signed into law during their watches. In other cases, people on the Hill told us that certain Cabinet secretaries were essentially onlookers. This is why Education Secretary Roderick Paige, for instance, gets a low grade, despite the passage of a major education bill. We gave the highest grades to Cabinet secretaries who played important roles in winning battles on Capitol Hill and earned the respect of lawmakers from both parties.

Questions we asked included the following:

- How successful has the secretary been in winning legislative battles on Capitol Hill?
- How involved has the secretary been in the legislative process? Do people on the Hill look to the secretary's department or to the White House for policy guidance?
- What kind of job does the secretary do in public testimony on the Hill?
- What kind of relationship does the secretary have with lawmakers?

Spencer Abraham	Energy	A
Colin Powell	State	A
Anthony Principi	VA	A
John Ashcroft	Justice	B
Donald Evans	Commerce	B
George Tenet	CIA	B
Tommy Thompson	HHS	B
Elaine Chao	Labor	C
Mitchell Daniels	OMB	C
Mel Martinez	HUD	C
Norman Mineta	Transportation	C
Gale Norton	Interior	C
Donald Rumsfeld	Defense	C
Christie Whitman	EPA	C
Robert Zoellick	USTR	C
Paul O'Neill	Treasury	D
Roderick Paige	Education	D
Ann Veneman	Agriculture	D

POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

Cabinet secretaries are invariably expected to further the president's political ambitions. This may mean keeping core constituencies satisfied while reaching out to potential swing groups. Or it might mean absorbing some of the heat for controversial policies so the president can stay above the fray.

In devising this category, we defined political imperatives broadly. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, for instance, got credit for helping Bush politically by projecting a firm, no-nonsense image in the wake of 9/11. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman got a low mark because she has alienated many farmers, despite their Republican leanings.

The following were among the questions we asked:

- What political objectives is the Cabinet secretary expected to achieve, and how is he or she doing?
- What kind of relationship does the secretary have with Republican-leaning interest groups and constituencies?
- Has the secretary helped or hurt Bush in reaching out to swing groups?
- Has the secretary alienated Democratic-leaning interest groups and constituencies to the point that their opposition is a political handicap for Bush?
- What kind of job has the secretary done in appearing at fundraisers and campaigning for Republicans? How much in demand is the secretary on the campaign trail?
- What kind of image does the secretary project in public appearances?
- Does the secretary handle himself or herself well on television talk shows?

John Ashcroft	Justice	A
Elaine Chao	Labor	A
Donald Evans	Commerce	A
Mel Martinez	HUD	A
Norman Mineta	Transportation	A
Colin Powell	State	A
Anthony Principi	VA	A
Donald Rumsfeld	Defense	A
Spencer Abraham	Energy	B
Mitchell Daniels	OMB	B
Gale Norton	Interior	B
Roderick Paige	Education	B
Tommy Thompson	HHS	B
Robert Zoellick	USTR	B
George Tenet	CIA	C
Christie Whitman	EPA	C
Ann Veneman	Agriculture	D
Paul O'Neill	Treasury	F

RUNNING THE DEPARTMENT

Few Cabinet secretaries throw themselves into the day-to-day management of their departments, preferring to delegate such responsibilities. But the secretaries do set a tone, and their attention—or inattention—to career staff can greatly affect the department's morale, performance, and reputation.

This grade, like the others, reflects some subjective judgments. If a Cabinet secretary inherited a smooth-running department and hasn't messed things up, he or she might get a B. If a Cabinet secretary inherited a dysfunctional bureaucracy and has made impressive strides, he or she might get an A, even if the department's overall performance isn't at an A level.

Questions we considered included the following:

- What was the general reputation of the department when the secretary arrived? Has that reputation changed for the better or the worse?
- What kind of performance grade did the department get in Bush's budget, and is there a sense that improvements have been made since then?
- Are career bureaucrats generally happy with the secretary's leadership, or is there a lot of dissension?
- Do the people who do business with the department feel that they have an opportunity to be heard?
- Are policy decisions conveyed clearly to affected parties?
- Do the sub-Cabinet departments cooperate with each other?
- Are the ultimate consumers of the department's programs being well served?

Mitchell Daniels	OMB	A
Donald Evans	Commerce	A
Colin Powell	State	A
Tommy Thompson	HHS	A
Norman Mineta	Transportation	B
Anthony Principi	VA	B
George Tenet	CIA	B
Ann Veneman	Agriculture	B
Spencer Abraham	Energy	C
John Ashcroft	Justice	C
Elaine Chao	Labor	C
Mel Martinez	HUD	C
Gale Norton	Interior	C
Donald Rumsfeld	Defense	C
Robert Zoellick	USTR	C
Paul O'Neill	Treasury	D
Roderick Paige	Education	D
Christie Whitman	EPA	D