

Book Review: The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution by Lindsay M. Chervinsky

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Lindsay M. Chervinsky. *The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution*. Belknap Press, 2020. x + 416 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Americans' fascination with the Revolutionary Era and the reliance on the Founding Fathers for guidance appears endless. The steady stream of books, articles, and shows that continues to emerge in academia and popular culture, as well as the role the nation's origins continues to play in political discourse, is evidence of this. Historian Lindsay Chervinsky's *The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution*, is an interesting addition to the scholarship on the Early Republic and its long-term influence.

Chervinsky focuses on George Washington's leadership performances during the Revolutionary War and his presidency. Her core argument is that Washington's experiences commanding the Continental Army informed his presidential management style and government organization. She concludes that Washington's bureaucratic constructions left an enduring imprint on the organization and power of the Executive branch, especially during times of domestic and international crises. This ambitious agenda succeeds only partially because the author struggles to establish a clear intellectual trajectory. At times, this reads like a book on presidential management style, at times as a biography of Washington and his cabinet, and at other times simply as a series of vignettes into the Early Republic. As a result, it never quite satisfies on any of these fronts.

The book works best when Washington's interactions with advisors are in focus. Chervinsky effectively illustrates how he created networks of close aides upon whom he could rely for expert counsel. As she points out, since the Constitution provided neither guidance nor institutions to aid presidential governance, any bureaucratic design rested with Washington. The result was that not only did he draw heavily on his experiences with the familiar military command structure, Washington also brought into government confidantes who had served him well in the War. The book's coverage of Washington's resourceful management style is especially

impressive. Chervinsky clearly and effectively explains how, depending on circumstances, the first president at certain times demanded written, and therefore documented, advice from cabinet members, and in other moments relied on extensive meetings with advisors in smaller groups or one-on-one. This includes interesting discussions of Washington's awareness not to create institutions that mirrored their British aristocratic counterparts; an outcome, the author rightly concludes, several members of Congress fiercely opposed.

The coverage of Cabinet discussions focuses on familiar crises. As a result, Chervinsky's analysis of the clashes between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton over the direction of the Republic as well as her coverage of the Neutrality Crisis, the Citizen Genêt Affair, Jay's Treaty, and the Whiskey Rebellion provides little that is new to scholars. All the same, the originality of the cabinet angle merits attention. This insider perspective, combined with a very effective coverage of how Washington navigated competing Cabinet advice as well as vivid descriptions of the president's conversations with advisors, are highlights of the book.

The Cabinet does suffer from excessive minutia. Simply put, it would have been better if it was shorter and focused more exclusively on the Cabinet and Washington's leadership style. Throughout, the author presents an abundance of administrative detail including references to presidential meetings; yet, the relevance of such information often remains unclear. At times, this includes full lists of people with whom Washington met but offers no specifics about their conversations. The intent may have been to demonstrate the breadth of his leadership but it comes off feeling intellectually superfluous.

This reflects a larger problem of underdeveloped arguments throughout the book. For example, Chervinsky's insistence that historians should consider Washington's government designs critical to long-term understandings of presidential management feels forced and not

persuasively backed by the evidence. While every subsequent president did indeed rely on the advice of departmental secretaries and on individuals with particular expertise, the link to the 1790s is less obvious. To prove such connections would have required an extensive engagement with the complex body of scholarship on presidential bureaucracy and administration. None of this appears in the sources. One potential avenue for comparison, and therefore an opportunity to consider the permanent legacy of Washington's Cabinet, would have been the post-World War II period when so much of the modern Executive advisory bureaucracy emerged. Here the 1947 creation of the National Security Council (NSC) would be of considerable interest because the functions of the NSC is far more similar to Washington's crisis-management groups than is the modern presidential cabinet. The fact that in contrast to the first cabinets, the NSC came into being through an act of Congress, would surely have led the author to different conclusions about Washington's enduring legacy.

Repetitions further hamper the book. Several descriptions appear and reappear almost verbatim throughout. Often, this is a result of poor editing and frankly, one expects more from Belknap Press. Just as often, however, repetitions appear deliberate. Multiple times in most chapters, the author reminds readers that this or that decision by Washington is traceable to his wartime experience. If the author consistently connected those decisions to specific moments from the Revolutionary War, or if Washington did so in his own words, it would have strengthened the point. As it stands, too often these references instead appear reflective of an author that is insecure about her argument but hopes that quantity of argument persuades.

These reservations aside, Lindsay Chervinsky's accessible book provides an intriguing window into presidential leadership style in the Early Republic. She deserves to be applauded for writing a book about political management and presidential leadership in an era when both are so

hotly debated. In that sense alone, her book provides food for thought. If her book inspires others—or even herself—to pursue further analyses and debates about later administrations and to elaborate more extensively and comparatively on the importance of the institutional development and importance of the cabinet, her oeuvre will have done a great service to the field of political and presidential history.

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