

[Does anybody really care?](#)

Really. Its budget of [between 6 and 7 billion dollars](#) is by far the smallest of any Cabinet Department. That kind of money would be a rounding error for the Pentagon or HHS; hell, [the Pentagon lost that much money](#) in transit between Washington and Baghdad.

And what really does it do? It's sort of a hodgepodge of unrelated things. Its biggest normal budget item is the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), which really should be in EPA (or perhaps split with Interior/Fish and Wildlife Service for the Oceans portfolio). Note that Obama moved aggressively to appoint a NOAA director (the superb [Jane Lubchenco](#)), but has seemingly lost interest in that director's ostensible supervisor.

That's not an accident. Take a look at [the Secretaries of Commerce](#): you will find exactly one who put his stamp on policy, and that one was Herbert Hoover. (Even then his influence was overrated, an artifact of his ability to churn out memos and reports that are the fodder for the historian. Calvin Coolidge remarked that "Hoover has been giving me advice for six years — all of it wrong."). The only other ones who even merit mention are [Maurice Stans](#), who quit to run the Nixon re-election campaign (from which he was indicted and acquitted), and [Malcolm Baldrige](#), who drove the Reagan Administration in a protectionist direction but failed in his goal of seizing control of trade policy from USTR.

The Department has two other major sub-agencies: the Census Bureau, and the Patent and Trademark Office, both of which are 1) quite important; 2) totally unrelated; and 3) not necessarily placed in **any** Cabinet Department.

An insider at Commerce [reports](#) that staffers there feel left out. I'm wondering whether that's a pretty common feeling over there.

Anything to do about this? Not necessarily. But there are a couple of intriguing possibilities:

1) In the run-up to the 2012 Election, President Obama should propose abolishing the department. It would be his equivalent of Bill Clinton's support of school uniforms and V-Chip: small, symbolic gestures that send a sort of cultural signal. You can trust the Democrats to run the government frugally. (One could argue that no Democrat ever wants to send this signal because it reinforces a Republican frame, but I don't think that that's true: even socialists don't like to waste money). The Gingrich Republicans [vowed to eliminate the Department](#), but as with most conservative beliefs, it was quickly forgotten as soon as the GOP took power. This would be a nice act of political jiu-jitsu if Obama could do it.

2) In his recent book [Common Wealth](#), Columbia University Earth Institute Director Jeffrey Sachs proposed a new Department for International Sustainable Development, modeled on Britain's [Department for International Development](#). The weakness in all of Sachs' writings is his inability to comprehend politics or bureaucracy, and this is no different: he doesn't really tell us what this department would do, why it needs Cabinet status, etc. And in his telling, it's just one more department. But perhaps some shuffling around might allow Commerce to do the job. The [US Agency for International Development](#) is currently an independent agency, and could be moved over. I don't know what other agencies would have to be moved (although this blog post thinks it through more fully than Sachs did), but it could give the Department a mission, which is more than it has now. It could also signal a serious US commitment to fighting extreme poverty without multiplying government departments.

Obama obviously has more important things on his plate than the Commerce Department. But either of these ideas could be useful down the road.

(Cross-posted at the Reality-Based Community: www.samefacts.com)