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# **The U.S. Coast Guard's Assignment to the Department of Homeland Security: Entering Uncharted Waters or Just a Course Correction?**

An Essay By

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On November 25, 2002, President George Bush signed the Homeland Security Act, which called for the largest reorganization in the U.S. government since the formation of the Department of Defense. The reorganization plan will bring together twenty-two agencies or parts of agencies from other departments such as Justice, Commerce, Health and Human Services, etc., under the control of the Department of Homeland Security. Often such large administrative reorganizations inevitably causes a great deal of upheaval and anxiety in the affected organizations. One of those agencies affected is the United States Coast Guard, which will be transferred from the Department of Transportation. As a member of the Coast Guard, I have spent some time recently reflecting on this monumental act and asking myself, how will this change affect the Coast Guard? Will this reorganization have a positive impact? Will Coast Guard culture change and how? In an attempt to answer these questions and alleviate my own angst, I decided to look to the past.

In reviewing the organizational developments of the Coast Guard and its antecedents, I have come to appreciate that major organizational changes are nothing new for us, and that such changes have usually had a positive impact. Additionally, understanding the Coast Guard's history of continual transformation gives me an added appreciation for the organization that I know embraces change. I can also see that these changes are a reflection of the evolution of the United States as a maritime nation. Most importantly, each of the major changes in the Coast Guard's organizational development has meant an improvement in the United States government's ability to ensure the safety of human life on its waters, the protection of its environment, and the defense of its economic and security interests in the maritime domain, and so I believe it shall be with this newest change.

Prior to the establishment of the Coast Guard in 1915, five separate federal agencies evolved between 1789 and 1884 to deal with various responsibilities associated with the growing demands of a maritime nation. These five agencies were the U.S. Lighthouse Service, the Revenue Cutter Service, the Steamboat Inspection Service, the U.S. Lifesaving Service, and the Bureau of Navigation. In 1915 the U.S Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Lifesaving Service were merged to form a new agency, the U.S. Coast Guard. In 1939 the Coast Guard absorbed the U.S. Lighthouse Service, and by 1946 it had also absorbed the Steamboat Inspection Service and the Bureau of Navigation. Finally, in 1967 the Coast Guard was transferred from the Treasury Department to the newly formed Department of Transportation.

The oldest of the Coast Guard's antecedents is the U.S. Lighthouse Service, established on August 7, 1789. The mission of the new service was the necessary support, maintenance and repairs of all lighthouses, beacons, buoys and public piers erected, placed, or sunk before the passing of this act, at the entrance of, or within any bay, inlet, harbor, or port of the United States, for rendering the navigation thereof easy and safe. . [1]

The act also authorized the building of twelve new lighthouses. The importance of providing safe navigation was obvious and pressing, a fact that is borne out by the priority with which Congress gave the matter. The act establishing the service was only the ninth act passed by the new Congress, and the first act that provided funding for a public work. By 1840 the Lighthouse Service had grown significantly, from its original twelve lighthouses to 234 lighthouses, 900 lesser aids to navigation, and thirty light ships. [2] Despite this, the growth of the service was inadequate to keep pace with the growing nation, and the Lighthouse Service had already come under a great deal of criticism for its inefficiency in operation. On October 9, 1852, Congress established the Lighthouse Board, which was composed of two officers of the Navy, two officers of the Engineer Corps, and two civilians of high scientific attainments whose services were at the disposal of the President, and an officer of the Navy and of the Engineers as secretaries. It was empowered under the Secretary of the Treasury to discharge all the administrative duties relative to lighthouses and other aids to navigation. [3]

Though the Lighthouse Service remained in the Department of Treasury, the Lighthouse Board would effectively control the service until 1910. Under the board's control, the Lighthouse Service made great strides, instituting the latest technological improvements in construction, steam and electricity. On February 14, 1903, Congress passed the act that created the Department of Commerce and Labor. That same act also directed the reassignment of the Lighthouse Service from the Department of Treasury to the newly formed Department of Commerce and Labor. The Lighthouse Service remained in the Department of Commerce and Labor until July 1, 1939, at which time it was absorbed into the Coast Guard. At the time the Coast Guard absorbed the service, it had 30,000 aids to navigation that included lighthouses, lightships and buoys. It also had 64 buoy tenders, vessels especially constructed to maintain and replace aids to navigation, and over 5200 employees nationwide. [4] Today the Coast Guard maintains the world's largest and most advanced networks of navigation aides, which include over 50,000 fixed and floating aids to navigation, Vessel Traffic Systems (analogous to Air Traffic Control Centers for aircraft) for some of the more congested U.S. ports, and a domestic fleet of icebreaking vessels that ensures the flow of commerce in the Great Lakes and the Northeast in winter months, all of which is part of the Coast Guard's larger modern mission of promoting mobility in the maritime realm.

The Coast Guard's task of providing maritime security was inherited from the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. In the summer of 1790, the newly formed United States government was in a financial crisis, and the country faced the real prospect of bankruptcy. The new government's sole source of revenue was the collection of customs duties. However, in their struggle with the British many Americans had come to see duties as a tangible expression of a repressive government. During the American Revolution, smuggling had become a patriotic duty. Unfortunately, the end of the revolution did not bring an end to smuggling as most Americans did not understand or accept the damage that smuggling was having on the government ability to operate. Additionally, the potential financial gains to be achieved by smuggling far exceeded the risk of being caught. The Revenue Cutter Service was created by law on August 4, 1790, to become the maritime enforcement arm of

the newly formed Treasury Department. Quickly the new service was able to stem the tide of smuggling and bring much needed money to the coffers of the Treasury Department.

However, with time and the growth of the maritime trade, other missions were added to the Revenue Cutter Service's charter. The first of these additional responsibilities was national defense, as a result of the Quasi War with France. On February 1, 1793, France declared war on Britain and Spain. Fearing the consequences of involvement in the war, the U.S. declared its neutrality. As the war between France, Britain and Spain raged, France continually violated U.S. neutrality in reprisal for its lack of support for the French war effort. In all, the French seized over three hundred U.S. merchant vessels on the high seas.

The new U.S. government had no means to stop French privateers from operating in its waters, as the Continental Navy had been disbanded and the last of its vessels sold in 1785. [5] The only standing U.S. naval force during that time was the ten vessels of the Revenue Cutter Service, until May 3, 1798, when Congress reestablished the Navy. Even then, it would be two years before the Navy could build and equip enough vessels to truly be called a navy. Thus on March 2, 1799, Congress declared that the "Revenue Cutters shall, whenever the President of the United States shall so direct, cooperate with the Navy of the United States." [6] Between 1798 and 1801, forty-five vessels served in combat in the Quasi War with France, eight of which were vessels of the Revenue Cutter Service. [7] The Revenue Cutter Service continued to serve its national defense mission in every major conflict, from 1798 until 1915, when the Revenue Cutter Service was merged with the U.S. Lifesaving Service to form the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard continues on with this mission today, and with a heritage of defending the U.S. that stretches from the Quasi War through Desert Storm.

The Coast Guard's missions of interdicting illegal drugs and aliens, general maritime law enforcement, and search and rescue all evolved from significant additions to the Revenue Cutter Service's original mission of collecting customs duties. Shortly after its creation, the Revenue Cutter Service proved its utility and effectiveness. Subsequently, it found itself being tasked with a wide range of new missions. The first of these new missions was stopping the slave trade. On January 1, 1808, all ports in the U.S. were closed to the importation or deportation of slaves, and for the next sixty years it was the mission of the service to intercept and halt the flow of slaves into the U.S. Another important mission the service assumed was the rescue of vessels and persons in distress. As the ports of the northeast began to flourish, regular shipping routes and schedules were established year round. As a consequence in 1831, Secretary of Treasury Louis McLane ordered the Revenue Cutter Service to conduct winter cruising for the purpose "of assisting vessels found on the coast in distress, and to ministering to the wants of their crew." [8]

A few years later Congress picked up on Secretary McLane's idea and passed an act that authorized the President "to cause . . . public vessels . . . to cruise upon the coast, in the severe portion of the season . . . to afford such aid to distressed navigators as their circumstance and necessities may require; and such public vessels shall go to sea prepared fully to render such assistance." [9] Beginning in 1815 the service and the U.S. Navy would cooperate in ridding the eastern seaboard and the Caribbean of pirates, and by the end of 1840 piracy was eradicated in U.S. waters and practically so in the Caribbean. [10] This tradition of maritime law enforcement and rendering aid continues today. In 2001 the Coast Guard interdicted and seized 138,393 pounds of cocaine worth 4.4 billion dollars in street value, and also seized 34,526 pounds of

marijuana. Additionally, since 1980 the Coast Guard has intercepted over 350,000 illegal aliens attempting to enter the U.S. [11]

In 1822 the Revenue Cutter Service would receive the first of its many missions to protect the environment. The Timber Reserve Act was passed to prohibit the illegal harvesting of oak trees from public lands in Florida. Florida oak timber was a highly prized commodity for shipbuilding, and it was the U.S. Navy's primary source of hull material for its sailing vessels. Revenue Cutter Service vessels regularly cruised the coast of Florida intercepting and searching vessels suspected of smuggling the trees until the act was repealed. In 1885 the Revenue Cutter Service was ordered by Congress to establish cooperation with the Bureau of Fisheries to ensure the "propagation of food fishes" [12] by boarding fishing vessels and enforcing catch limits.

In 1870 Congress realized the need to restrict the harvesting of seals for fur and passed an act restricting the number of seals that could be taken. However the law was not enforced until 1894 when the service began patrolling the rookeries of the Pribilof Islands to prevent poaching. This heritage of enforcing environmental protection laws was carried over with the merger of the Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Lifesaving Service to form the Coast Guard. Today the commercial fishing industry produces over 4.7 million tons of fish each year, which is worth over 25 billion dollars. The Coast Guard protects the U.S.'s living marine resources within the 3.36 million square mile U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, a band that extends seaward out to two hundred miles from the U.S shore, by conducting extended patrols and boarding fishing vessels to enforce laws and treaties that limit or ban the exploitation of fishery and marine mammals. [13]

The histories of the U.S. Lifesaving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service are intimately linked in many ways . Prior to 1848 assistance to shipwrecked or stranded vessels was nearly nonexistent except for a few voluntary organizations and thinly spread Revenue Cutter Service vessels. In one rather infamous incident in 1838, the vessel *Mexico* was stranded in the surf less than two hundred yards off the New Jersey coast and all one hundred and twelve passengers and crew were lost. As the number of shipwrecks increased so did the public outcry until it became too much for Congress to ignore. In 1848 Congress appropriated \$10,000 to build two lifesaving stations, one in New Jersey and one in Massachusetts. [14] The building and management of the stations was to be supervised by an officer from the Revenue Cutter Service. Between 1848 and 1854 other stations were built and loosely managed, but they were manned much like a modern day volunteer fire department. The winter of 1854 saw many mariners die in the waters of the northeast. Realizing that the management of stations was inadequate, Congress appropriated money to hire full time station keepers and two superintendents. Still not officially recognized as a service, the system of stations languished until 1871 when Sumner Kimball, chief of the Revenue Cutter Service, revamped the system.

Kimball convinced Congress to appropriate \$200,000 to build and fully man a system of lifesaving stations stretching from Maine to Florida. [15] In 1878 Congress formally recognized the U.S. Lifesaving Service as a separate agency in the Department of Treasury. Ironically the U.S. Lifesaving Service, which began under the Revenue Cutter Service, was first separated and then again merged with the Revenue Cutter Service in 1915 to create the Coast Guard. The U.S. Lifesaving Service saved thousands of lives, and its merger with the Revenue Cutter Service realized the best of both services, providing mariners a safety net that stretches from the beach to the open ocean. In 2001 alone the Coast Guard saved 4009 lives and responded to over 49,000 calls for assistance. [16]

The origins of the Coast Guard's modern day mission of maritime safety can be traced back to the Steamboat Inspection Service and the Bureau of Navigation. There is an old adage in the Coast Guard that says that maritime safety regulations are written in blood and oil, and this was especially true concerning the creation of the Steamboat Inspection Service and the Bureau of Navigation. By 1832, fourteen percent of vessels built with steam propulsion were destroyed by explosions and subsequent fires, resulting in scores of deaths. [17] On July 7, 1838, Congress passed an act that called for a system of inspectors to be appointed by U.S. District Judges and under the control of the Department of Justice to "provide better security of the lives of passengers on board of vessels propelled in whole or in part by steam." [18] Unfortunately the measure did little to reduce the number and severity of accidents. On August 30, 1852, Congress passed the Steamboat Act that created the Steamboat Inspection Service as a separate agency under the Department of Treasury. The new service was to establish stricter regulations and better oversight of vessels with steam propulsion.

Much like the creation of the Steamboat Inspection Service, the Bureau of Navigation was in part established to prevent human suffering. Beginning in 1840, several famous books were written by such notable authors as Richard Dana and Herman Melville depicting the deplorable conditions and treatment suffered by merchant seamen. [19] On July 5, 1884, Congress passed a bill establishing the Bureau of Navigation as an agency within the Department of Treasury. Its primary functions were to regulate the hiring and discharge of seamen to prevent abuses, collect tonnage dues, and administer navigation laws.

On February 14, 1903, both the Steamboat Inspection Service and the Bureau of Navigation were transferred to the newly created Department of Commerce and Labor. On June 30, 1932, the two agencies were merged to form the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection still within the Department of Commerce and Labor. On May 27, 1936, the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection's name was changed to the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation. Finally, on July 16, 1946, under an executive order, the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation was abolished and all its personnel and responsibilities transferred to the Coast Guard. The consolidation of the agencies and incorporation into the Coast Guard made way for vast improvements and efficiencies in promoting maritime safety. In 2001 the Coast Guard boarded over 11,000 foreign and domestic deep-draft vessels to ensure compliance with international and federal regulations that protect the health and safety of mariners, and the safety of ports and waterways, and the well being of the maritime environment. [20]

Through my examination of the Coast Guard's history, I feel I now have the answers I was seeking. Yes, the Coast Guard's move to the new Department of Homeland Security will have a major impact, and yes, it will change our culture. But if the past is any guide to the future, I believe the impact and changes will be positive. As I have demonstrated, major organizational changes are nothing new for the Coast Guard or its antecedents, and most of these changes have improved the capabilities of the Coast Guard. I believe that the Coast Guard's move to the Department of Homeland Security will be another one of those developments, and that as a result the Coast Guard will be even better prepared to promote public safety, protect the environment, and defend the economic and security interests of the United States in the maritime domain. In the end, the Coast Guard will accept this new assignment as it has accepted all those that went before, and live up to its motto "Semper Paratus," always ready!



## Notes

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