
THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY, 1977-1994 A SUMMARY HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

On October 1, 1977, the Department of Energy became the twelfth cabinet-level department in the Federal Government. The new Department of Energy brought together within one agency two separate programmatic traditions that had long coexisted within the federal establishment.

The first tradition consisted of a loosely knit amalgamation of agencies, offices, and commissions scattered throughout the Federal Government dealing with various aspects of non-nuclear federal energy policy and programs. These included energy research, development, regulation, pricing, and conservation. Although the Federal Government had been involved in various energy programs for decades, the many entities responsible for energy research, development, production, or regulation usually had not coordinated their activities or policies.

The second tradition consisted of the Federal Government's activities in the field of nuclear energy. Beginning with World War II and the Manhattan Project effort to build the atomic bomb, the Federal Government dominated the development of nuclear energy in the United States. Bureaucratically centralized and security-oriented, federal involvement

was almost exclusively of a military nature until the mid-1950s when the Atomic Energy Commission began major efforts to commercialize nuclear power.

What made marriage between these two traditions possible in the Department of Energy were two factors. First, the Atomic Energy Commission's activities in developing and commercializing nuclear energy represented the Federal Government's largest and most significant energy project from the 1950s into the early 1970s. Second, the energy crisis of the mid-1970s hastened a series of government reorganizations as both the executive and legislative branches sought to better coordinate federal energy policy and programs. The establishment of the Department of Energy brought most federal energy activities under one umbrella for the first time, but it also located a sizeable component dedicated to defense activities in the same organization.