

**Les Aspin**  
**January 21, 1993 - February 3, 1994**  
18th Secretary of Defense  
Clinton Administration



President-elect Bill Clinton's choice for secretary of defense, Leslie (Les) Aspin, had represented Wisconsin's First Congressional District in the House of Representatives since 1971. Aspin was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on 21 July 1938 and attended public schools there. His academic credentials included a B.A. from Yale University (1960), an M.A. from Oxford University (1962), where (like the new president) he was a Rhodes Scholar, and a Ph.D. in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1965). As an officer in the U.S. Army from 1966 to 1968, he served as a systems analyst in the Pentagon under Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. Before his election as a Democrat to Congress in 1970, Aspin had been active in Wisconsin politics and had taught economics at Marquette University.

Aspin began his career in Congress as an outsider but soon developed a special interest and expertise in defense matters. Before and during his tenure in the House, he had opposed the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In his early years in Congress he often issued press releases critical of shortcomings he detected in the armed forces. By 1985, when he became chairman of the House Committee on Armed Services, he was recognized as a leading defense authority. His chairmanship caused controversy among some House Democrats, particularly because he supported the Reagan administration's policies on the MX missile and aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. He again broke with many Democrats in January 1991 when he issued a paper supporting the Bush administration's intention to use military force to drive the Iraqis from Kuwait. The accuracy of his prediction that the United States could win a quick military victory with light casualties added to his reputation as a military expert.

Shortly after he became Secretary of Defense, Aspin discussed dangers that had emerged with the end of the Cold War: the uncertainty that reform could succeed in the former Soviet Union; the enhanced possibility that terrorists or terrorist states could acquire nuclear weapons; the likely proliferation of regional conflicts; and the failure to take adequate account of the impact of the state of the domestic economy on U.S. national security interests. Given these conditions and the end of the Cold War, it seemed clear that the Pentagon was entering a period of potentially profound change. Aspin looked like a sound choice to manage this change.

As it turned out, Aspin's tenure as Secretary was among the most difficult as any. The "peace dividend" was quickly overcome by military engagements in Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia, military strikes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan, budgetary difficulties, and management issues concerning the treatment of homosexuals and women in the military ranks.

Aspin served as secretary of defense until 3 February 1994, then joined the faculty of Marquette University's international affairs program in Washington. In March he became a member of the Commission on Roles and Missions, and in May Clinton chose him to be chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. In March 1995 he began work as chairman of still another study group, this on the Roles and Capabilities of the Intelligence Community.

On 21 May 1995, Aspin died in Washington after a stroke. He had been scheduled to present an address at the 35<sup>th</sup> Reunion of his Yale College Class the following week.