President Truman's long-pondered reorganization of the Maritime Commission is both drastic and plausible in many ways. The danger is that the President may be misled into believing that the trouble in the Maritime Commission will be cured by a mere reshuffling of authority. Whatever the administrative defects of the present commission, and they are many, the basic difficulty has been in the outlook of its members.

What the President proposes is to abolish the commission and divide its duties functionally as recommended by the Hoover Commission and other studies. Replacing the present five-member body, a three-man Maritime Board would be set up in the Department of Commerce to handle regulatory and subsidy functions. With respect to ship construction and operating subsidy determination, this board would be subject to policy guidance from the Secretary of Commerce; but its decisions, once made, would be conclusive. In such regulatory matters as approval of rates the board would act as an independent agency.

To carry out other duties of the Maritime Commission—administration of subsidies, management of the Government-owned merchant fleet and similar functions aggregating 162 million dollars yearly—the plan would establish a separate Maritime Administration in the Department of Commerce. Separate, that is, except for the fact that the chairman of the Maritime Board would serve in a dual capacity as Maritime Administrator.

Insofar as it would bring about policy accountability on subsidy awards, the proposal would be a distinct improvement. The granting of subsidies is basically an executive function, and when this function is carried out by an independent agency great abuse is possible. The plan would permit supervision to insure that presidential subsidy policy and maritime policy were not operating at cross-purposes. Moreover, the plan recognizes the overlap of many maritime functions by providing for the use of the same staff by the Maritime Board and the Maritime Administration.

The question remains, however: How many ways can the same man be divided? Can an administrator responsible to the Secretary of Commerce in some matters remain genuinely independent in others? For that matter, would not the dual Maritime Board-Administration head be in a position to thwart other board members, since all employees except personal staffs would be responsible to him alone? That has been one of the major complaints under the most recent reorganization of the Maritime Commission. Finally, if a Department of Transportation is the President's aim, ought not this issue to be met head-on? Should the already unyielding Department of Commerce be made more so?

Although the President's message does not mention it, undoubtedly a major factor in the shift was the report last summer by the Comptroller General dealing with the way the Maritime Commission majority had flouted the law in granting excessive subsidies—a report confirmed by the House Executive Expenditures Committee. If the reorganization plan is accepted, the President has a great opportunity to get rid of the commission members who have abused their offices. This gain would be nullified, however, if the President (as is now reported to be his intention) were to appoint as Undersecretary of Commerce for Transportation the present Maritime Commission chairman, who has sided with the majority. By the same token it would be unfair to jettison Commissioner Raymond S. McKeough, who has fought a losing battle to administer the law as written.

No reorganization plan can be stronger than the men chosen to administer it. In peculiar measure the chaos in the Maritime Commission is the result of incompetence. Far more important than the details of the reorganization plan, if it goes through, will be for the President to name as Undersecretary of Commerce a man specially qualified in the field of transportation and to appoint as Maritime Administrator and board members who have demonstrated that they can distinguish public from private interest.