

Issue Advocacy Groups and Think Tanks: Introduction

By Richard Skinner

The term “think tank” was first used during World War II to describe secure environments where top secret matters could be discussed freely. Paul Dickson elegantly defines a think tank as a “bridge between knowledge and power”; Andrew Rich describes it as an “independent, non-interest-based, non-profit” institute that produces and relies on “expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policymaking process.” [1] Unlike universities, think tanks do not offer undergraduate classes, although a few have bestowed graduate degrees, most notably the RAND Corporation. Think tanks are more intimately involved with the policy process, usually operate on shorter time horizons, and produce work accessible to those outside academia. [2] Unlike most other interest groups, think tanks generally do not have an explicit constituency. Although they may have ideological biases, they do not contribute to campaigns or endorse candidates. [3] Think tanks also may have close links to policymakers and may receive public contracts, but they are not part of the normal governmental structure. Their independence from bureaucratic controls can be a significant asset to think tanks. As Bruce Smith explains:

Systematic and imaginative policy research generally seems difficult to perform within an agency having responsibility for policy or operations. The pressure-ridden atmosphere of government agencies does not lend itself to the sort of intellectual “climate” conducive for creative policy research. And (what may amount to the same thing in practical terms) the individuals with the requisite research skills are difficult to recruit for direct government employment because they have become acclimated through years of training to an academic-type atmosphere. [4]

Estimates from the past two decades show about 100 think tanks operating in Washington and between 600 and 1,000 nationwide. [5] The most influential institutes are located in Washington, New York, or Los Angeles, but numerous others are located in state capitals and focus on issues facing state government. [6] Think tanks vary greatly in size and scope. Many small think tanks may have only a handful of researchers, rely heavily on outside academics working on contract, and focus on only one issue area. Larger organizations may have about a dozen fellows, writing papers on a limited number of topics. The biggest and best-established think tanks, such as RAND or the Brookings Institution, may have more than 100 fellows and research assistants, covering the full gamut of policy issues. [7]

Notes

[1] Paul Dickson, *Think Tanks* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 28; Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 11–12.

[2] Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 13; Donald Abelson, *A Capital Idea: Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 75–76.

[3] Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*, 13–14.

[5] Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14–15.

[6] James Allen Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: Free Press, 1991), xiv–xv.

[7] David Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 1–6.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "Issue Advocacy Groups and Think Tanks: Introduction." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 223. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367103>.



Think Tanks as Interest Groups

Document Outline

Features

By Richard Skinner

Think tanks have many of the same characteristics as other interest groups. In their early days, they often benefited from outside patrons. Jerome Greene, secretary of the Rockefeller Foundation, was critical to the formation of the Institute of Governmental Research (IGR), a progenitor of Brookings, and Henry “Hap” Arnold, chief of staff of the U.S. Army Air Force, essentially created RAND. Entrepreneurs may assume the costs of starting a think tank and may dominate their organization for years to come. Examples include Wesley Mitchell of the National Bureau of Economic Research and Bob Greenstein of the Center for Budgetary and Policy Priorities. The excellent reputations of these institutions reflect in large part the respect that policymakers held for the integrity and ability of their founders. Other leaders may not have technically created their think tanks, but still may be widely credited with their rise to prominence. William Baroody Sr. and Hamilton Fish Armstrong dominated the American Enterprise Institute and the Council on Foreign Relations, respectively, for a generation each. Both organizations encountered significant difficulty in replacing them.

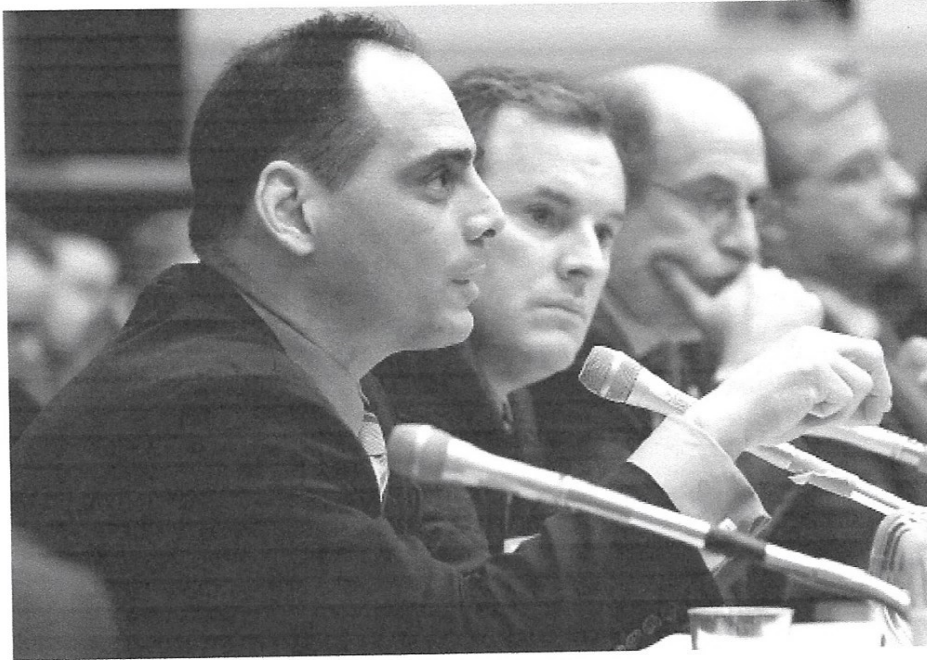
Like other interest groups, think tanks need to engage in organizational maintenance. To continue functioning, think tanks may need to shift their mission, seek new sources of funding, or adjust to a changing political climate. With the rise of media-savvy conservative research institutes such as the Heritage Foundation in the 1970s and 1980s, established players such as Brookings embraced more aggressive public relations. When the Pentagon reduced its spending on research and development during the Vietnam War, RAND successfully expanded its mission to include more work on domestic issues. Similarly, when President Ronald Reagan slashed spending for evaluation of antipoverty programs, the Urban Institute expanded its sources of funding to include more overseas clients.

Like other interest groups, think tanks can fail to maintain themselves. A changing political climate may push a research institute out of the mainstream, reducing its capacity to influence public policy or gain favorable publicity. Charges of “fellow traveling” with Communists destroyed the Institute of Pacific Relations in the 1950s and later badly damaged the Institute for Policy Studies. During the New Deal era, the Brookings Institution's reputation for dowdy conservatism alienated foundations and academia, cutting it off from vital sources of funding and personnel.

Think tanks may be unable to replace a charismatic leader. Despite building a respected reputation in progressive circles, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions never escaped the shadow of its founder, former University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins, and it expired within a few years of his death. The center suffered from many problems common among think tanks—insecure funding, extravagant spending, vagueness of purpose, an inability to attract personnel to match its ambitions, a failure to adapt to changing times—but its dominance by Hutchins posed particular problems. Mary Ann Dzuback argues: “The center's demise occurred because Hutchins was so much a part of its definition that when his health failed, there was not enough of a commitment to the idea on which it was based to sustain it.” [1] Hutchins had founded the center in 1959 as a spin-off of the Fund for the Republic, a civil libertarian group that was itself an outgrowth of the Ford Foundation. Although the center published a respected magazine and held some well-attended conferences, its “dialogues” among eminent scholars failed to fulfill Hutchins's extravagant visions. Milton Mayer described the center as the “lengthened shadow of Robert Maynard Hutchins”; its uncertain mission kept it from establishing a clear identity independent of its founder. [2] His advanced age and declining health discouraged donor interest in building a long-term endowment, and his successor left office after only a year, after repeated conflicts with the board of trustees, forcing the ailing Hutchins to resume command. After his death in 1977, the center failed to find a lasting leader or a source of funding, and was forced to close.

To continue functioning, think tanks need to secure funding. As of the early twenty-first century, RAND is by far the wealthiest think tank, with an annual budget of about \$200 million, overwhelmingly funded by contracts for

clients, especially the state government. Institution each spend more than \$30 million a year. Smaller institutes may have budgets of only a million or two. [3] Think tanks have often enjoyed exceptionally close relationships with philanthropic foundations; indeed the two entities can be said to have come of age together. The Carnegie Corporation helped give birth to the National Bureau of Economic Research, and the Rockefeller Foundation was intimately involved in the creation of the Institute for Government Research (IGR). In the 1970s a network of conservative foundations helped create the intellectual infrastructure that contributed to the Reagan administration. The Tax Reform Act of 1969 discouraged such close relationships by increasing a foundation's legal liability when it provided more than one-third of an organization's budget. [4] Wealthy individuals also provide much support for think tanks: Andrew Carnegie and Robert Brookings gave so much that their names now are emblazoned upon research institutes. The Heritage Foundation pioneered the use of direct mail in the 1970s, and conservative think tanks have henceforth remained heavily dependent upon small individual gifts. [5] The federal government began contracting out research to think tanks after World War II. Federal grants remain central to the funding of RAND, the National Bureau of Economic Research, and the Urban Institute.



Members of think tanks can influence policy by sharing their research with Congress. Here, scholars from the Heritage Foundation, Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Security Policy speak before the House Armed Services Committee on the national security implications of the potential takeover of six U.S. ports by a company based in Dubai in 2006. (Source: AP/Dennis Cook.)

Some think tanks have internal resources that can support their activities. A few of the largest and oldest think tanks, such as Brookings, have endowments that lend them greater stability even in difficult times. In addition, Brookings is among those think tanks that generate significant income through the sale of books, journals, and monographs, and through the rental of data produced in-house. Think tanks may also make money by providing training and holding conferences for policymakers and business executives.

Features

Major Think Tank Contributions to Policy Debates

The Institute for Government Research's work on behalf of an executive budget process, which culminated in the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921.

The studies conducted during World War II by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Committee for Economic Development on the shape of the postwar world, especially on the development of the global economy.

The popularization of Keynesian ideas by the Committee for Economic Development in the 1940s and by the Brookings Institution in the 1950s.

RAND's highly influential work on nuclear strategy in the 1950s, which contributed heavily to actions later taken by the Kennedy administration.



Think Tank Structure and Personnel

By Richard Skinner

Most think tanks are formally operated by a board of trustees, who are usually prominent figures from the worlds of politics, business, and education. Harold Orlans asserts that these boards “establish, review, and legitimate broad institutional policies and objectives” and “act as an intermediary and a buffer between an institute, sponsors, and the public.” [1] They rarely involve themselves in the day-to-day business of a research institute, but they may intervene to redefine its mission or replace its leadership.

The staff of the think tank is headed by a chief executive, usually with the title of president or director. These positions can be both rewarding and demanding. On the one hand, think tank director can operate without the constraints inflicted upon a university president. There are no student protests, no alumni questioning decisions, no state legislature cutting the budget, and no tenured faculty free to criticize on a whim. [2] On the other hand, think tank directors must be administrative managers, public intellectuals, fund-raisers, and chief researchers all at once. As a result, these positions are difficult to fill. Some think tank directors, such as Harold Moulton of Brookings and Ed Feulner of the Heritage Foundation, have stayed in power for decades. By contrast, junior staff, such as those who handle public relations, may experience rapid turnover. Many young people new to Washington may begin their careers as researchers or administrative personnel at think tanks, with the goal of moving on quickly. But the heart of think tanks is their team of research scholars and fellows. They include, among others, academics who prefer a less restrictive setting, former officeholders who enjoy the opportunity to think and write at leisure, and policy specialists who benefit from having institutional support for their research. These are the personnel who publish books, conduct research projects, testify before congressional hearings, answer media queries, and perform all the other tasks central to a think tank's functioning. Many younger, smaller institutes rely heavily on outside researchers, who may lend their expertise by contract, but are not employed by think tanks full-time. [3]

Notes

[1] Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*, 65; Harold Orlans, *The Nonprofit Research Institute: Its Origin, Operation, Problems, and Prospects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 59–63.

[2] Orlans, *Nonprofit Research Institute*, 63–64.

[3] Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*, 66–68.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "Think Tank Structure and Personnel." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 225. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367107>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367107

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367107>



Tax Status of Think Tanks

By Richard Skinner

Think tanks are usually organized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. This classification is a double-edged sword. Since 1917 contributions to a 501(c)(3) organization have been tax-deductible, providing a potent incentive to donors. But for almost as long, such groups have been generally forbidden to lobby public officials or take part in political campaigns. [1] This is not an idle threat. The American Enterprise Institute was forced to operate with much greater discretion after the IRS accused it of excessive entanglement with Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign.

Notes

[1] Jeffrey Berry, *A Voice for Nonprofits* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 4.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "Tax Status of Think Tanks." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 225.1-226. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367108>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367108

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367108>

© 2011, CQ Press, A Division of SAGE Publications. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Service](#) | [Copyright Notice](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



What Do Think Tanks Think About?

By Richard Skinner

Think tanks are probably best known for developing policy ideas: defining problems, producing proposals, and gauging the impact of existing programs. Relatively few think tanks produce much original data—it is expensive, time-consuming, and unpredictable—but those that do (such as the Brookings Institution, the Urban Institute, and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities) often make data production a core area of expertise. Think tanks rarely develop entirely new ideas. More often, they engage in “research brokering,” bringing academic concepts to the attention of policymakers, developing proposals in anticipation of the time when enactment might be politically feasible. [1] In essence, think tanks act as middlemen, more practical-minded than academic scholars, less caught up in the moment than officeholders. The independence of think tanks allows them to develop policy ideas without immediate concern for their political impact. As Martha Derthick and Paul Quirk explain, “the indifference of academic analysts to short-term feasibility” helps expand the array of policy changes available in the long term. [2]

Think tanks can market ideas to policymakers, either directly or through the media. The Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Council on Foreign Relations publish influential journals as well as numerous books and monographs. Journalists frequently turn to think tank scholars for commentary on current events, and many institutes expend great effort to place opinion articles in influential outlets. Bruce L. R. Smith notes that policymakers often have little time to read books. [3] Think tanks need to adapt to policymakers’ schedules by presenting ideas through in-person briefings or short-form written material. [4] Seminars and conferences can also provide a valuable means of bringing together government officials, academics, journalists, and business executives to discuss policy issues. Andrew Rich argues that think tanks are likely to have their greatest impact early in the policymaking process, defining a problem, proposing possible solutions, and doing the foundational work that those more engaged in the political game may lack the time to do. [5] As the process continues, research institutes lose most of their influence, as the outlines of the debate become set. Think tanks can also serve as part of a career track for policy experts who may have spent time in academia or government, and may return in the near future. They often advise presidential campaigns and transitions, providing them both with policy ideas and future administration appointees. [6] Of course, the think tanks of today have evolved over many decades. What follows is a brief history of this development. This background sheds light on the reasons that some think tanks were able to grow and prosper whereas others lost influence and declined by failing to respond to changing circumstances.

Notes

[1] Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics*, 104.

[2] Martha Derthick and Paul Quirk, *The Politics of Deregulation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1985), 247–248.

[3] B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation*, 277–283.

[4] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 9–18, 45–48.

[5] Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 144–151.

[6] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 24–36.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. “What Do Think Tanks Think About?” In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 226. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367109>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367109

The Birth of Think Tanks

By Richard Skinner

As the Industrial Revolution radically altered life in the United States of the late nineteenth century, a new breed of social scientists sought engagement with the problems besetting an industrializing United States. [1] But efforts at social change, even of the most conservative “economy and efficiency” sort, inevitably ran into an obstacle in the inadequacy of the American state. Unlike its European counterparts, the United States had developed popular politics before creating a modern administrative apparatus. Instead, American politics was dominated by party leaders, and government positions mostly went to patronage employees who had proven their loyalty through campaign work. The civil service movement that arose after the Civil War scored some modest victories: the creation of the Civil Service Commission in 1871 and the passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883. Some positions were put on the “merit system,” examinations were required, salary scales established, but the power and prestige of the career civil service remained limited. [2]

Seeking to ameliorate social conditions (or to improve their image), civic-minded businessmen endowed foundations to pursue “scientific charity”: the Russell Sage Foundation (1907, often considered the first “think tank”), the Carnegie Corporation (1911), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1913), and the Rockefeller Foundation (1913). [3] In New York City, Frederick Cleveland and two associates founded the Bureau of Municipal Research (1907), which sought to apply business methods to the study of the public sector. [4] President William Howard Taft, who shared the bureau’s emphasis on an executive budget, appointed Cleveland as chairman of the Commission on Economy and Efficiency in 1910. Cleveland assembled a blue-ribbon staff that included Frank Goodnow, an administrative law professor at Columbia, and William F. Willoughby, a prominent statistician who had held a variety of high-level government positions. [5] The “Taft Commission” proposed an executive budget in a 1912 report. But Congress feared such concentration of power in the president’s hands and immediately dismissed the idea.

Cleveland, Goodnow, and Willoughby were not willing to let the commission’s work die. Cleveland suggested to Jerome Greene, secretary of the Rockefeller Foundation, that the federal government needed a national version of the Bureau of Municipal Research, a nonpartisan institute devoted to government efficiency. Greene rounded up corporate and academic support for the Institute for Government Research; he selected Goodnow as chairman of the board of trustees and Willoughby as director. [6]

As soon as Willoughby took over the institute in 1916, he committed it to the struggle for a national budget. The outbreak of World War I only reemphasized the disorderly condition of the American state. Willoughby organized congressional hearings, drafted bills, and hired public relations specialists in the pursuit of his campaign. President Woodrow Wilson vetoed the first budget legislation over a constitutional issue, but his successor, Warren Harding, signed the Budget and Accounting Act into law in 1921. [7]

Notes

[1] Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of Federal Administrative Capabilities, 1877–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 46.

[2] *Ibid.*, 47–84.

[3] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 56–59; Leonard Silk and Mark Silk, *The American Establishment* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 104–108, 153–160.

[4] Donald Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution, 1916–1952: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985), 17–28.

[5] Skowronek, *Building a New American State*, 177–184; Critchlow, *Brookings Institution, 1916–1952*, 28–32.

[6] Skowronek, *Building a New American State*, 194–206; Critchlow, *Brookings Institution, 1916–1952*, 28–33.

[7] Critchlow, *Brookings Institution, 1916–1952*, 36–40.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. “The Birth of Think Tanks.” In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited



War, Depression, and the Need for Expertise: Think Tanks, 1917–1945

By Richard Skinner

After the U.S. entry into World War I, Wilson was forced to bring in academics and business executives to manage the war effort and plan for the postwar settlement. The War Industries Board (WIB), tasked with managing defense production, hired numerous economists and statisticians (including the staff of the IGR) to monitor the nation's financial health. These experts quickly understood the poor state of the federal government's economic data. [1] In September 1917, at Wilson's direction, a planning staff was assembled (soon known simply as "the Inquiry") that included many of the era's leading academics and journalists. Their findings became an important foundation for Wilson's "Fourteen Points." [2]

But after the armistice of November 1918, Wilson quickly disassembled the intellectual apparatus of the American war effort. Many scholars were frustrated by their experience. Frequently, the WIB lacked the necessary data to make economic decisions. Members of the Inquiry found themselves ignored at the Paris Peace Conference and commiserated with similarly alienated members of the British delegation. The two groups quickly found common ground and began plans for a joint Anglo-American institution to study international affairs, but postwar tensions soon made a bi-national organization unlikely. [3] So the group of Inquiry veterans (with the assistance of some influential New Yorkers) created the Council on Foreign Relations in 1921; Hamilton Fish Armstrong, a young journalist, served as the CFR's executive director. He dominated the CFR and its influential journal, *Foreign Affairs*, until his retirement in 1972. [4]

Economist Wesley Mitchell had run the War Industries Board's Price Section, where he was constantly frustrated by the lack of sound statistics. After the war, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, Mitchell created the National Bureau of Economic Research, which quickly became the nation's leading source of data on the business cycle. The NBER built a reputation for integrity, nonpartisanship, and high academic standards, which it has maintained to this day. [5]

Similarly, Robert Brookings, a St. Louis businessman, came away from his wartime experience with a new commitment to improved economic research. His friendship with Andrew Carnegie landed him on the Taft Commission and the board of the Institute for Government Research. These activities, in turn, led Wilson to appoint him to the WIB. At war's end, Brookings assumed the chairmanship of the IGR, where he soon became a dominant figure. In 1922 Brookings founded the Institute of Economics and, two years later, the Robert Brookings Graduate School of Economics and Government. The three entities were technically separate, but in fact deeply entangled. Their institutional culture differed substantially, and their leaders clashed frequently. The three entities were merged in 1927 to form the Brookings Institution. [6]

The New Deal led to an unprecedented need for experts in government, and yet it also posed dilemmas for the community of policy intellectuals and the think tanks that housed them. The government was developing its own internal sources of expertise and no longer depended as much on outsiders. Roosevelt's political wheeling-and-dealing and his lack of concern for policy coherence dismayed many Progressives devoted to "good government" and hostile to party machines. Harold Moulton, the economist who served as Brookings president from 1927 to 1952, became deeply alienated from the New Deal, and emerged as a conservative spokesman and an opponent of Keynesian economics. Brookings, while still respected for its technical expertise, was increasingly marginal to academic thinking and political debates. [7]

As with its predecessor, World War II greatly expanded the government's need for technical expertise. Even before the United States entered the war, the Council on Foreign Relations was conducting its War and Peace Studies to develop long-term paths for the nation as a superpower. The studies emerged from meetings in 1939 between the CFR leadership and top State Department officials. The government lacked the capacity for long-term studies of the kind envisaged by the council; to ensure independence, funding came from the Rockefeller Foundation. [8]

The businessmen who created the Committee for Economic Development (CED) thought about the postwar world

along similar lines to those followed at the time of the New Deal, such as Studebaker president Paul Hoffman and advertising magnate William Benton, created the committee in 1942 as an alternative to more conservative organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers. Supported by a staff of academic economists, the CED embraced Keynesianism as an alternative both to national planning and to laissez-faire. Its proposals underlay the Employment Act of 1946, which created the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA). Beardsley Ruml, a veteran of the Rockefeller Foundation, the University of Chicago, and the New York Federal Reserve Bank, became the CED's dominant intellectual force, spearheading establishment acceptance of Keynesian ideas. [9] Think tanks were showing their ability to not just to analyze policy, but to shape it, in the manner of other interest groups.

Notes

[1] *Ibid.*, 41.

[2] Robert Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs: The History of the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 2–4; Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 116–133.

[3] Steel, *Walter Lippmann*, 150; Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 2–11; Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 71–74.

[4] Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 5–11.

[5] J. A. Smith, *Idea Brokers*, 62–67.

[6] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 59–64; Critchlow, *Brookings Institution, 1916–1952*, 56; Silk and Silk, *American Establishment*, 153–166.

[7] Critchlow, *Brookings Institution, 1916–1952*, *passim*.

[8] Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 33–43, 60–51, 81–94, 102–106.

[9] John B. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and the Betrayal of the Public Trust* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "War, Depression, and the Need for Expertise: Think Tanks, 1917-1945." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 227-28. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367111>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367111

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367111>

© 2011, CQ Press, A Division of SAGE Publications. All Rights Reserved.
Terms of Service | Copyright Notice | Privacy Policy



Technocratic Liberalism and Its Critics: Think Tanks, 1945–1969

By Richard Skinner

Henry Arnold, the U.S. Army Air Force chief of staff created Project RAND (short for “research and development”) as a subsidiary of Douglas Aircraft in 1946; but the relationship proved uncomfortable, and it was spun off as an independent nonprofit corporation two years later. Franklin Collbohm, a Douglas Aircraft engineer, who served as RAND’s president for two decades, quickly established a permissive, individualistic culture that attracted many of the era’s leading minds. [1]

RAND rapidly moved beyond a narrow focus on technical issues facing the air force. Its very first report, issued in 1946, proposed the construction of an earth-orbiting satellite. [2] It benefited from steady support at the highest levels of the air force, but it also received funding from the nation’s leading foundations and eventually from the Atomic Energy Commission and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Financially secure and physically separated from the Pentagon (it was and is headquartered in Santa Monica, California), RAND enjoyed enormous independence and acquired impressive prestige. It absorbed numerous academics interested in the strategic implications of the atomic bomb. Heavily influenced by the polymath John von Neumann, RAND became a pioneer in game theory and computing. Mathematician Edwin Paxson transformed the wartime technique of operations research into the much broader field of systems analysis. [3]

In the 1950s RAND made its greatest contribution through its studies of nuclear strategy. A clique of scientists and mathematicians made it their mission to “think about the unthinkable.” This group included political scientists Bernard Brodie and William Kaufmann, physicists Bruno Augenstein and Herman Kahn, and economists Henry Rowen and Andrew Marshall. Kahn’s flamboyance would eventually make him by far the most famous (he allegedly served as the model for Dr. Strangelove), but the most influential member of this crowd was mathematician Albert Wohlstetter. In 1953 Wohlstetter produced a study of the vulnerability of Strategic Air Command bases to a surprise Soviet attack. Wohlstetter urged the air force to upgrade its early-warning radar system, to better protect its repair and fueling systems, and to abandon stationing bombers overseas. Not only were Wohlstetter’s recommendations adopted, but also his study proved vastly influential in broader contexts. It legitimized nuclear strategy as a field of inquiry. It greatly increased concern about the possibility of a Soviet first strike and it showed the utility of RAND’s mode of operations, especially its freedom from bureaucratic control. [4] With its growing prestige, RAND made further contributions in strategic studies as the decade approached an end. Concerned about the possibility of an accidental nuclear war, Wohlstetter devised a “fail-safe” procedure in which bombers would pause at a series of checkpoints to await confirmation of an actual conflict; should no such assurance come, the bombers would return to their bases. [5] RAND scientists also pushed for the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, and helped conceive the ideas behind the first spy, weather, and communications satellites. [6]

But RAND analysts were especially active in formulating a critique of “massive retaliation”: the policy enunciated by President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that the United States might respond to Soviet aggression anywhere on the globe with an enormous atomic attack on the USSR itself. Kaufmann, Kahn, and other members of the RAND clique of strategic thinkers instead offered a policy of “counterforce,” using nuclear weapons sparingly against military targets only, while holding a reserve for further action should the Soviets not back down. Thinkers affiliated with the CFR also shared the RANDites’ disdain for “massive retaliation,” with Henry Kissinger’s widely read *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957) providing the most influential summary of their perspective. [7]

During his 1960 bid for the presidency, John F. Kennedy seized upon many of the ideas of the RAND strategic clique, with Wohlstetter and Marshall advising his campaign on nuclear issues. Kennedy warned of a “missile gap” that would lead to Soviet nuclear superiority; RAND studies, based on air force intelligence, had dwelled on the same (nonexistent) threat. Kennedy appointed Ford Motor president Robert McNamara as his secretary of defense. Quantitatively minded and familiar with operations research from his wartime work for the U.S. Army Air Force, McNamara was a natural ally of think tank intellectuals. He filled the Pentagon with RAND sages rapidly dubbed the “Whiz Kids” who helped him overhaul the defense budget and increase his power over the individual services. RAND analyst Daniel Ellsberg helped in the radical overhaul of the nation’s plans for a nuclear war, injecting notions of

counterforce and realistic response into international relations. [8] Kahn himself was too outrageous for government service. But his works *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) and *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (1962) made him a household name, and he soon left RAND to create his own think tank, the Hudson Institute. [9] But RAND's heyday would be brief. Many uniformed personnel (especially, ironically enough, in the air force) came to loath what they saw as the arrogance of the Whiz Kids. Doves found them to be cold-blooded technocrats, cavalierly discussing the deaths of tens of millions. The missile gap proved nonexistent, and two of the RANDites' favorite notions, civil defense and counterforce, found only limited applicability. [10] The Vietnam War increasingly soaked up resources that might have been available to RAND. Many saw the quagmire in Southeast Asia as the ultimate example of the failures of technocratic notions of "limited war." With its Pentagon support on the decline, in the late 1960s RAND looked to diversify its financial support and research agenda. In 1967 economist Henry Rowen replaced Collbohm as RAND's president. The institute won more grants from foundations, foreign governments, and states and municipalities; by 1970, one-quarter of its funding came from nondefense sources. [11]



Dr. Louis A. Giamboni and Elaine Renner carry out secret research with the TRAC machine at the RAND Corporation in 1958. During the 1950s RAND carried out influential research, most notably in defense matters. (Source: AP/HF.)

Despite the rise of RAND, the Council on Foreign Relations retained its prestige in the years after World War II. It increased its professional staff and gained greater support from foundations. The CFR's meetings and publications continued to be leading venues for statements by important policymakers. The council remained a voice of internationalist "establishment" opinion, firmly supporting NATO and the Marshall Plan. It weathered assaults from conservatives and isolationists to retain influence in both Democratic and Republican administrations, especially within the State Department. [12]

The power of think tank intellectuals in postwar America was not limited to foreign policy. If RAND and the CFR were the centers of technocratic liberalism as the United States became a superpower, Brookings performed a similar function as the federal government increased its role in the economy. Economist Robert Calkins, a veteran of the Committee on Economic Development and the Rockefeller Foundation, took over the institution's presidency in 1952. Unlike his predecessor, Harold Moulton, Calkins proved to be a pillar of the liberal establishment, building close ties with prominent foundations and assembling a staff that included several of the nation's leading Keynesian economists. Calkins quickly built strong relationships between Brookings and pivotal bureaucrats, congressional

starters, and policymakers, particularly during the Kennedy-Johnson era. [13]

The institution's ethos fit an era of "liberal consensus," of optimism about the capabilities of government, of confidence that fundamental ideological questions had been answered. President Lyndon Johnson especially embraced social science as a tool that could inform policymaking. The rapid growth of social services under the Great Society led to a greater need for program evaluation. With skepticism growing about the effectiveness of many new initiatives, Johnson called for the creation of an "urban RAND" that would employ the latest techniques. In 1968 the Urban Institute was created, with funding from three cabinet departments, as well as from the Ford Foundation. The Urban Institute emulated RAND in its dependence on government contracts, and its president, William Gorham, was a veteran of RAND as well as of the Pentagon and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The Urban Institute proved to be anything but a slavish supporter of the Great Society. Many of its analyses of War on Poverty programs found them to be ill-conceived or poorly administered. By the end of the 1960s, even liberal technocrats were losing faith in the ability of government to solve social problems. [14]

Think tanks were coming under fire from critics all along the ideological spectrum. Through legislation and committee hearings, congressional critics reined in the political activities of foundations. The Vietnam War undermined the reputation of technocratic expertise, especially that of RAND and the CFR, which had supported U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia and provided advice to the government on the conduct of the war. [15] Both entities, traditionally centers of establishment consensus, saw bitter internal disputes as the war persisted. Most notably, Daniel Ellsberg, a quintessential RAND analyst and veteran of McNamara's Pentagon, leaked to the press a top-secret history of the Vietnam War that became known as the "Pentagon Papers." The leak badly damaged RAND's relationship with the military and forced the resignation of RAND president Henry Rowen. [16]

Both sides of the political spectrum developed critiques of technocratic liberalism. The New Left criticized "objective" expertise as simply another element of a soul-crushing social hierarchy and saw many think tanks as tools of the military-industrial complex. These forces had their own research institution in the Institute for Policy Studies, founded by two former Kennedy administration officials in 1963. Funded by wealthy liberals and some small foundations, the IPS became a favorite of many left-leaning intellectuals, the antiwar movement, and the 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern. [17]

If technocratic liberalism's critics on the Left often received the most publicity, its opponents on the Right proved to be more influential. A small group of right-leaning think tanks gained prominence as the conservative movement increased its political relevance in the late 1960s. Founded as a probusiness advocacy group in 1943, the American Enterprise Association remained little known until General Electric president A. D. Marshall took over its command a decade later. He soon hired two staff economists from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, William Baroody Sr. and W. Glenn Campbell, to remodel the stagnant organization. Baroody proved to be an organizational wizard and a master fund-raiser, and he made the renamed American Enterprise Institute into the premier exponent of free-market thought in the 1960s. Baroody placed special value on establishing AEI's intellectual respectability and built ties to conservative thinkers such as economist Milton Friedman. But Baroody also was an enthusiastic supporter of Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, and his work on its behalf led to investigations by congressional critics and the Internal Revenue Service. AEI was forced into a stance of cautious detachment from the political process, eventually opening room for more engaged think tanks on the Right.

During the First World War, Herbert Hoover became concerned about the need to preserve records from this tumultuous era; in 1919 he gave his budding collection to his alma mater, Stanford University, establishing the Hoover War Library. The archives eventually also encompassed the Second World War and the rise of fascism and communism. At the end of the 1950s Hoover pushed for what had become the Hoover Institution to adopt a stronger conservative, anticommunist ethos. After winning greater independence from Stanford, the institution lured Campbell away from AEI to serve as its president. Campbell made the Hoover Institution into the West Coast equivalent of AEI: a right-leaning think tank with strong academic credentials and valuable ties to the political circles of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. [18]

AEI encouraged the rise of another conservative think tank in the 1960s. The Center for Strategic and International Studies was founded in 1962 by Adm. Arleigh Burke, former chief of naval operations, and David Abshire, who had worked in turn as a military officer, an academic historian, and a congressional staffer, and would later serve in the Nixon and Reagan administrations. CSIS exuded a more humanistic and tradition-minded ethos than the quantitative orientation of RAND; its conservative, anticommunist politics gave it entrée in Republican circles. Gradually its views became less distinctive, and it became a favorite base for former officeholders such as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. [19]

Notes

- [1] B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation*, 49–65, 154–157.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 49–65; Alex Abella, *Soldiers of Reason: The RAND Corporation and the Rise of American Empire* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008), 19–20.
- [3] Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 85–110; B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation*, 6–8, 67–74; Orans, *Nonprofit Research Institute*, 108–122; Abella, *Soldiers of Reason*, 57–63; Paul Dickson, *Think Tanks* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 61–64, 67–71.
- [4] Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 74–110, 125–43. B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation*, 199–240.
- [5] Abella, *Soldiers of Reason*, 86–87.
- [6] Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 111–124. B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation* 108–114; Dickson, *Think Tanks*, 69–71.
- [7] Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 150–157; Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 185–200, 232–247.
- [8] Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 241–257; B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation*, 14–20, 125–147.
- [9] Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 220–32.
- [10] B. L. R. Smith, *RAND Corporation*, 283–296.
- [11] Abella, *Soldiers of Reason*, 168–187, 200–202; Orans, *Nonprofit Research Institute*, 108–122; Dickson, *Think Tanks*, 75–85.
- [12] Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 113–115, 125–129, 136–141, 148–149, 177–193.
- [13] J. A. Smith, *Idea Brokers*, 122–166; Critchlow, *Brookings Institution, 1916–1952*, 166–10.
- [14] Berry, *A Voice for Nonprofits*, 11–15. Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics* 42–43; J. A. Smith, *Idea Brokers*, 146–66; Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 76–77.
- [15] Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 166–175; Dickson, *Think Tanks*, 55, 67; Abella, *Soldiers of Reason*, 168–187.
- [16] Abella, *Soldiers of Reason*, 213–216.
- [17] Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics*, 153; J. A. Smith, *Idea Brokers*, 159–165; Dickson, *Think Tanks*, 277–289.
- [18] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 64–71.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 88.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "Technocratic Liberalism and Its Critics: Think Tanks, 1945-1969." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 228-30. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367112>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367112

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367112>



The Rise of the New Right: Think Tanks, 1969–1981

By Richard Skinner

Despite the growing prominence of right-leaning think tanks, the Nixon administration found itself dependent on the Brookings Institution, the Urban Institute, RAND, and the Council of Foreign Relations for advice, even though they were often home to veterans of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Conservatives inside and outside the administration bemoaned the power of a “permanent government” of high-level civil servants, policy intellectuals, establishment journalists, and congressional staffers. [1] Nixon advisers such as speechwriter Patrick Buchanan urged greater attention to building a conservative intellectual infrastructure that could develop policy alternatives, coordinate media communications, and serve as a “talent bank” for future Republican administrations. The same idea occurred to two conservative Republican staffers on Capitol Hill, Ed Feulner and Paul Weyrich. Both men were frustrated by what they saw as the centrism of the Nixon administration, the nonideological approach of congressional Republican leaders, and by the cautious tone of AEI. In 1973 Feulner and Weyrich first founded the Republican Study Committee and then the Heritage Foundation. Heritage would be a new kind of think tank, an “advocacy think tank” that made no pretense at objectivity and that would use the media aggressively to disseminate its ideological message. Heritage was funded not by the likes of the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, but by wealthy conservatives such as Richard Mellon Scaife, brewer Joseph Coors, and oilman Edward Noble. It also became the first think tank to employ direct-mail fund-raising.

If Brookings and the CFR tended to produce earnest book-length studies, Heritage preferred backgrounders and bulletins that would pass what Feulner called the “briefcase test”: a policymaker could take one out of a briefcase, and digest it while riding to work. Rather than the quasi-academic tone of earlier think tanks, Heritage adopted the traditional methods of lobbyists: pithy, accessible information that supports a specific policy outcome. It built a staff of young conservative intellectuals, who became used to writing on tight deadlines and were more comfortable in Republican congressional offices than in faculty lounges. Heritage quickly equaled or exceeded the influence wielded by AEI and Hoover in conservative circles. As the media noticed the rise of the New Right in the late 1970s, they increasingly turned to Heritage fellows for timely, glib commentary. As more conservative Republicans gained power, they used Heritage’s “talent bank” to find potential staffers. [2]

Heritage’s success helped fuel an explosion in conservative think tanks in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These included the Institute for Contemporary Studies (1974), the Ethics and Public Policy Center (1976), the Cato Institute (1977), the Manhattan Institute (1978), and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (1984). These organizations owed much of their power to a new network of conservative funders: not only individuals such as Coors, Scaife, and the members of the Koch family (especially important in libertarian circles), but also a number of foundations: John M. Olin, Bradley, Smith Richardson, and Lilly. Much of their giving was coordinated by the neoconservative intellectual Irving Kristol and by former Treasury secretary William Simon. [3]

The growth of the New Right was not limited to new institutions. William Baroody Sr. continued to promote the AEI energetically. If Heritage had outflanked it on the Right, there was still room for AEI to serve as the favorite think tank of establishment Republicans. Many veterans of the Nixon and Ford administrations joined AEI after leaving government service. These included Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Federal Reserve chairman Arthur Burns, CEA chairman Herbert Stein, and even former president Ford. At a time when free-market ideas were gaining greater acceptance, AEI amassed an outstanding team of conservative economic thinkers, including James C. Miller III, Murray Weidenbaum, Paul MacAvoy, Antonin Scalia, and Robert Bork. Weidenbaum’s *Government Mandated Price Increases* and Bork’s *The Antitrust Paradox* proved especially influential in policy debates. AEI also became a popular perch for many neoconservatives, former Democrats disillusioned by what they saw as the party’s leftward turn. Irving Kristol joined the institute in 1976 and soon brought along foreign policy thinker Jeane Kirkpatrick and public opinion analyst Ben Wattenberg. [4] AEI served as a means for many neoconservatives to build ties with the Republican Party and the business community. [5] But neoconservatives soon joined other right-leaning think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation and the Ethics and Public Policy Center, as their loyalty to the Democratic Party waned.

Free market thought spread well beyond conservative circles in the 1970s. The role played by Brookings and AEI in

bringing economic deregulation to the attention of policymakers. In the 1950s and 1960s academic economists became increasingly critical of New Deal-era regulations of trucking, telecommunications, and airlines. They argued that these restrictions prevented competition, which in turn led to high prices, poor service, and slow growth. But these regulations served the interests of existing producers and the labor unions that represented their employees, which were able to win the support of policymakers. [6] Between 1967 and 1975 the Ford Foundation funded research on economic regulation at the Brookings Institution, apparently for no other reason than that it was an area that might reward greater investigation. AEI soon began its own studies. The two think tanks held regular conferences and workshops that brought the new academic consensus to the attention of policy experts. These events helped build a cadre of young economists and lawyers, who would later serve in government, especially the CEA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). [7] Free market Republicans (notably President Ford) and consumer-minded Democrats (especially Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.) both embraced greater competition, and, to the surprise of most observers, all three industries were deregulated by the early 1980s. The perceived success of deregulation led to an intellectual consensus among think tank intellectuals in favor of greater competition in telecommunications, which helped lay the groundwork for the Telecommunications Act of 1996. [8]

Notes

[1] Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics*, 152–153; Silk and Silk, *American Establishment*, 153–160, 174–177.

[2] Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment* (New York: Crown, 1986), 46; Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics*, 160–162.

[3] Rich, *Think Tanks*, 53–56; Judis, *Paradox of American Democracy*.

[4] Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics*, 160–162; J. A. Smith, *Idea Brokers*, 180–184, 190–202; Blumenthal, *Rise of the Counter-Establishment*, 29–47.

[5] Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010), 204; Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 131–132.

[6] Derthick and Quirk, *Politics of Deregulation*, 29–35.

[7] *Ibid.*, 36–37.

[8] Rich, *Think Tanks*, 40–41.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "The Rise of the New Right: Think Tanks, 1969-1981." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 231-32. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367114>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367114

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367114>



The Age of Ideological Warfare: Think Tanks, 1981–1993

Document Outline

Features

By Richard Skinner

Conservative think tanks had a rare opportunity for influence during the Reagan administration. Drawing upon the experience of Brookings's role during the Kennedy transition, the Heritage Foundation and the Hoover Institution produced guides for beginning a new era of conservative governance: *Mandate for Leadership* and *The United States in 1980*, respectively. Both garnered massive attention from the press and policymakers. Given its strongly conservative cast, the Reagan administration needed to fill policymaking positions with those who possessed substantive expertise and ideological reliability. Think tanks, especially Heritage, Hoover, AEI, and CSIS, could easily fill these requirements, and their alumni were soon walking the corridors of power.

The new era forced existing think tanks to adapt. Just as cutbacks in defense research encouraged RAND to expand its efforts into domestic policy, reductions in federal spending on antipoverty and housing programs led the Urban Institute to seek support elsewhere, especially from foreign governments. Brookings moved away from its traditional emphasis on book-length studies and embraced shorter publications and more aggressive media outreach. [1] RAND continued to branch out, including accepting more overseas contracts, but the hawkish tone of the Reagan years suited it well, as defense spending soared, and many with ties to the Santa Monica beach gained high office. William Baroody Jr. replaced his father as president of AEI in 1978, but proved to be a disaster as a financial manager, and the board of trustees forced him out eight years later. He was replaced by Christopher DeMuth, a former top official at Reagan's OMB, who then led AEI for two decades. [2] Heritage has remained a powerful force among Republicans; its aggressive marketing of conservative proposals made it unusually influential during debates on telecommunications, health care, and welfare during the 1990s. [3] But other think tanks found it more difficult to adapt to changing times. The Institute for Policy Studies was badly damaged by internal disputes in the 1970s, by cutbacks in foundation support in the 1980s, and by an increasingly radical reputation that alienated more mainstream allies. [4] The Hudson Institute nearly collapsed after the death of founder Herman Kahn in 1983. The CFR lost much of its influence as elite consensus on foreign policy evaporated in the wake of Vietnam. [5]

Conservative "advocacy tanks" soon met with counterparts on the center-left, including the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (1981), the Progressive Policy Institute (1989), the Economic Policy Institute (1985), and the World Policy Institute (1982). [6] More specialized think tanks emerged, particularly in foreign policy (the Institute for International Economics and the Henry Stimson Center) and environmentalism (the Worldwatch Institute and the World Resources Institute). The growth in specialized groups reflected a tendency about foundations to prefer grants for narrowly focused projects with clear payoffs.

Features

Criticisms of Think Tanks

Populist: Think tanks' reverence for expertise produces an elitist ethos that does not easily coexist with popular control or open debate.

Leftist: Think tanks serve the interests of an oligarchy distrustful of democratic politics. They narrow the public agenda to issues that do not threaten the existing socioeconomic hierarchy. The wealthy individuals who serve on think tank boards of trustees and provide their funding have powerful stakes in a capitalist status quo.

Rightist: Think tank intellectuals form part of a "new class" of professionals who, even as they prosper from the fruits of capitalism, nevertheless encourage hostility to the very free enterprise system that supports their work.

Notes

[1] *Ibid.*, 67–71.

[2] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 80–84; J. A. Smith, *Idea Brokers*, 204.

[3] Rich, *Think Tanks*, 171–172, 181–196.

[4] Ricci, *Transformation of American Politics*, 218–219; Rich, *Think Tanks*, 70–71.

[5] Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs*, 210–242.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "The Age of Ideological Warfare: Think Tanks, 1981-1993." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 232-33. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367115>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367115

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367115>

© 2011, CQ Press, A Division of SAGE Publications. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Service](#) | [Copyright Notice](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



Think Tanks Today, 1993–Present

Document Outline

Features

By Richard Skinner

Think tanks have continued to move away from the older model of objectivity and generalism. “Vanity tanks” often have little identity apart from that of a founding personality. For example, since its creation in 1988, the Center for Security Policy has been dominated by Frank Gaffney Jr., a former official in Reagan’s Defense Department, and his concern with ballistic missile defense. “Legacy tanks” founded by retired policymakers have also joined the ranks of research institutes. Former presidents Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter founded organizations to pursue their commitments to national security and human rights, respectively. The lines between think tank research, political advocacy, and interest group lobbying have continued to blur. Several free market think tanks have been accused of pursuing research primarily to serve the needs of corporate sponsors. Old guard think tanks still remain the most respected by the media and policymakers; surveys find them holding in highest regard Brookings, CFR, RAND, and the Carnegie Endowment. Even in an ideological era, a reputation for disinterested expertise remains an asset. [1]

Liberals have followed conservatives in developing advocacy tanks. Organized labor sponsored the creation of the Economic Policy Institute in 1985, which has become particularly known for its criticism of free trade and for its biennial study, *The State of Working America*. Jared Bernstein, a longtime scholar at EPI, became chief economic adviser for Vice President Joseph Biden. Jeffrey Faux, a onetime member of Jimmy Carter’s CEA, has headed EPI throughout its existence, and former secretary of labor Robert Reich and economics writer Robert Kuttner are among the charter members of the board of trustees who still serve. [2]

Moderate Democrats created the Democratic Leadership Council in 1985 to promote centrist ideas within the party. [3] From the beginning, DLC founder Al From entertained the notion of the organization creating an in-house think tank. After the 1988 election From and fellow DLC staffer Will Marshall planned an organization modeled on conservative advocacy tanks; they actually met with Heritage Foundation founder Ed Feulner to discuss plans for the group. Such a think tank would produce policy proposals accessible to political elites, hold seminars for policymakers, and publish a journal of progressive thought. The Progressive Policy Institute was incorporated in December 1988 and began its activities the next year. Marshall has headed the PPI throughout its history, and the organization has consistently remained close to the DLC.

Bill Clinton headed the DLC before entering the 1992 presidential election, and his campaigns and administrations made use of DLC/PPI ideas on welfare reform, free trade, and national service. Following in the footsteps of conservative think tanks, the DLC produced an influential guide for the Clinton transition, *Mandate For Change*. Veterans of the two organizations filled numerous positions in the administration. Bruce Reed (once policy director at the DLC, now the council’s president) wrote several important Clinton speeches, helped develop Clinton’s health care proposal during the 1992 campaign, served as a leading advocate of welfare reform, and eventually became White House domestic policy chief. Elaine Kamarck, once a PPI senior fellow, headed the Reinventing Government initiative. Jeremy Rosner, a health care analyst for PPI, helped promote the version of managed competition that became the centerpiece of the Clinton health care proposal. [4]

Most notably, the Center for American Progress (founded 2003) was created as a “Democratic Heritage” (AEI was once referred to as the “Republican Brookings”). Just as Heritage and AEI have provided holding places for Republican policymakers, CAP was founded by onetime Clinton White House chief of staff John Podesta, who later presided over Barack Obama’s transition to power. Other veterans of the Clinton administration, such as CEA chair Laura D’Andrea Tyson and State Department official Morton Halperin, also joined CAP. Gene Sperling, who served as chairman of the National Economic Council under Clinton, joined CAP before later becoming counselor to Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner. Within five years, CAP had acquired 180 employees and a \$25 million budget, with much of its funding coming from prominent liberal donors such as financier George Soros and

hosting a group blog at ThinkProgress.org, and producing an electronic newsletter, "The Progress Report." It also provides communications material to the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. [5]

Several CAP veterans worked on the presidential nomination campaigns of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Obama. Denis McDonough, a senior fellow at CAP, served as a top foreign policy adviser to Obama during the 2008 election, and later served as chief of staff to the National Security Council. [6] Melody Barnes, a CAP veteran, became chair of the Domestic Policy Council. In his management of the Obama transition, Podesta was able to draw upon CAP's resources, including a variety of policy studies and an experienced staff. CAP produced a twenty-six-page report detailing the day-to-day activities of the early Obama presidency. [7]

Conservative think tanks enjoyed access to the George W. Bush administration much as they did with other Republican presidents. The Heritage Foundation provided advice on personnel during the transition. [8] Economists at the Hoover Institution, many of them veterans of previous Republican administrations, provided advice to Bush's 2000 presidential campaign. In 2005 Bush proposed adding private accounts to Social Security. The Cato Institute had advocated this idea since 1981, when it published Peter Ferrara's *Social Security: The Inherent Contradiction*. In 1998 Ed Crane of Cato met with then-governor Bush and found him to be an enthusiastic supporter of privatization. Andrew Biggs, a former Cato analyst, served as associate commissioner of the Social Security Administration. Other Cato alumni led advocacy groups supporting private accounts. [9]

The American Enterprise Institute, however, received the most attention for its role in the administration. Vice President Dick Cheney had been an AEI fellow in the 1990s. His wife, Lynne Cheney, continued to work there while her husband was in office. Lawrence Lindsey, director of the National Economic Council and principal author of the Bush tax cuts, was another AEI veteran. R. Glenn Hubbard joined AEI after serving as chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, and John R. Bolton, a former AEI fellow, served in the State Department, and later became ambassador to the United Nations. [10]

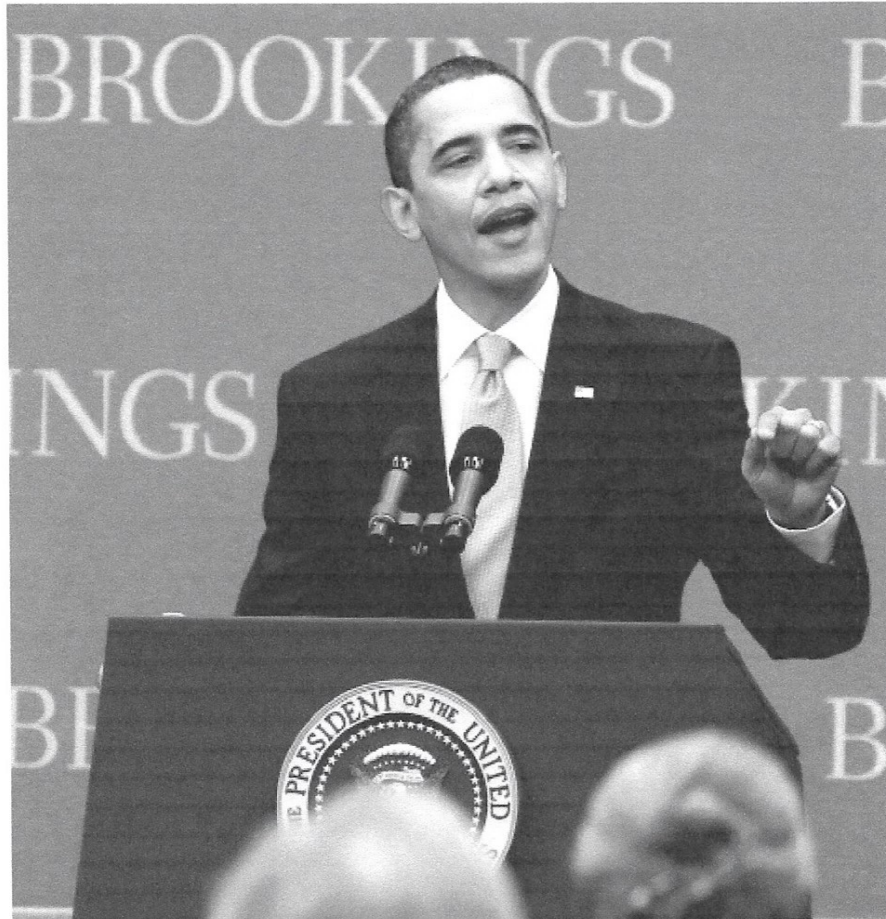
But probably the most controversial aspect of AEI's influence was the role that neoconservatives played in the conduct of the Iraq War. AEI had a strong relationship with the neoconservative movement since Irving Kristol joined the think tank in 1976. Michael Ledeen, a veteran of Ronald Reagan's National Security Council, became a resident scholar at AEI, where he advocated a policy of overthrowing dictators, including Saddam Hussein. Richard Perle, a leading neoconservative who had served as a staffer to Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash., in the 1970s, and then as assistant secretary of defense for national security policy under Reagan, advocated regime change in the Middle East while based at AEI. David Wurmser, a protégé of Perle at AEI, promoted American support for an Iraqi insurgency against Hussein; he later became a top adviser to Cheney. Laurie Mylroie, a foreign policy scholar once aligned with the 1992 Clinton campaign, promoted the notion that Hussein was involved with the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Mylroie served as a scholar at AEI and became close to Perle. [11]

Perle, who served as chair of the Defense Policy Board during the early years of the George W. Bush administration, emerged as an early supporter of war with Iraq, as did his fellow neoconservative (and longtime friend) Paul Wolfowitz, who would later join AEI himself after serving as deputy secretary of defense. [12] Perle and Wolfowitz were close allies of controversial Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi, who attended annual AEI conferences. [13] The *Weekly Standard*, founded by William Kristol (son of Irving Kristol), became an important outlet for neoconservatives close to AEI and committed to the ouster of Saddam Hussein. Think tank support for the Iraq War was not limited to conservatives; Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute and Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution were also among the influential advocates of regime change. [14]

Other AEI veterans in the administration, such as Cheney, Wurmser and Bolton, were also leading hawks before and during the war. David Frum, the speechwriter who coined the phrase *axis of evil* for Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, joined AEI after leaving the White House. Frum was fired by AEI in March 2010 after he criticized Republican strategy on health care legislation; he had previously lambasted Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh. [15]

Even in an era of partisan polarization, some issues remain amenable to old-fashioned building of consensus. By the late 1990s both parties were open to a more centrist path on education. Republicans had suffered politically by limiting their education proposals to school vouchers and calling for the abolition of the Department of Education. Democrats were aware of widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of public schools and became more open to a greater emphasis on testing and standards. The Heritage Foundation, Brookings Institution, and Progressive Policy Institute led a new centrist critique that emphasized accountability and teacher quality, eventually influencing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. [16] But the influence of education research remains limited, given shaky methodology, accusations of politicization, and a disconnection from policy reality. [17]

The 1996 welfare reform bill offered an unusual opportunity for think tank influence. Few organized interests were active in the debate, allowing experts to supersede lobbyists in influence. Although the debate followed sharp ideological lines, nearly everyone agreed the existing system was not functioning well. Years of research had produced a consensus on the need to reduce long-term dependency. Conservative think tanks had led the criticism of welfare programs, dating back to the Manhattan Institute's support for Charles Murray's influential work *Losing Ground* (1984). The Cato Institute produced a widely read 1995 report arguing that welfare benefits often paid more than low-wage work. A relentless critic of welfare, Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, enjoyed great influence among congressional Republicans. [18]



Upon the fiftieth anniversary of the Brookings Institution in 1966, President Lyndon Johnson remarked, "You are a national institution, so important to, at least, the Executive Branch—and, I think, the Congress, and the country—that if you did not exist we would have to ask someone to create you." In December 2009 President Barack Obama addressed scholars at the Brookings Institution on his economic policies. (Source: Mark Wilson/UPI /Landov.)

But centrist or left-leaning institutes also shaped the welfare reform debate of the 1990s. The Urban Institute, Brookings, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities all gained influence through producing works summarizing the state of welfare policy research in a form that was accessible to policy professionals. [19] The CBPP especially benefited from the reputation of Robert Greenstein, its founder, for expertise, integrity, and political acumen. Greenstein had been the most influential advocate of the expansion of the earned income tax credit in the 1980s and early 1990s, a reform to help low-wage workers that appealed to many moderate Republicans and the so-called New Democrats. [20] In 2001 Greenstein helped lead efforts for an expanded child tax credit aimed at lower-income families, which became part of tax cut legislation signed by George W. Bush. [21]

Features

Major Think Tanks and Their Political Orientations

Conservative or Center-Right

American Enterprise Institute

Cato Institute

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Heritage Foundation

Hoover Institution

Lexington Institute

Manhattan Institute

Centrist

Aspen Institute

Brookings Institution

Carnegie Endowment

Center for Politics

Council on Foreign Relations

Institute for International Economics

Inter-American Dialogue

Kaiser Family Foundation

New America Foundation

Public Policy Institute of California

RAND Corporation

Progressive or Center-Left

Carter Center

Center for American Progress

Center for Economic and Policy Research

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

Economic Policy Institute

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Urban Institute

Notes

[1] Abelson, *Capital Idea*, 170–176; Abella, *Soldiers of Reason*, 304.

[2] Paul Taylor, "Analyzing Alternatives in Labor's Think Tank; Liberal Economists Study Government's Role," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1987, A25.

[3] Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism From Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 65–92.

[4] *Ibid.*, passim. Rich, *Think Tanks*, 169–170.

[5] Charlie Savage, "Shepherd of a Government in Exile," *New York Times*, November 7, 2008, A22; Eliza Newlin Carney, "Extreme Makeover," *National Journal*, February 26, 2005, 598–603.

[6] Marisa Katz, "In the Tanks," *National Journal*, August 4, 2007, 39–31.

[7] John P. Burke, "The Obama Presidential Transition: An Early Assessment," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, 3 (September 2009).

[8] Paul Krugman, "In the Tank?" *New York Times*, December 13, 2000, A5.

[9] Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "Private-Account Concept Grew from Obscure Roots," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2005, A1; Richard W. Stevenson, "For Bush, A Long Embrace of Social Security Plan," *New York Times*, February 27, 2005, 1.

[10] Gregg Sangillo, "Intellectual Infrastructure," *National Journal*, October 15, 2005.

- [11] Jacob Hellbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 219–240.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 250–277.
- [13] Vaisse, *Neoliberalism*, 247–251.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 251–255.
- [15] Howard Kurtz, "Conservative David Frum Loses Think-Tank Job after Criticizing GOP," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2010.
- [16] Patrick McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965–2006* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).
- [17] Frederick M. Hess, ed., *When Research Matters: How Scholarship Influences Education Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2008).
- [18] R. Kent Weaver, *Ending Welfare As We Know It* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 213.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 105–143.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 199–201.
- [21] Rich, *Think Tanks*, 199–201.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. "Think Tanks Today, 1993-Present." In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 233-36. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367117>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367117

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367117>

© 2011, CQ Press, A Division of SAGE Publications. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Service](#) | [Copyright Notice](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



Issue Advocacy Groups and Think Tanks: Conclusion

By Richard Skinner

Diane Stone argues that it is difficult to evaluate the importance of think tanks, because policymakers are reluctant to share credit for policy ideas. Many worthy reports and research studies may go unread. Much of the work done by think tanks, particularly those of a more ideological stripe, mostly serves to reinforce the existing views of policymakers. Andrew Rich suggests that think tanks have their greatest impact when they engage in “foundational research,” defining problems, translating ideas into concrete policy proposals. They also contribute when they produce “hard data” such as cost estimates for proposed legislation, but relatively few institutes have such a capability. Rich suggests that think tanks have been seeing their collective credibility decline in recent years as competition for attention increases and as policymakers disregard work from ideologically hostile institutes. Focusing too much on short-term matters, such as commentary on pending legislation, may bring attention but not influence. When a think tank becomes simply another voice repeating a predictable mantra, it loses much of its “value.” [1]

But Frederick Hess notes what he calls the “clarity, focus, and energy” of “advocacy tanks” that can “act and speak with more crispness and agility.” [2] Think tanks share many of the characteristics of other interest groups. They need to find the means of keeping themselves in existence: establishing a purpose, raising money, finding supporters, and adjudicating internal conflicts. Leadership is vital to the establishment of a successful think tank: entrepreneurs to found an organization, patrons to provide essential outside support, and staff to manage day-to-day affairs. Think tanks need to build and maintain credibility with policymakers to preserve influence in policy debates. But think tanks do differ from other interest groups in some fundamental ways. Most still at least maintain the pretense of being “objective” seekers of truth, rather than representatives of a specific group with particular concerns. Although think tanks usually have some large individual supporters, and they may even have a number of small donors, they rarely make “member services” a core mission. Given their 501(c)3 status, think tanks, even highly ideological ones, avoid open advocacy for specific legislation. Much like other interest groups, think tanks are most often at the periphery of the policy process, dependent upon their influence on government officials.

Notes

[1] *Ibid.*, 153–154.

[2] Frederick M. Hess, “Conclusion,” in *When Research Matters*, 247.

Document Citation

Skinner, Richard. “Issue Advocacy Groups and Think Tanks: Conclusion.” In *Guide to Interest Groups and Lobbying in the United States*, edited by Burdett A. Loomis, Peter L. Francia, and Dara Z. Strolovitch, 236. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011. <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367120>.

Document ID: g2iglus-1276-69691-2367120

Document URL: <http://library.cqpress.com/interestgroupsguide/g2iglus-1276-69691-2367120>
