

Old world, new world: the evolution and influence of foreign affairs think-tanks

DONALD E. ABELSON

Before the ink on the Treaty of Versailles was dry, the idea of creating an organization dedicated to educating, informing and advising future leaders about the causes and consequences of war was already gaining traction. At ‘a series of unofficial meetings held in Paris in 1919’,¹ Lionel Curtis, an Oxford professor and visionary with a reputation for possessing an impressive array of entrepreneurial skills, was spearheading efforts to establish an Anglo-American research institution where scholars could explore international problems and advocate policy solutions.² This kind of organization appealed to Curtis and to those with whom he discussed it for several reasons, not the least of which was that it could provide a valuable forum for both policy-makers and prominent policy experts in the leading western powers to talk to one another about international affairs. It was also a concept with which several of the delegates attending the Paris peace talks had some familiarity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of institutions had already taken root in Great Britain and in the United States with the aim of helping policy-makers navigate their way through complex policy problems. They included the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (1831), founded by the first Duke of Wellington; London’s Fabian Society (1884), home to a number of prominent scholars, including Sidney and Beatrice Webb, co-founders of the London School of Economics; the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), established by the Scottish-American steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie; and the Institute for Government Research (1916), which merged with two other institutions to form the Brookings Institution in 1927.³ Curtis and his colleagues in Great Britain and the United States were also aware of the ground-breaking research that had been conducted at hundreds of settlement houses in their respective countries. It was at places such as London’s Toynbee Hall (1884) and Chicago’s Hull House,

¹ Inderjeet Parmar, *Think tanks and power in foreign policy: a comparative study of the role and influence of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1939–45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 3.

² Donald E. Abelson, *American think-tanks and their role in US foreign policy* (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan/St Martin’s, 1996), pp. 43–7.

³ For a sweeping history of these and other think-tanks, see Donald T. Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution, 1916–52: expertise and the public interest in a democratic society* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985); Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett, *British think-tanks and the climate of opinion* (London: UCL Press, 1998); James A. Smith, *The idea brokers: think tanks and the rise of the new policy elite* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

co-founded by Jane Addams in 1889, that sociologists and other university faculty with expertise in social welfare policy could study the working conditions of the poor.⁴ In short, proponents of establishing a foreign affairs research institution recognized the importance of encouraging a dialogue between leading social scientists and high-level policy-makers.

Despite Curtis's efforts to establish two branches of a single foreign affairs institution,⁵ a decision was taken in the ensuing years that resulted in the formation of two separate bodies: the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), founded in London in 1920, and its sister organization, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR, 1921), headquartered in New York.⁶ It did not take long for the RIIA and the CFR to emerge as leading foreign and defence policy institutions. In the years leading up to, and in the aftermath of, the Second World War, both bodies undertook significant research studies on a wide range of issues relating to peace and conflict. They also provided prestigious forums for scholars and world leaders to discuss pressing issues of the day and, as a result, became important fixtures in the foreign policy-making establishments of their respective countries. However, by the latter half of the twentieth century, policy-makers could also turn to several other research organizations with expertise in the field of international relations, broadly defined. Though the RIIA and the CFR continued to make their presence felt, by the 1990s foreign affairs research institutions could be found in virtually every region of the globe.⁷

The purpose of this article is not to chronicle the history of think-tanks in Europe and North America, nor is it to engage in a prolonged inquiry into how these eclectic and diverse institutions are best defined and operated. That laborious and painstakingly difficult exercise has been taken up elsewhere.⁸ Rather, it is to reflect on the origins of several prominent foreign affairs and defence policy think-tanks and to reveal, drawing upon selected case-studies, how a small group of American think-tanks have become active and vocal participants in the policy-

⁴ For more on the role played by scholars at settlement houses, see the entry for Jane Addams in *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/addams-jane/>, accessed 11 Nov. 2013. Settlement houses were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as reform institutions. Located in heavily populated immigrant neighbourhoods, settlement workers offered a range of support services to the poor. The goal of these institutions was to help remedy poverty. In several of these houses, scholars were invited to observe the many challenges confronting new immigrants and to recommend possible solutions to elected officials.

⁵ Parmar, *Think tanks and power in foreign policy*, p. 3.

⁶ The role played by Elihu Root and Lionel Curtis in establishing the CFR and the RIIA is examined in Parmar, *Think tanks and power in foreign policy*. See also Stephen King-Hall, *Chatham House: a brief account of the origins, purposes, and methods of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937); Laurence Martin, 'Chatham House at 75: the past and future', *International Affairs* 71: 4, 1995, pp. 697–703; Peter Grose, *Continuing the inquiry: the Council on Foreign Relations from 1921 to 1996* (New York: CFR, 1996); Michael Wala, *The Council on Foreign Relations and American foreign policy in the early Cold War* (Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berghahn, 1994).

⁷ For a comprehensive listing of think-tanks, see James G. McGann, *2012 global go to think tank report* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Think-tanks and Civil Societies Program, 2012). There are also several think-tank reference guides available, including *NIRA's World Directory of Think Tanks 2005*, 5th edn (Tokyo: National Institute for Research Advancement, 2005).

⁸ See e.g. James G. McGann and R. Kent Weaver, eds, *Think tanks and civil societies: catalysts for ideas and action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000); Hartwig Pautz, *Think-tanks, social democracy and social policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

making process. In doing so, some useful comparisons between think-tanks in the United States and in Europe can be drawn. The aim in undertaking this discussion is threefold: to provide an overview of the rise of foreign affairs think-tanks, particularly in the United States and Europe; to highlight, with reference to several high-profile foreign policy debates, various strategies upon which think-tanks rely to shape the policy preferences and choices of decision-makers; and finally, to consider how scholars familiar with these institutions might want to assess their impact.

Although some interesting comparative research on think-tanks has been undertaken in recent years,⁹ scholars need to delve more deeply into the institutional, political, sociological and economic conditions which might explain why think-tanks in the United States appear to enjoy more visibility and prominence than many of their counterparts across Europe and in other regions of the globe. This article will touch briefly on why think-tanks have established a strong foothold in the United States and will shed some light on the think-tank experience in Europe. The limited scope of this study and the great differences between the experiences and circumstances of think-tanks in different countries and in different regions make it exceedingly difficult to provide here the kind of detailed analysis this kind of investigation warrants. That said, some comparisons between how think-tanks function in the United States and in Europe will be highlighted.

The role of think-tanks

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify what we mean by a 'think-tank'. When the term was coined in the United States during the Second World War, it simply meant a secure room or environment in which military planners and policy-makers met to discuss wartime strategy. In contemporary discourse, 'think-tank' generally refers to a non-profit-making, tax-exempt, non-partisan (not to be confused with non-ideological) institution engaged in research and analysis on one or more issues related to public policy, whether foreign or domestic. As think-tanks have grown in number and become more diverse, scholars have been unable to reach a consensus on how to describe them. Instead, they have constructed various typologies to account for the range of institutions that populate the think-tank community.¹⁰ Most typologies differentiate between think-tanks that focus primarily on policy research and those that focus primarily on political advocacy. But what has preoccupied scholars even more in recent years is determining how to assess the influence of think-tanks on domestic and foreign policy, a subject that will be addressed in the final section of this study.

The inner workings of think-tanks and the various strategies they employ to gain access to the corridors of power continue to intrigue scholars, who monitor

⁹ See McGann and Weaver, eds, *Think tanks and civil societies*; Diane Stone and Andrew Denham, eds, *Think tank traditions: policy research and the politics of ideas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ See McGann and Weaver, eds, *Think tanks and civil societies*.

their activities closely.¹¹ But for most US observers, think-tanks should be examined not because of what their involvement in the policy-making process might say about the role of unelected experts or whether their participation enhances or undermines democracy; rather, think-tanks should be ‘watched’ so that the American public has a better sense of who and what are the driving forces behind major policy initiatives.

Political pundits who carefully track the vicissitudes of American politics may not be familiar with scholarly debates surrounding the role and function of think-tanks, but this has not prevented them from forming impressions about their impact. The impression shared by many political commentators in North America is that an elite group of think-tanks in Washington DC and on America’s west coast have, to put it mildly, assumed too much power and influence. As in the case of special interest groups, think-tanks, particularly the more advocacy-oriented among them, are regularly portrayed as opportunistic organizations committed to advancing their political agenda at the expense of the public interest.¹² The negative reaction in some sectors to the growing presence of think-tanks throughout the industrialized and developing world is undoubtedly fuelled by media speculation that a cadre of conservative and neo-conservative think-tanks was ultimately responsible for President George W. Bush’s decision to wage war in Iraq. But this reaction might also be attributed to the apprehension some scholars and journalists have expressed about the *changing role* of think-tanks.¹³

When scholars on both sides of the Atlantic observe the behaviour of the Washington-based Heritage Foundation and other think-tanks that place a premium on political advocacy,¹⁴ it is difficult for them not to become nostalgic about early twentieth-century policy research institutions. Reflecting on think-tanks of that period, the social and cultural historian James A. Smith, the political scientist David Ricci and several others conjure up images of experts working tirelessly at their desks to identify the underlying causes of economic, social and political unrest.¹⁵ Given the partisan leanings of many of today’s think-tanks, it is understandable that these and other admirers of Britain’s Fabian Society and Chatham House, and of the Brookings Institution during its formative years, are concerned about the direction think-tanks have taken in recent decades. For those longing for the re-emergence of more traditional policy research institutes, it is both troubling and worrisome that think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the Adam Smith Institute and many others have, in effect, become lobbyists for

¹¹ See e.g. Andrew Selee, *What should think tanks do? A strategic guide to policy impact* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

¹² Donald E. Abelson, ‘National interest or self-interest? Think tanks, 9/11 and the future of North American security’, in Jonathan Paquin and Patrick James, eds, *Game changer: the impact of 9/11 on North American security* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming 2014).

¹³ An interesting discussion on the extent to which think-tanks have undergone a major transformation can be found in Thomas Medvetz, *Think tanks in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁴ For a history of the Heritage Foundation, see two books by Lee Edwards: *The power of ideas: the Heritage Foundation at 25 years* (Ottawa, IL: Jameson, 1997); *Leading the way: the story of Ed Feulner and the Heritage Foundation* (New York: Crown Forum, 2013).

¹⁵ See Smith, *The idea brokers*; David M. Ricci, *The transformation of American politics: the new Washington and the rise of think-tanks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

various political causes.¹⁶ This concern has intensified in recent years as several American think-tanks, including the Heritage Foundation and the Center for American Progress, have established separate advocacy and lobbying arms with the explicit aim of influencing policy-making.¹⁷ Purists argue that contemporary think-tanks, rather than serving as institutions helping government to think its way through complex policy problems—a goal they articulated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—have embarked on a far less virtuous and dangerous path. However, as I have suggested in a recent essay,¹⁸ while the priorities and orientations of think-tanks may have shifted since the latter half of the twentieth century, their desire to investigate a range of policy problems and to advocate solutions has remained intact. What has changed over the past few decades is how deeply invested think-tanks have become in the marketplace of ideas. They are more politically savvy, more technologically sophisticated and better equipped to compete with the thousands of organizations in the United States jostling to leave an indelible mark on key policy initiatives.

Bridging the academic and policy-making worlds, think-tanks occupy a unique space, and in some respects perform a unique role for policy-makers and other key stakeholders. Not only do they generate research that might be timely and relevant for members of Congress and the Executive, they can help to validate and reinforce policy prescriptions recommended by policy-makers, business leaders and other opinion-formers. They do this by sharing their ideas with the media and testifying before legislative committees, and through the many kinds of electronic and print-based publications they disseminate. Think-tanks can also help to advance the mandate of certain policy-makers, or one that more closely resembles their own, by encouraging their staff to accept positions in government.¹⁹ In short, think-tanks can and do become more relevant to policy-makers and to other power-brokers by providing them with the information and expertise they need. In the process, they may be seen to compromise their independence, but for some institutions this is a price they are only too willing to pay in exchange for securing political power.

As the American public becomes increasingly apathetic about US public policy, both domestic and foreign, there is mounting concern that think-tanks, interest

¹⁶ The history of the Adam Smith Institute is chronicled by one of its co-founders, Madsen Pirie, in *Think tank: the story of the Adam Smith Institute* (London: Biteback, 2012).

¹⁷ These and other think-tanks have established separate organizations that are legally permitted to lobby government officials. They are registered as 501 c (4) organizations under the Internal Revenue Code. This designation allows them to circumvent the prohibitions placed on the majority of think-tanks, which are designated as 501 c (3) organizations. Unlike 501 c (4) organizations, 501 c (3) are registered as charitable, tax-exempt organizations and cannot engage in certain types of political activities. For more on the advocacy and lobbying arms of think-tanks, see Tevi Troy, 'Devaluing the think tank', *National Affairs*, no. 10, Winter 2012, pp. 75–90; Bryan Bender, 'Many DC think tanks now players in partisan wars', *Boston Globe*, 11 Aug. 2013.

¹⁸ Donald E. Abelson, 'It seemed like a good idea at the time: reflections on the evolution of think tanks', in Marc Riedel and Sélim Allili, eds, *Les think-tanks nouveaux: baromètres de la démocratie?* (forthcoming).

¹⁹ For more on the strategies of think-tanks and the symbiotic relationship they enjoy with key stakeholders, see Donald E. Abelson, *Do think tanks matter? Assessing the impact of public policy institutes*, 2nd edn (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

groups and lobbyists will come to play a more ominous role in public policy.²⁰ With significant resources at their disposal, and an insatiable desire to influence the political climate, several well-funded think-tanks are more than willing to play an active role at virtually every stage of the policy cycle. And with considerable access to key policy-makers on Capitol Hill, in the White House and throughout the bureaucracy, they have ample opportunity both to shape the parameters of policy discussions and to leave their mark on presidential directives and government legislation. In short, think-tanks are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as powerful organizations with influential friends who occupy prominent positions in the policy-making establishment. The cosy relationships that have been cultivated between a handful of think-tanks and several recent presidential administrations provide further evidence that policy experts from many of these organizations operate in close proximity to high-level decision-makers.²¹ Similar observations have been made about Margaret Thatcher's ties to the Centre for Policy Studies, and about Tony Blair's association with Geoff Mulgan, founder of Demos, and policy experts in other British think-tanks.²²

Scepticism surrounding the rise of think-tanks, and their impact on domestic and foreign policy, is encouraged by consideration of two other factors: the incestuous relationship that has developed between think-tanks and the media, which provides the former with greater public visibility and prominence; and the considerable financial backing the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for New American Security and several of their competitors receive from philanthropic foundations and corporate donors.²³ With strong and enduring connections to some of the nation's most important power brokers, it is not surprising that these institutions are perceived as ambitious and influential players in a high-stakes political game. Nonetheless, as this article will reveal, these perceptions do not necessarily mirror reality. While it might be in the interest of think-tanks to create the impression that they wield tremendous influence, it is for the scholars who study them to determine the most appropriate ways to evaluate their impact.²⁴

Though think-tanks have been established in almost every country and region of the world, the largest concentration can be found in the United States and Europe,

²⁰ This theory has been advanced by Lawrence Davidson in his book *Foreign Policy, Inc.: privatizing America's national interest* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

²¹ For an examination of the relationship between several think-tanks and US presidents, see Donald E. Abelson, *A Capitol idea: think tanks and US foreign policy* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), pp. 23–42.

²² Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett, 'A "hollowed-out" tradition? British think-tanks in the twenty-first century', in Stone and Denham, eds, *Think tank traditions*, pp. 232–46. See also Pautz, *Think-tanks, social democracy and social policy*.

²³ Considerable attention has been devoted to the relationship between philanthropic donors and think-tanks. See Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American century: the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the rise of American power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Russ Bellant, *The Coors connection: how Coors family philanthropy undermines democratic pluralism* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 1991); Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado, *No mercy: how conservative think tanks and foundations changed America's social agenda* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

²⁴ Abelson, *Do think tanks matter?*.

where over half of the globe's estimated 6,000 think-tanks reside.²⁵ Topping the list of America's most renowned foreign affairs think-tanks are the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Center for New American Security, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, the Hudson Institute and the Rand Corporation. Across the Atlantic, the most prestigious think-tanks include the Royal Institute of International Affairs (UK), the International Institute of Strategic Studies (UK), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sweden), the French Institute of International Relations and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.²⁶

Much has been written in recent years about the proliferation of think-tanks in the UK, Germany and France,²⁷ all of which, along with other countries, have seen numbers of these institutions increase significantly since the 1980s.²⁸ In the case of Germany, the increase can be attributed to relevant changes in the country's tax regime which have made it more attractive to philanthropists and corporations to fund organizations engaged in social science research.²⁹ In the UK, and more recently in France, think-tanks are being identified increasingly as institutions that can effectively promote discussions on important policy issues. Yet, as think-tanks in these and other European countries have discovered, several conditions must coexist for them to make their presence felt. Not only do they require sufficient funding and staff to maintain a rigorous research programme, they must operate in a political system that affords them ample opportunity to convey their ideas. In this respect, no country provides more fertile soil for think-tanks to grow than the United States, whose highly fragmented and decentralized political system offers multiple channels of access to policy-makers. This institutional feature of the American republic, combined with weak political parties and a political and social culture that encourages philanthropy and policy entrepreneurship, offers unlimited opportunities for think-tanks to take root and flourish. Moreover, unlike in Canada, Britain and other parliamentary democracies in which there is very little turnover in the senior ranks of the civil service, in the United States a 'revolving door' in the civil administration facilitates the movement of think-tank scholars in and out of government departments and agencies. When a new administration comes to power, the president not only handpicks his inner circle of policy advisers, but must find thousands of qualified experts to occupy positions throughout the bureaucracy. Many of these vacancies are filled by academics in think-tanks looking for government experience. As some policy practitioners have observed, think-tanks often serve as 'holding

²⁵ McGann, *2012 global go to think tank report*.

²⁶ McGann, *2012 global go to think tank report*.

²⁷ For comparative studies of think-tanks in Germany and the UK, see Pautz, *Think-tanks, social democracy and social policy*; Denham and Garnett, *British think tanks and the climate of opinion*. For additional information on German think-tanks, see Martin Thunert, 'Think-tanks in Germany', in Stone and Denham, eds, *Think-tank traditions*, pp. 71–88. In the same volume, there is an interesting analysis of French think-tanks authored by Catherine Fieschi and John Gaffney: 'French think tanks in comparative perspective', pp. 105–20.

²⁸ See McGann, *2012 global go to think tank report*.

²⁹ Pautz, *Think-tanks, social democracy and social policy*.

tanks' where policy experts congregate in the hope of being recruited into senior government positions.

Scholars may disagree about how much influence think-tanks wield in the policy-making process and the best ways of measuring or otherwise evaluating their impact, a subject to which we will return shortly. Nonetheless, they generally concede that since the late 1960s and early 1970s, think-tanks have tended to place a higher premium on political advocacy than on policy research. Interestingly enough, before this reorientation took place, political scientists and historians paid little attention to think-tanks and their efforts to convey ideas to policy-makers. Indeed, in most textbooks on International Relations and US foreign and defence policy, think-tanks were barely mentioned. Unlike interest groups, political action committees, and foreign lobbies whose express purpose was to influence legislation on Capitol Hill, think-tanks were, for much of the twentieth century, perceived as institutions that were far more concerned about insulating themselves from partisan politics. Although many of the recommendations that they made to reform government were inherently political, their primary goal was not to become entangled in contentious political debates but to help government think its way through complex policy problems. However, as will be discussed, when advocacy think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation began to emerge during the final years of the Vietnam War, the priorities of think-tanks changed. Not content with observing policy debates play out from the comfort of their book-lined offices, a new generation of so-called advocacy think-tanks made a conscious decision to become vocal combatants in the war of ideas.

From the time that the first wave of think-tanks swept across Europe and the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these organizations have offered thousands of policy recommendations on how to improve the efficiency of government. And in many cases, including a proposal from the Institute for Government Research that led to the creation of a national budget system in 1921, they succeeded. But equally significant is the contribution that several high-profile think-tanks have made to the formulation of foreign and defence policy. In discussions ranging from developing America's nuclear strategy in the atomic age to pursuing a national missile defence and fighting the 'war on terror', several think-tanks, including Rand, the American Enterprise Institute and the now-defunct Project for the New American Century (PNAC), have made their presence felt.

The rise of foreign affairs think-tanks in the United States and Europe

Possessing wealth, vision and an intimate understanding of the world beyond America's shores, Andrew Carnegie, Robert Brookings and Herbert Hoover shared something else: a profound desire to encourage policy experts to use their knowledge to address the many challenges confronting the United States at home and abroad during the first half of the twentieth century. Together with other visionaries, the steel tycoon, the St Louis businessman and the mining engineer who served as the 31st president of the United States created some of America's

most prestigious policy research institutes, marking the early 1900s as the golden age of think-tanks.

With a US\$10 million endowment, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) was founded by Andrew Carnegie in 1910 as a non-partisan institute to educate the public about peace, 'to spread arbitral justice among nations and to promote the comity and commerce of the world without dangers of war'. Carnegie believed that the annual income derived from the endowment should be used in any way 'to hasten the abolition of war'.³⁰ Located today adjacent to the Brookings Institution off Washington's Dupont Circle, the CEIP organizes its research programmes around various themes and area studies. These include the Middle East, Asia, Russia and Eurasia, nuclear policy, and energy and climate. More than five dozen scholars produce a steady stream of articles and books on these and other topics. The CEIP promotes itself as America's first global think-tank, and has every right to do so. It maintains offices in several regions, including the Americas, Central and East Asia, eastern and western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

Unlike the CEIP, which was created for the specific purpose of promoting world peace, the Institute for Government Research (IGR) was established in 1916 to improve the overall management of government. In 1927 the IGR merged with two of its sibling organizations, the Institute of Economics and the Robert Brookings Graduate School, to form the Brookings Institution. During its impressive history, Brookings scholars have written extensively about various aspects of US foreign and defence policy. Brookings is well known for its research on the Middle East, western Europe and north-east Asia, and in defence studies. Although the research generated at Brookings adheres to rigorous academic standards, in recent years those managing the institute have become preoccupied with the organization's public profile. In this sense, Brookings has followed the lead of many advocacy think-tanks by becoming more sophisticated in its dealings with the media.³¹

Three years after the IGR opened its doors, the Hoover Institution was established on the picturesque campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. From its beginnings as a repository for documents and memorabilia related to the First World War, the Hoover Institution has become one of the most renowned think-tanks in the United States. Recognized for its research on global security, conflict resolution, democracy and free markets, and the politics of western Europe, the Hoover Institution has enjoyed close ties to several Republican administrations. During the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the Hoover Institution came under serious fire from Stanford faculty, who objected to an overtly partisan institute being located on a university campus. Tensions between the Hoover Institution and Stanford are legendary, but the two have managed to maintain a working relationship now well into the twenty-first century.

³⁰ Donald E. Abelson, 'Think tanks and US diplomatic and military affairs', in Timothy Lynch, ed., *The Oxford encyclopedia of American military and diplomatic history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 357.

³¹ Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution, 1916–52*. See also James A. Smith, *Brookings at 75* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1991).

The creation of think-tanks specializing in foreign and defence policy did not end with the Hoover Institution. At approximately the same time that Herbert Hoover was making plans to build a library at Stanford to house the boatloads of wartime documents that he and his colleagues had amassed, an elite group of academics, lawyers, business leaders and government officials with a keen interest in international affairs was gathering in New York City to discuss and debate America's changing role in world affairs. Meeting once a month in the Metropolitan Club, the 30 participants led by Elihu Root established a special dinner club called the Council on Foreign Relations. Incorporated in 1921, the CFR has become a meeting place for world leaders to discuss a multitude of pressing global issues with America's academic, business and political elites. In addition to sponsoring lectures and workshops on issues ranging from terrorism to energy security, the CFR is perhaps best known for its periodical *Foreign Affairs*, which has enjoyed a long and distinguished history. With its headquarters in the Harold Pratt House, a five-storey mansion on New York's Fifth Avenue, the CFR has been perceived as overly elitist and exclusive, and has been described disparagingly as 'the best club in New York', 'the government in exile' and a 'school for statesmen'.³² Membership in the council and its affiliates is by invitation only, but in recent years the organization has tried to make itself more accessible to the public.

The first half of the twentieth century proved to be a formative period for think-tank growth in the United States. From 1910 to 1921, four of the most distinguished think-tanks with expertise in foreign policy were created. Think-tanks continued to proliferate in the United States and around the globe during and immediately after the Second World War. In 1943 the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research was formed, and although initially it did not concentrate on foreign policy, this field of research has become one of its trademarks. Five years later the Rand Corporation was chartered in Santa Monica, California, to 'further and promote scientific, educational, and charitable purposes, all for the public welfare and security of the United States of America'. Rand's star-studded line-up of scientists, including Herman Kahn, Bernard Brodie and Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling, were entrusted with helping the United States develop its nuclear strategy. Using systems analysis, game theory and various simulation exercises, Rand scientists devoted themselves in the immediate postwar years to serving the needs of the US air force.³³

In the years following Rand's foundation, several more foreign affairs think-tanks joined the fray. Among them were the Foreign Policy Research Institute (1955), the Hudson Institute (1961), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (1962), the Institute for Policy Studies (1963), the Center for Defense Information (1972), the Heritage Foundation (1973), the Worldwatch Institute (1974),

³² Abelson, *American think tanks and their role in US foreign policy*, p. 45.

³³ Several studies have been written about the Rand Corporation. The following should be consulted: Jean-Loup Samaan, *The Rand Corporation (1989–2009): the reconfiguration of strategic studies in the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Alex Abella, *Soldiers of reason: the Rand Corporation and the rise of the American empire* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2008); Fred Kaplan, *The wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985); Bruce L. R. Smith, *The Rand Corporation: case study of a non-profit advisory corporation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

the Carter Center (1982), the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom (1994), the Project for the New American Century (1997), the Center for Security Policy (1998), the Center for a New American Security (2007) and the Foreign Policy Initiative (2009), the successor to PNAC. As James McGann records in his annual global think-tank survey,³⁴ both the Second World War and the Cold War led to the creation of hundreds of think-tanks in the United States. Indeed, of the 1,823 think-tanks headquartered in the US, 90.5 per cent were established since 1951.

The United States is not the only country, nor, as noted, is North America the only region, to experience a growth in think-tanks with expertise in foreign affairs. Indeed, in recent decades, similar institutions have been established around the globe, most notably in Europe, which, next to the United States, is home to the largest population of policy institutes in the world. In Europe, think-tanks can be traced as far back as the early nineteenth century. As noted above, in 1831 the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) was founded by the Duke of Wellington. The goal of RUSI, as its name suggests, is to provide research and analysis on a broad range of issues relating to defence and security. It produces a wide range of publications, including full-length monographs as well as policy briefs. There are several other think-tanks in the UK that cover similar terrain, most notably Chatham House, home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Founded by Lionel Curtis in 1920, the RIIA, today known as Chatham House, has enjoyed a long and distinguished history as Britain's leading foreign affairs institution. Led by a series of prominent figures, including Curtis, the eminent historian Arnold Toynbee and Lord Lothian, the RIIA has worked closely with universities, government department and agencies, philanthropic foundations and corporate donors to help, in Inderjeet Parmar's words, 'to enlighten and educate public and policymakers alike' about international affairs and the challenges and opportunities confronting Britain in the global community.³⁵ Home to many leading scholars during the decades of its existence, the RIIA has published hundreds of studies and hosted dozens of world leaders. Research at Chatham House focuses on four main areas: energy, environment and resource governance; international economics; international security; and international law. The role of Chatham House, like that of its sister organization, the Council on Foreign Relations, is to encourage and facilitate informed discussion about international affairs. Despite the creation of several more advocacy-driven think-tanks in the UK, the RIIA has not abandoned its commitment to research, the hallmark of think-tanks established in the early part of the twentieth century. Indeed, by remaining true to its founding principles, the RIIA has been able to distinguish itself from the chorus of voices seeking to advance their institutional interests, often at the expense of the national interest.

Sharing a passion for the study of international affairs is the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), established in 1958. Widely known for its

³⁴ McGann, *Global go to think tank report 2012*, p. 15.

³⁵ Parmar, *Think tanks and power in foreign policy*, p. 4.

research on nuclear deterrence and arms control, the IISS also conducts military assessments of countries' armed forces and maintains offices in London, Singapore, Manama (Bahrain) and Washington DC. Policy experts at the IISS try to persuade policy-makers to adopt sound policies that will 'maintain and further international peace and security'. On 9 September 2002, IISS director John Chipman attracted considerable attention for the organization when he issued a statement about the institute's strategic dossier 'Iraq's weapons of mass destruction: a net assessment'.³⁶ Among other things, the dossier concluded: 'Iraq has no nuclear weapons but could build one quickly if it acquired sufficient fissile material. It has extensive biological weapons capabilities and a smaller chemical weapons stockpile.'³⁷ Although the report cautioned that the 'dossier does not attempt to make a case, either way, as to whether Saddam Hussein's WMD arsenal is a *casus belli per se*',³⁸ more than a few policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic referenced the report's findings in justifying the invasion of Iraq.³⁹

As noted above, several foreign affairs think-tanks can also be found in France, Germany, Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and throughout eastern Europe. There are also think-tanks that have been established to advise the European Union; these, unlike their counterparts in the United States, place a premium on facilitating discussions between relevant stakeholders.⁴⁰ In the EU context, think-tanks are not generally perceived as agents of social and political change, but rather as institutions willing to rely on their networks to encourage discussions about important policy issues. Though the circumstances that brought these and other think-tanks to life differ widely, they share a desire to shape public opinion and public policy. The resources they have at their disposal, as well as the political environment they inhabit, vary enormously. These and other factors will undoubtedly affect their ability to exercise policy influence.

Think-tanks at work: in search of policy influence

For think-tanks to achieve policy influence, they must be able to communicate effectively with multiple stakeholders. This is particularly important in an environment in which thousands of interest groups, lobbies, political action committees and other non-governmental organizations compete for the attention of policy-makers and the public. Although no two think-tanks are exactly alike, most rely on similar strategies to disseminate their research findings. Not surprisingly, it is through their various research products, which may include books, articles,

³⁶ A complete text of the dossier is available from the Iraq Foundation at http://www.iraqfoundation.org/studies/2002/asept/9_wmd.html, accessed 11 Nov. 2013. For a useful critique of the IISS strategic dossier, see Rolf Ekeus, 'Reassessment: the IISS strategic dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction', *Survival* 46: 2, 2004, pp. 73–87.

³⁷ Ekeus, 'Reassessment'.

³⁸ Ekeus, 'Reassessment'.

³⁹ See Christoph Bluth, 'The British road to war: Blair, Bush and the decision to invade Iraq', *International Affairs* 80: 5, Sept. 2004, pp. 73–87.

⁴⁰ On the involvement of think-tanks in the European Union, see Heidi Ullrich, 'European Union think tanks: generating ideas, analysis and debate', in Stone and Denham, eds, *Think-tank traditions*, pp. 51–70.

academic journals, opinion magazines, policy briefs, social media and newsletters, that think-tanks attempt both to raise the importance of various policy issues and to frame the parameters of key policy debates. Think-tanks generally produce a variety of research products to suit a range of target audiences. For example, recognizing that members of the US Congress and their staff have a finite amount of time each day to sift through dozens of reports, think-tanks are more likely to provide them with concise policy briefs rather than full-length monographs. Think-tanks also understand the importance of generating timely and relevant policy research. Unlike university professors, who may take several years to complete a book manuscript, think-tanks, especially those that are more advocacy-driven, are under constant pressure to keep on top of current policy issues. This is what convinced the Heritage Foundation that it should specialize in what has come to be known as quick-response policy research.

Think-tanks rely on several other channels to convey their ideas. In view of the importance they assign to attracting media exposure, think-tank scholars are encouraged to submit op-ed articles to major US and international newspapers, offer commentaries on radio and television talk shows and newscasts, maintain blogs on their institute's website, and, when invited, testify before congressional committees and subcommittees. Think-tanks also sponsor lectures, conferences, seminars and workshops at which policy-makers, academics, journalists and leaders of commerce and industry exchange ideas. These more public avenues of communication are often followed by private meetings with policy-makers on Capitol Hill, in the White House and throughout the bureaucracy. This is why the revolving door in the United States is so important: it allows think-tank scholars to take advantage of the connections that they have established throughout government to advance their policy preferences.

Scholars who study think-tanks take for granted that these institutions will employ various tactics to shape public opinion and public policy. After all, this is what think-tanks are expected to do. But why do policy-makers rely on them for advice? What incentive do elected officials have to listen to them? One reason has to do with the absence of a permanent senior civil service in the United States. In Westminster-style parliamentary democracies such as Canada and Great Britain, members of the legislature draw heavily on the advice of senior civil servants. However, as noted above, in the United States the top layer of the bureaucracy changes every four or eight years when a new administration assumes power. The result is that it takes years for the new bureaucracy to develop its own institutional memory. This lack of continuity in the bureaucracy may undermine not only the quality of expertise that is offered but also the confidence that elected officials have in government. Moreover, since members of Congress are not bound by the parliamentary principle of strong party unity, they are free to solicit advice from the external policy research community.

Think-tanks can offer expertise to policy-makers either through the traditional mechanisms outlined above or through workshops that they offer to members of Congress. They can also educate newcomers to Washington about the inner

workings of the policy-making process. Even if think-tanks do not provide policy-makers with new and innovative ideas, they can help repackaging and recycle those that politicians are willing to test on the campaign trail. Several presidential candidates, including Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama,⁴¹ relied heavily on scholars from think-tanks both during elections and in the transition period that followed. In many instances, think-tank scholars who shared their expertise with these and other candidates were rewarded with high-level positions in the administration. Once in government, they had the opportunity to consider how ideas that they toyed with at a think-tank could be translated into concrete policy proposals. As scholars have begun to delve more deeply into the domestic sources of US foreign and defence policy, they have identified fingerprints left by a select group of think-tanks on several policy initiatives. As discussed below, there is little doubt that around discussions involving the development and possible deployment of a national missile defence, the marketing of the 'war on terror' and support for the surge in Iraq, think-tanks made their presence felt.

When Ronald Reagan toured the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) on 31 July 1979 he began to internalize how vulnerable the United States was to a nuclear attack. Among other things, he discovered that there was little that the US military could do to protect America if the Soviet Union launched its missiles. As Reagan conveyed to his advisers after the tour, the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD), the bedrock of America's nuclear strategy, had to change. During the Republican presidential primaries in 1979, Reagan's advisers outlined various options that the United States could pursue. Of all the options that were flagged, none struck a more responsive chord with the former governor of California than the idea proposed by General Daniel Graham.⁴²

Graham, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, briefed Reagan on the concept of a missile shield that, in theory, would protect the United States from incoming ballistic missiles. His idea was to construct a multilayered ground-based and space-based defence system that could track, intercept and destroy missiles. In September 1981 Graham founded High Frontier, a Virginia-based think-tank, with the intention of continuing research on this and related programmes. With the assistance of the Heritage Foundation, which provided space for the nascent think-tank to conduct research, High Frontier published a report that examined in greater detail how a missile defence system would function. When Reagan entered the Oval Office in January 1981, several meetings were arranged between high-level members of his administration and key military advisers to discuss missile defence. Graham was often in attendance. When President Reagan unveiled the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) during a televised address on 23 March 1983, it

⁴¹ On the relationship between a select group of think-tanks and Barack Obama, see Donald E. Abelson, 'Changing minds, changing course: Obama, think tanks and American foreign policy', in Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, eds, *New directions in US foreign policy*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2014).

⁴² Abelson, *A Capitol idea*, pp. 182–200.

was clear that Graham and High Frontier had made an impression. Indeed, on several occasions during his presidency Reagan paid homage to High Frontier and its founder for advancing a new strategic vision for the United States.

Every US president since Ronald Reagan has pursued missile defence in some form, and several think-tanks have offered their support along the way. In addition to the Heritage Foundation, which has long been a vocal advocate of missile defence, few think-tanks have invested more resources in keeping this initiative alive than the Center for Security Policy (CSP). Headed by Frank Gaffney, Jr, a former Pentagon official, the CSP has developed an extensive network of current and former policy-makers, academics, journalists and representatives from the private sector to extol the virtues of missile defence. Since its inception in 1988, the CSP has generated an impressive body of research on missile defence and related technology. When terrorists reduced the iconic World Trade Center to rubble on 11 September 2001, political pundits who had observed American politics for years predicted that support for national missile defence would quickly erode. On the contrary, to their chagrin, the cause of missile defence gained even greater momentum, in large part because of the marketing campaign waged by a handful of conservative think-tanks. Even before the United States declared a 'war on terror', the CSP and other think-tanks reminded the American people that, if anything, the terrorist attacks confirmed why the government should make an even greater investment in missile defence. Such a system might not have been able to prevent hijacked commercial airliners from slamming into buildings, but it could, they claimed, protect the United States against rogue states and terrorist organizations that acquired missile capabilities. Amid growing anxiety over the possibility of more terrorist attacks, a high-tech defence that promised greater security was music to American ears.

High Frontier, the Heritage Foundation and the CSP played an important role in both formulating and promoting missile defence as a strategic option for the United States. Yet, as scholars have recently discovered, this was not the only policy initiative around which think-tanks made their presence felt. Following 9/11, several think-tanks joined the chorus of voices calling for the United States to take military action against states that harboured terrorists. Although President Bush might not have needed any encouragement to invade Afghanistan, selling the Iraq War to the American people required greater political skill. Fortunately for the President, both PNAC and the American Enterprise Institute were prepared to lend a hand.

Founded in 1997, the PNAC was a small think-tank with powerful ties to the Bush White House. Several of its members, including Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Armitage, Paul Wolfowitz and Richard B. 'Dick' Cheney, had assumed key positions in Bush's inner circle and understood what steps the United States had to take to reduce its vulnerability. In several of its reports, the PNAC urged the US military to prepare for simultaneous wars in multiple theatres. It also urged both the Clinton and the Bush administrations to remove Saddam Hussein from power. When President Bush issued an executive order to invade Iraq, journalists on both

sides of the Atlantic seemed convinced that his foreign policy had been strongly influenced by the PNAC. Only later did veteran *Washington Post* reporter and best-selling author Bob Woodward discover that the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) had also had a hand in urging the President to topple the Iraqi dictator. At the request of Paul Wolfowitz, Chris DeMuth, a former president of the AEI, organized a small policy task force that included some of America's leading experts on the Middle East. Among other things, the task force produced a report entitled *Delta of terrorism* that recommended that the Iraqi people be liberated from their dictatorial leader. The report was circulated to top officials in Bush's inner circle. According to Woodward, several of the so-called 'Vulcans', a nickname for Bush's closest foreign policy advisers, found the report very persuasive.⁴³

The various factors that influenced President Bush's decision to go to war with Iraq will be debated for years. Still, it is clear that several think-tanks were responsible not only for helping lay the foundation for Bush's foreign policy, but also for helping make the war on terror more palatable to the American public. Through their publications, media commentaries and meetings with top officials, scholars from the PNAC, the AEI and even the Brookings Institution helped shape the parameters of important foreign and defence policy discussions during the Bush years. Scholars in the think-tank community often complained about the limited access that they had to the Bush White House, but the President's relatively closed foreign policy shop did not prevent some institutes from exercising influence over key decisions regarding the war in Iraq.

In December 2006, two AEI scholars met with Vice-President Cheney to discuss their plans for a so-called 'surge' in Iraq. After presenting the results of months of work that they had conducted at the AEI, Retired General Jack Keane, a former vice-chief of staff of the US Army and a member of the advisory Defense Policy Review Board, and Fred Kagan, a military historian, found an ally in Cheney and another in Senator John McCain, who played a key role in selling the idea to President Bush.

Though the PNAC should be credited with bringing scholars and policy-makers together to reconsider how US defence and foreign policy interests might be pursued in the twenty-first century, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this organization alone was responsible for laying the foundations of US foreign policy during the Bush years. Several other think-tanks, including the AEI, also played a key role in disseminating ideas to senior officials in the Bush administration. Not surprisingly, when Barack Obama assumed the presidency in January 2009, a stable of foreign policy experts from the Center for a New American Security, and from a host of other think-tanks, were ready to advise the new President.⁴⁴ When the Obama administration completes its second term in 2016, scholars will have to determine how much of an impact these think-tanks might have had on the President's domestic and foreign policy.

⁴³ Abelson, *A Capitol idea*, pp. 183–201. See also James Mann, *The rise of the Vulcans: the history of Bush's war cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004).

⁴⁴ Abelson, 'Changing minds, changing course'.

Conclusion: do think-tanks matter?

Not long ago think-tank directors, and university administrators for that matter, used to celebrate the publication of a study that enhanced the prestige of their institutions. The quality of the book or article written by one of their scholars, and the reviews it generated, were what mattered most. However, in recent years, as the competition for funding has intensified, the priorities of those entrusted with overseeing research programmes at think-tanks and institutions of higher learning have changed dramatically. Several think-tanks and universities have adopted the language of corporations, and, in doing so, devote much of their time to discussing metrics and performance indicators. In the era of corporatization, numbers matter. For think-tanks, this means identifying the various ways in which their achievements can be evaluated relative to those of their competitors. Although they may disagree on which indicators or measurements are most significant, there are few numbers they can afford to disregard.

In an effort to lure potential donors, and to keep happy those who have already contributed generously, think-tanks pay close attention to their media profile. They survey how often their institution has been cited by the print and broadcast media; the number of interviews experts have given; how many followers they have on Twitter and Facebook; and the number of times their colleagues have been asked to testify before congressional hearings. They also keep a close watch on the number of publications that have been downloaded from their websites; the number of visits to their websites; and how many of their staff have served in various government posts. As if that were not enough, some think-tanks monitor the number of times they have been referred to in records of legislative debates and in other government and academic indices.

Many of these so-called indicators of policy influence make their way into the annual reports of think-tanks, and are showcased in the most positive light. For many think-tanks, these numbers are intended to convince donors that with more funding they could become even more influential players in the political arena. Unfortunately, in their efforts to paint a glowing portrait of their accomplishments, directors of think-tanks fail to point out the vast difference between public visibility and policy relevance. While there is no doubt that some of the indicators referred to above may help scholars determine how much visibility think-tanks enjoy, they are of little use when it comes to assessing how much of an impact these institutions have in influencing policy outcomes. Recording the number of publications downloaded from a think-tank's website, or how often the media refer to a particular policy institute, does not provide valuable insight into who or what influenced government decisions. While think-tanks realize that such indicators might not provide a true reflection of how much influence they actually wield, maintaining these data often proves extremely useful in their fundraising efforts.⁴⁵

To make better sense of the complex world of policy-making, and the role think-tanks play in it, scholars must rely on far more than numbers. They require

⁴⁵ See Abelson, *A Capitol idea*, chs 4–6; Bender, 'Many DC think tanks'.

context. Through interviews and surveys with key participants in the policy-making process, and through examination of relevant archives, it is possible to shed far more light on the conditions under which think-tanks are able to achieve influence. But to do this requires the construction of case-studies that provide a detailed account of how ideas advanced by various think-tanks have made their way through the policy-making process. Isolating the impact that think-tanks have had at different stages of the policy cycle remains a formidable undertaking. As Martin Anderson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, has observed: ‘Every successful idea has a hundred mothers and fathers. Every bad idea is an orphan.’⁴⁶

Determining how much or little influence think-tanks wield is inherently difficult, a conclusion reached several years ago by Leslie Gelb, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations. In reflecting on this issue, he remarked, it is virtually impossible to measure the influence of think-tanks on Congress, the Executive branch and on the media, as it tends to be ‘highly episodic, arbitrary, and difficult to predict’.⁴⁷ Yet, notwithstanding the methodological obstacles that must be overcome to properly assess the impact of think-tanks on public opinion and public policy, directors of think-tanks remain convinced that their institutes wield enormous influence. When funding dollars are at stake, think-tanks have an obligation and an incentive to measure their performance. However, the preoccupation some think-tanks have with metrics need not become an obsession for the scholars who study them. In fact, as think-tanks continue to proliferate in the United States and around the globe, historians, political scientists and sociologists will need to think more critically about how to evaluate the contribution these organizations make to policy development.

⁴⁶ Donald E. Abelson, ‘Think-tanks: definition, their influence and US foreign policy’, interview with Leonhardt van Efferink, 18 Oct. 2010, http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/Interview_Abelson_Donald_Think_Tanks_Definition_Influence_US_Foreign_Policy_Public_Opinion_Ideas_Media_Non_Ideological_Partisan_Defense_Research_Heritage_Brookings.html, accessed 11 Nov. 2013.

⁴⁷ Abelson, *A Capitol idea*, p. 167.