

THINK TANKS AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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While think tanks, in recent years, have become “a global phenomenon,” U.S. think tanks are distinguished from their counterparts in other countries by their ability “to participate directly and indirectly in policy-making” and by “the willingness of policy-makers to turn to them for policy advice,” says Donald Abelson, professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario and the author of two books on think tanks.

As the tragic events of September 11, 2001 began to unfold, network executives and journalists in the United States scrambled to find policy experts capable of answering two critical questions: why were two of America’s greatest symbols of economic and military prowess — the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — attacked? And who ultimately was responsible for orchestrating and coordinating these heinous acts?

To provide millions of viewers with answers to these and other questions, journalists quickly flipped through their rolodexes to locate policy experts at dozens of American think tanks. Their frantic search soon paid off. Indeed, even before the initial shock of what had transpired sunk in, policy experts from some of America’s leading foreign and defense policy think tanks began to appear on the major television networks to share their insights. Over the next several weeks and months, the visibility of think tank scholars in the media continued to increase.

The willingness of think tanks to participate in the media frenzy surrounding September 11 came as no surprise to scholars who have witnessed their increasingly active involvement in the policy-making process. Since think tanks are in the business of developing, repackaging, and marketing ideas to policy-makers and the public, they could hardly pass up an opportunity to comment on one of the most tragic days in contemporary American history.

Gaining access to the media, however, is only one of the many strategies think tanks rely on to shape public opinion and public policy.

My purpose is not simply to describe the activities of think tanks in the United States, nor to speculate on the level of influence that these institutions may or may not have. Instead, I will briefly explore the evolution and proliferation of American think tanks and highlight the various strategies they rely on to contribute to foreign policy decision-making. As a result, it will become clear why think tanks in the United States have become an integral feature of the country’s political landscape and why policy-makers in Congress, the Executive Branch, and the wider federal bureaucracy often turn to them for policy advice.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN THINK TANKS

Scholars who have studied the growth and development of American think tanks generally agree that the highly decentralized nature of the American political system, combined with the lack of strict party discipline and the large infusion of funds from philanthropic foundations, have contributed greatly to the proliferation of think tanks in the past quarter-century. Unfortunately, they cannot seem to agree on when the first think tank was created in the United States or what in fact constitutes such an entity. As a result, rather than trying to define what a think

tank is — a difficult and frustrating task given the enormous diversity of their population — scholars have resigned themselves to identifying major waves or periods of think tank growth. However, in this article, I will treat think tanks as non-profit, non-partisan (which does not mean non-ideological), research-oriented institutes among whose primary objectives is to influence public opinion and public policy.

A few observations should be made. First, although the term “think tank” was employed originally in the United States during World War II to refer to a secure room or environment where defense scientists and military planners could meet to discuss strategy, this rather narrow usage of the term has since been expanded to describe over 2,000 U.S.-based organizations that engage in policy analysis and approximately 2,500 other similar institutions worldwide. A think tank might invoke images of an organization like RAND, one of America’s premier foreign and defense policy research institutions, which has over 1,000 staff members and an annual budget in excess of \$100 million, or it may be used to describe a more modest policy shop such as the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, an organization with less than two dozen staff members and a budget in the \$1 million to \$2 million range.

In chronicling the history of American think tanks, particularly those engaged in the study of foreign policy, it is important to keep in mind the tremendous diversity of the think tank community. It is also necessary to recognize that while think tanks share a common desire to shape public opinion and the policy preferences and choices of decision-makers, how they seek to exercise policy influence depends on their mandate, resources, and priorities.

THE FIRST GENERATION: THINK TANKS AS POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

The first major wave of foreign policy think tanks in the United States began to emerge in the early 1900s, largely as a result of the desire of leading philanthropists and intellectuals to create institutions where scholars and leaders from the public and private sectors could congregate to discuss and debate world issues. Three institutions in particular

began to make their presence felt in the first decades of the 20th century: the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), established by Pittsburgh steel baron Andrew Carnegie; the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace (1919), created by former president Herbert Hoover; and the Council on Foreign Relations (1921), an institution which evolved from a monthly dinner club to become one of the most respected foreign affairs institutions in the world. Two other think tanks, the Institute for Government Research (1916), which later merged with two other institutes to create the Brookings Institution (1927), a Washington icon, and the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (1943), a highly respected conservative think tank, would in time begin to focus considerable attention on a wide range of foreign policy issues.

These and other think tanks created during the first decades of the 20th century were committed to applying their scientific expertise to a host of policy issues. Functioning, in the words of Brookings scholar Kent Weaver, as “universities without students,” think tanks like the Carnegie Endowment and Brookings assign the highest priority to producing quality academic research. They publish books, journals, and other material that is intended for different target audiences. Although scholars from these institutions occasionally provided advice to policy-makers when they were first established, their primary goal was not to directly influence policy decisions, but to help educate and inform policy-makers and the public about the potential consequences of pursuing a range of foreign policy options. In part, the willingness of policy research-oriented think tanks to remain detached from the political process stemmed from their commitment to preserving their intellectual and institutional independence, something many contemporary think tanks have been prepared to sacrifice.

THE SECOND GENERATION: THE EMERGENCE OF GOVERNMENT CONTRACTORS

In the aftermath of World War II, the need for independent foreign policy advice became even more critical for American policy-makers. Faced with the increased responsibilities of becoming a hegemonic

power in a bi-polar world, decision-makers in Washington required the insight and expertise of think tanks that could help them develop a coherent and sound national security policy. By 1948, policy-makers knew where to turn. The RAND Corporation was created in May 1948 to promote and protect U.S. security interests during the nuclear age.

In addition to filling a void in the external policy research community, RAND ushered in a new generation of think tanks — government contractors — policy research institutions largely funded by government departments and agencies whose research was intended to address specific concerns of policy-makers. In the ensuing years, RAND would inspire the creation of several other government contractors including the Hudson Institute (1961) and the Urban Institute (1968).

THE THIRD GENERATION: THE RISE OF ADVOCACY THINK TANKS

No other type of think tank has generated more media exposure in the last three decades than the so-called advocacy think tank. Combining policy research with aggressive marketing techniques, a function they share in common with many interest groups, advocacy-oriented think tanks have fundamentally altered the nature and role of the think tank community. Unlike think tanks in the early part of the 20th century that were reluctant to become embroiled in policy debates, advocacy think tanks including the Center for Strategic and International Studies (1962), the Heritage Foundation (1973), and the CATO Institute (1977) welcome opportunities to influence both the direction and content of foreign policy. As the U.S. think tank industry has become more competitive, most think tanks have come to realize the importance of capturing the attention of the public and the minds of policy-makers.

THE FOURTH GENERATION: LEGACY-BASED THINK TANKS

The newest type of think tank to emerge in the foreign policy-making community is what some have referred to as “legacy-based.” Legacy-based think tanks, including the Carter Center in Atlanta and the Washington, D.C.-based Nixon Center for Peace and

Freedom, are think tanks created by former presidents intent on leaving a lasting legacy on foreign and domestic policy. They produce a wide range of publications, hold seminars and workshops, and conduct research in a number of policy areas.

EXERCISING POLICY INFLUENCE: THE STRATEGIES OF U.S. THINK TANKS

Think tanks are in the business of developing and promoting ideas, and like corporations in the private sector, they devote considerable resources to marketing their product. Unlike corporations, however, think tanks measure success not by profit margins (after all, they are registered as independent non-profit organizations) but by how much influence they have in shaping public opinion and policy. In this sense, think tanks have come to resemble interest or pressure groups that compete among other non-governmental organizations for political power and prestige. Despite some notable differences between think tanks and interest groups, the distinguishing characteristics between the two have, over time, become increasingly blurred.

Think tanks vary enormously in terms of size, staff, and institutional resources, but they all rely to a certain extent on both public and private channels to exercise policy influence. Of the approximately 2,000 think tanks in the United States, close to 25 percent are considered independent or free standing. The vast majority are affiliated with university departments.

Publicly, think tanks rely on a host of strategies to convey their views to policy-makers and the public. These may include: holding public conferences and seminars to discuss various foreign policy issues; encouraging resident scholars to give lectures at universities, rotary clubs, etc.; testifying before legislative committees; enhancing their exposure in the print and electronic media; disseminating their research; and creating web pages on the Internet.

Privately, experts at think tanks may seek to become involved in foreign policy by: accepting cabinet, sub-cabinet, or other positions in the federal government (following government service, many policy-makers return to or take up residence at a think tank); serving

as advisers during presidential elections, on transition teams, and on presidential and congressional advisory boards; inviting selected policy-makers from the Department of Defense, the State Department, the National Security Council, the CIA, and other intelligence gathering agencies to participate in private workshops and seminars; and by providing policy-makers in Congress, the Executive Branch and throughout the federal government with policy briefs and relevant studies on current foreign policy issues — the trademark of the Heritage Foundation, known as the quintessential advocacy think tank.

ASSESSING POLICY IMPACT: ARE AMERICAN THINK TANKS INFLUENTIAL?

Until very recently, scholars and journalists assumed that think tanks were a uniquely American phenomenon and that those situated in and around Washington, D.C. were particularly influential. Both assumptions need to be addressed. First, although the United States is home to some of the most distinguished think tanks in the world, think tanks have emerged in significant numbers in most developed and developing countries. In Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Australia, indeed in most of Eastern and Western Europe, and throughout Asia, the Middle East and Africa, think tanks have come to occupy a more visible presence in recent years. Funded by philanthropic foundations, corporations, international organizations such as the World Bank and political parties, think tanks have become a global phenomenon.

What makes think tanks in the United States unique, besides their sheer number, is the extent to which many have become actively involved in the policy-making process. In short, what distinguishes American think tanks from their counterparts in other parts of the world is not how well-financed some institutions are. Rather, it is the ability of American think tanks to participate both directly and indirectly in policy-making and the willingness of policy-makers to turn to them for policy advice that leads

some scholars to conclude that U.S. think tanks have the greatest impact on shaping public policy. Unfortunately, very few scholars have looked closely at how policy influence is achieved and the various obstacles that must be overcome to measure or assess the influence of think tanks. At the very least, it is important to recognize that think tanks exercise different types of policy influence at different stages of the policy-making cycle. While some think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation are effective at helping to frame particular policy debates such as the ongoing debate over missile defense, others, including RAND, are more influential in working closely with policy-makers to evaluate the costs and benefits of developing new military technologies.

As the number of think tanks in the United States and throughout the international community continue to grow, there will be a tendency to infer that their influence is on the rise. However, before such a conclusion is reached, scholars and journalists need to pay closer attention to how think tanks have contributed to specific foreign policy debates and whether policy-makers in different branches, departments, and agencies have heeded their advice. Only then can more informed observations about their role and impact be made.

Think tanks have emerged as visible and, in many respects, important players in the policy-making community. Yet, the fact that they have proliferated in great numbers tells us more about the culture, society, and politics of the United States than about the extent to which this diverse set of organizations influences the policy-making environment and specific policy decisions. There is no doubt that think tanks can and have made valuable contributions to American foreign and domestic policy. The questions that scholars continue to struggle with are how much of an impact and in what specific ways? Answers to these and other questions will go some way in providing additional insight into the role and function of these organizations and their place in the American foreign policy-making process. ●