

THINK TANKS AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: A POLICY-MAKER'S PERSPECTIVE

*By Richard N. Haass
Director of Policy and Planning
U.S. Department of State*



From the perspective of U.S. policy-makers, today's think tanks offer five principal benefits, according to Ambassador Richard N. Haass, who is Director of Policy and Planning at the State Department. He says they generate "new thinking" among U.S. decision-makers, provide experts to serve in the administration and Congress, give policy-makers a venue in which to build shared understanding on policy options, educate U.S. citizens about the world, and provide third-party mediation for parties in conflict.

Of the many influences on U.S. foreign policy formulation, the role of think tanks is among the most important and least appreciated. A distinctively American phenomenon, the independent policy research institution has shaped U.S. global engagement for nearly 100 years. But because think tanks conduct much of their work outside the media spotlight, they garner less attention than other sources of U.S. policy — like the jostling of interest groups, the maneuvering between political parties, and the rivalry among branches of government. Despite this relatively low profile, think tanks affect American foreign policy-makers in five distinct ways: by generating original ideas and options for policy, by supplying a ready pool of experts for employment in government, by offering venues for high-level discussions, by educating U.S. citizens about the world, and by supplementing official efforts to mediate and resolve conflict.

ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

Think tanks are independent institutions organized to conduct research and produce independent, policy-relevant knowledge. They fill a critical void between the academic world, on the one hand, and the realm of government, on the other. Within universities, research is frequently driven by arcane theoretical and methodological debates only distantly related to real policy dilemmas. Within government, meanwhile, officials immersed in the concrete demands of day-to-day policy-making are often too

busy to take a step back and reconsider the broader trajectory of U.S. policy. Think tanks' primary contribution, therefore, is to help bridge this gap between the worlds of ideas and action.

The rise of modern think tanks parallels the rise of the United States to global leadership. They first emerged a century ago, during the progressive era, as part of a movement to professionalize government. For the most part, their mandate was avowedly apolitical: to advance the public interest by providing government officials with impartial, policy-relevant advice. Early examples included the Institute for Government Research (1916), the forerunner of the Brookings Institution (1927). The first think tank devoted solely to foreign affairs was the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, founded in 1910 to investigate the causes of war and promote the pacific settlement of disputes. These tasks assumed urgency with the outbreak of World War I, which generated passionate debate over America's proper global role. During the winter of 1917-1918, Colonel Edward House, an adviser to President Woodrow Wilson, discretely assembled prominent scholars to explore options for the postwar peace. Known as "The Inquiry," this group advised the U.S. delegation at the Paris Peace Conference and, in 1921, joined with prominent New York bankers, lawyers, and academics to form the Council on Foreign Relations. The first generation of think tanks helped build and maintain an informed domestic constituency for global engagement, keeping the internationalist flame

flickering during the years between the American repudiation of the League of Nations and the coming of the Second World War.

A second wave of think tanks arose after 1945, when the United States assumed the mantle of superpower and (with the outbreak of the Cold War) defender of the free world. Many such institutions received direct support from the U.S. government, which devoted massive resources to defense scientists and researchers. The RAND Corporation, initially established as an independent non-profit institution with Air Force funding in 1948, launched pioneering studies of systems analysis, game theory, and strategic bargaining that continue to shape the way we analyze defense policy and deterrence decades later.

Over the last three decades, a third wave of think tanks has crested. These institutions focus as much on advocacy as research, aiming to generate timely advice that can compete in a crowded marketplace of ideas and influence policy decisions. The prototype advocacy think tank is the conservative Heritage Foundation, established in 1973. The liberal Institute for Policy Studies plays a similar role.

At the dawn of the 21st century, more than 1,200 think tanks dot the American political landscape. They are a heterogeneous lot, varying in scope, funding, mandate, and location. Some, like the Institute for International Economics (IIE), the Inter-American Dialogue, or the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, focus on particular functional areas or regions. Others, like the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), cover the foreign policy waterfront. A few think tanks, like Brookings, have large endowments and accept little or no official funding; others, like RAND, receive most of their income from contract work, whether from the government or private sector clients; and a few, like the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), are maintained almost entirely by government funds. In some instances, think tanks double as activist non-governmental organizations. The International Crisis Group, for example, deploys a network of analysts in hot spots around the world to monitor volatile political situations, formulating original, independent recommendations to build global pressure for their peaceful resolution.

THE IDEA FACTORY

From the perspective of U.S. policy-makers, today's think tanks offer five principal benefits. Their greatest impact (as befits their name) is in generating “new thinking” that changes the way that U.S. decision-makers perceive and respond to the world. Original insights can alter conceptions of U.S. national interests, influence the ranking of priorities, provide roadmaps for action, mobilize political and bureaucratic coalitions, and shape the design of lasting institutions. It is not easy, however, to grab the attention of busy policy-makers already immersed in information. To do so, think tanks need to exploit multiple channels and marketing strategies — publishing articles, books, and occasional papers; appearing regularly on television, op-ed-pages, and in newspaper interviews; and producing reader-friendly issue briefs, fact-sheets, and web pages. Congressional hearings provide another opportunity to influence policy choices. Unencumbered by official positions, think tank scholars can afford to give candid assessments of pressing global challenges and the quality of government responses.

Certain historical junctures present exceptional opportunities to inject new thinking into the foreign policy arena. World War II offered one such instance. Following the war's outbreak, the Council on Foreign Relations launched a massive War and Peace Studies project to explore the desirable foundations of postwar peace. The participants in this effort ultimately produced 682 memoranda for the State Department on topics ranging from the occupation of Germany to the creation of the United Nations. Two years after the end of the war, the Council's marquee journal, *Foreign Affairs*, published an anonymous article on “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.” The article, which was in fact authored by U.S. diplomat George Kennan, helped establish the intellectual foundation for the containment policy the United States would pursue for the next four decades. Then in 1993 *Foreign Affairs* published Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's “The Clash of Civilizations,” a seminal contribution to the debate surrounding American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Since September 11, 2001, studies by CSIS, Heritage, and Brookings have all contributed to the discussions within the government over the

proper strategies and organizations needed to confront the terrorist threat at home and abroad.

Presidential campaigns and transitions are ideal occasions to set the foreign policy agenda. As Martin Anderson of the Hoover Institution explains, “It is during these times that presidential candidates solicit the advice of a vast number of intellectuals in order to establish policy positions on a host of domestic and foreign policy issues. Presidential candidates exchange ideas with policy experts and test them out on the campaign trail. It’s like a national test-marketing strategy.” The most celebrated case occurred after the 1980 election, when the Reagan administration adopted the Heritage Foundation’s publication, “Mandate for Change,” as a blueprint for governing. A more recent instance was a 1992 report by IIE and the Carnegie Endowment proposing an “economic security council.” The incoming Clinton administration implemented this proposal in creating a National Economic Council (a body that continues today).

PROVIDING TALENT

Besides generating new ideas for senior government officials, think tanks provide a steady stream of experts to serve in incoming administrations and on congressional staffs. This function is critical in the American political system. In other advanced democracies, like France or Japan, new governments can rely on the continuity provided by a large professional civil service. In the United States, each transition brings a turnover of hundreds of mid-level and senior executive branch personnel. Think tanks help presidents and cabinet secretaries fill this void. Following his election in 1976, Jimmy Carter staffed his administration with numerous individuals from the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations. Four years later, Ronald Reagan turned to other think tanks to serve as his brain trust. During two terms in office, he drew on 150 individuals from Heritage, the Hoover Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

The current Bush administration has followed a similar pattern in staffing the upper echelons of its foreign policy apparatus. Within the State Department, senior officials with think tank

backgrounds include the Undersecretary for Global Affairs, Paula Dobriansky, previously senior vice-president and director of the Council on Foreign Relations’ Washington office; the Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Security, John R. Bolton, formerly vice-president of AEI; the Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, James Kelly, previously president of the Pacific Forum of CSIS (Honolulu); and the Assistant Secretary-designate for International Organization Affairs, Kim Holmes, formerly vice-president at the Heritage Foundation. At the Pentagon, meanwhile, Peter W. Rodman assumed his position as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs after a stint as director of national security programs at the Nixon Center.

In addition to supplying experts for incoming administrations, think tanks provide departing officials with institutional settings in which they can share insights gleaned from government service, remain engaged in pressing foreign policy debates, and constitute an informal shadow foreign affairs establishment. This “revolving door” is unique to the United States, and a source of its strength. In most other countries one finds a strict division between career government officials and outside analysts. Not so in America. Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell’s predecessor as Secretary of State, once headed the Center for National Policy. Her former deputy, Strobe Talbott, is now president of the Brookings Institution — where I previously served as vice-president and director of foreign policy studies. Having divided my career between government service and think tanks, I can testify to the insights to be gained by combining ideas and practice. Over the past quarter century, I’ve alternated stints at the National Security Council, the Defense and State Departments, and on Capitol Hill with time at Brookings, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment.

CONVENING PROFESSIONALS

In addition to bringing new ideas and experts into government, think tanks provide policy-makers with venues in which to build shared understanding, if not consensus, on policy options among what my former

Harvard colleague Ernest May has labeled the “foreign policy public:” the opinion makers and shapers drawn from across the professions. As a rule, no major foreign policy initiative can be sustained unless it enjoys a critical base of support within the broad foreign policy community. Among think tanks, the non-partisan Council on Foreign Relations has been most adept at this convening role, hosting hundreds of meetings annually in New York, Washington, and major cities around the country. For U.S. officials, events at major think tanks offer non-partisan settings to announce new initiatives, explain current policy, and launch trial balloons. For visiting foreign dignitaries, the opportunity to appear before prominent think tank audiences provides access to the most influential segments of the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

Even as they convene elites, think tanks enrich America's broader civic culture by educating U.S. citizens about the nature of the world in which they live. The accelerating pace of globalization has made this outreach function more important than ever. As the world becomes more integrated, global events and forces are touching the lives of average Americans. Whether the issue is ensuring foreign markets for farm exports, tracking the spread of infectious diseases, protecting U.S. software from piracy abroad, ensuring the safety of American tourists overseas, or safeguarding our ports against terrorist infiltration, the U.S. public has a growing stake in foreign policy. Eighty World Affairs Councils, scattered around the United States, provide valuable forums in which millions of adults and high school students can discuss international events. But formal think tanks, too, are increasingly engaging U.S. citizens. In 1999, the Aspen Institute launched a Global Interdependence Initiative, “a 10-year effort to better

inform, and more effectively motivate, public support for forms of U.S. international engagement that are appropriate to an interdependent world.”

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES

Finally, think tanks can assume a more active foreign policy role by sponsoring sensitive dialogues and providing third-party mediation for parties in conflict. As part of its congressional mandate, the U.S. Institute of Peace has long facilitated such informal, “Track II” negotiations, as well as training U.S. officials to mediate long-running disputes. But other, more traditional think tanks have also extended their mandates to participate actively in preventive diplomacy, conflict management, and conflict resolution. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Carnegie Endowment hosted a series of meetings in Washington, bringing together leading South African politicians, clergy, businessmen, labor representatives, academics, and exiled liberation figures, as well as members of Congress and executive branch officials. These gatherings, occurring over eight years, helped establish the first dialogue and built understanding on South Africa's future during a delicate political transition. Likewise, CSIS has launched projects to improve ethnic relations in the former Yugoslavia, to bridge religious-secular divisions in Israel, and to facilitate Greek-Turkish dialogue.

Such unofficial initiatives are delicate undertakings. But they have great potential to build peace and reconciliation in conflict-prone regions and war-torn societies, either as a complement to U.S. government efforts or as a substitute when an official American presence is impossible. In the darkest corners of the world, they can serve as the eyes, the ears, and even the conscience of the United States and the international community. ●