

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION: HOW A THINK TANK WORKS

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The goal of The Brookings Institution, and all other think tanks, is "to provide the policy community with analysis and conclusions to use as the basis for developing new policies, and for modifying or retiring existing policies," says Brookings President Strobe Talbott. "One of our most challenging tasks," he says, "is to identify early on the new and important issues our nation and the world will confront in the future" and bring them to the attention of policy-makers and the public.

The raw material that think tanks work with is ideas. Think tanks — more properly public policy research organizations — assess the validity and utility of the ideas that form the basis for policy, and they develop new ideas upon which the policies of the future might be based. James Allen Smith, an historian who has written a number of books about think tanks, has described them in the title of one of his volumes as “The Idea Brokers.”

The Brookings Institution is one of the oldest think tanks in the United States. The precursor of the present-day Brookings — the Institute for Government Research — was established in Washington in 1916 by a St. Louis businessman and philanthropist named Robert Brookings. He later set up two related organizations, the Institute for Economics and the Graduate School of Economics and Government.

Robert Brookings established these organizations because he saw that businesses in the early part of the 20th century were benefiting from the relatively new disciplines of economic research and organizational management, and he believed that government also could benefit. The three research organizations were combined in 1927 to form the Brookings Institution, which initially focused on domestic social and economic policy. International studies were not added to the Brookings research agenda until after World War Two.

Brookings is organized into three major research areas: Foreign Policy Studies, Economic Studies, and Governance Studies, though those departmental distinctions are increasingly blurred as the Institution takes on the cross-disciplinary issues that define our globalized world. Our organizational structure also includes several research centers, focused on areas such as the Middle East or functional issues such as education policy.

Robert Brookings once said, “Underlying all Brookings activities is a belief in the necessity of framing issues accurately and impartially, of presenting ideas without ideology.” Since its earliest days, Brookings has provided policy-makers and the public with timely, applied research that is aimed at finding solutions to America’s most complex policy challenges.

Over the decades, ideas emanating from Brookings played a key role in the mobilizations for World Wars One and Two; the creation of the Federal government’s budget process, civil service system, and Social Security; the development of the Marshall Plan; the imposition of price controls during World War Two; the use of sanctions to punish and influence rogue states; the organization of the National Security Council and other foreign policy and defense structures; the commitment to promote development in poorer countries; the evolution of U.S. policy toward post-Soviet Russia; and many other policies.

Since the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the research here has been refocused to concentrate more intently on generating ideas and insights that will lead to the development or revision of policies concerning relations between the West and the Islamic world; the proper balance between vigilance against terrorism and protection of civil liberties; the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians; the need to adjust traditional state-to-state diplomacy to take into account the rise of non-state players; the debate over preemptive or preventive warfare to counter threats from terrorists and terrorist-supporting states; the development of a long-term international strategy for the post-Cold War world; the future of arms control; and the case for a missile defense system.

“Think tanks remain a principal source of information and expertise for policy makers and journalists,” Andrew Rich, a political science professor who has studied think tanks, concluded in a report five years ago. “Their studies and reports are regularly relied upon to guide and/or bolster members of Congress in their legislative efforts and journalists in their reporting.”

In a survey of congressional staff members and journalists covering the Senate and House of Representatives, Rich found that more than 90% viewed think tanks as “somewhat or very influential” in contemporary American politics. Rich reported that Brookings was judged to be the “most credible” of the 30 think tanks listed in his survey.

Brookings is often referred to as “a university without students.” Many of our 75 senior scholars have advanced degrees, and quite a few come from university faculties. Their research and writing is subject to scholarly review.

Some of the Brookings Fellows are what we call “scholar practitioners.” This description applies to researchers who periodically accept positions in government where they can test their academic conclusions in real-world circumstances, and to former officials who come to Brookings after a period of public service and use their government experience to add a practical viewpoint to our academic research.

For example, more than a dozen Brookings “scholar practitioners” have served in the State Department or on the National Security Council, including James Steinberg, the Vice President and Director of the Foreign Policy Studies program at Brookings (former Deputy National Security Adviser at the White House and Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department); Helmut Sonnenfeldt (National Security Council senior staff member in the Nixon administration and former director of the State Department Office of Research on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe); and Martin Indyk, Director of our Saban Center for Middle East Policy (former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and twice U.S. ambassador to Israel). Brookings also has expertise from all the other branches of government, such as former Congressman Bill Frenzel (Republican-Minnesota), one of our resident experts on taxes, free trade, and budget policy.

The National Institute for Research Advancement in Tokyo compiled a list of 3,500 think tanks worldwide, half of them in the United States. Not all of these policy research organizations maintain a strictly academic atmosphere, or are required to be “independent and non-partisan” in their analysis, as is mandated by the Brookings mission statement. Some think tanks are more overtly political. A number focus on a single issue or a small number of related issues. Some have an ideological agenda or a clearly identifiable partisan approach, and lobby policy makers to implement their agenda.

But, whether identified with the left or right — or centrist, like Brookings — all think tanks are dedicated to disseminating their research and recommendations to the policy-makers, and to the news media, influential opinion leaders, interested organizations, and members of the public. Underlying all these activities lies the goal of Brookings and all other think tanks — to provide the policy community with analysis and conclusions to use as the basis for developing new policies, and for modifying or retiring existing policies.

Dissemination of policy analysis and recommendations from Brookings takes a number of forms. The conclusions of many research projects are presented in books and reports. However, a few

years ago, when it was realized that policy-makers and their staffs don't always have time to read books and lengthy reports, Brookings also began publishing its findings additionally in shorter, more accessible papers called Policy Briefs. Other think tanks have followed suit.

Scholars at Brookings often communicate their conclusions more directly to policy-makers through Congressional testimony, private consultations, and meetings with Congressional and executive branch staff members, and to interested non-governmental audiences through forums, roundtable discussions, and other public events.

Policy-makers are often influenced by public opinion, and public opinion is often influenced by coverage in the news media. Additionally, much of what policy-makers, their advisers, and the public know about policy issues they learn through the news media. Therefore, it's not surprising that many scholars at Brookings and other think tanks devote a good deal of effort to presenting their ideas and findings through the news media. This takes the form of interviews on television and radio and in print, opinion articles for the op-ed pages of newspapers, press briefings, public speeches, and articles for scholarly journals. More than a year ago, Brookings built its own TV and radio studio to facilitate media interviews.

Brookings and other think tanks also publish "media guides" to help reporters locate and interview scholars with specific expertise on the policy issue a journalist is writing about.

The budget to fund all this research, analysis, dissemination, and outreach — and the necessary staff — runs approximately \$40 million a year at Brookings. The money comes from an endowment which was originally established by founder Robert Brookings; from grants and donations by foundations, corporations, and individuals; and from

such revenue sources as the Brookings Institution Press, which publishes more than 50 books a year, and the Center for Public Policy Education, which runs executive education seminars for government and corporate managers.

Elaborate rules are in place to guarantee that financial providers have no influence over the design and outcome of Brookings research.

One of our most challenging tasks is to identify early on the new and important issues our nation and the world will confront in the future. Then, in the Brookings tradition, we focus our scholarship on bringing those issues to the attention of the policy-makers and the public, providing solid research and analysis, informing the debate, and offering constructive ideas and recommendations.

As the historian James Allen Smith wrote in his history of Brookings on its 75th anniversary, "...when few scholars have been available and prepared to tackle an emerging policy issue, Brookings has often worked to redirect scholarly attention and fashion new networks of expertise, whether on government finance and regulation, the economies of Asian nations, or the command and control of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the best single test of the institution's long-term success and influence resides not in its immediate impact on particular policy decisions...but on its ability to shape expert networks in ways that continue to anticipate the nation's problems even before the contours of policy debate are delineated."

Busy government policy-makers have noted the value added in Brookings' ability to combine the analysis of long-term trends with the recommendation of short-term policies. Though many issues we tackle today could hardly have been imagined by Robert Brookings in 1916, that non-partisan, policy-oriented method of inquiry has remained constant since our founding day. ©