

Think Tanks and Influence on US Foreign Policy: The People and the Ideas

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Think Tanks and Influence on US Foreign Policy: The People and the Ideas, by COL Peter M. Little, 57 pages.

Think tanks have proliferated in number in the United States in the last century, and with that growth has come an increase in the potential influence that they have on foreign policy and national security strategy. The modern era of think tanks, encapsulating their evolution in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has witnessed a community of non-partisan and non-profit public policy research organizations, become a source of increasing influence, often of a partisan nature. This study looks at the means by which think tanks seek to achieve influence in the foreign policy and national security domain. The primary focus is on the methods of influence. Specifically, it looks at the movement of people and their ideas, between think tanks and government, and the significant influence potential that is delivered in that way. It also provides a brief background understanding of the origins of think tanks, their typology and orientation, and their phenomenal growth in number in the last hundred years, and most notable in the period from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s.

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Acronyms

AEI	American Enterprise Institute (for Public Policy Research)
APRC	Asia Pacific Research Center
CAP	Center for American Progress
CEIP	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CNP	Center for National Policy
CNAS	Center for a New American Security
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSP	Center for Security Policy
DLC	Democratic Leadership Council
FPI	Foreign Policy Initiative
IISS	International Institute for Security Studies
MoE	Measure of Effect
MoP	Measure of Performance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NSA	National Security Advisor
NSC	National Security Council
NSS	National Security Strategy
PNAC	Project for the New American Century
PPI	Progressive Policy Institute
TTCSP	Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Introduction

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.

— Richard N. Haass, Director of Policy and Planning,
US State Department, November 2002.

The epigraph succinctly articulates the significant role of think tanks in influencing US government policy from the perspective of an individual who has served in both official government positions and prominent think tanks.¹ Think tanks, or research institutes, while not normally a part of governments, conduct studies across all policy areas including national security and foreign policy. While the size and scope of think tanks vary enormously, as does their reputation and credibility, the breadth and depth of intellect and experience within the organizations can provide a large resource base of knowledge and analytical capability. Some would argue that the ability to conduct deep and relevant research in some areas often outstrips that of many government departments responsible for delivering policy and strategy formulation.

¹ Richard Haass, “Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker’s Perspective,” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda* 7, no. 3 (November 2002), 5-8. Richard Haass is currently in his thirteenth year as President of Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)(since 2003). Prior to that he was a government official including: Department of Defense (1979-1980); Department of State (1981-1985); Special Assistant to President George H.W. Bush and National Security Council Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs (1989-1993). He was serving as Director of Policy and Planning Staff (2002) when this article was written. In the 2008 Presidential election he advised both Republican and Democratic parties on foreign policy issues. He has also held positions previously at Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Think tanks cover a wide array of fields and derive funding from disparate sources. Perhaps the formal relationships between think tanks and governments in many cases is the most difficult to determine; think tank labels such as government sponsored, party-affiliated, university-based, autonomous, independent, advocacy, and policy enterprise all suggest a wide range of connections. The image that most seek to portray is that of a non- or bi-partisan organization. Further, many of those people that work for and contribute to think tanks are former employees of government or talented young academics with a potential role in future governments; essentially performing the role of “governments in exile” or “shadow governments.” In the US government system, unlike the parliamentary systems in some countries such as the United Kingdom or Canada, there is no standing opposition party cabinet structure for those would-be politicians and officials to go; this factor contributes in part to why the United States is perhaps more suited to a think tank community of such size and character.² While not specifically targeting think tanks, Henry Kissinger made a telling assertion in his memoirs that indicated the importance of the thinking that one does before entering office:

Any statesman is in part the prisoner of necessity. He is confronted with an environment he did not create, and is shaped by a personal history he can no longer change. It is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience. As I have said, convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office. There is little time for leaders to reflect. They are locked in an endless battle in which the urgent constantly gains on the important. The public life of every political figure is a continual struggle to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance.³

The contributions of some think tanks to informing security policy and strategy, whether direct or indirect, are highly likely to shape the resultant strategies that the various US administrations

² Diana Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), 38-52. The multiple differences between the UK and US systems are explored in this chapter. The term “shadow government” is a broadly British term to denote the lead opposition party’s cabinet of elected members of parliament who are not in power.

³ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 54.

pursue. If this is indeed the case then official US security strategy at home and abroad is being influenced to some degree by non-governmental organizations.

This study focuses primarily on the methods by which think tanks influence government policy and less on the complicated theory and evolution of think tanks. While background and understanding are important, in a paper of this length that aspect is deliberately provided in less detail than the reader might wish, in order to concentrate on the subject of influence. Accordingly, the study begins by providing a brief understanding of think tanks. This is a broad section that looks at definitions and origins. It then identifies some of the characteristics that help categorize think tanks and the political orientations that may shape their ideological alignment. The next section is specifically focused on charting both the emergence of think tanks by type (in pronounced waves) and their numerical growth over the last century (defined as the modern era of think tanks). The following section then turns specifically to the generic means by which think tanks achieve influence, or at least seek to achieve influence, drawing on the observations of both political scientists and practitioners. This is then followed by three case studies from the last two and a half decades across the presidential administrations of Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Barrack Obama (2009-present). In particular, it exposes linkages between the people that reside in think tanks, their positioning in the national security apparatus of government and the ideas that they carry with them and impart into policy and strategy formulation. That flow also works in reverse, with government officials moving back into the think tank environment between administrations, taking both experience and credibility back with them. The result is a continuous process of movement backwards and forwards between think tanks and government, in what is often referred to as a “revolving door.” It is this personnel aspect that appears to have the most direct way of delivering think tank influence on the formulation of US national security and foreign policy. This study concludes that there are certainly strong inferences and perceptions of influence by certain think tanks, and predominantly by the means of human capital.

Understanding Think Tanks

There are numerous definitions of think tanks. Indeed many political scientists, scholars and commentators suggest that it is often easier to articulate what think tanks do than it is to define precisely what they are.⁴ This is mainly due to the significant variation in the nature, type, funding, motivation and affiliation of the enormous number of think tanks that now exist. Diane Stone, a Professor in Politics and International Studies and a leading commentator on think tanks for the last twenty five years, referred to them as “independent public policy institutes.” She also exposed many of the subtle variations that have been used by other leading experts on think tanks, to include “imperial brain trusts,” “policy discussion groups,” “research institutes,” “public policy research institutes,” and “policy planning organisations.”⁵ Arguably, the term ‘think tank’ only really came into existence in the Second World War to describe the secluded room where strategy and planning took place, and was then used more commonly from the 1960s onwards in its broader sense in reference to research institutes.⁶ Brooke Williams argued that these types of organization and activities have been in existence for almost two and half millennia since the era of Plato and classical Athens, to describe how “enlightened thinkers have been gathering to discuss public policy and share knowledge to benefit the common good.”⁷ Perhaps the only

⁴ Kubilay Yado Arin, *Think Tanks: The Brain Trusts of US Foreign Policy* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS, 2013), 9. In terms of those that have applied scholarly attention to the study of think tanks, while the list of authors and commentators has expanded significantly in the last ten years or so, Andrew Rich, himself a Professor of Political Science, notes in his book, *Think Tanks, Public Policy and the Politics of Expertise* (2004), that since 1970 (and by inference up until to 2004) less than a dozen books had been written on the subject of think tanks and only a handful by political scientists, namely: David M. Ricci, James G. McGann, Donald E. Abelson (2) and Diane Stone.

⁵ Diana Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*, 9-10.

⁶ James Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York, NY: The Free Press 1991), xiii-xiv.

⁷ Brooke Williams, *Influence Incognito* (Harvard University, Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, 2013), accessed April 18, 2016, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2239839

formal and common characteristic in defining think tanks now is that they are “nonprofit and nonpartisan organizations engaged in the study of public policy,” identifying the requirement for think tanks to remain nonpartisan as a stipulation of tax-exempt status.⁸ Andrew Rich, a Professor of Political Science and expositor on think tanks defined them as, “independent, non-interest-based, nonprofit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policymaking process.”⁹ Rich goes on to explain think tanks, marked out by him as non-interest-based but at the same time seeking to influence, by suggesting that they differ from interest groups because think tanks rarely have “an explicit and specifically identifiable constituency whom they represent in the eyes of policy makers.”¹⁰ It is evident, and is further exposed in the broad categorization of think tanks, that there is a tension when definitions of a think tank include the terms ‘nonprofit,’ ‘non-interest-based’ and ‘nonpartisan,’ only to find the tags ‘for-profit,’ ‘influence’ and ‘advocacy’ freely used in differentiating the types of think tank rather than deciding whether an organization actually qualifies as a think tank. James McGann, a leading expert in think tank analysis and classification, captured the numerous variables involved in defining think tanks, in his 2007 book:

Think tanks or public policy research, analysis, and engagement institutions are organizations that generate policy-orientated research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues in an effort to enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about political issues. Think tanks may be affiliated with political parties, governments, interest groups, or private corporations or constituted as independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These institutions often act as a bridge between the academic and policymaking communities, serving the public interest as an independent voice that translates applied and basic research into a language and form that is understandable, reliable, and accessible for policymakers and the public.

⁸ Donald Abelson and Christine Carberry, “Following Suit or Falling Behind? A Comparative Analysis of Think Tanks in Canada and the United States.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XXXI:3 (September 1998), 529-530, accessed April 18, 2016 http://www.medientheorie.com/doc/abelson_think_tanks_in_canada.pdf

⁹ Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2004), 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Structured as permanent bodies, in contrast with ad hoc commissions or research panels, think tanks devote a substantial portion of their financial and human resources to commissioning and publishing research and policy analysis in the social sciences: political science, economics, public administration, and international affairs. The major outputs of these organizations are books, monographs, reports, policy briefs, conferences, seminars, briefings and informal discussions with policymakers, government officials, and key stakeholders.¹¹

There seems to be little agreement amongst historians and political scientists on exactly when the first think tank or similar styled research institute came into being on American soil. Since the 1600s scholars have exposed or shared their studies in some form or other with government officials from well established institutions such as the universities of Harvard (1636), Yale (1701), Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754) and Brown (1764).¹² The 1830s has been noted as a possible emergence of a link between research institutes and government, where the government contracted the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia in 1832 to conduct a study on the steamboat industry.¹³ A modern and distinct era of think tanks emerged in the early 1900s which has seen their increasing accessibility in public and policy circles.

The think tank landscape is complicated and it is hard to place a single label on them individually or to group them neatly into a certain category. James McGann has argued that “since 1991, when I wrote my doctoral dissertation, ‘The Competition for Dollars, Scholars and Influence in the Public Policy Research Industry,’ several changes have occurred, distorting the original promise and purpose of public policy research organizations.”¹⁴ These changes, including the remarkable growth in numbers of think tanks, are examined in the next section. McGann noted that the nature of think tanks around the world differs with regards their connections to

¹¹ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US: Academics, Advisors and Advocates* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), 11.

¹² Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks & Foreign Policy* (Quebec, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 50.

¹³ Ibid. Abelson cites the example from Paul Dickson’s writing on think tanks in 1970.

¹⁴ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 2.

government and corporations, or their degree of relative independence.¹⁵ Consequently, he lists seven broad categories in the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, compiled by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania, as follows: autonomous and independent, quasi independent, government affiliated, quasi governmental, university affiliated, political party affiliated and corporate (for profit).¹⁶ McGann also provided a categorization of the organizational characteristics of US think tanks specifically, but it is important to understand that the lines between them are often blurred. McGann separated US think tanks into two broad headings, Independent or Affiliated, summarized below.¹⁷

Independent think tanks are autonomous organizations supported in the most part by private contributions, although some may receive government grants. Four further sub-categories exist within this group. (1) Academic (diversified and specialized). Academic-diversified think tanks conduct research across a broad range of policy domains, drawing heavily on the academic community, and are often referred to as “universities without students.” Academic-specialized think tanks only differentiate themselves by tending to focus on a single discipline and narrower research agendas. (2) Contract research or consulting organizations conduct most of their research for government agencies and rely heavily on government contracts and funding. (3) Advocacy think tanks concentrate on the marketing and tend to maintain a central objective of advancing an ideology or cause, to influence policy in a preferred direction. There is a potential contradiction here with the concept that think tanks are sometimes defined as nonpartisan, a claim that is often made by the think tanks themselves but often challenged in commentary by political scientists and practitioners. As McGann specifically stated: “research and analysis that has a strong

¹⁵ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 12.

¹⁶ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program: 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* (University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons, 29 Jan 2016), 7.

¹⁷ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 13-19.

partisan edge.”¹⁸ (4) Policy enterprise organizations separate themselves from advocacy think tanks mainly due to the business nature of their management and marketing, and the apparent absence of a particular ideological or partisan stance; they “view policy-makers as consumers who have specific needs and preferences. Consequently, the policy enterprise is specifically organized to produce, package, and promote policy ideas and proposals.”¹⁹

Affiliated think tanks display a level of connection to another organization, whether in administrative, financial or legal terms. This group comprises four sub-categories. (1) Party-affiliated think tanks are formally linked with a political party with agendas and research programs that meet the party’s interests and aims. (2) Government sponsored think tanks form part of the government apparatus to support the executive and legislative branches with research and analysis. (3) Private (or for-profit) think tanks conduct their research and analysis for a fee, but are generally funded from a broad base of contributions to satisfy some of the requirements of US tax laws. (4) University-based think tanks are formally affiliated with a university or college. The Global Go To Think Tank Index Report states that in North America and Europe “more than half the think tanks are university affiliated.”²⁰ They tend not to focus on analyzing or informing policy but instead on research and knowledge for academic ends.

In addition to the characteristics of think tanks, is the issue of political and ideological orientation. As Andrew Rich asserted in his 2004 findings, “amid the growing number of think tanks, no change has been more remarkable at both the state and national levels than the association of many new think tanks with identifiable ideologies.”²¹ Nearly all think tanks claim a nonpartisan or bipartisan stance. This claim may reflect the desire of think tanks to maintain

¹⁸ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ James McGann, *2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, 8.

²¹ Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, 18.

impartiality in respect of their audiences and donors alike, in addition to the requirement to maintain tax-exempt status.²² It is also important to distinguish those organizations that may have guiding ideologies or principles, but which do not necessarily politicize them or seek to influence government in a partisan way. One might say they are politically orientated, but not ideological.

Think tanks tend to align from left to right on the spectrum as liberal (or progressive), center-left, centrist (or nonpartisan), center-right and conservative. The term libertarian is also used in relation to right wing think tanks. James McGann differentiated conservative from libertarian; a conservative approach to the economy might be described as free-market and a social policy that seeks to preserve traditional values, while a libertarian approach would be more laissez-faire on economic policy and discourage any government intervention in social policy.²³ Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' in the 1930s saw a political realignment based on liberal ideas and during the period 1933-1969, the Democrats were in power for all but eight years. David Ricci noted that "liberalism, in the form of governmental activism, flourished in the 1960s."²⁴ But it also saw a right wing or conservative response to that movement.²⁵ The term neoconservatism further confuses the distinctions within the political right-wing orientations. Emerging from a rejection of communism and social policies in the 1960s the neoconservatives grew in prominence during the 1990s and 2000s, advocating the movement for a powerful and influential America through foreign policy and a strong military.²⁶

²² Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, 18. For IRS tax-exempt status also see Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, 2nd ed. (Quebec, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 148.

²³ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 24.

²⁴ David Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2004), 259. The emergency of the neoconservatives is also documented in other theorist literature, including Diana Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*, 25.

Political scientists and historians have observed the way that some think tanks in recent years, and perhaps decades, have sought to achieve influence on national policy. Donald Abelson noted change from the days when Robert Brookings, Andrew Carnegie, and Herbert Hoover created think tanks in the early 1900s to bring the best minds to one place to develop innovative ways to address the problems that the United States was facing and serve the national interest. He makes his point clearly in respect to advocacy think tanks:

But the days when think tanks could legitimately claim that their research helped advance the national interest are long over. By their very nature, advocacy think tanks—institutions that combine policy research and aggressive marketing—are not hard wired to think in terms of the national interest. Rather their primary motivation is to shape the policy preferences and goals of decision makers in the ways that both satisfy and advance their ideological interests and those of their generous benefactors.²⁷

Bruce Bartlett, a US historian and senior policy analyst in the Reagan administration, concurred:

Rather than being institutions for scholarship and research, often employing people with advanced degrees in specialized fields, think tanks are becoming more like lobbying and public relations companies. Increasingly, their output involves advertising and grassroots political operations rather than books and studies. They are also becoming more closely allied with political parties and members of Congress, to whom they have become virtual adjuncts.²⁸

Some observers may find it difficult to distinguish between think tanks and the multitude of lobbying that goes on at every level of government, except to realize that increasingly more of this activity has been evident in recent decades with the enormous growth in the industry.

²⁷ Donald Abelson, “Think Tanks must think more about issues of national interest, not self-interest,” *London School of Economics and Social Science* (11 October 2011), accessed April 18, 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/10/11/think-tanks-national-interest/>.

²⁸ Bruce Bartlett, “The Alarming Corruption of the Think Tanks,” *The Fiscal Times* (December 14, 2012), accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/Columns/2012/12/14/The-Alarming-Corruption-of-the-Think-Tanks>.

The Growth of Think Tanks in the Modern Era

Variable definitions, origins and typology aside, there is little doubt that the last hundred years or so witnessed a new era for think tanks in the United States, characterized mainly by their number, accessibility, prominence, and influence. James McGann noted, “throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, overall growth in think tanks has been nothing short of explosive.”²⁹ Although it is accepted that public policy discussions have taken place in some form or other since about 400-300 BC, formal articulation of public policy research institutes or think tanks (acknowledging the late introduction of the label ‘think tank’ itself) dates to the period of the turn of the 19th and 20th Century. This last century constitutes the modern era of think tanks.

The evolution of US think tanks in this timeframe has been characterized by Donald Abelson as “four distinct periods, or waves, of think tank development: 1900-45, 1946-70, 1971-89, and 1990-2008.”³⁰ James McGann differs slightly when he identified the “four major periods of think tank growth” in the United States occurring at the end of each of the two World Wars, in the 1960s and in the 1980s.³¹ Abelson was primarily focused on the emerging nature and type of organization in the respective time periods, whereas McGann reported a more quantitative proliferation of think tanks by number in his work. The graphical representation of this numerical growth in US think tanks is shown in Figure 1.

²⁹ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program: 2014 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, University of Pennsylvania Scholarly Commons (1 Mar 2015), 6, accessed April 18, 2016, http://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/8/

³⁰ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, 2nd ed. (Quebec, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 22-37. There is a discrepancy in the timeframe of the fourth ‘wave’ between pages 18 and 34. It is assumed that Abelson meant 1990-2008 as stated on p.18. Abelson also summarized his four waves as “generations” in an earlier piece of work for the U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda (Journal): Donald Abelson, “Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical Perspective.” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda: An Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State*, 7, no. 3 (November 2002), 9-12.

³¹ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 9-10.

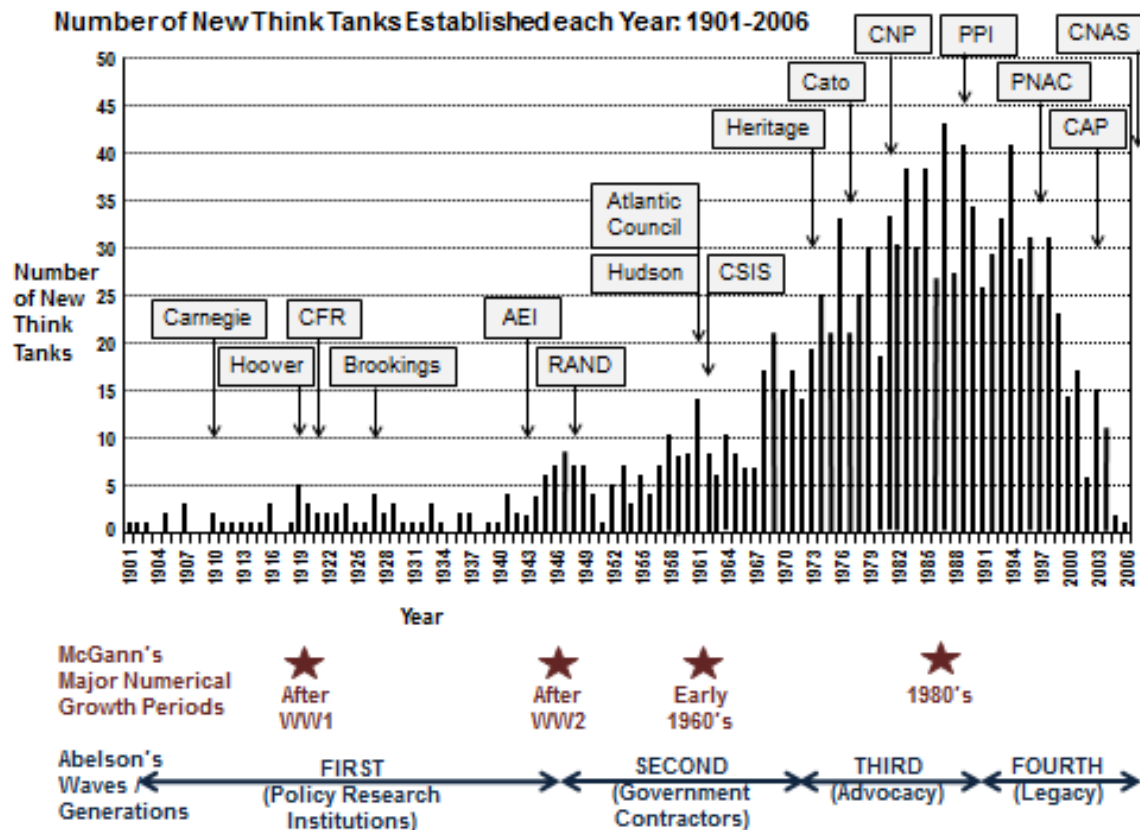


Figure 1. Think Tank numerical growth in the United States (1901-2006).

Source: James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 10.³²

The first wave or generation of think tanks (1900-1945) in the United States is noted primarily by the emergence of organizations focused on policy research and analysis independent of the universities then in existence. A number of privately funded institutes ensued, supported by

³² McGann noted that this chart was based on preliminary data from the 2006 Global Think Tank Survey and that the final data might diverge slightly from this. This data accounts for approximately 1,189 US think tanks rather than the estimated 1,736 that McGann stated existing that year. About 550 think tanks have not been accounted for in the graph, mainly because there is no accurate establishment date for many think tanks and a small number will have already existed as university-affiliated from before the year 1900. The importance in the graph is the trend. The additions to the source material on the recreated graph show the underpinning periods that both Abelson and McGann used to explain the proliferation and the time of arrival of some of the most prominent think tanks were established are also indicated.

significant endowment funding. The oldest surviving policy-research institution (not associated with a university) is widely accepted to be the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), predominantly focused on progressive domestic issues of the time.³³ The first to focus on international relations and foreign policy was the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP)(1910). Some of those that followed included the Cooperative League (1911), the Institute for Government Research (1916), the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace (1919) and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)(1921). At this stage, McGann charts the end of the first period in US think tank growth, after which the growth rate roughly doubled until the end of World War II. These new organizations were broadly of the policy research type, as Abelson recognized, including prominent think tanks such as Brookings Institution (1927) (which incorporated the Institute for Government Research) and American Enterprise Institute (AEI)(1943).

The second wave (1946-1970) saw the emergence of government contractors, drawing on the benefit that academics and professionals could deliver, an idea particularly championed by Presidents Truman and Johnson. Not only was the expertise in itself beneficial, but as Abelson stated, it brought efficiencies from using “independent research institutes that had the luxury of engaging in medium- and long-term strategic research, instead of relying on government officials who were often drowned in daily paper work.”³⁴ RAND Corporation (1948) is the most notable of these government contractors, focused initially on the area of defense.³⁵ It was followed by similar contractor organizations such as the Hudson Institute (1961). During this period new independent research institutes also emerged including the Atlantic Council of the United States (1961) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)(1962).

³³ James Smith, *The Idea Brokers*, 305.

³⁴ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 28.

³⁵ Amongst the literature devoted to RAND, the origins and evolution of the organization are well-documented in Alex Abella, *Soldiers of Reason: The RAND Corporation and the Rise of the American Empire* (Orlando, FL: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

The third wave (1971-1989) saw the emergence of “advocacy” think tanks which have significantly changed the policy research landscape. These new think tanks became far more engaged in the political debate, and optimized new methods and formats by which to “most effectively influence policymakers, the public, and the media.”³⁶ The Heritage Foundation (1973) was at the leading edge of this new approach which included a responsive mechanism to deliver short briefing notes to members of Congress and other government officials on key and timely issues, while at the same time applying significant attention to utilizing the media to amplify its message.³⁷ Other think tanks such as the Cato Institute (1977) followed in the same vein. The Progressive Policy Institute (PPI)(1989), established as the research element of the Democratic Leadership Council, would more closely align as one of the only party-affiliated think tanks in the United States.³⁸ This period, particularly the 1980s, witnessed a new style of think tank but also an explosive growth in the overall number. Many contemporary think tanks like the Center for National Policy (CNP)(1981) emerged during this period.

The fourth wave of think tanks that has appeared in the last part of the 20th century (overlapping slightly with the third wave) is what Abelson referred to as the “vanity or legacy-based think tanks.”³⁹ They include such organisations as the Carter Center (1982) and the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom (1994), which have been created by former Presidents aimed at leaving a lasting legacy in the policy arena.⁴⁰ Overall, there has been a sharp decline in the number of new think tanks since the 1990s, perhaps due to a natural saturation point in the market

³⁶ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 18.

³⁹ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 28.

⁴⁰ Donald Abelson, “Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical Perspective.” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda* 7, no. 3 (November 2002), 11. While not specifically designated as think tanks, the John F. Kennedy School of Government and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs might also be considered as legacy organizations.

for ideas from think tanks or because a fiscal ceiling on donor funding has been reached. Nonetheless, some new and particularly prominent organizations have appeared such as the neoconservative Project for the New American Century (PNAC)(1997-2006), the liberal Center for American Progress (CAP)(2003), the bipartisan Center for a New American Security (CNAS)(2007) and the conservative Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI)(2009). The latest formal reporting from the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program for 2016 described a think tank landscape estimated at 1,835 in the United States as a whole, of which 397 are in the Washington, DC area.⁴¹

How Think Tanks Influence

While the purpose of this paper is not just to count think tanks, it is important to understand the numerical expansion as it relates to the potential level of influence. One might infer from this growth that there would be a commensurate increase in influence attained, with more people conducting research across a broader range of policy issues and improved quality driven by intellectual competition. However, more research products and noise from think tanks does not necessarily equate directly to influence. Eliot Cohen penned an op-ed newspaper article only a few days after departing government at the end of the George W. Bush administration. In it Cohen commented on just how much time officials spent on that which was generated internally from meetings, reports, briefings, telephone calls and email traffic, and precious little time on “the buzz on the outside.”⁴² Cohen’s observation suggested that influence is not easy to achieve.

⁴¹ James McGann, *2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, 31, 34-35.

⁴² Eliot Cohen, “How Government Looks at Pundits,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2009, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123267054604308313>. His assertions are reinforced in David Rothkopf, *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2014), 366, where the statistics chart the enormous increase in the number of emails that circulate in the NSC in the administrations of the last three presidents (estimated at one million during the Clinton years, about five and a half million during the George W. Bush years, and ten million at the time of writing in 2014 in Obama’s NSC).

Andrew Selee asserted that “think tanks are set up precisely because they want to shape policy thinking in some way—whether simply by improving the quality of understanding of issues or influencing thinking in a particular direction—and they have built-in capabilities to get their messages to key audiences.”⁴³ Some of that influence is transparent to the wider audience and some is less so. If there is to be proof of a causal link or degree of influence between think tank and government, not only will the nature and affiliation of the think tank be critical to understand, but also there would need to be a visible and tangible means by which to measure that influence, and that would be extremely challenging. Just because the product from any given think tank, for example the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) annual Preventative Priorities Survey for 2015, may have highlighted a number of contingency areas that were consistent with the published 2015 US National Security Strategy (NSS), there is no way of telling whether that output influenced the NSS.⁴⁴ It is plausible that someone involved in the drafting of that NSS saw the CFR brochure at some stage, or even attended a briefing on the annual survey, but there can be no assumed link. Andrew Selee made some very clear observations on how the RAND Corporation measures its success and it is an indication of the very direct nature of the think tank’s objectives: “Each year, senior leadership assembles a ‘year in review’ report that looks at three key issues: (1) Are we addressing the issues at or near the top of the national policy agenda and are we helping shape those agendas? (2) Is our research and analysis reaching the key decision makers? (3) Have our products and services contributed to improvements in policy and practice?”⁴⁵ It is not just a check on whether RAND did what it was asked to do by the

⁴³ Andrew Selee, *What Should Think Tanks Do? A Strategy Guide to Policy Impact* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 51.

⁴⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, *Preventative Priorities Survey 2015* (2014), accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/preventive-priorities-survey-2015/p33990>, and The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015).

⁴⁵ Andrew Selee, *What Should Think Tanks Do?* 83-84.

government that funds it, but more acutely whether its findings directly influenced the ensuing policy and strategy. There is a stark difference between Measures of Performance (MoP) and Measures of Effect (MoE) in relation to think tanks. MoP can be measured in many ways such as the number of seminars held or publications produced, the scale of media amplification, or the number of congressional engagements conducted. MoE is far less tangible; there is rarely any proof that influence effect has been achieved but it may be possible to determine influence effort.

Figure 2 provides of a summary of the leading US think tanks in the ‘Defense and National Security’ domain today, as measured and ranked by the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Report Index.⁴⁶ Many of these think tanks feature in the analysis of influence in this study.

Table 1 Top ranked US think tanks in the defense and national security domain (2015)

U.S. Think Tank (non-U.S. removed)	World Ranking (Top 40) in the Defense and National Security domain in 2015
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)	1
RAND Corporation	3
Brookings Institution	4
Center for a New American Security (CNAS)	6
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	7
Atlantic Council [of the US]	9
Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)	11
Cato Institute	13
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA)	14
Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs	17
American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI)	20
United States Institute of Peace (USIP)	21
Center for American Progress (CAP)	25
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars	27
Hoover Institution [on War, Revolution and Peace]	33
Heritage Foundation	36

Source. James McGann, *2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, 75.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 31, 34-35. The Global Go To Think Tank Index Report goes into extensive detail as to how the ranking is compiled through index nomination and ranking criteria, both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, pages 25-29.

Across the broad commentary on think tanks to include political scientists, government officials and think tank scholars, the understanding of objectives and approaches of think tanks is generally similar, albeit often grouped into different categories and subsets. The approach of any specific think tank will vary according to a great number of factors such as the type and affiliation of the research organization, or the policy domain in which it has interest. Donald Abelson noted two distinct groupings, those of public influence and private influence; he makes it clear that while the methods to conduct the former are fairly easy to monitor and articulate, not surprisingly it is harder to track the latter.⁴⁷ Alternatively, as the epigraph that begins this paper highlighted, Richard Haass recognized five “principle benefits” from the perspective of the policy-maker: The Idea Factory—generating original ideas and options for policy; Providing Talent—supplying a ready pool of experts for employment in government; Convening Professionals—offering venues for high-level discussions; Engaging the Public—educating US citizens about the world, and; Bridging Differences—supplementing official efforts to mediate and resolve conflict.⁴⁸ Other commentators fall somewhere between these positions with the occasional difference or interpretation such as Andrew Rich and Kent Weaver. They observed a generally similar range of functions to Haass, but with an additional role of being able to “act as evaluators of government programmes, usually on a contractual basis.”⁴⁹ David Ricci was not so specific in identifying the flow of the human resource between think tank and government, perhaps an indication that this particular mechanism may not have been so prevalent at the time he was writing in 1993.⁵⁰ Haass on the other hand, who published since Ricci’s book, cited the flow of personnel from think tanks

⁴⁷ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 82.

⁴⁸ Haass, “Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker’s Perspective,” 6.

⁴⁹ Andrew Rich and Kent Weaver, *Think tanks in the political system of the United States (from think tanks in policy making – do they matter)*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Briefing Paper, September 2011, 16-17, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/china/08564.pdf>

⁵⁰ David Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics*, 162-166.

going back at least as far as the Carter presidency in 1977, taking scholars from the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).⁵¹ James McGann, who wrote in the same timeframe as Ricci, was stark in his description of the major outputs of think tanks, specifically people and ideas. While ideas make their way into the various forms of written and spoken media, they are also carried by the people “who frequently enter government positions in which they can attempt to transform their ideas into policy.”⁵²

This human aspect of influence through the movement of people with ideas is perhaps the most interesting, complicated, and difficult to determine. Think tanks offer a large array of scholars and aspiring young minds across all areas of policy, which forms an attractive resource to new administrations on election, particularly in the US environment where there is no shadow government or standing opposition when the other party is in power. As the individual moves from think tank to government, quite often to return to government after a period in figurative ‘exile,’ so too do the influences of the individual, the think tank and its benefactors. This movement of personnel is not just one-way. Due to the nature of changes in US governments, as the bulk of the staff and officials are brought in to government, so also is there an exodus from the previous administration which in turn feeds significant numbers of policy experienced personnel back in to the think tanks; this term is often referred to as the “revolving door” between think tanks and government. Glenn Hastedt sees today’s think tanks as “providing a base of operations for policy-oriented academics, defeated and would-be elected officials, and foreign policy experts who hope to enter or reenter government service in the future administration.”⁵³

⁵¹ Haass, “Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker’s Perspective,” 7.

⁵² James McGann, *The Competition for Dollars, Scholars, and Influence in the Public Policy Research Industry* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 65. In the text, he is referring to Public Policy Research Institutes (PPRI), which he identifies as an interchangeable term for think tanks in footnotes earlier in the book, 3.

⁵³ Glenn Hastedt, *American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005), 208.

Since the end of World War II, whether as a direct result of changes in the global balance of power or from emerging concerns, a new set of complex issues has occupied foreign policy agendas. David Newsom argued that “the foreign policy areas of government have not been able to cope with the new demands,” and even those that are positioned to conduct long range policy planning are increasingly being reassigned to respond to crises and short-focus tasks.⁵⁴ Think tanks on the other hand normally have the capacity, the expertise and the credibility to provide much of what the pressured staffs and officials cannot achieve. As Newsom saw it, “the think tanks have become ‘research brokers,’ putting academic research into readable forms for policymakers.”⁵⁵ It is clear that the number and size of think tanks has certainly expanded to meet the needs of the customer. The following three case studies examine the linkages between the last three US presidential administrations and think tanks, and demonstrate some of the ways in which the relationship has been manifest in the defense and national security policy domain.

The Clinton Years (1993-2001)

In 1989, more than three years before the 1992 election that saw William J. Clinton become the 42nd President of the United States, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) was established as a think tank for the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). It worked specifically on a blueprint on how to reform government titled the Mandate for Change. When Clinton, former chair of the DLC, announced his run for presidency in 1992 he endorsed the blueprint. Donald Abelson noted, “once in office, he tried to translate several of the institute’s suggestions into concrete public policies, often with the assistance of a handful of staff members from the

⁵⁴ David Newsom, *The Public Dimension of Foreign Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 144.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 145. Newsom uses the label ‘research brokers’ which he takes from David Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 163.

DLC and PPI who had joined his administration.”⁵⁶ The press corps at the time also saw strong similarities between the *Mandate for Change* and that which was mentioned in Clinton’s first State of the Union address.⁵⁷ While the blueprint was mainly focused at domestic policy issues, the ideas and people that followed into government were indicative of think tank influence, to include the President himself. Perhaps ironically, when PPI’s *Mandate for Change* was launched, there was some acknowledgement of the debt that PPI owed to Heritage Foundation, the conservative aligned think tank. Over a decade earlier in 1980, Heritage had published its *Mandate for Leadership*, which was read widely and well-regarded in the Reagan administration. The similarity in names might mislead people to think that the liberal think tank had based its blueprint on the conservative document, not least because a number of the most concerning domestic issues would have had some consistencies. However, what Heritage had shown to PPI, according to Thomas Medvetz, was that a “well-constructed transition manual could quickly catapult a relatively new organization into the elite tier of think tanks.”⁵⁸ As James McGann quotes: “PPI serves as the research arm of the Democratic Leadership Council, a centrist democratic group that provided the intellectual and policy framework for the Clinton campaign and later the ‘Clinton Agenda.’”⁵⁹ Despite these documented and inferred links to PPI, there is no mention of the think tank in Clinton’s autobiography, *My Life*. Indeed, there is no obvious reference to any think tank in the book. There is discussion in a dozen or so places concerning the DLC and his connections to it, and he referred to his involvement in setting up DLC in 1985,

⁵⁶ Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 38.

⁵⁷ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 189. The 1993 State of the Union Address is found at The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara, *Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Administration Goals* (February 17, 1993), accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=47232>

⁵⁸ Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 121-122.

⁵⁹ James McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US*, 18.

“dedicated to forging a winning message for the Democrats based on fiscal responsibility, creative new ideas on social policy, and a commitment to a strong national defense.”⁶⁰

In addition to those personnel that joined the domestic policy departments of the Clinton administration from PPI, there were a few notable individuals who took positions on the foreign policy side from other think tanks. Perhaps the most prominent was Madeleine Albright, President of the Center for National Policy (CNP) from 1989-1992, who then moved to join the administration and was appointed US Ambassador to the United Nations (1993-1997) and then Secretary of State (1997-2001). She has since returned to the think tank arena and currently serves on the Board of the Council on Foreign Affairs (CFR) in the capacity of Director Emerita. Anthony Lake, Clinton’s National Security Advisor during the period 1993-1997, also had links to CFR in the 1970s. Lake had served as a Foreign Service Officer in the State Department for eight years, including service in Vietnam during 1963-1965. CFR chose him to lead a comprehensive analysis of the the Vietnam war policy and the impacts that it was having on American society, which was published by CFR Foreign Affairs in 1976.⁶¹ Lake returned to government service in 1977 as Director for Policy Planning in the Carter administration until 1981, following which he became a Professor of International Relations and taught on the Vietnam War at colleges in Massachussets until his recall to government with Bill Clinton. It is reasonable to expect that Lake carried much of his critical thinking from the Vietnam study into

⁶⁰ William Clinton, *My Life* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2005), 319.

⁶¹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Continuing the Inquiry: Consensus Endangered*, accessed on April 27, 2016, http://www.cfr.org/about/history/cfr/consensus_endangered.html. “Even if we do not want to think about the war, it has changed us,” Lake wrote. “We are condemned to act out the unconscious, as well as conscious, ‘lessons’ we have learned.” The comprehensive analysis directed by Lake was published as a collection of essays: Anthony Lake, ed., “The Vietnam Legacy: The War, American Society and the Future of American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 1976), accessed April 20, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/1976-07-01/vietnam-legacy-war-american-society-and-future-american-foreign>.

government service in the service of Carter and Clinton. Robert E. Hunter, having served in the National Security Council (NSC) for President Carter throughout 1977-1981, and who was at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) from 1981-1993, served as US Ambassador to NATO (1993-1998); since finishing government service he has spent time as an advisor at the RAND Corporation.⁶² Although the numbers of prominent individuals that moved from think tanks to the Clinton government appear to be a great deal fewer than in the Bush government that followed, Ambassadors Albright and Hunter, and Anthony Lake were placed in pivotal US foreign policy roles at the United Nations, NATO, the State Department and the NSC. It also bears witness to the concept of the revolving door at the end of public service; indeed, Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State under Madeleine Albright in the Clinton government, also subsequently entered into the think tank community and is now the President of Brookings Institution.

In late 1994 a Republican majority was elected into both the House and the Senate which brought with it a renewed conservative challenge.⁶³ The Republicans maintained their majority for the remaining six years of Clinton's tenure, although a characteristic that has not been unique in recent presidential terms. At the same time, criticism of the Clinton government's foreign policy was being generated from some of the more right-wing assessed think tanks such as American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Heritage Foundation.⁶⁴ And 1997 saw the birth of a new conservative think tank, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), with its Statement of Principles that firmly challenged the course of US foreign and defense policy.⁶⁵ PNAC would

⁶² David Newsom, *The Public Dimension of Foreign Policy*, 150. Supplementary information drawn from think tank sources (CFR, CNP and CSIS) and biographies.

⁶³ Ryan Hendrickson, *The Clinton Wars – The Constitution, Congress, and War Powers* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), xii.

⁶⁴ David Newsom, *The Public Dimension of Foreign Policy*, 147.

⁶⁵ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 42.

become increasingly critical through Clinton's second term, particularly over his handling of Iraq. An open letter from PNAC to the President on 26 January 1998 called for a policy aimed at "the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power."⁶⁶ It was signed by eighteen leading conservatives and veterans of former Republican administrations of whom many would go on to serve in top positions in the Bush administrations that followed, including such prominent names as Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Armitage, Paul Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams, John Bolton, Paula Dobriansky and Robert Zoellick.⁶⁷

Across the Washington think tank base a busy and varied schedule of briefings, seminars and conferences has routinely taken place as part of the research and influence process, covering broad policy issues and specific subjects. It is no hidden fact that many of these events are from time to time attended by high profile government officials, their staffs and members of Congress. In nearly all cases they are presented as nonpartisan events on the surface even if a think tank has certain political leanings, but there are exceptions. One such case is cited in the aftermath of the 1994 Congressional election when the Heritage Foundation organized a briefing for new members of Congress. Rather than attending the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, which was common, seventy-three Republican members of Congress chose to attend the Heritage event instead. In the words of David Newsom, "the Heritage briefing was clearly partisan; no Democrats were invited."⁶⁸ This assertion may seem mischievous because with such an enormous net gain for the Republicans in the 1994 election, fifty-four seats in the House and nine in the Senate, there were only in fact a handful of new Democrat members to be briefed. Also, Newsom does not point out that the alternative option of attending the Kennedy School was perhaps no less

⁶⁶ Project for the New American Century letter to President Clinton, 26 January 1998, accessed April 18, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130112203258/http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>

⁶⁷ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 238.

⁶⁸ David Newsom, *The Public Dimension of Foreign Policy*, 156-157.

partisan. But the point is well-made and demonstrates the leanings of some of the conservative think tanks at the time, indeed verging on advocacy.

The Center for National Policy (CNP), discussed earlier in respect of Madeleine Albright's role before entering government in 1993, identifies itself as "progressive-pragmatist," although it is characterized as a liberal think tank and has well documented ties with the Democrat party.⁶⁹ In sending a visit team to Vietnam in April of 1993, CNP demonstrated the role that a think tank can play in bridging the void between the US government and a country with which, at the time, it had no diplomatic relations with. The visit report that followed recommended that the embargo on Vietnam be lifted. Later that same year, Clinton began to significantly remove the restrictions that were in place on bank loans and involvement of US companies in projects in Vietnam.⁷⁰ Not only did the Clinton administration edge closer in 1995 towards the normalization of relations, but also enabled other regional nations, sensitive to US wishes, to further their ties with Hanoi. Newsom added that CNP was not the only organization or country making these recommendations but, given the links to the Democrat party and the connections through Albright, the report most likely reinforced the Clinton move. In the 1996 US national security strategy, the first published following the normalization in 1995, Vietnam began to appear in the text with recognition of the country "as a pivotal player in ensuring a stable and peaceful region."⁷¹

In many areas of foreign policy, it has been argued that Clinton was unable to follow his preferred path of "assertive multilateralism," essentially seeking coalitions and broader consent to take actions where necessary as a collective rather than the US acting alone. From 1994, a

⁶⁹ Diana Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*, 49, 256.

⁷⁰ David Newsom, *The Public Dimension of Foreign Policy*, 149.

⁷¹ The White House. *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*. (Washington, DC: The White House, February 1996), 41.

Republican-dominated Congress was able to exert pressure on Clinton, forcing him further away from his preference for assertive multilateralism towards a stronger US unilateral track. Further, the conservatives in Congress were being influenced by an emboldened group of right-wing think tanks such as AEI, Heritage Foundation, and PNAC.⁷² A more unilateral approach was also evident in the pursuit of Osama Bin Laden in the wake of attacks against the United States in the late 1990s and the turn of the millennium. The same was true for the strikes on Iraq in the same period, which Ryan Hendrickson suggests were carried out “with questionable international legal authority.”⁷³ Now, there is always a balance in judging these events and it is important to acknowledge that the collective international effort was engaged at times in most of these cases and in other matters, namely through the United Nations and NATO, including the first use of force by NATO in the Balkans since its founding in 1949; surely that in itself demonstrated a level of multilateralism. Perhaps what was occurring was pressure from the neo-conservative think tanks, through the Republican-weighted Congress in order to deliver influence on the military budget and shape foreign policy.

There was another significant challenge facing NATO that occupied the resources of some think tanks in the 1990s, that of the enlargement of the organization. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO had remained the same size but in 1999, three new members joined the Alliance (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland). The expansion of NATO had been championed by Clinton since January 1994, the President announcing in Prague that “it was no longer a question of whether NATO would enlarge, but simply a matter of when and how.”⁷⁴ Much of the discussion was led by RAND Corporation and detailed analytical briefs were produced, including

⁷² Kubilay Yado Arin, *Think Tanks: The Brain Trusts of US Foreign Policy*, 77-79.

⁷³ Ryan Hendrickson, *The Clinton Wars*, 138.

⁷⁴ James Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 3.

such considerations as implications for Russia, likely reactions and impacts on those not invited to join, and cost predictions. RAND made every attempt to avoid any particular stance on the issue or options within it, although many individuals had their own strong views.⁷⁵ Aside from RAND, the issue created wider think tank activity across Washington including CFR, Brookings and AEI, as noted by Ronald Asmus, where “their briefings and memos became an integral part of the intellectual and policy debate.”⁷⁶ William Odom, Director of Security Studies at the conservative Hudson Institute, had been stressing the importance at the end of 1993 for a necessary expansion of NATO, a move that even Yeltsin had said he would not object to a few months before. Odom argued that in addition to bolstering NATO it would actually provide a degree of security to Russia by filling the strategic vacuum in Eastern Europe that Russia itself could not fill.⁷⁷

This case study shows how all of the framework of think tank objectives (going back to the explanations of Richard Haass) have been demonstrated to some extent to be at play during this administration. The sharing of ideas, the convening of professionals and the bridging of differences were all important. But perhaps what characterized this period most significantly was the nature and crescendo of the conservative voice, directly from the think tanks themselves and routed indirectly through the Republican Congress, from early in the first term and enduring throughout the remainder of Clinton’s presidency. Finally, and mainly as a result of that

⁷⁵ Ronald Asmus, “Having an impact; Think Tanks and the NATO Enlargement Debate.” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda: An Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State* 7, no. 3 (November 2002), 30. Asmus himself was part of RAND and the work to develop the NATO Enlargement analysis and options.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ William Odom, “Strategic Realignment in Europe: NATO’s Obligation to the East,” in *NATO: The Case for Enlargement*, ed. (Alliance Publishers for the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, 1993), 7-12. Odom was writing for the conservative Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, while Director of Security Studies at the conservative think tank Hudson Institute.

increasing Republican success, by the end of Clinton's second term, the status of PPI had diminished to such a level, along with that of the DLC, that its effectiveness as a think tank was denuded; since that time, PPI has ended its affiliation with the DLC in order to re-establish its reputation and position.⁷⁸

The Bush Years (2001-2009)

During his 2000 campaign for the presidency, George W. Bush assembled a large team of policy experts. Many of these advisers came from the conservative think tanks such as the Hoover Institution and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).⁷⁹ At the same time, a significant number of influential neoconservatives, many of who would later become his inner circle of foreign policy officials, were grouped or connected to the newest of the right-wing think tanks, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). Bush's inner circle of friends and policy advisors has been labeled by some historians and political observers as the "Vulcans," a group that James Mann referred to as the individuals "who worked in foreign policy in previous Republican administrations and then returned to office under George W. Bush."⁸⁰ While all had seen service in either the governments of Reagan or George H.W. Bush during the 1981-1993 period, a few went back to the Nixon and Ford era of the 1970s, most famously Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Prior to the period when these individuals were in George W. Bush's government they were "Vulcans-in-exile," in Mann's phrase, looking at enduring issues that the Clinton presidency was "addressing only through strategies of deferral," including Iraq and North Korea.⁸¹ Some of this thinking was taking place in conservative think tanks, such as PNAC, AEI,

⁷⁸ Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*, 140.

⁷⁹ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 144.

⁸⁰ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, xv.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

Heritage Foundation and the Center for Security Policy (CSP), but, as Donald Abelson noted with few exceptions these, “think tanks had limited access to President Bush and his inner circle.”⁸² As always there are exceptions to the rule. Condoleezza Rice commented in her book, *No Higher Honour*, of an occasion when she had considered creating a deputy for homeland affairs in the National Security Council (NSC) at the start of her time in office as National Security Advisor (NSA), based on a briefing by the president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).⁸³ The decision was finally taken not to create the post in the NSC, but some think tank influence was certainly being achieved within the inner circle.

The distinctive nature of the “Vulcans” has been compared with that of the “Wise Men” that shaped US foreign policy after the Second World War, but that may be where the comparison ends. One significant difference in the background of the grouped individuals was that the Wise Men had nearly all come from a background of business, banking and law. The Vulcans had almost entirely come from a background of defense and foreign policy.⁸⁴ Some of Bush’s Vulcans and many of his other government officials had also come from a few key right-wing think tanks. Dick Cheney, Vice President for the entire 2001-2009 Bush administration, was one of Bush’s oldest friends and closest confidants. They met weekly for lunch and, as Bush states in his memoirs, “while I had similar meetings with other top aides, Dick was the only one on a regular schedule.”⁸⁵ Dick Cheney had well known roots in AEI, as did his wife Lynne. Cheney’s own memoirs mention little about think tanks other than AEI, which features regularly. He specifically noted that on departing government at the end of the George H.W. Bush

⁸² Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 146.

⁸³ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honour* (New York, NY: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011), 111.

⁸⁴ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, xiii.

⁸⁵ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, 86.

administration he signed on at AEI in order to “continue to contribute on the major policy and political debates of the day.”⁸⁶ He also made particular mention, in the efforts to find a running mate for George W. Bush in the run up to his first presidential term, that he moved all of the sensitive vice presidential selection materials from his wife Lynne’s office at AEI to the basement of their daughter’s house in the suburbs because “you can’t conduct political activities on nonprofit premises.”⁸⁷ This recognition of the boundaries between think tanks and government is admirable, but Cheney was also aware of the work that was going on at AEI under the pen of Fred Kagan in 2006 to conduct a review of the government’s Iraq policy and a proposal for a counterinsurgency strategy and troop surge.⁸⁸ While Cheney also mentioned speeches by politicians that he attended and speeches that he made at AEI, he drew particular attention to his relationship with and the importance of AEI. In his acknowledgements at the end of the book he stated, “I’d like to thank the American Enterprise Institute, with which I’ve been long associated, and its outstanding and visionary president Arthur Brooks for the many forums the organization has provided over the years for debate about the most important policy issues of our time.”⁸⁹ The connection was strong and ideas seemed to penetrate into the Bush government.

There is next to no mention of think tanks in George W. Bush’s memoir *Decision Points*, either collective references or of think tanks named specifically, which perhaps suggests that the thought of think tanks really did not occupy much of his time. Certainly, his chapters on the presidential campaign in 2000 and the selection of personnel for key positions in his administration made no mention of think tanks. His references to the prominent individuals and the reasons for their selection appear to be based on previous service with his father and other

⁸⁶ Dick Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York, NY: Threshold Editions, 2011), 241.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 531.

Republican presidents, or proven success in major US institutions. They were chosen for reasons of their expertise and suitability, and not about their connections to think tanks. There is one particular mention of AEI in relation to a gathering of highly respected experts in the spring of 2006 at Camp David to discuss the way ahead in Iraq organized by Bush's NSA, Steve Hadley. The four names mentioned in the book that formed the group were Robert Kaplan (journalist and author), Michael Vickers (former CIA), Eliot Cohen (professor and author) and Fred Kagan (AEI military scholar). Bush also stated that Steve Hadley had brought to the meeting a number of papers and articles written by senior military officers that offered balanced and alternative views for the way to proceed in Iraq.⁹⁰ While it is unsurprising to see Fred Kagan there from an AEI perspective, one of the few think tanks that did perhaps have access to President Bush, it is interesting to note that Fred Kagan is brother to Robert Kagan (one of the founders of PNAC) and son of Donald Kagan, and the three Kagans all took part in the major PNAC study in 2000 titled *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. Eliot Cohen and Michael Vickers also participated in the project, a study that included clear advice on Iraq: "While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein."⁹¹ Eliot Cohen's name also appeared on the letter sent to President Bush in the aftermath of 9/11, some five or so years before the discussions that preceded the 2007 surge in Iraq.⁹² So in the small group 'balanced' discussion to decide the way

⁹⁰ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2010), 364.

⁹¹ The Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (September 2000), 14. The names of all who participated in the project study are listed on the final page – including all three Kagans, Cohen and Vickers. Accessed on April 18, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130112234519/http://newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>

⁹² The Project for the New American Century, *Letter to President Bush on the War on Terrorism*, September 20, 2001, accessed April 18, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130112203252/http://www.newamericancentury.org/Bushletter.htm>

ahead for Iraq in 2006, three of the four experts that were assembled had already formed and presented their clear views while part of the think tank community; some might argue that the decision to surge was a foregone conclusion.

After the tragic events of 9/11, perhaps, came the greatest break-through for the conservative think tanks, and particularly PNAC. While PNAC, with its impressive array of connections to past and future Republican officials, had been active in the late 1990s, it reportedly had relatively little impact as an organization on the Clinton administration. Co-founded by neoconservatist William Kristol (who had been Chief of Staff to the Vice President in the George H.W. Bush government) and Robert Kagan, PNAC continued to push its message of a strong and decisive approach to US foreign policy; the aforementioned *Redubling America's Defenses* is a prime example.⁹³ After Bush assumed the presidency, the PNAC effort of criticizing the Clinton administration turned into unequivocal support for the Bush government. Some people in the key government positions had been those that signed their names at the bottom of some or all of the letters and policies that PNAC had distributed throughout Clinton's second term. PNAC had caught the eye of scholars and media alike, and there is no doubt that the names on the PNAC letters matched those of the personalities that move into the key positions of government. The degree to which PNAC directly influenced policy in the first eight months of the Bush first term is difficult to gauge. What followed after 9/11, however, is perhaps a little more revealing. As Donald Abelson's investigation exposes across a broad group of commentators, if the principles and policies that PNAC was advocating seemed a little extreme and unpalatable to most for how the world was looking on 10 September 2001, they probably carried significantly greater appeal after the events of the following day.⁹⁴ Only nine days after 9/11, PNAC penned a letter dated 20 September 2001, this time to President Bush following the administration's

⁹³ Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 212.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

statements on the direction of the war on terror. The letter was unequivocal in its support for the action that the Bush administration should pursue, and identifying military action in Afghanistan and the capturing or killing of Osama Bin Laden, the removal of Saddam Hssein from power, the isolation of Hezbollah, the cessation of support to the Palestinian Authority, and a major increase in the defense budget to achieve it all.⁹⁵ Whether by coincidence or design, the seeming alignment of ideas between PNAC and the new direction of Bush's foreign policy agenda, and the well-known ties between PNAC and Bush's inner circle, were shaping the discussions in the media. Donald Abelson brought some balance to the debate, perhaps given the weight of circumstantial evidence over any real tangible proof:

The president did not appoint Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and other foreign policy experts to serve in his administration because they were card-carrying members of PNAC or any other think tank; they were recruited because they were people he could trust. Although Bush appeared to be sympathetic to many of the ideas presented by PNAC, we should not assume that this or any other organization dictated his foreign policy.⁹⁶

Although PNAC drew a good deal of the attention in the eighteen months between 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, not surprisingly a good number of the leading Washington think tanks were doing considerable work to try and inform the way ahead from both sides of the political divide. Ellen Laipson provided an excellent comparison and summary of some of the leading think tanks' positions vis-à-vis the decision to go to war in Iraq, and remarked that "think tanks can be marginal or irrelevant players when an administration has strongly held views or solicits input only from like-minded thinkers."⁹⁷ Those in clear support of the war were perhaps those that would be expected, the heavily conservative organizations, namely, AEI, Heritage

⁹⁵ PNAC, *Letter to President Bush*.

⁹⁶ Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 218-219.

⁹⁷ Ellen Laipson, "Think Tanks: Supporting Cast Players in the National Security Enterprise," in *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth*, ed., Roger George and Harry Rishikof (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 294.

Foundation, and the Hoover Institute. In the anti-war corner but working to develop options to monitor and deal with any WMD, was Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), widely accepted as a center-left think tank.⁹⁸ The center ground saw some think tanks mixed in their support: some Brookings scholars supported an invasion of Iraq and a regime change while others called for greater debate in Congress. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) sought to assess whether containment or disarmament of Hussein's regime could be achieved by other means than military action. CATO Institute offered no support for the war and argued that Iraq posed no threat. CSIS offered no opinion on the subject at all. Of note, one of the leading British think tanks in the defense and national security domain, the International Institute for Security Studies (IISS), and included in Laipson's analysis, offered no support and completely refuted the CIA evidence of a WMD program. The US think tanks continued to work for the following years to provide genuine analysis and advice on various issues relating to the situation as it developed.⁹⁹ What is not necessarily discernable is to what extent the individual think tank advice was penetrating into the Bush government's foreign policy discussions except, perhaps, for the inferences one might draw from the policies that the administration implemented. Bush's *Decision Points* included an interesting commentary of the meeting at Camp David in the week after 9/11, when Bush met with his national security team to discuss what action needed to be taken in Afghanistan and the region. Bush recalled that "at one point, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz suggested that we consider confronting Iraq as well as the Taliban." The memoir stated that Donald Rumsfeld supported the suggestion, although the conversation was then brought back into balance by Colin Powell who argued that "going after Iraq now would be

⁹⁸ Ellen Laipson, "Think Tanks: Supporting Cast Players in the National Security Enterprise," 296.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

viewed as a bait and a switch” and that now was not the time.¹⁰⁰ Of note, both Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld were among the eighteen people who signed the PNAC letter to President Clinton in January 1998 calling for the removal from power of Saddam Hussein.¹⁰¹ Again, this supports the concept that it is the people and their ideas that perhaps have the greatest think tank influence or influence effort on policy and strategy.

Afghanistan and Iraq were not the only priorities for foreign policy influence from the right-wing think tanks. The bipartisan Rumsfeld Commission, which had been conducted in 1998 during the Clinton presidency, had concluded that Iran and North Korea, in addition to Iraq, were developing ballistic missile capabilities that could threaten the United States, potentially within as little as five years. This challenged the findings of the National Intelligence Estimate of 1995 that sought to reassure the Clinton administration that the continental US could not be reached by these nations for the next fifteen years. Although the report did not specifically support missile defence, Republican pressure in the House of Representatives continued to mount for a missile defense system.¹⁰² Interestingly, the perceived threats posed by Iran and North Korea had not made mention in the PNAC letter that followed 9/11, perhaps not to dilute the focus of the message. However, the emphasis on the missile, and potential nuclear, threat from Iran and North Korea maintained the pressure in Congress. In fairness, the Missile Defense issue had been ongoing for decades and the think tank High Frontier, formed in 1981 by General Daniel Graham, a former Defence Intelligence Agency chief and an advisor to Reagan, had persistently pushed

¹⁰⁰ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, 189.

¹⁰¹ The PNAC letter of January 26, 1998, is discussed in the previous section and found at the archived website, accessed April 18, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130112203258/http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>

¹⁰² James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 241. With hindsight, the NIE estimate would seem entirely valid.

the merits of ground-based and space-based systems, at times in conjunction with the Heritage Foundation.¹⁰³ Twenty or so years later, established and leading right-wing think tanks such as Heritage Foundation and CSP continued to champion missile defence, countered by the center-left think tanks such as Brookings Institution and Carnegie Endowment.¹⁰⁴

The US position on Taiwan, as it pertains to a threat from China, is another interesting area of a think tank narrative aligning with Bush's stated position. The enduring position since the 1950s concerning any potential defense of Taiwan in the case of Chinese aggression had been described as "strategic ambiguity." PNAC, in a 1999 letter, had called for a review of the Taiwan policy in order to pursue a neoconservative objective to end the ambiguity over the US position and show greater support to democratic Taiwan. Both Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Armitage had signed the letter relating to Taiwan. Less than two years later they were Deputy Secretary of Defense and Deputy Secretary for State respectively in the Bush government. Whether intentionally or not, Bush stated his position very clearly during an ABC television interview in April 2001 in the aftermath of proceeding with weapon sales to Taiwan. The transcript of the discussion between ABC's Charles Gibson and President Bush on Taiwan was reprinted by *The Washington Post* (one of many news outlets to document the interview), which read:¹⁰⁵

GIBSON: You made the decision on arms sales to Taiwan. I'm curious, if you, in your own mind, feel that if Taiwan were attacked by China, do we have an obligation to defend the Taiwanese? BUSH: Yes, we do, and the Chinese must understand that. Yes, I would. GIBSON: With the full force of American military? BUSH: Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself.

¹⁰³ Donald Abelson, *A Capitol Idea*, 186.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁰⁵ The conversation is shortened to the key phrases in James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 284-285. The full transcript of the ABC interview, including the passage as shown, is at WP On Politics, *Bush on ABC's Good Morning America*, April 25, 2001, accessed on April 27, 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushabctext042501.htm>

The “Israel lobby,” as labelled by John Mearsheimer and Stephan Walt in the book bearing the same title, described the right-wing agenda to foster the special relationship between the United States and Israel, and the “loose coalition of individuals that seeks to influence American foreign policy in ways that will benefit Israel.”¹⁰⁶ At the time of the Bush administration, the number of linkages between names of prominent government officials and think tanks with a pro-Israel agenda was certainly plentiful (including PNAC, AEI, CSP, Hudson Institute, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the Middle East Forum and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy).¹⁰⁷ The lobby was significant and the linkages to government officials well-established, but assessing the degree of influence that these individuals may have had on President Bush’s supportive approach to Israel, as an extension of the think tanks and the “lobby” that they represented on Israel, is one that warrants further investigation at another time.

George W. Bush may well have had fairly limited interaction with think tanks, albeit perhaps a little more after 9/11, but he certainly had former think tank personnel providing some of that advice from inside his government. Donald Abelson pointed out that “President Bush is ultimately responsible for the management and mismanagement of American foreign policy in the post 9-11 world. His decision to follow the advice of some key advisers, while ignoring dozens of policy recommendations made by academics and policy experts at think tanks, must fall on his shoulders.”¹⁰⁸ Of note, PNAC was dis-established in 2006 but Kristol and Kagan teamed up again in 2009 to co-found the right-wing think tank, the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI).¹⁰⁹ And while

¹⁰⁶ John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), viii.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 129-131.

¹⁰⁸ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 146.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

Robert Kagan remains a Director of FPI, he is also now a senior fellow with the foreign policy program at the more moderate and nonpartisan Brookings Institute.¹¹⁰

The Obama Years (2009-present)

Barrack Obama's first term as president was focused in large part on managing the issues of the past that had begun in the previous administration such as Iraq, Afghanistan, the search for Osama Bin Laden, and the broader task of regaining the support of allies.¹¹¹ The second term has witnessed a lengthy foreign policy agenda, including but not limited to: the Arab Spring and particularly war in Libya, the continued efforts to prevent Iran and North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, a resurgent Russia and the conflict in Ukraine, a China in the ascendancy (both economically and militarily), and the rise of ISIS and the conflict in Iraq and Syria.

James Mann, in assigning his label of "Obamians," referred to the inner circle of aides that support Obama and input to his policy decisions as an extension of himself as the "chief Obamian."¹¹² There is no doubt that they were distinctive from the Vulcans of the Bush government in their origins, experiences and relationships that we saw in the previous study, but they also represented (and in many cases still represent) a newer generation. Donald Abelson observed that in the run up to the election and in building his network of policy experts, Obama turned to a number of think tanks including the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.¹¹³ What is striking is that this list of think tanks that Obama favoured is broadly balanced across the partisan divide, significantly more so than the

¹¹⁰ Brookings Institute website, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/experts/kaganr>

¹¹¹ James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2012), ix.

¹¹² Ibid., xx-xxi.

¹¹³ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 147.

group that supported the 2000 Bush campaign or Obama's opponent in 2008, John McCain, who looked almost entirely to the more right-wing organizations. Perhaps the exception in the Obama camp was the more progressive think tank CAP.

CAP was founded in 2003 by John Podesta, a lifelong Democrat who had been Clinton's chief of staff for his final two years in office. He sought to create an organization that could do the same for the liberals that the likes of American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Heritage Foundation did for the Republicans, and ultimately "to provide intellectual content to the progressive center."¹¹⁴ He co-opted Lawrence Korb, who had previously served in the Department of Defense during the first Reagan term and had since been a fellow at AEI, Brookings Institution, and CFR.¹¹⁵ Korb, in 2005, urged a withdrawal from Iraq.¹¹⁶ Podesta was reportedly also keen to attract Kurt Campbell and Michele Flournoy, both relatively young, but veterans of the Pentagon during the Clinton government and both of whom worked at CSIS. James Mann noted that Campbell and Flournoy felt stifled by the CSIS constraints on political activity and discussed the idea of doing something new with Podesta. While Podesta wanted them to join him at CAP, they were keen to run their own think tank. So they created the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) in 2007, which while nonpartisan on the face of it with a mix of Republican and Democrat minded people, was also engineering policies and personnel for the next Democrat government. Mann summarized their importance: "The result was that by 2007 the Democrats had two separate think tanks in Washington working on defense issues – one for the doves, the Center for American Progress, and one for the more hawkish, the establishment

¹¹⁴ James Mann, *The Obamians*, 50.

¹¹⁵ Center for American Progress website, accessed April 18, 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/about/staff/korb-lawrence-j/bio/>

¹¹⁶ James Mann, *The Obamians*, 51.

defense specialists, the Center for a New American Security.”¹¹⁷ These think tanks also supplied some of the individuals that would occupy some key positions in Obama’s government. John Podesta was brought from CAP by Obama in 2008 to co-chair his transition team into the Presidency and as a Counselor to the President.¹¹⁸ And when Obama assumed the presidency in 2009, Michele Flournoy became Undersecretary for Defense for Policy (2009-2012) and Kurt Campbell became Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (2009-2013). After their respective stints in government, both are now back at CNAS, with Flournoy as CEO and Campbell as a Director.¹¹⁹

Perhaps the most prominent individual to move from think tank to government and take up a position at the start of the Obama first term was Susan Rice. Rice was brought in from Brookings to be Obama’s senior foreign policy advisor for the presidential campaign and then became Ambassador to the United Nations in 2009.¹²⁰ After four years at the United Nations, she became the National Security Advisor in 2013. Other individuals followed Rice from a think tank background. Chuck Hagel, came from his position as President of the Atlantic Council to be Secretary for Defense 2013-2015, returning to Atlantic Council after government service in 2015 to be Distinguished Statesman.¹²¹ It is worth noting that a significant number of those listed as Atlantic Council Directors, each with former service in government, are also members or recent

¹¹⁷ James Mann, *The Obamians*, 52.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*, 6. The reference does not name Podesta specifically but cites the transition chief coming from CAP. The Washington webpages confirm Podesta as the co-chief, accessed April 18, 2016: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/author/john-podesta>

¹¹⁹ Center for a New American Security (CNAS) website, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.cnas.org/flournoymichele> and <http://www.cnas.org/CampbellKurt>

¹²⁰ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?* 147.

¹²¹ The Atlantic Council website, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/hagel-returns-to-atlantic-council-as-distinguished-statesman>

members of the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee, names such as: Henry Kissinger, William Perry, Franklin Miller, Harold Brown, Madeleine Albright, Brent Scowcroft, and the aforementioned Chuck Hagel.¹²²

While there has been some evidence linking the think tanks to government through the flow of people, such as CAP and CNAS from a more democratic leaning perspective, and CFR, CSIS and Atlantic Council from a broad nonpartisan standpoint, there seems a great deal less of the strong partisan narratives from the think tanks than that which was witnessed in the Bush years. This may well be reflective of the absence of PNAC since 2006. The Cato Institute, viewed to be one of the few true libertarian organizations, has consistently made a case for non-interventionism in US foreign policy. The *Cato Handbook for Policymakers*, published in 2009, calls for a number of forthright changes to the policy. Colin Dueck in his book *The Obama Doctrine*, sites many examples of anti-interventionist rhetoric from Cato, including: eliminating most of the US defense alliances; redeploying back to the United States the troops in South Korea, Europe and Japan; cutting the size of the army to 25-30 brigades and the navy to 200 ships; terminating defense contracts with South Korea and the Philippines; rescinding the commitment to defend Taiwan; withdrawing ground forces from Japan.¹²³ At the same time, Michael O'Hanlon from Brookings warned strongly against cuts in defense in order to deal with the global issues, and in no way suggested a withdrawal from the world except perhaps to wind down the current wars.¹²⁴ It would appear that Obama has not been short on options and advice for foreign policy from the think tanks, across all voices on the political spectrum, not just those that are progressively aligned.

¹²² The Atlantic Council website, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/board-of-directors>

¹²³ David Boaz, ed., *Cato Handbook for Policymakers*, 7th ed. (Washington DC: Cato Institute, 2009), quoted in Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 166-167.

¹²⁴ Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, 97.

The review of Afghanistan also sees a strong connection to Brookings. Bruce Riedel had advised Obama on Afghanistan and Pakistan in the election campaign and had returned to Brookings once the presidency began, but Obama very quickly called on his services again to conduct the review for the National Security Council. In short, Riedel's report stressed the requirement for a counterinsurgency approach, which was also championed by Michele Flournoy, and the requisite troop increase to conduct it. It was essentially shaping and reinforcing what the President was having to do in real time to support his Commanding Generals in the early months of 2009.¹²⁵ Hilary Clinton stated that she "made the Reidel review's criteria for reintegration—abandon violence, break with al Qaeda, support the Constitution—a mantra for my diplomacy."¹²⁶ Brookings, or at least one of its leading defense analysts, Reidel, appeared to have an influence on foreign policy.

There are fewer books and texts that have been written by political scientists and historians on the relationship of think tanks to the Obama government. This may not just be a factor of time and it may well be that the relevance of think tanks during the transition period from Bush to Obama and the perceived influence during the time in office was just not as pronounced or publicized as it was in the last years of Clinton and the early years of George W. Bush. There is evidence that Obama's administration used think tank people during the campaign and during the presidency, and it would be difficult to deny that the CAP and CNAS members amongst them did carry their thoughts forward but there was neither a PNAC in the last transition, nor the open and high profile letters that came with it. It would, therefore, be a leap to suggest that the liberal think tanks sought to influence government in the same manner or to the

¹²⁵ James Mann, *The Obamians*, 123-125.

¹²⁶ Hilary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 153. Just as with Bill Clinton's book, *My Life*, has no mention of think tanks specifically or collectively from his time leading up to and in office 2001-2009, nor does Hilary Clinton's book make any obvious mention of think tanks for her time in government or in the preceding years.

same extent than the Republicans had done before via the conservative think tanks. Or at least, if they did, they did so in a surreptitious manner that has not attracted the same attention from the media or political scientists. The result of the 2016 election will be interesting to observe which think tanks might provide additional individuals to a third successive Democrat administration, in the event of election success, or conversely which think tanks are filled with the outgoing officials, into exile, in the case of a loss.

Conclusion

The US think tank landscape is complicated. Think tanks are difficult to define and characterize, at least to a point where they can be conveniently pigeon-holed into a particular type or political orientation. This has as much to do with the hidden nature of what identifies them as it is the difference of opinion that exists between the political scientists, historians, practitioners, media and public that observe them. Determining the level of influence that these organizations, of all types, have on the formulation of foreign policy and strategy in the national security domain is equally hard to quantify. Perceptions and inferences of influence do not necessarily indicate the level to which influence is being achieved or that a connection actually exists at all. Accordingly, there are five broad conclusions from this study, which demonstrate varying degrees of certainty.

First, there is no doubt that there has been a significant increase in the number of think tanks in the United States in the last half century, and approximately doubling since about 1985. The period between the late-1960s and the mid-1990s saw major expansion in growth rate as the graph at Figure 1 attests to. That trend suggests that there are significantly more people purporting to think in the political space and generating more ideas across all policy domains. Combined with the ability of the media to reach a far wider audience in so many forms and at such a speed, the visibility, accessibility and timeliness of those ideas has been amplified as never before. But it is also true to say that the rate of think tank increase has reduced since its peak in the mid-1990s with a steady decline in the emergence of new think tanks in the last 20 years, with

some notable exceptions such as PNAC, CAP and CNAS. While the concrete evidence is not there to fully explain why this boom is seemingly over, it is likely to be a combination of overcrowding and saturation in the think tank market of ideas (perhaps a factor of simply how many ideas can be heard and absorbed by busy government officials), and a finite limit on donor funding.

Second, building on the proliferation of think tank ideas, is the degree to which this translates into potential influence on makers of policy and strategy in official government circles. There is no doubt that the increase in collective think tank output compounded by the revolution in technological and social networks by which to spread those ideas, that the influence effort is powerful. However, influence effort, measured by performance in both quantitative and qualitative terms, does not necessarily equate to influence effect. The actual effect of think tank influence is still relatively intangible because rarely will or can a public official openly state that the foundation of a national level policy came from a particular non-governmental organization. The official and creative reputation of the government and the impartial credibility of the think tank would be exposed to the cut-throat scrutiny of partisan politics and the media alike. So, much of the influence effect is judged on inferences and perceptions, whether fact or fiction.

Third, while the written and spoken word form the basis of most of the agreed methods that think tanks share their ideas, and deliver influence effort, the most significant and yet most opaque of the means of delivering influence is through the people that transition back and forth between government and think tanks. This is the closest that we can get to proving at least some level of influence effect. There is no certainty that think tank literature and soundbites have been heard, let alone used, by the appropriate staff or officials. When a think tank individual is positioned in the heart of government, often deliberately selected on their background to fill that role, the potential for influence is undoubtedly greater. Not only is the individual or collection of like-minded individuals driving the issue from inside, they are maintaining the pressure to see it through.

Fourth, the amount of advocacy being conducted by think tanks has increased to such a level that the nonpartisan or centrist nature of certain think tanks can be questioned. To date there seems to have been a generous extension of the benefit of doubt given to self-proclaimed nonpartisan or bipartisan think tanks. This study has not focused in any depth on the margins by which advocacy and lobbying are judged, but in plenty of the literature reviewed, the connection is clear. Perhaps it makes sense for lobbyists, whether driven by corporate business endeavours or personal political aims, to direct their financially supported ideas through the biggest and most reputable influence industry in Washington.

The fifth and final consideration centers on whether the positioning of think tank experts in government and the influence effort has been increasing from administration to administration, or whether it is more prevalent within Republican (or conservative) organizations than in Democrat (or progressive) ones. Only the administrations of the last three presidents have been reviewed in any detail, but as Richard Haass reminded us, this migration of people and think tank connection to government has been taking place since at least the start of the Carter administration. The activity of the conservative think tanks in challenging the last four years of the Clinton presidency and then supporting Bush certainly suggests a spike in influence effort, through advocacy and the placement of people, but perhaps that trend is heavily skewed by the emergence of the short-lived PNAC at that time. Maybe the conservative effort is just noisier and more open than that of the liberals, but on balance it has been more prevalent within Republican circles in the last twenty years than it has been with the Democrats.

The approach of the 2016 election may serve to reinforce or deny the fifth conclusion, both in the presidential campaign and the first few years of the term. Much will depend on whether the Democrats win through to a third term. If that is the case, progressive thinking will probably continue at existing levels in support of government. At the same time there may well be an increase in the neoconservative voice to challenge an administration that is perceived to be weakening America, particularly in light of the global issues that might materialize in the 2017-

2021 timeframe: Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, ISIS, and whatever else transpires. There would also likely be a new flow of personnel into the administration to suit the next Democrat president, including think tank experts from the likes of CAP and CNAS but it would not be a surprise to also see CFR and CSIS personnel. If the Democrats lose, there should be a significant rotation of experts from the conservative think tanks such as AEI, Heritage, and Hoover moving into a new Republican administration at a rate greater than was seen from liberally aligned think tanks when Obama or Clinton came to power, and at a similar rate to when George W. Bush assumed the presidency in 2001. Think tanks certainly have influence on administrations, mainly through the people they inject to government, but the degree to which it takes place will likely always be a judgement and balance between perceptions, inferences, and documented evidence.

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