

## Devaluing the Think Tank

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*Tevi Troy*

ONE OF THE MOST PECULIAR, and least understood, features of the Washington policy process is the extraordinary dependence of policymakers on the work of think tanks. Most Americans—even most of those who follow politics closely—would probably struggle to name a think tank or to explain precisely what a think tank does. Yet over the past half-century, think tanks have come to play a central role in policy development—and even in the surrounding political combat.

Over that period, however, the balance between those two functions—policy development and political combat—has been steadily shifting. And with that shift, the work of Washington think tanks has undergone a transformation. Today, while most think tanks continue to serve as homes for some academic-style scholarship regarding public policy, many have also come to play more active (if informal) roles in politics. Some serve as governments-in-waiting for the party out of power, providing professional perches for former officials who hope to be back in office when their party next takes control of the White House or Congress. Some serve as training grounds for young activists. Some serve as unofficial public-relations and rapid-response teams for one of the political parties—providing instant critiques of the opposition’s ideas and public arguments in defense of favored policies.

Some new think tanks have even been created as direct responses to particular, narrow political exigencies. As each party has drawn lessons from various electoral failures over recent decades, their conclusions

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*TEVI TROY, former deputy secretary of Health and Human Services, is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and the author of Intellectuals and the American Presidency: Philosophers, Jesters, or Technicians? In his career, he has also had fellowships or affiliations with the American Enterprise Institute, the Claremont Institute, the Potomac Institute, the American Action Forum, the Heritage Foundation, and the Institute for Humane Studies.*

have frequently pointed to the need for new think tanks (often modeled on counterparts on the opposite side of the political aisle).

After Democrats lost the 2000 elections, for example, some liberal intellectuals and activists concluded that they were being outgunned in the arena of political communication, and created, among other institutions, the Center for American Progress—a think tank with a heavy emphasis on message development. And in 2008, after Republicans lost amid deep concern about the financial crisis and the ensuing economic downturn, some conservatives concluded that they needed more creative economic thinking, and this yielded, among other projects, e21—a right-of-center economic-policy think tank based in Washington and New York. This trend—which might be summed up as “lose an election, gain a think tank”—has not only increased the proliferation of such institutions, but has also tended to make their work all the more responsive to political needs and developments, for better and for worse.

Today, think tanks are highly influential in our politics; their research and scholars are heavily consulted and relied on by our elected leaders. And in a time of both daunting policy challenges and highly polarized political debates, there is every reason to expect that think tanks will grow only more important in Washington.

As they become more political, however, think tanks—especially the newer and more advocacy-oriented institutions founded in the past decade or so—risk becoming both more conventional and less valuable. At a moment when we have too much noise in politics and too few constructive ideas, these institutions may simply become part of the intellectual echo chamber of our politics, rather than providing alternative sources of policy analysis and intellectual innovation. Given these concerns, it is worth reflecting on the evolution of the Washington think tank and its consequences for the nation.

#### “SYSTEMATIC STUDY”

For many decades, the classic definition of think tanks as “universities without students” fit reasonably well. From their beginnings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century well into the post-war period, Washington think tanks tended to be research centers modeled on academic institutions and devoted to addressing technical questions relevant to government policy.

The Brookings Institution, founded in 1916 as the Institute for Government Research, is generally considered the original Washington

think tank. Its founder, businessman and philanthropist Robert Brookings, defined the new entity (in the words of the institution's official history) as "the first private organization devoted to the fact-based study of national public policy." Brookings grew out of the reformist sentiment of the Progressive era, and was dedicated to finding government efficiencies and pursuing budgetary reform. According to James A. Smith's *The Idea Brokers*, Brookings was one of a number of institutions propelled by the metaphor of social afflictions as maladies and public-policy experts as the physicians who could heal the patient. Brookings scholars were generally academics on loan; in its early years, in fact, the institution actually served as a kind of university *with* students, operating a graduate school in Washington that granted a small number of degrees.

Brookings was also, for the most part, a bipartisan institution. In the 1930s, for instance, a number of its scholars conducted a study on the causes of the Great Depression that helped President Franklin Roosevelt's administration design its early economic agenda. And yet the institution's president—former University of Chicago economist Harold Moulton—and several other Brookings scholars were among the leading opponents of the New Deal, arguing that it would hamper economic recovery.

Other early think tanks followed a similar model. For instance, the Hoover Institution (originally called the Hoover War Collection) was established on Stanford's campus in 1919 with the purpose of "constantly and dynamically point[ing] the road to peace, to personal freedom, and to the safeguards of the American system." And the Council on Foreign Relations was founded in New York in 1921 as "a program of systematic study by groups of knowledgeable specialists of differing ideological inclinations," intended to help "guide the statecraft of policymakers," as Peter Grose put it in *Continuing the Inquiry*, a history of the CFR.

By the late 1930s, critics had begun to argue that some of these institutions—while formally non-partisan and largely academic—represented a left-leaning intellectual consensus and required some counterbalance. In 1938, a group of New York businessmen and pro-market academics (like Harvard's Roscoe Pound) created the American Enterprise Association. The organization's purpose, as they put it, was to promote "greater public knowledge and understanding of the social and economic advantages accruing to the American people through

the maintenance of the system of free, competitive enterprise.” When, in the midst of the Second World War, officials in Washington (aided by some Brookings scholars) began openly discussing the possibility of retaining wartime price and production controls after the war in order to avoid another depression, the AEA’s leaders decided they needed a Washington presence to make the case against such a turn to managed economics. They relocated the organization in 1943, and eventually re-named it the American Enterprise Institute.

In the decades following the war, these think tanks—joined by about 40 other institutions, such as the RAND Corporation (founded in 1946), the Aspen Institute (in 1950), and the Hudson Institute (in 1961)—played an increasingly significant role in the development of federal policy. Brookings was deeply involved in the design of what became the Marshall Plan for the post-war redevelopment of Western Europe. The Council on Foreign Relations was pivotal in shaping the policy of containment toward the Soviet Union. The AEA helped engineer the dismantling of wartime production and price controls. And other think tanks increasingly came to supply outside researchers and policy architects to federal officials often overwhelmed by the growing size and complexity of the government.

The development of these institutions was greatly helped along by the fact that they were, from the start, granted tax-exempt status, meaning that contributions to them were (and remain) exempted from the contributors’ income-tax liabilities. Because think tanks are understood to offer important support to the process of making good public policy, they have been included among the charitable and other public-service institutions exempted from the income tax since its creation in 1913.

But this tax-exempt status results in some important limits on what think tanks may do in the political arena. In 1954, Senator Lyndon Johnson offered an amendment to tax-reform legislation that restricted political activity by tax-exempt groups (under section 501(c)(3) of the tax code), and Congress has refined and clarified this provision over the years, usually with the intent of making the restrictions on political activity more difficult to circumvent. Thus, since the mid-1950s, think tanks have had to be careful not to cross the line from policy research into explicit political or partisan activity. They can be very actively involved in policy debates, but may not offer material support to specific parties or candidates for office.

Although they were becoming increasingly important in prominent policy discussions, think tanks in the 1950s and '60s intentionally kept some distance between themselves and the most heated political debates of the era. They saw it as their role to inform but not quite to advocate—to help clarify policy alternatives, but generally not to choose among them. This may have been driven in part by their understandable desire to retain that all-important tax-exempt status. Still, most think tanks went well beyond the requirements of the tax code, having made a very deliberate decision to distance themselves from direct policy advocacy.

It was frustration with this studied aloofness that eventually ushered in the age of more activist think tanks, beginning especially on the right. In his book *The Power of Ideas*, Heritage Foundation fellow Lee Edwards describes a pivotal moment in this evolution when, in 1971, AEI produced a study of the benefits and drawbacks of the supersonic transport aircraft that Congress was considering funding for the Pentagon. The study was delivered to congressional offices a few days *after* the Senate had defeated funding for the project in a close 51-46 vote. After receiving the apparently tardy report, Paul Weyrich—then an aide to Colorado Republican senator Gordon Allott—called AEI president William Baroody to ask why the helpful analysis could not have been available before the vote. Baroody's response, according to Edwards, was that AEI "didn't want to try to affect the outcome of the vote."

Baroody's answer shocked Weyrich and his fellow congressional staffer Ed Feulner, who wondered what the purpose of such research was if not to affect the outcome of exactly that sort of vote. Weyrich and Feulner hatched the notion of a new think tank that would see as its mission the development of serious policy research to advance a broadly conservative agenda. Encouraged by Nixon White House staffer Lyn Nofziger, they began the work that would, in 1973, result in the creation of the Heritage Foundation.

#### RESEARCH IN ACTION

Heritage was a different breed of think tank, and augured the new direction in which such institutions were headed. A far cry from its avowedly hands-off predecessors, Heritage tried explicitly to "formulate and promote conservative public policies," as the organization's mission statement put it. It sought not only to serve as a source of basic research and analysis but also to help drive the agenda on behalf of conservatives around the

country. To that end, Heritage pursued direct-mail fundraising, a tactic more typical of political campaigns and mostly unheard of among think tanks at the time. It rightly considered itself as much an organ of the conservative movement as of the Washington intellectual world.

When Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980, Heritage spotted its chance to influence policy more directly, and worked to compile a comprehensive conservative policy agenda for the new administration. Titled *Mandate for Leadership*, the publication contained more than 2,000 specific policy recommendations, from ways to pursue a more assertive approach toward the Soviet Union to minute alterations of environmental regulations. By the end of Reagan's second term, more than 60% of these proposals had been adopted by the administration, including, most famously, Reagan's across-the-board tax cuts. As the *Washington Post's* David Von Drehle wrote, *Mandate for Leadership* "came to be known, hyperbolically, as 'the bible of the Reagan Revolution.'" In 1986, *Time* magazine described Heritage as "the foremost of the new breed of advocacy tanks."

But Heritage was hardly the only conservative think tank to blossom in those years. It is true that, over the past few decades, think tanks affiliated with the left and the right have tended to be most active and important when their parties have been *out* of power—as opposition makes for more intensity, and think tanks tend to be robbed of their best people by friendly presidential administrations. Even so, in the 1980s—perhaps because the Reagan administration made a special effort to draw on the work of right-leaning think tanks—conservative research institutions prospered. Martin Anderson, a senior Reagan economic-policy advisor, recalled that Mikhail Gorbachev waved a 1980 Hoover Institution book, *The United States in the 1980s*, in front of Reagan aides at preparatory talks for a 1985 summit. According to a *New York Times* report about the incident, Gorbachev cited the book as "the real blueprint for Reagan Administration policy." Meanwhile, in 1988, Reagan himself said that "today the most important American scholarship comes out of our think tanks, and no think tank has been more influential than the American Enterprise Institute."

Reagan's reference to scholarship points to another potential explanation for the rise of the conservative think tanks in the 1980s. By that decade, many conservative intellectuals had come to regard the academic world as stultifying and unwelcoming, as the politicization

of many university campuses caused right-leaning professors to feel like pariahs. For the most part, think tanks allowed these scholars to flourish free from the strictures of both academic coursework and oppressive political orthodoxies. Anderson exemplified this shift, having left Columbia University for the Nixon White House and later the Hoover Institution. In the Reagan White House, he helped funnel think-tank ideas and personnel into the administration.

The practical success of the conservative think tanks in this period, coupled with Heritage's new and more activist approach—which, to varying degrees, was embraced by the other major think tanks on both sides of the aisle—ushered in the era of what political scientist Donald Abelson has called the “advocacy think tank.” Since that time, new Washington-based think tanks have, for the most part, tended to be less scholarly, increasingly political, and more likely to be tied to the fortunes of a party (or a wing within a party).

Politicians on both sides of the aisle have found these advocacy-based successors to the original staid Washington think tanks increasingly useful. After Democratic losses in the presidential elections of 1980 and '84, for example, a group of moderate Democrats founded the Democratic Leadership Council—not a think tank but an advocacy organization, expressly designated as such under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code, meaning that donations to it were not tax exempt. The DLC was designed to pull the party in a more centrist direction; Bill Clinton was part of the organization from the beginning, and eventually became its chairman. In 1989, the DLC created the Progressive Policy Institute, a tax-exempt think tank, to generate ideas for DLC-affiliated politicians.

After Clinton's 1992 victory, PPI was just as hot as Heritage had been after 1980, serving as the “president's brain shop of choice,” according to the *Washington Post*. DLC and PPI staffers Al From, William Galston, Elaine Kamarck, and Bruce Reed all worked for Clinton in various posts. PPI ideas that became Clinton policies included AmeriCorps and Vice President Al Gore's efforts to “re-invent government” by modernizing the bureaucracy and making better use of technology. Perhaps more important, PPI gave Clinton crucial Democratic blessing to introduce work incentives into welfare, a policy that became an important component of the welfare-reform law Clinton signed in 1996.

While PPI was clearly an advocacy think tank, it differed from Heritage in a number of important ways. First, it explicitly grew out of an existing

advocacy organization. Second, it was far smaller than Heritage and its other rivals on the right. Called the “Mighty Mouse” of the think-tank world by the *Post*’s Von Drehle, PPI has typically had fewer than ten scholars, but those scholars were generally more prominent and more senior than the rank-and-file Heritage scholars. Third, PPI sought to take its party in a specific direction, while Heritage was trying to refine and market the conservatism that had become the prevailing Republican ideology. In this way, PPI—which is no longer linked to the recently shuttered DLC—was less of a Heritage clone and more of a precursor to other left-leaning “third way” think tanks, like the New America Foundation (founded in 1999) or the Bipartisan Policy Center (founded in 2007).

Right-leaning think tanks, too, have functioned as governments in exile. After Clinton’s win in 1992, former Bush-administration officials created two new advocacy think tanks of their own: the Project for the Republican Future and Empower America. PRF, founded by William Kristol (who had previously been Vice President Dan Quayle’s chief of staff), was intended to serve as a “strategic nerve center for a network of thinkers, activists, and organizations committed to a coherent agenda of conservative reform.” Among PRF’s most prominent products were its “policy memos” (distributed by the then-cutting-edge technology of fax), some of which helped to inform and solidify Republican opposition to Bill Clinton’s health-care plan. Empower America—founded by former education secretary and drug czar Bill Bennett, former Republican congressman Jack Kemp, and former U.N. ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick—brought together three of the era’s top conservative brand names in an effort to “[bridge] the gap between the array of think tanks that produce white papers on the public-policy debate and the actual enactment of policy.” Both organizations were based on the advocacy model, although PRF’s mission was closer to PPI’s in that both organizations sought to create a new way of thinking within their aligned parties. Empower America, meanwhile, was closer to Heritage in its focus on not just policy development but also message distribution. Neither organization exists in its original incarnation today, as PRF closed its doors in 1995 (when Kristol and others left to start the *Weekly Standard* magazine), and Empower America merged with Citizens for a Sound Economy to become FreedomWorks in 2004.

Thus, by the late 1990s, think tanks had evolved significantly from their origins as “universities without students.” No longer confined to

the neutral role of developing non-partisan policies, these institutions were active in the formulation and advancement of political arguments—a trend that, over the past decade, has only accelerated.

#### DO TANKS

By early 2001, with Republicans in control of the White House and Congress, Democrats started contemplating their next move in the think-tank arms race. Ken Baer, a former speechwriter for Vice President Gore (and now communications director at the Office of Management and Budget in the Obama White House), warned in *Slate* of an intellectual missile gap between the parties. Democrats, he noted, needed to find professional homes for talented policy experts—including Baer himself—who were leaving the Clinton administration. According to Baer, the left had “failed to develop any sort of farm system for its displaced wonks,” while the right devoted almost “limitless policymaking resources to its unemployed policy wonks.” Part of the reason for this disparity, Baer explained, was that Democratic policy intellectuals and experts had traditionally found homes in academia. Republican policy experts, by contrast, needed to find Washington-based perches because they did not feel comfortable—and often were not welcome—on university campuses.

In 2001, though, Democrats were being squeezed from three directions at once. First, Baer argued, they held none of the levers of power in Washington. Second, academia was no longer a comfortable place for policy-minded individuals. Because of the extreme specialization of the professoriate and the narrowing of academic research, Baer contended, the “academy has moved to the margins of public life.” And third, Democrats could not compete with the plethora of conservative think tanks, since, Baer found, “AEI alone has more researchers and policy experts on staff and in house than PPI, the Economic Policy Institute, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities combined.” For these reasons, if Democrats bolstered their existing organizations or launched new think tanks, they would be able to “count on a willing and able talent pool.” Otherwise, Baer warned, the ex-Clinton “wonks [would] move on if not tapped soon,” finding lucrative jobs in the corporate sector; the left, he feared, would thus lose valuable experts who would be essential to future policy debates.

Baer’s concerns were clearly shared by others on the left, and they led to efforts that, in 2003, resulted in the founding of the Center for

American Progress. CAP was the next step in the evolution of think tanks into political players. The organization was (and is) explicitly and proudly political, to a degree unmatched by prior think tanks. As CAP's former vice president for communications, Jennifer Palmieri — a veteran Democratic campaign operative — said in a Bloomberg article about the organization in 2008, "Others strive to be objective, we don't." The purpose of CAP was not to generate new ideas so much as to defend Democratic political positions and promote Democratic policies like universal health care and "green jobs."

CAP's affiliated advocacy organization — the Center for American Progress Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) group — even has a "news service" that sends staffers out to report news from CAP's perspective. CAPAF has had some success breaking stories — typically stories damaging to Republicans, such as Scott Keyes's report in early 2011 that GOP presidential candidate Herman Cain said he would never select a Muslim for his cabinet. *Politico's* Ben Smith and Kenneth Vogel described this 30-person enterprise as an "in-house full-fledged, ideologically driven news organization aimed in part at tripping up Republican candidates on the ground in the early presidential contests." According to Palmieri, who also served as president of CAPAF, "We see ourselves as a content provider." The top bloggers at the Action Fund's ThinkProgress website, such as Matthew Yglesias and Joseph Romm, are also fellows at CAP; ThinkProgress.org's editor in chief, Faiz Shakir, is a CAP vice president. As Shakir put it, "The newsroom side is absolutely competing with all the leading news organizations." CAP's media project is breaking new ground in terms of what think tanks do; as Smith and Vogel noted, "the Center for American Progress newsroom has no parallel on the national stage."

Like Heritage and PPI before it, CAP has benefited from its close ties to a presidential administration: CAP's founding president was former Clinton White House chief of staff John Podesta, who also served as co-chairman of the Obama transition team. From that position, Podesta — who stepped down from the presidency of CAP this fall — helped usher so many of his former employees into the new administration that *Washington Examiner* columnist Tim Carney joked that Van Jones's reported move from the White House Council on Environmental Quality to CAP counted as a "transfer." Jones was only one of a host of individuals who worked for both Obama and CAP. Podesta's successor as CAP's president, Neera Tanden, was the domestic

policy director of Obama's presidential campaign, and then worked in the Office of Health Reform in Obama's department of Health and Human Services. Carol Browner, Obama's former top environmental and energy advisor, is a senior fellow at CAP. Melody Barnes, former executive vice president at CAP, was the senior domestic-policy advisor for the Obama campaign and is now head of Obama's Domestic Policy Council. And Palmieri, former vice president for communications at CAP, is now deputy communications director in the Obama White House.

The Center for American Progress is easily the most thoroughgoing example of what City College of New York professor Andrew Rich has called "marketing think tanks." For these institutions, the balance between original research and public relations is clearly tipped in the direction of the latter. As Rich puts it, these organizations often seem more interested in selling their product than in coming up with new ideas. CAP in particular seems to have turned marketing and organizing into an art form. According to a 2008 article by Bloomberg's Edwin Chen, CAP devoted about 40% of its resources to communication and outreach that year, eight times as much as typical liberal policy organizations did. At the time, CAP had a budget of \$27 million and claimed 180 staffers, employing about as many full-time bloggers (11) as PPI did scholars. CAP has even been involved in the Occupy Wall Street protests: According to the *New York Times*, CAP "encouraged and sought to help coordinate protests in different cities"; a spokesman for the center told the *Times* that "we've definitely been publicizing it and supporting" the movement.

While CAP is the most far-reaching example, the "do tank" model is by no means limited to the left. Republican losses in 2006 and 2008, coupled with CAP's success, have led conservatives to pursue their own more activist think tanks. An aide to former president George W. Bush and to Senator John McCain's presidential campaign, Douglas Holtz-Eakin, recently started the American Action Forum, the very name of which reflects its activist inclinations. According to *Congressional Quarterly*, Holtz-Eakin felt that existing operations such as AEI and Heritage were "'not helpful' during the McCain campaign because they weren't politically engaged or innovative in their media strategies." His new organization hopes to change that dynamic and, as the group's mission statement puts it, "use the modern tools of communications to deploy ideas; engage Americans in the debate

over the boundaries of government policy, personal freedoms, and market incentives; and educate and challenge the media to explore these issues and shape the next generation of political leaders.” (For the sake of full disclosure, it should be noted that I have lent my name to AAF as an affiliated expert, though I am not paid or supervised by the group in any way.)

These new institutions bear far less resemblance to universities than did the traditional think tanks, and have even drifted from the model of the more advocacy-oriented think tanks of the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s. These differences among think tanks are evident, for instance, in the proportion of scholars at different institutions who hold Ph.D. degrees. A review of publicly available data about the educational backgrounds of think-tank scholars (conducted with the aid of Hudson Institute researcher Peter Grabowski) suggests that those think tanks that were founded earlier tend to have significantly more scholars with Ph.D.s today than do younger institutions. Among a representative group of think tanks founded before 1960, for instance, 53% of scholars hold Ph.D.s. Among a similarly representative group of think tanks founded between 1960 and 1980, 23% of scholars have such advanced degrees. And among those founded after 1980, only 13% of scholars are as highly educated.

Granted, the Ph.D. is an imperfect measure, and it is certainly possible to do high-level policy work without an advanced degree. But the decline in the percentage of Ph.D.s does signal that the more recently created Washington-based think tanks are no longer adhering to the “university without students” model. So does the fact that their glib, TV-friendly, and often partisan spokesmen tend to eschew serious research in favor of analyzing every issue through a political lens. Thus, while think tanks have come a long way, it is far from clear that their evolution of late has been for the better.

#### DEVALUING THE CURRENCY?

One of the clearest consequences of this evolution has been the growth in the sheer number of think tanks. Every outgoing administration spits out dozens of high-level staffers interested in remaining involved in policy and politics through think-tank work, but the large, established institutions — like AEI or Brookings — have only limited capacity for new blood. Moreover, former senior officials often want to run their own shows, and so are disinclined to fold themselves into existing bureaucracies when they can launch new institutions instead. As a result,

the number of think tanks in the U.S. has ballooned—from about 45 after the Second World War to about 1,800 today, including nearly 400 in the Washington, D.C., area alone.

Each of these new think tanks must somehow distinguish itself from the others. And as such distinctions become increasingly narrow, institutions have found that they can stand out by adopting a more strident ideological bent—a practice that has led to think tanks' increasing politicization. This can be seen in the rise of the phenomenon of think tanks that, like CAP, create 501(c)(4) affiliates (donations to which are not tax-exempt) to do more political work. Even though these organizations are careful to maintain a “Chinese wall” between the (c)(3) and (c)(4) components that enables them to retain their tax-exempt status, the existence of the more political twin makes the intent of the think tank clear. It is hard to imagine Brookings or AEI, for example, creating a (c)(4) arm, and even harder to imagine exactly what those political arms would advocate, or even what process would enable them to make those decisions.

The emergence of cable-television networks has put further pressure on think tanks to produce more immediate and political products. Going on TV has become an important metric of success at many think tanks, and scholars often have to write articles and papers in ways designed to increase the chances of attracting the interest of television producers. The 24-hour news channels are constantly looking for new stories to draw ratings, and complicated studies with cautious conclusions do not fit the bill.

Donor pressure has further driven this politicization. As noted above, think tanks typically get their money from outside donations—from individuals, foundations, or corporations—and they surely sometimes tailor their messages and approaches based on those funding sources. Heritage, for example, gets a lot of donations from individuals through direct mail, which makes it important for the organization to demonstrate its ability to influence the political process. Some think tanks, such as Brookings and AEI, have endowments in the way that major universities do, albeit on a smaller scale. Most think tanks, however, are funded in the shorter term, and administrators seek to develop scholars or projects (or both) that can attract foundation or corporate support.

In addition, both liberals and conservatives have been more directed in their funding of think tanks in more recent years, as the lessons of conservative successes in the idea wars have proliferated throughout the

political community. In fact, in recent years, campaign-finance reforms have made donations to think tanks one of the few tax-exempt ways to support political causes without running afoul of funding limits. Moreover, donors interested in influencing key debates want their contributions to lead to results, and are unlikely to be satisfied with merely helping to create an environment in which scholars kick around ideas regardless of their political impact.

As James McGann found in his 2004 paper “Scholars, Dollars, and Policy Advice,” the move discussed above from longer-term to shorter-term funding models at many newer think tanks has led to an increase in “the influence of donors on research design and outcomes.” This sometimes means that a think tank will take up or emphasize issues of particular interest to a donor. This practice need not be problematic, as long as researchers’ conclusions are not pre-determined; indeed, actual “bought and paid for” research remains quite rare, even in this age of increasingly political think tanks. Still, keeping donors happy is more important now than ever—for if an organization’s backers do not get their desired results, they have an increasing array of alternatives to support.

One particular downside of this trend is the potential of political or donor pressure to lead to self-censorship among both individual scholars and think tanks as institutions. A researcher is unlikely to write an essay or publish a study that he knows will make his bosses or donors unhappy. And an entire think tank may remain silent on an issue about which it had previously been more vocal when political circumstances, such as the party in power, change. Self-censorship is obviously nearly impossible to measure, but, on occasion, clear examples do emerge. For instance, the American Security Project’s Michael Cohen noted last June in the *New Republic* that the Center for American Progress’s *Wonk Room* blog had not run a single story about the Afghanistan war in the prior five months. During the Bush years, CAP had frequently taken up the war and been an adamant critic of the administration’s policies; once Obama more or less continued those policies, however, CAP grew silent.

This proliferation and politicization of new think tanks has, perhaps ironically, tended to weaken the ability of *all* think tanks to influence policy debates. According to Andrew Rich, who also authored *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, “the known ideological proclivities of many, especially newer think tanks, and their aggressive efforts to obtain high profiles have come to undermine the credibility

with which experts and expertise are generally viewed by public officials.” As AEI’s Karlyn Bowman told Rich, the politicization of think tanks limits their ability both to provide new and innovative policy solutions and to get them implemented. As Bowman put it, “I wonder what is happening sometimes to the think tank currency, whether it’s becoming a little bit like paper money in Weimar—currency without a lot of value because of the proliferation and because of the open advocacy of some of the think tanks.”

This potential for devaluation poses a serious problem for the Washington policy process. There is nothing inherently wrong with the proliferation of think tanks and advocacy organizations intended to hone an existing line of thinking or advance better communication strategies; in an age of fast-paced politics and new media, such institutions surely play a useful role. But precisely in such an age, there is also a real need for original thinking that can break the mold of some familiar debates and propose plausible solutions to the enormous policy problems that now confront us. In other words, there is plenty of room for the new kind of think tank, but there is also plenty of need for the old kind as well. If the proliferation of “do tanks” makes traditional policy research—and even policy advocacy informed by original research—more difficult and less reliable, it stands to make the task before our policymakers far more challenging.

#### POLICY AND POLITICS

It is important not to overstate the independence and the value of the original think-tank model. Because it informs the political system, policy research has always been political. The Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the other first-generation think tanks drew upon a certain set of political presumptions, and were able to sustain a patina of objectivity only because those presumptions were shared by an extended elite consensus in Washington. That consensus is long gone.

The value of that original model, therefore, was not that it was objective; it very often was nothing of the sort. Its value, rather, came from its ability to bring serious, original, expert research to the task of analyzing policy problems and proposing solutions. It sought to expand the range of options under debate and to ground that debate in hard facts and figures.

Some new think tanks, by contrast, are less likely to expand the range of options under debate. Rather, these institutions are helping politicians avoid the difficult task of pursuing creative policy solutions by giving them more ways to persist in failed courses. There are still great exceptions in the think-tank world, on all sides of our politics, but they increasingly have trouble being heard over the din.

It is not easy to see a way out of this problem. Every incentive — political, financial, and professional — points toward the further politicization of think tanks. The countervailing force would probably need to come from policymakers themselves: If elected officials, alert to the depths of the policy challenges they confront, were to actively demand from think tanks more rigorous, innovative research and less communications strategy, they might just get what they asked for. Of course, if we had political leaders inclined to such thinking, we might well have avoided our troubles to begin with.