

THINK TANKS IN THE USA

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The origins of think tanks go back to antiquity. The Greek dramatist Aristophanes tells us that Socrates taught his pupils not only thievery and disregard of the law in his Athens "workshop", but also the fine art of turning weak arguments into strong ones. Nowadays, the United States is the country with the highest number of these public policy research organizations (or "think tanks") worldwide. Political life without think tanks has become inconceivable. Think tanks are institutions of political research, analysis, and debate, and are generally non-profit, independent non-government organizations which transfer knowledge to the political arena, influencing the development of ideas, articulating domestic and foreign policy issues and offering a forum for the exchange of opinions.

Recent studies report that there are 5.550 think tanks in approximately 170 countries. In the USA, considered the cradle of modern think tanks, they have been in existence for many decades. For instance, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Brookings Institution, or the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace can look back on a long history.

According to McGann, there are currently 1.777 think tanks in the USA, 58 % of which were founded during the past 25 years. In terms of the number of think tanks, the USA ranks first worldwide, followed by Great Britain and Germany. American think tanks can be divided into four categories: academic think tanks keep track of a large number of political topics, but may also focus on one single issue. Contract research organizations align their political research to the interests of their clients. Advocative think tanks follow a certain political/ideological line. And policy research organizations are think tanks that function like a company in that they use management, marketing and sales methods for political research and policy advice. However, not all think tanks fit clearly into one of these four categories. In a more recent study, McCann takes the mixed forms into consideration and sets up eight categories. However, his latest Think Tank Index lists five categories – the Policymakers, the Partisans, the Phantoms, the Scholars, and the Activists.

Think tanks can also be grouped in terms of political orientation – conservative, liberal, centrist, and progressive – with some subtle variations. The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the Manhattan Institute are examples of conservative think tanks. The Reason Foundation is considered liberal; the Rand Corporation is considered centre-right. The Freedom Forum and the Baker Institute are centrist, while the Carter Center and Brookings Institution are centre-left. And finally, the

Worldwatch Institute and the Economic Policy Institute are considered progressive.

Most of the larger think tanks in the USA deal with numerous domestic and foreign policy issues. They are also active, to varying extents, in the areas of economics, trade, social issues, taxation, budget, legislation, international affairs, security and foreign policy. Or they may deal with scholarly work, race relations, administration and public law, education, labour relations, population studies, and many other topics.

Think tanks are generally headed by a president or CEO who is responsible for management and organization. Board chairmen are often recruited from the economic, financial or political sectors, and they frequently work on a volunteer basis. The board's most important task is fundraising. The scientific staff of think tanks varies considerably. In addition to the Director, who is in charge of current and regional programmes, there are Resident Fellows, Scholars, Associates, Non-Resident or Visiting Fellows, Adjunct Scholars, and Guest Scholars. The staff's educational and professional background also varies considerably. Many pursue successful careers, hold doctorate degrees and are considered experts in their fields.

The large think tanks in the USA use a variety of instruments to publicize their work, and they also make use of the expertise of members of the advertising industry. They organize events targeted directly at high-ranking clients in a particular field, hold conferences, seminars and symposia, and offer policy advice to both groups and individuals. Almost all large think tanks are also multimedia publishing houses which publish magazines, journal articles, and newsletters, some of which appear several times per year. Their offerings often also include e-mailed news briefs on current political topics.

An indispensable must-have for all think tanks is their own homepage, which serves to multiply the ideas generated by the organization, as well as a forum for the organization to present itself. The media also play an important role, and many well-known radio and TV stations have developed a mutually beneficial relationship with think tanks. Of course, the organizations also cooperate with the government and Congress: maintaining open channels of communications to members of Congress is an imperative for all think tanks.

The large think tanks in the USA fund their work through donations, primarily from industry, private foundations, and individuals. For instance, the AEI and the Hudson Institute fund 90 % of their budgets through fundraising. And some think tanks, such as the Carnegie Endowment on International Peace, were founded thanks to a generous donation. However, funding trends have

changed: while long-term financial contributions are on the decrease, short-term grants tied to a specific project are on the increase.

All think tanks pursue the objective of influencing and improving policies in accordance with the tenets of their own world view. Thus it is important to maintain good relations with policymakers. Conversely, think tanks are also attractive to policymakers as they offer many of them a new field of endeavour upon their retirement from active politics. The chances for influencing policymakers are especially good during presidential election campaigns and during the transition period until the newly elected president and his team take office. If the favoured candidate, i.e. the candidate who was being advised and influenced, should win, the "think tanker" backing him can often count on an influential position for himself. However, the influence exerted by think tanks varies by location. Analyses show that the leading think tanks in the Washington, D.C., metro region have a greater presence in the national daily press than those located in other parts of the country.

Think tanks also serve as personnel pools where not only retiring politicians, but also government workers who lose their jobs when a new administration takes office may find a place to work. After all, an incoming US President has to fill approximately 600 cabinet posts and top positions in the various departments and government agencies. And there are thousands more positions on the lower levels of these agencies, in the embassies, courts, and other institutions which must be filled with new appointees.

During the most recent transition, the Democrat-leaning Center for a New American Security came to the forefront, as many of Obama's foreign and security policy advisors were recruited from that organization. For instance, Michele Flournoy was nominated for Under Secretary of Defence, Susan Rice for Ambassador to the United Nations, and James Steinberg for Deputy Secretary of State. There is speculation that Kurt Campbell, currently the organization's CEO, is slated to become assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs. However, it is to be expected that employees of other think tanks, such as John Podesta from the Center for American Progress, who already worked in Bill Clinton's administration, will also be given an important role.

Originally, think tanks considered themselves "universities without teaching," but since the seventies, their role has become increasingly advocative, with the journalistic component of their work also gaining in significance. The mix of scientific, advocative and journalistic work holds, by its very nature, conflict and can lead to double moral standards. That has led to increasing demands for more transparency, but also for a reform of the tax code.

In McGann's view, the think tanks are currently confronted by new trends and challenges – changes in the funding model, a strong increase in the number of NGOs, the 24-hour presence of the media, technological progress, increased partisan conflicts, and, finally, the effects of globalization.

Andrew Rich bemoans the current developments affecting think tanks, especially the end of their traditional task as nonideological policy advisors. He is concerned about the development of new, conservative think tanks that has taken place since the seventies. According to Rich and others who share his views, the emphasis on politics and marketing comes at the expense of the credibility of the experts.

And indeed, the mode of operation of the think tanks has changed since the inception of the first ones many decades ago. They are being managed like companies and measure their success in terms of the efficiency with which they are able to market their own ideas in the mass media. In view of this development, those familiar with the field fear that the end of think tanks as pure research institutions may well be near.

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