Rethinking the Role and Influence of U.S. Defense and Foreign Policy Think Tanks

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For well over a century, public policy research institutes, or think tanks as they are more commonly known, have played an important role in informing and educating policymakers on Capitol Hill, in the White House, and throughout the intelligence community about how to protect and promote U.S. interests around the globe. Established under very different and often unusual circumstances, think tanks, particularly those with expertise in defense and foreign policy, have attracted the interest, attention, and at times, the suspicion of those trying to explain how organizations ostensibly operating on the periphery of government have managed over the past several decades to leave an indelible mark on several national security initiatives. Yet, despite being subjected to increased scrutiny, important questions remain regarding how, and under what conditions, think tanks can and do shape public opinion and public policy.

Understanding how and where in the policymaking process such prominent think tanks as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Center for National Security Studies, the Hudson Institute, and Rand, to name a few, try to make their presence felt is not difficult to ascertain. For some time, scholars familiar with the think tank world have identified several governmental and non-governmental channels upon which these institutions rely to convey their ideas to elected and appointed officials.

Testifying before legislative committees, organizing workshops, seminars, and conferences around key issues in defense and foreign policy where policy-makers, journalists, academics and others can exchange ideas, producing op-eds for various national and international newspapers, making themselves available to the media for interviews and commentaries, volunteering to work as advisers and/or speechwriters on congressional and presidential campaigns and policy task forces, and generating and disseminating publications designed for specific target audiences are just some of the ways think tanks can help shape the discourse around key policy issues. But there are even more obvious channels of access.

One of the most important ways scholars from think tanks can contribute to policymaking is by becoming policymakers themselves, and there is no greater opportunity for them to do this than in the United States, which boasts a political system uniquely suited for think tanks and other non-governmental organizations to infiltrate and navigate the corridors of power. And there is no better time to observe the flow of think tanks scholars to and from the state department, the defense department, the national security council, the department of homeland security, the CIA, and other federal government departments and agencies engaged in protecting and advancing US national security than when a presidential administration comes to an end – and a new one is about to begin. It is during this transition period when scholars can monitor where foreign and defense policy experts who leave government end up, and where a new cadre of analysts eager to enter government land. This is what scholars generally refer to as the “revolving door phenomenon.”

The frequency with which scholars recognized for expertise in domestic and foreign policy either gravitate to think tanks after leaving government or prepare for positions in federal departments and agencies after working at prominent think tanks for years, speaks to the reputation public policy research institutions have for transforming

scholars into politically astute and savvy practitioners. After all, as organizations committed to helping government think its way through complex policy problems, what better way to lend a hand than to prepare their own staff to assume leadership roles?

The exodus of think tank scholars from their more academic surroundings to government is another way think tanks can obtain a strong foothold in the policy-making process. With an ever-expanding network of former colleagues who enter public service, think tanks can extend their tentacles into the far reaches of the bureaucracy, critical for organizations intent on informing the content and direction of government policy. Still, relying on their government contacts, and drawing heavily on the other governmental and non-governmental channels previously mentioned, does not guarantee that think tanks will be able to exercise discernible influence.

As a scholar of think tanks, I am often asked how much influence think tanks wield over domestic and foreign policy. I generally respond by reminding those in attendance of the importance of focusing on the nature of influence, what it entails, and to whom or what it is directed. Although I would much prefer to provide a less obtuse answer, the dynamics and reality of policymaking preclude me and others from doing so. There is no simple recipe or approach to evaluating influence, particularly when so many people and organizations are involved in efforts to affect policy change. So, what is the answer? Acquiring a better understanding of what influence is, and how it can be achieved, might be a good place to start.

In much of the literature on defense and foreign policy, influence is treated in a linear fashion. In other words, one is thought to have exercised influence if A has been able to convince B to do X; A has been able to convince B not to do X; or A has been able to convince B to maintain the status quo. Put simply, influence is presented as an all or nothing proposition. You either have influence or you don't.

Applying this model or approach to the study of influence might be helpful in some instances but it can also prove problematic. After all, influence can be achieved in different ways and at different times in the policy cycle. For example, during the 1980 US presidential campaign, High Frontier, a Virginia-based think tank, received support from the Heritage Foundation to work on a project which would help lay the foundation for President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, known as Star Wars, unveiled by the president on national television on 23 March 1983. In this case, one could argue that High Frontier had tremendous influence in shaping Reagan's thinking around finding an alternative to the nuclear doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD). However, while there is no doubt that High Frontier played an important role in discussions about deploying ground-based and space-based weapons systems that could in principle track, intercept, and destroy incoming ballistic missiles, there were several other individuals and organizations that had a hand in galvanizing support and/or opposition to this initiative. As Martin Anderson, a former scholar at the Hoover Institution who would go on to advise President Reagan on a host of issues noted, "every successful policy idea has a hundred mothers and fathers. Every bad idea is an orphan."

Anderson's comment speaks to the difficulties scholars often encounter in tracing the origin of an idea to a particular person or organization. The policy-making process is not only difficult to maneuver for those intent on shaping it, but it is also extremely difficult to make sense of given the number of participants who enter and exit the process at different times. In the case outlined above, Reagan did acknowledge the valuable contributions of High Frontier, but he also benefitted from the vast expertise provided by the defense policy establishment of which High Frontier was but one player.

This is one of the many reasons why I avoid discussions that only lead to speculation about how much or little influence think tanks, interest groups, domestic and foreign lobbies, and other organizations seeking to play a role in defense and foreign policy have exercised; rather, I think greater insight can be gleaned by isolating the involvement and activity of think tanks at specific stages of the policy cycle: issue articulation, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. By doing so, it is possible to better identify and evaluate the contribution specific institutions have made in helping to frame the discourse around an issue by, for instance, conveying their ideas and policy recommendations to the media, hosting conferences and workshops, and releasing a flurry of publications. Highlighting how think tanks have or have not contributed to formulating, implementing, and evaluating the success or failure of specific policies would also be helpful in providing a more accurate assessment of how relevant they were in and around key

policy debates.

After years of studying think tanks and evaluating their motives and strategies, I have concluded that they can truly have an impact on policymaking when they present the right ideas, to the right people, at the right time, and in the right form. It is also important to keep in mind, however, that think tanks can have the best, most creative, and most innovative policy recommendations at their disposal, but unless the political stars are aligned, their efforts may have no discernible impact.

Think tanks have no shortage of ideas to convey to multiple stakeholders, but for their ideas to take hold, policymakers and other leaders with the authority to shape their country must have the capacity to listen. In the United States, there is rarely a shortage of ideas related to defense and foreign policy, or in any of the many domestic policy issues that regularly surface. It is more a question of demand. What kind of information do policymakers in Congress, in the White House, and throughout the bureaucracy require of think tanks and other non-governmental organizations to perform their duties more responsibly? How can these organizations help government officials think, rather than validate what they already know or want to hear? Answers to these and other questions could go a long way in providing those entrusted with the power to govern with what they need to protect the American people, while allowing think tanks to fulfill their mandate and mission.

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