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Devaluing the Think Tank

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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 shi ing. And with that shi , 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 o cials who hope to be back in o ce when their party next takes control of the White House or Congress. Some serve as training grounds for young activists. Some serve as uno cial 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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have frequently pointed to the need for new think tanks (often modeled on counterparts on the opposite side of the political aisle).

the maintenance of the system of free, competitive enterprise." When, in the midst of the Second World War, o cials in Washington (

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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 shi , having le Columbia University for the Nixon White House and later the Hoover Institution. In the Reagan White House, he helped funnel think-tank

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 '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 le -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. A er Clinton's win in 1992, former Bush-administration o cials 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 sta), 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 c

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 O ce of Management and Budget in the Obama White House), warned in 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 le 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 o en were not welcome

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 a liated advocacy organization—the Center for American Progress Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) group—even has a "news service" that sends sta ers 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. 's Ben S p idat

policy director of Obama's presidential campaign, and then worked in the O ce 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 o en 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 sta ers, 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 *r* , CAP "encouraged and sought to help coordinate protests in di erent cities"; a spokesman for the center told the 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 le . 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 *C r r r .*, 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 a liated 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 dri ed from the model of the more advocacy-oriented think tanks of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. These di erences among think tanks are evident, for instance, in the proportion of scholars at di erent 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 a er 1980, only 13% of scholars are as highly educated

the number of think tanks in the U.S. has ballooned—from about 45 a er 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 po-

with which experts and expertise are generally viewed by public o - cials." 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 di cult 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 o en 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