Think Tanks and Their Impact

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Think tanks (or institutes for policy research) as we know them today are essentially a post Second World War development. One of the first and most famous institutes of the genre, RAND Corporation in the US, can lay a credible claim to having invented the appellation. One Sunday in the late 1940s one of RAND’s most renowned analysts, Dr. Albert Wohlstetter, looked around at a number of his colleagues gathered around his swimming pool and declared: “Here we all are, in deep discussion around the think-tank.” Gradually the term acquired currency first merely as a nick-name, and then, in more recent years, it has been embraced even by academic institutions whose leaders wish to emphasize that they have an applied-policy wing with which government and business people can interact usefully and profitably.

Think tanks are often credited with having wide-ranging powers and a direct influence on government policies, especially in democratic countries. In the United States the neo-conservatives who have risen to such power under President George W. Bush were nurtured and given critical mass by several like-minded research institutes in the 1990s. Money flowed in from conservative Republican sources and facilitated the development of policy papers on which much of the foreign and international security policy of President George W. Bush has been founded. In most of these cases proponents of a particular policy line, especially from the business community, were able to increase the chances that the Bush administration would apply policies of which they approved, from which they often stood to benefit directly and which in many cases they had helped to develop.

Both sides of politics in the US sponsor their own partisan think tanks, and many people who will later have influential political careers often receive their policy grounding in such institutes. It is open to argument as to whether the left or the right in American politics benefits more from being able to avail themselves of the specialized advice which think tanks tend to produce. Those of the right have more money; those of the left have access to a wider array of talented people in academia and non-governmental organizations. Think tanks are
formidable and indispensable on both sides of American politics. The competition between them for public profile and private influence is fierce.

Germany probably presents one extreme example of the politicized think-tank because each major party has its own research institute, funded federally, to foster its policy development. But in most democracies think tanks can be found with close affiliation to the major political parties. They tend to have a high profile, ample resources, and their staff members sometimes become widely known as a result of media coverage of their output and their own personal charisma.

These however are only one variety of think tank. More common, but often less prominent, are research institutes founded to investigate a particular policy area from a non-partisan, objective perspective. There was a proliferation of such bodies after the First World War as informed, expert and committed people, especially intellectuals and politicians, sought to learn policy lessons from the terrible experiences that much of the world had endured between 1914 and 1918. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the US was one of these. Another was the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London.

During the 1920s and 30s national institutes of international affairs proliferated in Europe and the British Empire. Many of these bodies found it difficult to exert much influence on policy, however. They lacked money for major research projects. They sought a reputation for objectivity and thus did not feed their ideas directly into a group of powerful policy makers. They were frequently regarded, with some justification, as academic bodies which were a long way from having effective leverage on national and international policies, and which also did not give journalists much material for a spectacular headline. Most of them have continued and have gained respect while remaining outside the boundary of active politics. But their impact is more of an indirect nature through helping to shape public and expert opinion rather than addressing directly the chief shapers of national policy.

The severity of the challenges brought about by the Cold War in the late 1940s and the need to understand the roles and dangers of nuclear weapons led to the development of a third kind of think tank: the research institute dedicated to studying a relatively narrow field, often in close cooperation with government departments and other agencies as well as with academics, journalists, religious leaders and business people.

Institutes of this kind, more limited in their embrace than the national foreign policy institutes of the 1920s and 30s, but focusing on key, complex and often baffling issues, have become the archetypes of the modern think tank of the 21st Century. RAND mentioned above is one excellent example. Another is the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. This body was founded in 1958 by a group of British scholars, service officers, politicians, journalists and business
people to examine the problems of maintaining international peace under the shadow of nuclear weapons. Without being partisan, refusing as a body to endorse particular policy stances, it none the less has made major contributions to rational discussion by experts which have resulted in policies for government leaders and their advisers to take up and adopt if they so desired. Becoming international in its membership and focus in the early 1960s, IISS exerted a major influence for good on NATO policies, especially in developing ideas based on strategic realism but which had a humanitarian purpose. While remaining aloof from both hawkish and dovish stances as an institution, its members, especially the leading protagonists in debate, were able to put forward their own individual ideas with added credibility as a result of the discussion they had received inside IISS while these policy lines were being developed.

The world-wide research community rejoiced when the Institute for International Policy Studies was founded in Tokyo nearly twenty years ago. While recognizing that its field of endeavor was wider than that of many other think-tanks, and therefore the work of IIPS could become less focused and less influential, it was also seen that international policy had become much more multi-faceted as the Cold War entered its final years. Indeed IIPS has shown a lead to many other institutions in emphasizing a broader approach to international issues which is much more appropriate to the age of terrorism and counter-terrorism than a purely military approach. And of course it also plays a major role in bringing excellent Japanese ideas and thinkers into play on the wider world scene.

This is a development which has brought benefits not only to Japan but also has contributed to international peace and harmony. Long may IIPS continue to flourish and promote the expert views of its members both nationally and internationally!

About the author

Professor O’Neill retired as Chichele Professor of the History of War and as a Fellow of All Souls College, University of Oxford in September 2001. Professor O’Neill is a graduate of the Royal Military College of Australia (RMC) and served in the Australian Regular Army from 1955–1968. Having been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship, he studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Brasenose College, Oxford from 1961–1963 and in 1965 was awarded a D Phil in Modern History. After resuming military duties in Australia, he served with 5RAR in Vietnam from 1966–1967 and was mentioned in dispatches. Subsequently he was posted to the RMC as Instructor in Military History 1967 to 1969.

In 1969 Professor O’Neill was appointed as a Senior Fellow in International Relations at the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University (ANU). As Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at the ANU from 1971–1982 he established the Centre as a substantial force in public debate.
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... on strategic policy in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region, and internationally. In 1982, he was appointed as Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, an organisation then of 2,500 members in 80 countries. Professor O’Neill was appointed as the Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford in 1987 and was a founding Co-Director of the All Souls College Foreign Policy Studies Program from 1991–2001. He served as Chairman of the Council of the IISS, 1996–2001, and as Chairman of Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, 1998–2001.

Professor O’Neill was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1988. He is the former Chairman of the Council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London. He served as Council Chairman at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute from 2000 to 2005.