

## The Washington Blob On Video

*It is still making the case for endless war.*

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Washington, D.C., is the think tank world capital and home to the eternal seminar. There has always been at least one panel, forum, conference, luncheon, party, or something similar every day to discuss issues of great moment. It's simply what think tanks do.

Bringing reputedly important thinkers together is supposed to promote discussion of the vital issues of the day. These gatherings help sell philosophies and policies to those who rule, mostly in the executive and legislative branches. Public events also justify donations, demonstrating activity to those who help pay the bills. And there are few better ways to suck up to power than to invite a noted politician or staffer to headline a discussion. The entire process is an enormous industry, with food and drink often the informal bribe to get people to fill a room.

However, the problem was always showing up. Even people located in Washington had to be willing to stop working, trek across town, and sit through sometimes uneventful, even boring, proceedings. It has long been even worse for me. I've worked from home since the magazine I edited, *Inquiry*, shut down in 1984. So the proceeding had to be worth *driving across the Potomac into D.C.*, a fate akin to journeying across the River Styx into you know where.

Which meant I virtually never attended the plethora of available seminars, other than those to which I was contributing. A full-scale conference, with multiple panels, networking opportunities, and a meal or two tossed in, maybe. Spending a couple hours just getting to and from a solo event of uncertain quality, no way.

Then Covid-19 made its appearance and the world went to Zoom (and Skype and the other variants). Suddenly every organization was constantly hosting online events. The larger the think tank, the more and greater variety the offerings—Brookings, Atlantic Council, Wilson Center, and the like never seemed to allow a day to go by without at least one. Sometimes choosing which show of many to watch became a problem.

So I developed a new routine. I would put think tank videos on as background as I worked on email, filed paperwork, clipped newspapers, ate meals, rode my exercise bike, and did most anything else that required little serious attention. It was striking how many electronic productions regurgitated shared conventional wisdom without offering anything new or interesting. Yet snippets of nuance sometimes broke through despite what often seemed like a

concerted effort to prevent free thought. And on rare occasion a very serious discussion among bright, creative people emerged, so that recording sometimes required a second listen.

With a focus on the foreign policy side, I've come away from the last year almost in awe at the near unanimity of members of what Barack Obama's deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes called the "blob"—largely about developing and implementing U.S. foreign policy. This agreement, which sometimes resembles a Red Guards convention circa 1967, did not surprise me. But the forums dramatically demonstrated the uniformity in sentiment and style. A number of consistent realities have shown through.

Big names, preferably sitting legislators or former officials, are the coin of the realm. They need not say anything meaningful, sensible, or even coherent. However, they are frequent headliners, inevitably elevating the prestige of the discussion even when spouting veritable nonsense. On occasion politicians impressed—Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.) and Ro Khanna (D-Ca.) are two who I think generally worth listening to, even though coming from radically different positions. Alas, most others do little other than express platitudes, mumble non sequiturs, offer political affirmations, and waste viewers' time.

For politicians, especially, the bigger the title, the more obsequious the moderator and inflated the introduction (visualize Mike Pompeo genuflecting, forehead to floor, while babbling praise of Mohammed bin Salman, bonesaw in hand). The speaker involved might be obscure, but his or her accomplishments are presented as legendary. Even the most banausic remarks receive rapturous praise, along with affirmations of the presenter's legislative record and patriotic commitment. Perennial moderators are especially skilled at verbal kowtows.

Similarly, organizers and moderators routinely proclaim every event to be essential, panel to be great, participant to be distinguished, issue to be critical, and result to be important. After all, who wants to admit that one is wasting one's time, essentially checking off a job responsibility to justify an organization paycheck. The issue could be the impact of the latest Saudi military offensive on Yemen's basket-weaving industry or the state of New Zealand kiwifruit production after the latest Chinese BRI initiative, and the superlatives would still flow.

The political biases of participants routinely are ignored and go unmentioned. One recent panel on Cuba included two members of Congress from Florida. This might shock some people, but both paladins expressed horror at the massive human rights violations and extraordinary security threat posed by the communist juggernaut just off the U.S. coast, and emphasized the essential, vital, indeed, overwhelming need to keep and, of course, strengthen sanctions, which should be maintained until the Second Coming, the lion and lamb lay down together, and Donald Trump and Nancy Pelosi kiss and make up. Who would have imagined!?! Well, some of us, actually, given the composition of their districts.

Only very rarely are there meaningful differences of opinion represented on panels. Most organizations use forums to sell their viewpoint or, at most, delineate shades of differences within their specialized coalition. Very often all the panel members know each other and spend much of their time in mutual praise. Of course, think tanks have no obligation to present a debate. However, this makes many events beyond monotonous, turning them into an intellectual Greek Chorus.

At times the unanimity is campy, as participants attempt to distinguish their views by steadily escalating their claims. Victory goes to the most passionate presenter. With special verve, some groups on the right insist on a military buildup to match the enemy *du jour*, lest a new Dark Ages shortly descend. At a nominally cosmopolitan group, the score or so of staffers tasked with promoting Ukraine as America's Most Vital Ally and battling Russia as the new Mordor take special pleasure in attacking fellow scholars at their own organization who dare express a word or two of dissent. Every forum assumes that Moscow must be punished, usually by doubling, trebling or even quadrupling sanctions. I always listen in anticipation, waiting for a participant to slip and blurt out his or her real feelings, calling on Uncle Sam to drop a few nukes on the Kremlin.

The absence of debate runs far deeper than individual policies. Virtually every foreign policy organization believes in the imperative of action. Such groups exist to urge the country forward to fulfill what earlier Americans called "manifest destiny" and more modern sorts with finer sensibilities call "leadership." Other than a few outliers—the Cato and Quincy Institutes, some leftish groups, and a handful of foreign think tanks—the overwhelming, unrelenting demand is to "do something!" Special credit goes for those who come up with new wars to keep the U.S. military busy. While there are degrees of involvement, action is *always* required, and usually the more, and bloodier, the better.

Another unvarying principle is that whatever is must forever be, and perhaps should even be a bit stronger. Never is there an organization, alliance, treaty, commitment, discussion, agreement, concordat, accord, or anything else that can be discarded. Never. Rather, everything must be strengthened, improved, expanded, refurbished, and more. NATO is sacred. So is the Paris Accord. And the "mutual" defense treaties with South Korea and Japan. As well as the troop presence in Iraq and Syria. Certainly, the troop presence in Afghanistan, which spawned a spate of emergency forums with participants in near hysteria about the outrage in withdrawing even one American from such a strategically vital spot so precipitously after barely 20 years on station. Such discussions rarely offer even the hint of dissent, presumably because the Truth is considered to be so obvious that only a traitor or an idiot could think differently—and even the slightest disagreement is worse than heresy.

Sometimes there are breaks between conservatives and progressives, say, over unilateralism and multilateralism or diplomacy, sanctions, and military action. When partisanship intrudes, such as in the debate over the Iraq War, issue differences typically widen. Yet even in these cases rarely does even one participant suggest that a problem, of whatever kind, does not warrant some U.S. action. Rather, the debate typically breaks down into a squabble over whether sanctions should be imposed first, before military action, or whether a bombing campaign is so imperative that it should be launched immediately, to be followed by an invasion.

Where reasoning is most wrong viewpoints often are in greatest unanimity. The blob has become very effective at enforcing group think. Of course, the U.S. should have stayed in Afghanistan. Of course, the U.S. should stay in Iraq. Of course, the U.S. should stay in Syria. Of course, the U.S. should have done nation-building in Libya. Of course, the U.S. should have stayed after the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan to build a country for the Mujahedeen. Of course. After all, *forever wars are supposed to last forever*. How could anyone miss such an obvious point?

Rarely has the official line been so clearly set and carried forth so consistently by online blobbers. Even though the war in Afghanistan has been endless, no one is supposed to refer to it

as an endless war. Even though a war has been going on, everyone is supposed to treat it like a peaceful place to deploy American troops, a la Germany or Japan. Even though Afghanistan is as distant as any spot on the planet, everyone is supposed to treat the land as uniquely vital to U.S. survival. Even though Washington has been in Afghanistan for two decades, everyone is supposed to express outrage that American forces did not stay months, years, or decades longer. Even though Afghanistan will now be a problem for its more than half dozen neighbors, everyone is supposed to act like China and Russia have gained a geopolitical asset. Even though 9/11 was planned and manned outside of Afghanistan and future acts also could be planned and manned elsewhere, everyone is supposed to assume that local insurgents in Afghanistan will magically become transnational terrorists, ready to overrun America. Even though the Afghan government proved to be a Potemkin state that collapsed quickly and unexpectedly, everyone is supposed to believe that, nevertheless, it would have lasted for years or even decades with just a handful of Americans sticking around somewhere in a fortified camp or base.

As summer wanes, I've enjoyed a bit of a webinar break. Virtually every group has cut back on the frequency of events, and many organizations have stopped recording them. For now, at least, the subliminal messages that war is always good, occupation is always necessary, and social engineering is always just have diminished. For now. However, after Labor Day the establishment institutions are likely to be back with a full webinar schedule, perhaps busier than ever. And that is likely to continue even as in-person events reemerge. There may be more opportunities than ever for intellectual navel-gazing in the nation's capital.

Still, I think that more selective use of this tool might be good for my mental health as well as policy duties. Some events probably shouldn't be added to my schedule. The predictable might deserve rejection. Mundane presentations might warrant a quicker exit. And robotic uniformity might warrant a broader search for views beyond adherents to the blob *uber alles*. After all, even a policy nerd like me gets tired of hearing eternal praise of forever intervention and endless war.

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