



The Bad Ideas-Industrial Complex

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One of the integral components of Beltway ecology, along with the Pentagon, intelligence spooks, contractors, and lobbyists, is the think tank. Whether it's called a foundation, an institute or a trust, it's not only as important as the other big players, it synergizes with them and cements their power. And since the think tank is a tax-exempt 501(c)3 "charitable" or "educational" pursuit, it operates with an implicit taxpayer subsidy.

Think tanks have been a part of the American scene since the early 20th century, when passage of the income tax motivated the super-rich to shield their money from the revenooers with some ostensibly do-gooding activity. Some of the major ones performed undeniably laudable works, such as the Rockefeller Foundation's medical research, but from the beginning, even the highly prestigious foundations, such as Carnegie and Ford, engaged in studies that inevitably impacted the politics of the day.

That said, the Washington think tank world, at least through mid-1960s, was a mostly gentile and prestigious activity whose directorships were suitable for the political elite. McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser to presidents Kennedy and Johnson, left government to become president of the Ford Foundation, while Dean Rusk, secretary of state in both administrations, previously had been president of the Rockefeller Foundation.

That changed when President Nixon pursued his vendetta against the Brookings Institution, ordering his White House plumbers to steal its files. It was at that point that the conservative movement, growing more and more paranoid that the whole Washington ecosystem was against them, began a methodical and relentless institution building that continues to this day.

Around that time, the Kochs established the CATO Institute, while beer mogul Joe Coors jump-started the Heritage Foundation. Outfits like the National Taxpayers Union, the Free Congress Foundation, Freedom Forum, and Americans for Tax Reform followed, while already-existing think tanks with a conservative tinge, like the American Enterprise Institute, became more openly partisan. Along with countless others, they became a linchpin in the Right's successful effort to "wire" the nation's capital and put it under the effective control of Republicans and corporations.

While Washington is almost universally seen as a liberal town—most of its residents vote Democratic—its institutional infrastructure is now surprisingly conservative. This is not to say there are no liberal think tanks and ancillary organizations, but their influence on the Hill,

throughout the Washington political landscape, and among the politically engaged public, is decidedly weaker. For all their reputation as collectivists and lovers of bureaucratic organization, liberals are light years behind conservatives in creating institutional power structures.

As the Reagan Revolution made its mark, the right-leaning policy think tanks metastasized into what I call the Bad Ideas-Industrial Complex. Every crackpot or dangerous idea, from tax cuts paying for themselves, to handing Social Security over to Wall Street, to the flat tax, to budget-busting military spending on gold-plated weapons of dubious utility, have found their zealous advocates in the Complex; sometimes those ideas originated there.

One of the most influential was and is Heritage. When I began working on Capitol Hill in the 1980s, Heritage, located just across the street from the Senate, was already blanketing congressional offices with its issue briefs, spending big bucks on inviting Hill employees to policy lunches, and helping staff up the Reagan administration. Its political line could be summed up as follows: raise Pentagon spending to infinity, cut taxes to zero, and balance the budget.

During the 2000 presidential transition, Heritage really hit its stride. One employee, Virginia Thomas (wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas), helped provide staffing assistance to the Republican presidential transition team. This conflict of interest should have resulted in Justice Thomas' recusal from hearing Bush v. Gore, but of course it did not. Like other aspects of that election debacle, it is one more fact that smells even fishier with time.

Just before George W. Bush's inauguration, Heritage produced a policy document designed to help his administration choose personnel (notwithstanding the foundation's nonprofit, nonpartisan status). The authors of this memo stated, "The Office of Presidential Personnel must make appointment decisions based on loyalty first and expertise second, and... the whole governmental apparatus must be managed from this perspective." (emphasis mine).

This prescription of sycophancy over competence was enthusiastically adopted by the Bush administration, and nowhere with greater zest than the Coalition Provisional Authority, the American-run entity with near-dictatorial power to rule "liberated" Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, gave the job of screening prospective CPA employees to Jim O'Beirne (husband of National Review columnist Kate O'Beirne); he was a person with no known Middle East expertise.

Candidates who spoke Arabic were generally disqualified, and one of O'Beirne's litmus-test questions solicited candidates' opinions on Roe v. Wade. As a result, experts were few, but people fresh out of right-wing Bible colleges got the nod. This led to travesties like a 24-year old graduate who had never worked in finance being in charge of reopening the Baghdad stock exchange.

But all of this pales before the performance of the Trump administration, a riot of incompetence rivaling that of Britain in the Crimean War. How is it possible to fire the president's chief of staff before a replacement is definitively lined up? Worse, how can it be that the hoped-for replacement not only turns down the job, but simultaneously departs his position as chief of staff to the vice president, leaving the two top elected officials in the country without their vital administrative managers? This and a thousand other examples from the Trump presidency are

merely the application of theories that have erupted from the Bad Ideas-Industrial Complex like toxic clouds from a volcano.

It is no coincidence that a coauthor of that 2000 transition memo, George Nesterzuk, became a key figure on the Trump transition team. Trump even nominated him to become director of the Office of Personnel Management, but Nesterzuk withdrew his nomination, citing “partisan attacks.” In other words, unwanted scrutiny.

Heritage’s hand in foreign policy is equally deft. Now that there is an increasingly bipartisan clamor for the United States to cease assisting Saudi Arabia in its murderous war in Yemen, the foundation has released a paper designed to tamp down dissent among Republicans. Its rationale boils down to this: our assistance isn’t significant enough to worry our pretty heads about, but if we stop assistance, the sky will fall.

The question is this: did Mohammed bin Salman (or one of his cronies) write a suitably laundered check to Heritage? Or did a defense contractor with business at stake in the kingdom top up Heritage’s endowment? The use of 501(c)3 tax-exempt organizations as conduits for foreign money and influence-peddling (such as the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies’ shilling for Israel) is a scandal fully as troubling as how we finance our campaigns, but politicians are not interested in turning over that rock.

Space prohibits a comprehensive analysis of the Bad Ideas-Industrial Complex—Grover Norquist’s no-tax pledge, which GOP congressmen treated as more sacrosanct than their oath of office; Judicial Watch’s phony government scandal-mongering; or CATO’s long campaign to gin up the mistaken sentiment that Social Security is actuarially doomed in order to privatize it—but it is one more symptom of a sickness at the heart of our political system, a system that subsidizes propaganda hacks who pose as “resident scholars.”