

# WAR ON THE ROCKS

## Think Tanks And American Interventionism

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In a polarized environment, where political elites have staked out opposing positions on whether to vaccinate against a plague, we might not expect much agreement on complex matters of military intervention. Yet when President Joe Biden honored his commitment to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan, the bulk of the national security think-tank community responded with vociferous disapproval. As with the proposed invasion of Iraq in 2002, the core disagreement among the foreign policy establishment has centered not on whether to remain in Afghanistan, but why. After failing for 20 years to build a robust Afghan state, persisting in the belief that success remains just around the corner, or that a continued investment in a failed project is worthwhile, suggests a stubborn predisposition to credit the political effectiveness of military force. This tendency demands an explanation.

Understanding Washington's romance with foreign intervention requires paying close attention to public-relations collaborations between the White House and outside organizations. Presidents enlist think tanks and other groups to provide third-party validation for ambitious policies, with the ultimate goal of mobilizing the public to gain leverage over Congress. Since ambitious foreign policy initiatives tend to involve the use of military power, administrations more often partner with pro-intervention organizations than supporters of restraint. These collaborating groups gain access to political, professional, and informational resources that help them build

constituencies, develop networks, and gain influence. Over time, the ecosystem of influence increasingly reflects their interests and worldviews.

Influential Democratic and Republican national security voices have condemned the president's decision to withdraw. John R. Allen, a former commander of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and now president of the Brookings Institution, called upon Biden to "reverse his decision." Richard Fontaine, head of the Center for a New American Security and longtime aide to the late Sen. John McCain, argued that it would undermine America's competitiveness with China. Kori Schake, the director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, rejected the administration's claim that the "status quo was unsustainable." Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, derided the president's action as a "withdrawal of choice." Fred Kempe, head of the Atlantic Council, said that it would damage U.S. credibility. Add to that the chorus of warnings that Afghanistan would again become a safe haven for terrorists.

To be sure, some experts have come out in support of the president's decision. At the grassroots level, a coalition of veterans and military-support organizations sent an open letter to the president encouraging him to follow through on his promise to withdraw. The Quincy Institute's top Afghanistan analysts have called the withdrawal "a courageous decision." Experts from the Cato Institute, Defense Priorities, and the New American Engagement Initiative at the Atlantic Council have praised the decision to withdraw (if not its execution). These groups are part of a relatively young initiative to diversify the foreign policy community and promote restraint. But their voices still represent a minority inside the Beltway.

### Why Presidents Seek Surrogates

My research, published in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, shows why presidents enlist surrogates, how think tanks benefit from these partnerships, and why they favor interventionism. When administrations pursue ambitious foreign policies — those that require affirmative congressional consent — they often face public resistance or legislative opposition. They can respond in several ways. They can scale back a policy so it falls within the boundaries of existing

discretionary authority. They can attempt to strike a bargain with Congress to forge ahead without public support. Or they can try to mobilize the public in their favor, to exert leverage over legislators to compel them to consent to the administration's agenda.

This last option brings think tanks and other outside organizations into the picture. Presidents, having worked out what policy they want to pursue, need to secure the funding and authorization to do it. Outside groups help put pressure on members of Congress who oppose the policy or whose caution prevents them from consenting to the administration's agenda without public backing.

The president's bully pulpit gives administrations a powerful tool of persuasion, but appeals corroborated by independent surrogates appear more credible than those made by administration officials alone. It is the logic of the advertising testimonial: Endorsements help sell everything from salad dressing to life insurance. Audiences perceive third-party sources as credible when they appear knowledgeable and trustworthy. If presidents can deploy external experts to validate the administration's agenda, they can overcome the mistrust endemic to partisan politics.

Think tanks represent one type of organization that the White House has enlisted to help make its foreign policy arguments. During World War II, the government helped create the War Advertising Council — a volunteer association of advertising professionals that produced public service announcements on behalf of the war effort — to circumvent statutory prohibitions against government propaganda. Diaspora lobbies such as the Iraqi National Congress and the Cuban American National Foundation partnered with the government to market the continued embargo of the Communist-controlled island and regime change in the Persian Gulf dictatorship.

Throughout the Cold War, administrations enlisted "citizens' committees" — pressure groups consisting of prominent figures with foreign policy experience — to muster support for major foreign policy initiatives. Led by Dean Acheson and modelled on the interwar Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, the Committee for the Marshall Plan promoted President Harry Truman's European Recovery Program. Upon securing its passage, the group re-formed as the Committee on the Present Danger to support the militarization of the Cold War as laid out in

the National Security Council policy paper known as NSC-68. Nearly two decades later, Acheson continued to support administration policy as co-chair of the Committee to Safeguard America, working to secure funding for the Safeguard anti-ballistic missile program.

### Vietnam: A Turning Point for Think Tanks

The 2002 debate over whether to invade Iraq offers a perfect illustration of how outside organizations converge to support an interventionist president's foreign policy. Think tanks lined up behind the president's proposed invasion. This contemporary example of extra-governmental support for military intervention can trace its roots back to the politics of the Vietnam War. The archival record I have assembled reveals the intentional cultivation of allied organizations by the White House, and a deliberate effort to politicize think-tank influence over foreign policy. The brief narrative that follows shows how President Lyndon B. Johnson decided whether to collaborate with outside organizations, and how Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford initiated the conservative transformation of the think-tank ecosystem with a partnership that Nixon struck with the American Enterprise Institute to keep the Vietnam War going in 1970, which Ford continued.

#### *Johnson Rejects, then Pursues Collaboration*

In 1965, Johnson's "Americanization" plan to escalate the U.S. presence in the conflict enjoyed broad public and congressional support, despite his personal misgivings about the war. James Conant — president of Harvard University, consultant to the Policy Review Group that wrote NSC-68, and former head of the Committee on the Present Danger — approached the administration with an offer. He would convene a citizens' committee, led by Arthur Dean (another citizens' committee veteran), to promote Americanization, armed with public relations expertise, aligned with the administration though projecting the appearance of independence.

The administration initially declined Conant's offer. Without public resistance and congressional opposition, it had little need to partner with outside organizations in 1965, and the president's advisers saw political risks in collaboration. Jack McCloy, one of Johnson's "wise men" of

foreign policy, objected on the grounds that the president had already “done such a good job of pulling public support together” without external organizational support.

By 1967, the public mood had begun to turn against the war, and the president changed his mind. National Security Adviser Walt Rostow agreed to create the Vietnam Information Group to manage public opinion. Harold Kaplan, the group’s coordinator, explained to Rostow that “American public opinion has become the ‘X factor’ in the entire Vietnamese equation.” The White House group would be the “focal point which would coordinate our judgments on key PR issues.” It collaborated closely with the Committee for Peace with Freedom, a new group convened under the leadership of Paul Douglas, which also included Conant.

### *Nixon and Ford Forge Ahead*

In 1970, Charles Colson, special assistant to the president for public liaison (the interface between the administration and outside organizations), had begun searching for a conservative counter-weight to the Brookings Institution. At the same time, Colson was organizing the administration’s efforts to fight off the McGovern-Hatfield amendment to end the war. He combined his two assignments and sought out a partner that could help bury McGovern-Hatfield and fill the role of advocate on behalf of conservative Republican policy ambitions. He chose the American Enterprise Institute, then a sleepy Washington think tank with a few well-placed affiliates but a fraction of Brookings’ budget and prestige.

McGovern-Hatfield failed. Convincing himself and others in the administration that the American Enterprise Institute had performed its task with alacrity and skill, Colson coordinated a fundraising campaign on its behalf. He aimed to establish a \$25 million endowment (\$165 million in today’s dollars) plus additional annual commitments from donors such as the Lilly Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Richard Mellon Scaife.

For reasons I can only speculate about, the White House allowed Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and his aide, William Baroody Jr., to take the credit for securing the American Enterprise Institute’s fortune. After the Watergate scandal forced Nixon to resign and sent Colson to prison, the Ford administration established the Office of Public Liaison, and put Baroody in charge of it.

One more thing to keep in mind: Baroody Sr. (the *elder*) was at the time the president of the American Enterprise Institute. The rise of the conservative think-tank movement that would soon follow began within the White House, founded upon their collaborative efforts to keep the Vietnam War going in 1970.

### Bottom Up or Top Down?

Most theories about the influence of private organizations offer “bottom-up” explanations. That is, groups outside of formal positions of power persuade officials to pursue policies they otherwise might reject. The protest call “no blood for oil” opposing the Iraq War reflects this concern, but there’s nothing new about the belief that private interests drag governments into war. Lenin argued that commercially motivated imperialist expansion represents the “highest stage of capitalism.” Proponents of neutrality during the interwar years blamed U.S. involvement in World War I on the banking and munitions industries. Dwight Eisenhower warned against the influence of the “military-industrial complex.” Sociologist C. Wright Mills inveighed against “warlords” who push the country into conflict. International relations theorist Jack Snyder argues that commercial cartels spin “myths of empire” that lead countries into over-expansion.

I describe a mostly top-down dynamic. Administrations rarely create outside organizations out of whole cloth. Think tanks bring their own skills, resources, and credibility to the table, in addition to their perceived independence. Still, entering into these partnerships remains a matter of executive discretion, and the conditions that encourage collaboration, indeed the incentives of the U.S. presidency more generally, favor hawkish partners. As James Madison wrote, “War is in fact the true nurse of executive aggrandizement.” Foreign policy offers an arena for the president to operate with greater autonomy and gain political advantages over Congress, especially if the administration can get the public on its side. Military interventions tempt ambitious presidents. They also require affirmative congressional consent for military appropriations and the use of force beyond the window of discretion delegated by the War Powers Act. They force Congress to get involved, and make it necessary for presidents to win support, which gives interventionist think tanks their opportunity.

Collaborating groups gain access to resources (money, administration jobs, political intelligence) that allow them to build constituencies and develop influence. Morton Blackwell, a Reagan administration official in the Office of Public Liaison, spelled out this strategy during the 1980 election campaign, in a blueprint for a “New Right Foreign Policy Offensive” that involved identifying allies and “boosting their careers,” training them in “the latest technique of winning,” and “building new organizational vehicles.” Think-tank experts have individual incentives to maintain the alliances they forge with the White House, even when their presidential benefactors leave office. Think tanks serve as “governments in exile,” training centers for new political talent and holding pens for political appointees awaiting their party’s return to power. Over time, this practice has shaped the ecosystem of national security think tanks.

### Cautious Presidents Beware

Not all presidents pursue ambitious military ventures. The individual preferences and beliefs of the Oval Office occupant matter. Jimmy Carter took a more cautious approach to foreign policy than many of his peers, and found himself in the cross-hairs of the second manifestation of the Committee on the Present Danger. More recently, when President Barack Obama declined to respond militarily to Syria’s use of chemical weapons in 2013, the think-tank community responded in protest. Brookings analysts warned that the decision would “haunt Obama’s presidency for the rest of its days,” urged him to build up the Syrian opposition and replace the Assad regime by force. Conservative think tanks were no kinder to the Democratic president than their center-left counterparts. They leveled these criticisms against his caution despite reports of CIA-run regime change programs under Obama and sustained troop deployments in Syria that persist to this day.

Republican and Democratic-affiliated groups have both gotten in on the action. Carter’s foreign policy critics included the Coalition for a Democratic Majority — mostly Johnson administration alumni who remained in the party rather than join the departing neoconservatives — which paved the way for the Democratic Leadership Council, the hawkish faction that included Joe Lieberman and the Clintons. And Brookings, Nixon’s old *bête noire*, has evolved with its

environment, demonstrating no reluctance to criticize Democratic leaders who show excessive caution in their foreign policy doctrines.

This brings us back to Biden and the opposition to his withdrawal from Afghanistan. Presidents who wish to abstain from or roll back military commitments often get the policy they want, but they have to contend with the legacy of those who built the infrastructure of influence that has made such interventions popular in the first place, on both sides of the partisan divide.

## Conclusion

Interventionism pervades elite national security politics within government as well. The boundaries between the official and unofficial wings of the national security establishment are permeable, and as personnel move between the executive branch and the assembly of private organizations tethered to it, they develop a shared set of norms, beliefs, and interests. Stephen Walt argues that the inclination to intervene militarily in the affairs of other countries represents a “full employment policy” for national security experts, generating demand for the type of labor they provide. Walt explains the perpetuation of “liberal hegemony,” but not its origins. Stephen Wertheim offers an intellectual history of the origins of the doctrine of U.S. supremacy, but focuses his account on the independent agency of outside actors. I argue that closer attention to the partnerships I’ve described helps U.S. foreign policy analysts understand where the establishment’s interventionism comes from, how it has evolved, and why restraint-oriented administrations will find it difficult to reverse.

A few additional points bear mentioning. First, outside validation for public policy is commonplace in Washington. The fact of collaboration between administrations and think tanks should not surprise close observers of American government. However, many fail to recognize the centrality of top-down collaboration to the evolution of the national security establishment. Second, individuals in think tanks surely act in good faith, working diligently to craft policy ideas they believe will improve national security. But many remain unaware of the presidential origins of the influence their institutions enjoy.



Finally, dissenting voices are not absent from foreign policy debates. Indeed, proponents of restraint are enjoying a kind of renaissance, but they suffer a disadvantage. Cautious presidents rarely build durable organizational support for their policies — it seems unnecessary. Biden doesn't need to mobilize the public to coerce Congress to permit him to remain withdrawn from Afghanistan. An ambitious, diplomacy-centered foreign policy might generate the demand for the kind of institution-building that interventionist presidents have pursued for decades. Until that happens, the structural advantages of interventionism will likely remain.