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You Gotta Serve Somebody

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[Benjamin H. Friedman](#)^[2]



Reporters^[3] are^[4] suddenly^[5] interested in how the defense industry impacts defense politics, especially think tanks. Here at the *Skeptics* blog, both [Justin Logan](#)^[6] and [Chris Preble](#)^[7] have just written posts touching on the incentives that limit the intellectual independence of think tank analysts. This issue—the intersection of interests and ideas—is a big concern of mine these days, so here’s my ([reprise](#)^[8]) two cents.

Washington does not produce independent analysis because it isn’t supposed to. Democratic politics means [competition](#)^[9] among interest and ideological groups. Ideas about policy are weapons in those fights. Think tanks are part of that process, and thus inherently political and non-independent. It’s like the Bob Dylan song: [You Gotta Serve Somebody](#)^[10]. Instead of quixotic struggles to purge non-independent voices from policy debates, we should aim simply

to be aware of them.

Unlike universities, which use tenure, with some success, to protect intellectual independence, think tanks are part of what they study. I count five ways politics biases them. Obviously, the intensity of each pressure varies by organization.

The first is institutional funding. If you take government or industry money, you will hesitate to undertake research that offends your sponsors. Many people see foundations as somehow cleaner money, but they too have agendas. Even those of us that rely on donations from many individuals of an ideological persuasion get selected to advance that ideology and thus cannot much violate it.

Second, personal profit ^[11] biases ideas. Many defense and homeland security experts, especially the most prominent ones, work for defense contractors or investment companies in that industry.

Third is ambition. Those concerned with defense analysts' independence tend to focus on money, but as Hans Morgenthau ^[12] tells us, power matters more. Analysts tend to reflect the views of one party because they hope to serve it or because their employer does. Those pining for jobs in the Obama or Thune administration are not going to tell you exactly what they think about Afghanistan without considering how their would-be bosses would react.

A fourth bias in defense analysis is what academics call a selection bias. Just as people that go into the international development business are likely to support increased foreign aid, defense analysts are more likely than most to be hawkish people.

Fifth is social convention. When these pressures point in a particular direction, it seems impolite and for many people uncomfortable to swim against the tide. And we unconsciously adjust our political views to fit in ^[13] with those around us.

These pressures create a kind of operational mindset among defense analysts. What best pays the bills and moves you up the ladder is analysis that improves the means serving policy goals rather than questioning those goals. The engine gets more attention than the destination. The status quo gets way more support than it deserves.

This disease cannot be cured without killing the patient. The information you get from think tanks is never going to be unbiased. But we can limit the harm by paying more attention to it. Consumers of think tank products, especially reporters, should pay more attention to their funding. Publishers should force contributors to disclose appearances of conflict created by their institutions' sponsors or their own contracts. Think tanks should list contributors, including amounts, and force their employees to disclose sources of outside income. And everyone should be aware that while there is nothing wrong with ambition, it mixes badly with intellectual honesty.

More by

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