

Slate

Life in the Tank

What really happens inside all those think tanks?

By [Katy Waldman](#) | Posted Wednesday, March 7, 2012, at 6:46 PM ET

Charles and David Koch staged an attempt to take over leadership of the Cato Institute, the prominent libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., last week by claiming a majority of seats on its governing body. What do people who work at think tanks do all day, aside from thinking? Lots of reading and writing, with occasional breaks for coffee. Think tank employees pore over studies, articles, and history books and issue policy briefs and reports on a bevy of topics. In global-oriented institutes such as [AEI](#), scholars focus on specific hotspots like the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. Think tank workers must cultivate an extensive network of connections, so coffees, lunches, and meetings also eat up a large part of a scholar's day. There are also plenty of TV appearances and phone interviews. Like college professors, think tank scholars are always traveling to conferences and joining in panels. Life at a think tank tends to be stratified: There are the scholars, and then there's everybody else. The former are treated very well, because they purvey the ideas and analysis that fuel the think tank's operations. At the Carnegie Endowment, scholars get to stretch out in large offices. Senior fellows at Cato are paid salaries of about \$160,000. Most think tank members get plenty of help from their own research assistants and administrative aides.

The phrase *think tank* originates to World War II, when it described organizations such as the RAND Corp. that gave the government military advice. In American Army slang, it also referred to the smoke-and-idea-filled rooms in which officials crafted their war strategy. During the 1950s, the civilian sector adopted the term for the nonprofit research-and-advocacy groups that sprang up. (Previously, such institutions were known as "brain boxes.") The earliest think tanks were classical research institutions that convened the country's brightest minds to solve the political and social problems of the day. Billionaire Andrew Carnegie created the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) in 1914 to fund a coterie of intellectuals who he hoped would avert the coming war. Two years later, the [Brookings Institution](#) appeared as a private research organization dedicated to the "scientific" study of public policy issues. From 1924 to 1927, Brookings also encompassed a degree-granting graduate school. The professors lasted; the students didn't.

A second wave of think tank creation came after World War II and really picked up starting in the 1970s. Nongovernment advocacy groups like the Sierra Club and the Chamber of Commerce proliferated in Washington, generating a lobbying arms race between liberals and conservatives that created a demand for research companies to compile data and make policy recommendations quickly. The new breed of think tank—the [Heritage Foundation](#) is one example—has moved away from pure academia and toward social and political advocacy.

The product of think tanks—policy papers—end up all over the place, but mostly in Washington, D.C. Some institutes pipe their reports directly to senators' offices or Cabinet-level departments; others focus on nongovernmental sectors. A recent report by [PolicyLink](#) on access to healthy foods was distributed among grocers and food retailers.

Think tank scholars don't necessarily have to be academic all-stars. It's much more important that they be good writers and persuasive speakers who can analyze others' research. Having lots of different interests and being nimble with statistics helps, too.