

# The Washington Post

## Will the IRS scandal make Washington names even more obscure?

By Joel Achenbach – July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

---

There are two kinds of Washington organizations: The ones with names that tell you exactly what they're up to, and the ones with names that could mean just about anything, and reveal nothing of the agenda or ideological bent.

The Washington trade associations tend to be in the first category, with literal names like the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association, which represents — obviously! — the interests of companies involved in construction aggregates and pulverized material.

Or the Snack Food Association, making the world safe for snack food, one chip at a time.

The American Meat Institute. Message: Vegetables are murder.

And the American Iron and Steel Institute, the Compressed Gas Association, the Flexible Packaging Association, and the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association. No mysteries here.

But then there are the political groups, and they tend to skew fuzzy when it comes to names. What is the New America Foundation? Or the R Street Institute? Are they liberal or conservative? It's impossible to know until you ask them what they thought of the movie "Red Dawn."

Into these naming conventions comes the IRS scandal. It pivots on names and search terms. It could push the organizations of Washington toward even more nomenclatural obscurantism.

You recall that IRS agents screening applications for tax-exempt status were told to be on the lookout for groups with an obvious political agenda, and so they did keyword searches for political-sounding names. Among the red-flag terms were "tea party" and "patriot," according to the IRS inspector general. Last week, the Associated Press reported that the IRS also searched for "Israel," "progressive," and "occupy."

These organizations could have learned from older, established groups that have tended to adopt bland, easy-listening names, often including words such as "American," "Freedom," and "Family." These groups know that in Washington, terminology is half the battle, which is why legislation is invariably named with what seems to be a positive inflection — the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Affordable Care Act, etc.

For years, Republicans have said that Democrats are beholden to trial lawyers who oppose tort reform. In 2006, the Association of Trial Lawyers of America — which decades earlier had been

the National Association of Claimants' Counsel of America — decided to rename itself once again. It became the American Association for Justice.

Many political organizations go out of their way to avoid telegraphing any ideological leaning. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, for example, combines wordiness with edgelessness. Which, of course, is a style of its own. Keep 'em guessing. (The group is liberal.)

David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, points out that the Economic Policy Institute has union support and the Employment Policies Institute is backed by businesses. “They could flip their names and no one could tell the difference,” he says.

And what about Cato? You would think it's obvious whom the Cato Institute is named after, but the story is rather complicated. There were actually two Catos back in Roman times — the Elder and the Younger. In the 18th century, a couple of Englishmen wrote political tracts under the pseudonym Cato, in homage to the Younger. The Institute traces its intellectual heritage to those letters.

When Fred Smith founded the Competitive Enterprise Institute in 1984, he originally called it the Competitive Enterprise Center and designed a nice “CEC” logo. But he remembers a transformative conversation with a friend.

“You don't want to be a ‘center,’ ” the friend said.

“Why not?” Smith asked.

“Centers are where people go to lose weight.”

The “Competitive” and the “Enterprise” are two strong clues that CEI is a pro-business, anti-regulation think tank. But does the “Heritage” in Heritage Foundation tell you that it's a conservative think tank? Does “Brookings” connote anything at all?

Who knows the ideological agenda of the George C. Marshall Institute?

Aiding the trend toward obscure names is what you might call the KFC Effect — the tendency of groups to replace their names (as did Kentucky Fried Chicken) with initials. Thus the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is now just ASCD. The American Society for Industrial Security is now ASIS International. Perhaps the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association realized that there was something very 1990s about its name, because now it's called CTIA-the Wireless Association.

Some groups tweak their name slightly: The Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals is now called Strategic and Competitive Intelligence Professionals. Either way, it sounds like a group for people who want to tell you what they got on the SAT.

The International Apple Institute is now the U.S. Apple Association, or, as it wants to be known, USApple.

This town is filled with so many organizations, associations, foundations and societies that of course it also has an association of organizations — a kind of agglomeration of aggregators —

known as the American Society of Association Executives, headquartered on the 11th floor of an office building on Eye Street. Except it, too, has left words behind. It's just ASAE now.