



The Alarming Corruption of the Think Tanks

By: BRUCE BARTLETT - December 14, 2012

Item: U.S. Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) resigns from Congress to become president of the Heritage Foundation

Item: Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey resigns as chairman of FreedomWorks over \$12 million in secret cash payments to the organization, leaves with \$8 million payout.

These two items illustrate an important phenomenon now taking place in Washington: the end of the think tank as we know it. Rather than being institutions for scholarship and research, often employing people with advanced degrees in specialized fields, think tanks are becoming more like lobbying and public relations companies. Increasingly, their output involves advertising and grassroots political operations rather than books and studies. They are also becoming more closely allied with political parties and members of Congress, to whom they have become virtual adjuncts.

Historically, think tanks like the Brookings Institution were universities without teaching. Indeed, Brookings was originally established as a university and it still has a dot-edu web address. Its goal was to bridge the gap between academia and the policymaking establishment.

In the 1970s, this model began to change with the founding of the Heritage Foundation. Unlike Brookings, Heritage was not especially interested in research; its goal was to directly influence policy, especially on Capitol Hill.

Rather than produce books that might take years to write and become the definitive statement on some policy topic, Heritage produced short, often one-page analyses of issues that might be on the House or Senate floor that day.

What Heritage understood is that a little bit of timely information was vastly more valuable than something definitive that arrives too late to matter. Eventually, other think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute and the Center for American Progress adopted Heritage-style brief-but-timely reports in lieu of the more academic style of Brookings and the Hoover Institution.

This model worked very well and was greatly improved by the advent of the Internet, which allowed even faster dissemination of research. It also turned out that the sort of political immediacy of the new era of think tank studies very well suited the media as well as policymakers. Reporters writing on deadline often found Heritage issue briefs easier to digest than the academic quality research coming from Brookings.

Unfortunately, one consequence of this fact was a degrading in the quality of experts the media turned to for analysis. The views of world class scholars such as Henry Aaron of the Brookings Institution now carried no more weight than the simplistic talking points regurgitated by a Heritage Foundation analyst a couple of years out of college.

One reason for this is that it is tough to explain complex issues in areas such as health or taxation without sacrificing critical nuance. Scholars often become tongue-tied trying to speak in sound-bite and reporters have difficulty quoting them. It's much easier to quote a Heritage analyst only concerned with coating the Republican agenda in Congress with a thin gloss of think tank respectability.

The effectiveness of think tanks in advancing a political agenda increased their budgets and the salaries of their leaders. It's reported that Ed Feulner, retiring head of the Heritage Foundation, makes more than \$1 million per year. It's now common for think tank analysts to have six-figure salaries.

The next step was for think tanks to abandon any pretense of objectivity and scholarship and become full-blown political action committees. Now many think tanks, which are tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the tax code, have affiliated lobbying and PR operations that are not tax-exempt and are organized under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code.

Thus the Heritage Foundation has a C4 affiliate called Heritage Action for America, the Center for American Progress has one called the Center for American Progress Action Fund and so on. It's become common for people to move back and forth between government, lobbying, political campaigns and think tanks. This corruption of the academic ideal of the think tank would have been unthinkable not too many years ago. As Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin put it in commenting on Sen. DeMint's move from politics to think tank head, "By embracing him, Heritage, to a greater extent than ever before, becomes a political instrument in service of extremism, not a well-respected think tank and source of scholarship."

There is nothing per se wrong with this except when policymakers, those in the media and general public don't realize that think tanks have gone from having philosophical orientations that might be liberal or conservative to being effective arms of political parties. I think a line has been crossed and for that reason I seldom rely much on think tank research other than to find out what the partisan line of the day is on some issue. Another problem is that members of Congress now seem content to farm out their analytical needs to think tanks rather than rely on in-house analysts. For example, two years ago Rep. Paul Ryan had the Heritage Foundation cost-out his budget plan rather than having it done by the Congressional Budget Office, Congress's official budget scorekeeper.

This outsourcing of congressional research, especially on the Republican side, has been so successful that some conservatives are now questioning the need for organizations such as the Congressional Research Service. There have also been efforts to undermine its independence and make it subservient to the partisan agendas of the congressional leadership.

I think this is a very dangerous trend. Policymaking must, ultimately, rest on a foundation of facts, data, analysis based on scientific methods, and be as free as possible of partisan bias. But these days, policymakers, like the public and the media, care more for congenial opinions that suite their partisan or philosophical predisposition than solid research that may undermine simplistic but deeply held opinions.

Famously, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said that people are entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts. My personal corollary is that people are entitled to their own opinions, but not to have them taken seriously. The politicization of the think tank makes it harder for even serious people to discern the distinction between fact or truth and partisan spin. Policymaking is suffering as a consequence.