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FIRST IMPRESSIONS, SECOND THOUGHTS: REFLECTIONS ON THE CHANGING ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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Introduction

Until recently, it was not uncommon for scholars studying America's foreign relations to overlook the role of think tanks in the policy-making process and their efforts to engage key decision makers and the public about a wide range of global issues. Although political scientists have devoted considerable attention to how interest groups, lobbyists and the media attempt to shape policy debates and political outcomes on Capitol Hill, in the White House and throughout the bureaucracy, rarely have they considered what impact intellectuals residing at some of the nation's most distinguished think tanks have in influencing America's conduct in world affairs. However, much has changed in the past twenty years as think tanks have come to occupy a more visible presence on the political landscape. With approximately 2,500 think tanks in the United States and an additional 4,000 think tanks worldwide, scholars can no longer afford to ignore their involvement in the political arena.

As scholarly interest in the role of think tanks has intensified, several issues relating to their behaviour have been addressed. In addition to grappling with the defining characteristics of think tanks and how they differ from interest groups and other types of non-governmental organizations that populate the policy

research community, close attention is now being paid to the types of think tanks that exist in the United States and in other advanced and developing countries. Consideration is also being given to the various public and private channels on which these institutions rely to convey their ideas to key stakeholders, including policy-makers, journalists, academics and leaders in industry and commerce. Yet, despite the advancements that have been made in better understanding the role and behaviour of think tanks, far more research needs to be undertaken before we can properly assess their impact or influence in shaping public opinion and public policy.

In a 2006 book entitled, *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy,* I argue that scholars need to think more critically and systematically about how and under what conditions think tanks can influence the way people and governments think about policy issues. While it is understandable why directors of major think tanks in the United States such as the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute often make bold claims about how influential their organizations are, those who observe their activities need to pay closer attention to what they are actually able to achieve. I understand that directors of think tanks are under constant pressure to find creative and innovative ways to secure funding from potential donors. This is why they often rely on metrics such as media exposure, the frequency with which their scholars testify before congressional committees and the number of their staff who have been appointed to high-level government positions, to foster the illusion of how much influence their institutions enjoy. Still, as tempting as it may be to equate the public visibility of think tanks with their policy influence, scholars must avoid falling into this all familiar trap. Those captivated by the amount of public exposure prominent think tanks in the United States enjoy may indeed walk away with the impression that these organizations wield enormous influence. But, as we will discover in the pages that follow, understanding how think tanks exercise influence in the foreign policy-making process is not always easy to decipher. Think tanks can and often do have an impact in informing and shaping key policy debates. The challenge is to discover the extent to which they have become involved in transmitting ideas to important policy makers and whether or not they have left a fingerprint on major policy initiatives.

The purpose of this paper is not to chronicle the evolution of think tanks in the United States, nor is it to provide an overview of the many channels on which

these organizations rely to participate in the American foreign policy-making process. Such studies have been undertaken elsewhere (Abelson, 1996, 2006 and 2009; Rich 2004). Instead, it is my purpose to help fill a void in the literature by providing a detailed case study of how a select group of think tanks became immersed in the most important foreign policy issue to confront the United States in the new millennium – the global war on terror. In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the American and foreign media, hundreds of interest groups and several other non-state and non-governmental organizations took part in the national conversation over the war on terror. While a study detailing the involvement of these and other actors in the foreign policy-making process would most certainly raise critical questions about the impact of ideas on the Bush administration, in this article I will focus solely on how one set of institutions — think tanks — sought to leave an indelible mark on U.S. foreign policy. In doing so, we can further explore how policy experts — who are neither appointed, or elected to public office — can become important actors in the foreign policy-making process.

> THINK TANKS CAN AND OFTEN DO HAVE AN IMPACT IN INFORMING AND SHAPING KEY POLICY DEBATES.

In particular, this paper will explore how a small group of think tanks sought to influence U.S. defense and foreign policy during the Bush administration. Particular emphasis will be placed on how the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) were able to share their insights on how to wage war in Iraq and in other conflict-ridden countries with key advisers in the Bush White House.

While there is little doubt that think tanks specializing in defense and foreign policy made a concerted effort to influence President Bush's thinking during his tumultuous terms in office, it is important to clarify how and under what circumstances they appeared to have had an impact. For instance, shortly after the United States invaded Iraq, journalists in North America and in Europe claimed that PNAC had, in effect, become the architect of Bush's foreign policy. However, as the war

progressed, it appeared that scholars at AEI may have played an even more important role in convincing the Bush administration to not only stay the course in Iraq, but to increase the number of troops being deployed. Support for the 'surge' in Iraq has been closely linked to several projects undertaken at AEI.

Rather than making sweeping claims about how influential some think tanks are in official policy-making circles, scholars must be better equipped to analyze the nature and degree of their involvement. As will be revealed, some think tanks have been able to make important contributions to foreign policy by generating timely and policy relevant studies that promote lively discussion and debate among key stakeholders. In doing so, they have made great strides in informing and educating the public and policy-makers about how to meet the many challenges confronting them in the twenty-first century. However, it will become equally apparent that establishing close ties to high-level decision-makers does not guarantee that think tanks will be able to achieve policy influence. Unless and until policy-makers are prepared to listen to their advice, there is little think tanks can do to translate policy recommendations into concrete public policy. And even when policy-makers make overtures to the think tank community and solicit their input, as members from the National Security Council did during the second term of the Bush administration, there is no guarantee that think tanks will accept the baton (Feaver 2011). For think tanks to succeed in the ever changing marketplace of ideas, policy-makers on Capitol Hill, in the White House and throughout the bureaucracy, must be prepared to trust their judgement. Otherwise, scholars residing at think tanks will be left to debate among themselves and members of the attentive public about the virtues and vices of U.S. foreign policy.

In the first section of the paper, a brief discussion of the many methodological obstacles scholars need to address in studying think tank influence will be provided. This will be followed by a detailed case study of how PNAC and a handful of other conservative think tanks attempted to influence both policy discussions and public debates over the war on terror. Finally, I will discuss why it is important to understand the management style of presidents in any assessment of think tank influence at the highest levels of government.

Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks: Challenges and Opportunities

As scholarly interest in the role of think tanks in the policy-making process has grown over the past two decades, far more consideration has been given to the various channels on which they rely to communicate their ideas. It is widely known, for instance, that think tanks depend on the media, the internet, workshops, conferences, seminars, as well as on a wide range of publications targeted at different stakeholders, to promote their views. It is also generally accepted that although think tanks vary enormously in terms of size, financial and staff resources, research programs and ideological orientation, the 2,500 or more think tanks headquartered in the United States share a common desire to shape public opinion and public policy (McGann and Johnson 2006). However, as noted, while several scholars have carefully chronicled the evolution and proliferation of American think tanks since the turn of the twentieth century, little attention has been devoted to evaluating their policy impact.

Scholars who study think tanks acknowledge, among other things, that assessing or measuring the influence of think tanks is inherently problematic. They realize that even the most basic questions about how to study policy influence give rise to a host of methodological concerns. Should policy influence be measured by tracking the number of times think tanks and/or their resident scholars are referred to or interviewed by the media? Would keeping a close watch on the number of publications downloaded on their web sites, the number of appearances their scholars make before legislative committees, and the number of publications produced in a given year provide a more accurate measurement of a think tank's influence? Or, alternatively, should we simply record the number of think tank staff appointed to high-level positions in the government to confirm the level of think tank influence? Put simply, do some metrics or indicators provide a more accurate measurement of policy influence than others?

Although data on each of these indicators may reveal the amount of exposure think tanks and their staff generate, they cannot confirm how much or little influence policy institutes have in shaping public opinion and/or the policy preferences and choices of policy-makers. Data on media citations, for instance, may tell us which institutes are effective at making the news. However, the frequency of media citations provide little insight into whether the comments made by scholars at think

tanks have helped shape, reinforce, clarify or change the minds of policy-makers and the public. Indeed, we cannot even be certain that policy-makers or members of the attentive public are even familiar with what various think tanks have stated in the media. Similarly, when think tanks testify before legislative committees, we can rarely confirm if their statements made a difference in how policy-makers approached particular policy issues. Other indicators such as the number of publications think tanks produce or how many of their staff receive high-level appointments, may tell scholars even less about the influence of think tanks in policy-making.

> When terrorists did strike the United States, policy-makers had no alternative — at least no viable alternative but to react.

In addition to considering how to measure policy influence, or if in fact, it can be measured at all, scholars must overcome several other obstacles in evaluating the impact of think tanks. They must, for example, determine how to isolate the views of think tanks from dozens of other individuals and governmental and non-governmental organizations that actively seek to influence public policy. As the policy-making community becomes increasingly congested, tracing the origin of an idea to a particular individual or organization gives rise to its own set of problems. For some students of public policy, examining the various organizations and individuals who coalesce around particular policy issues, offers a useful point of departure (Heclo 1978). By studying the interaction between policy-makers and representatives from non-governmental organizations in specific policy communities, some important insights can be drawn. In addition to identifying the organizations and individuals most actively involved in discussing a particular policy concern with government officials, scholars can, through interviews and surveys, determine which views generated the most attention. Still, unless policy-makers acknowledge that their policy decisions were based primarily on recommendations from a particular individual or organization, something they are rarely inclined to do, it is difficult to determine how much influence participants in the policy process have had.

Since it is unlikely that these and other methodological obstacles will easily be overcome, it may be more appropriate to discuss the relevance of think tanks in the policy-making process, than to speculate about how much policy influence they exercise. In other words, rather than trying to state categorically that, on the basis of a handful of indicators, some think tanks appeared to be more influential than others, scholars should determine if, when and under what conditions, think tanks can and have contributed to specific public policy discussions and to shaping the broader policy-making environment. In the following section, we can begin to answer these questions by assessing the extent to which a small group of think tanks became involved in policy discussions and public debates around the war on terror. This case study will help to illustrate that think tanks can and do exercise influence in different ways and at different times in the policy-making process.

The War of Words over the War on Terror

Despite the increase in terrorist activity during the 1980s and 1990s, little was being done in the intelligence community to protect the United States against future attacks, a concern expressed by Stephen Flynn of the Council on Foreign Relations. In an article published in his think tank's flagship journal, *Foreign Affairs,* before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Flynn outlined a scenario whereby Osama bin Laden "might exploit our perilously exposed transportation system to smuggle and detonate a weapon of mass destruction on our soil" (Flynn 2004, xi). To his delight, the article sparked interest in the policy-making community and eventually led to briefings about the vulnerability of America's transportation system. Unfortunately, Flynn's fears about terrorism and the unwillingness of policy-makers to take necessary precautions to protect the American homeland were not widely shared. As he points out, "The common refrain I heard was, 'Americans need a crisis to act. Nothing will change until we have a serious act of terrorism on U.S. soil'" (xii).

When terrorists did strike the United States, policy-makers had no alternative — at least no viable alternative but to react. How they have reacted, however, and the effectiveness of their response, has and continues to spawn an intense debate in the academic and think tank communities in the United States and abroad. As the initial shock and horror of what occurred on September 11, 2001 began to wear off, scholars in the nation's think tanks and universities took time to reflect on why the attacks took place and what the United States had to

do to protect its citizens. For policy experts on the left, the story line was clear: Islamic terrorists had made their way to the United States to punish America's leaders for their foreign policy in the Middle East and in particular, their steadfast support for Israel. Once the United States adopted a more even-handed approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and abandoned its imperialist goals, the threat of terrorism would be significantly reduced (Callinicos 2003; Ross and Ross 2004). If the United States did this, it would no longer have to worry about the Bin Ladens of the world. Order, rather than chaos and fear, would come to reflect the state of the international community. As an added bonus, America's strained relations with the United Nations and with much of Western Europe would improve dramatically, and the rising tide of anti-Americanism sweeping across the globe would gradually subside.

For those on the right who believed that this solution could only work in fairy tales, America's response to dealing with terrorism had to convey a very different message. Rather than coddling terrorists and the states that either directly or indirectly supported them, what was needed, according to many conservative policy experts, was a clear and forceful demonstration of American resolve. As David Frum and Richard Perle of AEI state in their book, *An End to Evil* (2004, 4):

> The war on terror is not over. In many ways, it has barely begun. Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas still plot murder, and money still flows from donors worldwide to finance them. Mullahs preach jihad from the pulpits of mosques from Bengal to Brooklyn. Iran and North Korea are working frantically to develop nuclear weapons. While our enemies plot, our allies dither and carp, and much of our own government remains ominously unready for the fight. We have much to do and scant time in which to do it.

For Frum and Perle, the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 was a good start. Among other things, it enabled the United States and its coalition partners to topple the Taliban regime and to destroy Bin Laden's terrorist training camps. An even better idea, according to the two AEI residents, was invading Iraq in 2003, a much overdue intervention that allowed the United States to remove another dictator from its roster of enemies. However, they insist that for America to win the war on terror much more has to be done, including removing terrorist mullahs in Iran, ending the terrorist regime in Syria and adopting tighter security measures

at home (Frum and Perle 2004), recommendations that if adopted would not doubt lead to new and more virulent waves of anti-Americanism.

Frum and Perle's recipe for defeating terrorism has found strong support among several conservative members of Congress and think tank scholars, including the Brookings Institute's Ken Pollack whose book, *The Threatening Storm* (2002), made a strong case for the invasion of Iraq. But, not surprisingly, their recommendations for future interventions have generated considerable controversy in more liberal policy-making circles. Growing concern over President Barack Obama's exit strategy for Iraq, combined with growing concerns over Iran and the questionable future of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, has produced little tolerance for additional conflicts. Regardless of how well or poorly Frum and Perle's grand plan for winning the war on terror has been received, their insights help to shed light on the complexity of waging a war that, according to several critics must be fought, but may never be won. Their well-publicized views also help to explain why many conservative think tanks should assume some responsibility for creating a political climate that fosters anti-American sentiments.

In their ongoing efforts to dissect both the Bush and Obama administrations' handling of the war on terror, journalists and scholars will continue to offer different explanations for what motivates American foreign policy. They may also comment on the think tanks that are best positioned and equipped to influence the policies of the incoming administration, and may again succumb to the temptation of assuming that proximity to those in power guarantees policy influence. This was the mistake that several journalists, scholars and pundits made in claiming that the blueprint for the Bush administration's foreign policy was drawn entirely by PNAC.

By the time George W. Bush entered the Oval Office in 2001, it had become Washington's worst kept secret: a small think tank with modest resources, but powerful connections to key members of the Bush team, was rumored to have developed a comprehensive foreign policy for the incoming administration. The think tank that had become a favourite topic of discussion for journalists covering Washington politics and for pundits searching for any clues that would help them predict Bush's behaviour in his first 100 days in office, was not the Heritage Foundation or AEI, the darlings of the conservative movement. The heir apparent was PNAC, a neo-conservative think tank whose foray into the policy-making community in 1997 sparked considerable

interest among, and support from, several high-level policy-makers, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Scooter Libby and Jeb Bush, the former Governor of Florida and the president's younger brother. If there were any doubts about which sources of information would help the president manage American foreign policy after September 11, 2001, they were put to rest when the decision was made to invade Iraq. When journalists and scholars skimmed through PNAC's September 2000 study, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, they thought they had discovered the key to the Holy Grail. In its study, PNAC made several policy recommendations that closely resembled initiatives being pursued by the Bush administration. In fact, the recommendations they made four months before President Bush assumed power (PNAC 2000), such as "defending the homeland and fight[ing] and win[ning] multiple, simultaneous major theater wars," may as well have been taken directly from his play book. But journalists did not even have to wait for the release of PNAC's 2000 study to make this connection. In an open letter to President Bill Clinton on January 26, 1998, several prominent members of PNAC, including Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Richard Armitage, James Woolsey, Paul Wolofowitz, and William Bennett urged the president to remove "Saddam Hussein's regime from power" (PNAC, 1998).

Could Bush's posture toward the Middle East and PNAC's recommendations have been just a coincidence? Not according to several journalists and scholars who paid close attention to the ties between PNAC, members of Bush's inner circle and the foreign policy the United States had embraced. Writing in *The Guardian* in the fall of 2003, Michael Meacher, a British Labour Member of Parliament, stated:

> We now know that a blueprint for the creation of a global Pax Americana was drawn up for Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Jeb Bush, and Lewis Libby. The document, entitled *Rebuilding America's Defences* [italics added], was written in September 2000 by the neoconservative think tank, Project for the New American Century (PNAC).

The plan shows Bush's cabinet intended to take military control of the Gulf region whether or not Saddam Hussein was in power. It says, "while the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam

Hussein." The PNAC blueprint supports an earlier document attributed to Wolfowitz and Libby which said the U.S. must "discourage advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role." Meacher's assessment of PNAC is similar in tone to the one presented by Andrew Austin (quoted in Hamm 2005, 55) who writes, "'Not content with waiting for the next Republican administration, Wolfowitz and several other intellectuals formed PNAC, a think tank 'to make the case and rally support for American global leadership.' Top corporate, military, and political figures aligned themselves with PNAC...Powerful economic interests [also] threw their support behind PNAC.'"

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Similar comments about PNAC's origins and its strong ties to the policy-making establishment and to the business community continue to make their way into the academic literature on the neo-conservative network in the United States (Halper and Clarke 2004; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2004). However, as discussed below, evaluating the extent of PNAC's influence is not as straightforward as Meacher and others maintain.

If It Looks Like a Duck and Swims Like a Duck. . . PNAC's Influence in Perspective

Gary Schmitt, the president of PNAC and a senior adviser to Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain, spent years in the academic community and in government before running a think tank. He understood the world of Washington politics and how decisions were made in Congress, in the White House and in the bureaucracy. And he understood and appreciated that the right ideas presented at the right time could make a profound difference.

Founded in 1997 to promote American global leadership, PNAC spent its early years developing a new conservative approach to foreign policy. This approach or strategy was based on the belief that the United States could and should become a 'benevolent

global hegemon.' As William Kristol and Robert Kagan (1996, 20, 23) stated in their essay, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," "American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible. To achieve this goal, the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence." Kristol and Kagan's article struck a responsive chord with several conservative policy-makers and policy experts who encouraged the authors to create an organization that would promote their vision of American foreign policy. As Schmitt points out, "we got approached by a lot of people saying why don't you try to institutionalize this?" (Abelson 2006, 214) After Kristol and Kagan convinced Schmitt to become PNAC's president, they secured sufficient funding to launch the new institute.

Building on the success of their 1996 article, Kagan and Kristol, both project directors at PNAC, published an edited collection in 2000 entitled, *Present Dangers*, which further explored the options and opportunities available to the United States as it set out to redefine its role in the international community. Among the many topics addressed by the long and impressive list of contributors were: regime change in Iraq, Israel and the peace process, and missile defense, all of which became hot button issues for President Bush. But it was the release of *Rebuilding America's Defenses* in September 2000, a 76-page document endorsed by several people who would come to occupy senior positions in the Bush administration that propelled PNAC into the national spotlight.

Written by Thomas Donnelly, Donald Kagan and Gary Schmitt, the report was intended to encourage debate among policy-makers and the public about America's military strength and how it could be harnessed to achieve the country's foreign policy goals. Based on a series of seminars in which participants with specialized areas of expertise were encouraged to exchange ideas about a wide range of defense and foreign policy issues, the document left few stones unturned. But did this document or blueprint as it is often described, amount to an 'extreme makeover' of U.S. foreign policy, or did it simply propose some minor modifications? Moreover, were PNAC's plans for advancing American national security interests in a world in which the United States could market itself as a 'benevolent global hegemon' the product of original thinking, or were their ideas recycled from other sources?

The PNAC document, as Schmitt acknowledged, was intended to provide a more coherent conservative vision of American foreign policy. "We weren't satisfied with what the isolationists and realists were saying about foreign policy [and felt] that they were very much drawing the United States back from the world at large... We thought that even though the cold war had ended, the principles of conservative foreign policy enunciated during the Reagan years, were still applicable to the world today." In this sense, the PNAC study offered new and innovative ways of promoting American interests in the post cold war era. Ironically, when the study came out, "its real impact was on the Clinton folks, not on the Bush people" (Abelson 2006, 215-16).

But when it comes to evaluating the work of his institute, Schmitt, like any responsible policy entrepreneur, can ill afford to be modest. "I think we do a good job of getting our vision on the table because I think we're very good at what we do... We get a lot of feedback from editorialists and you can tell they read the stuff. If you make a poignant argument and present a case that's well reasoned and brief, you have a lot of impact, or you can at least have some impact" (Abelson 2006, 217).

Scholars studying PNAC's ascendancy in the political arena cannot possibly overlook the fact that several of the original signatories to its statement of principles received high-level positions in the Bush administration. As Ted Koppel, formerly of ABC News pointed out, you do not have to be a conspiracy theorist to acknowledge the intimate ties between some of Bush's closest advisers and PNAC (Abelson 2006, 217). Still, acknowledging these important connections is a far cry from making the claim that PNAC was the architect of Bush's foreign policy. The president appointed Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and other foreign policy experts to serve in his administration, not because they were card carrying members of PNAC or of any other think tank. They were recruited because they were people Bush could trust.

PNAC may have been considered the architect of President Bush's foreign policy, but there were several other think tanks in and around the nation's capital that had become preoccupied with assessing the domestic and global implications of the war on terror. The Brookings Institution, Rand, the Heritage Foundation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations and a number of other institutes specializing in defense and foreign policy had produced dozens of studies, held workshops, seminars and conferences and testified before congressional

committees and subcommittees about various aspects of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, it was difficult to pick up a newspaper, listen to the news or watch one of many political talk shows without hearing the views of policy experts from various think tanks. Interestingly enough, while several think tanks struggled for air time, others were being secretly courted by senior officials in the Bush administration.

...WHILE SEVERAL THINK TANKS STRUGGLED FOR AIR TIME, OTHERS WERE BEING SECRETLY COURTED BY SENIOR OFFICIALS IN THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION.

President Bush and his small circle of advisers known as "the vulcans" were well aware of PNAC's recommendations for revamping the U.S. military (Mann 2004). Since several of Bush's key advisers had lent their name to PNAC's recently released study, it is likely they would have raised any pertinent ideas contained in the report with the president. However, it appears that PNAC did not have all the answers the president and his advisers were looking for. Shortly after the terrorist attacks, Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense, contacted his old friend, Christopher DeMuth, who, until recently, was the longtime president of AEI. His reason for contacting DeMuth, according to veteran journalist Bob Woodward, was to ask him to form a working group of the nation's top Middle East experts to provide the Bush administration with guidance on how to address the political and military problems associated with waging war in this historically-troubled region (Woodward 2006, 83-85).

DeMuth agreed to assemble the working group on short notice and on November 29, 2001, the group met "at a secure conference center in Virginia for a weekend of discussion" (Woodward 2006, 84). After hours of discussion, DeMuth produced a seven-page, single-spaced document entitled "Delta of Terrorism," which included several policy recommendations. Although DeMuth was not prepared to provide Woodward with a copy of the document, he stated that "We concluded that a confrontation with Saddam was inevitable. He was a gathering threat — the most menacing, active

and unavoidable threat. We agreed that Saddam would have to leave the scene before the problem would be addressed" (Woodward 2006, 84).

The conclusions reached by the group did not take long to make their way to the president's top advisers. According to Woodward, Vice-President Cheney noted that the report helped the president to focus "on the malignancy" of the Middle East and National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice found the report to be "very, very persuasive" (Woodward 2006, 85). Although several members of the group DeMuth assembled were not affiliated with AEI, it is difficult to ignore the important role the think tank president played in generating and disseminating ideas to the Bush White House. This would not be the last time AEI had a profound impact on helping the Bush administration manage the war on terror.

In December 2006, two AEI scholars, retired general Jack Keane, a former vice chief of staff of the Army and a member of the advisory Defense Policy Review Board and Fred Kagan, a military historian, met with Vice-President Cheney to discuss their plans for a 'surge' in Iraq. Based on months of work they conducted at AEI, Keane and Kagan found an ally in Cheney and in Senator John McCain, who played a key role in selling the idea to President Bush (Barnes 2008; DeMuth 2007). Although the involvement of AEI in promoting the surge warrants a detailed case study, for now, it is useful in illustrating an earlier point — that scholars must be careful in making claims about the nature and extent of think tank influence. As noted, while PNAC should be credited with bringing scholars and policy-makers together to reconsider how to pursue U.S. defense and foreign policy interests in the twenty-first century, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this organization was solely responsible for laying the foundation for U.S. foreign policy during the Bush years. There were several other think tanks, including AEI, that played a key role in disseminating ideas to senior officials in the Bush administration. However, as the final section will discuss, even if think tanks are equipped with the best ideas, they cannot hope to leave an indelible mark on U.S. foreign policy unless the president and his principal advisers are prepared to listen.

Is Anybody Listening? President Bush and His Foreign Policy

If anyone needed a crash course in international relations, it was George W. Bush. The eldest son of the 41st president of the United States shared his father's love of baseball, but showed little interest in world affairs. This was reflected in the limited number of trips Bush took abroad. By the time he became president in 2001, "Bush's foreign travels [had] been limited to three visits to Mexico, two trips to Israel, a three-day Thanksgiving visit in Rome with one of his daughters in 1998 and a six-week excursion to China with his parents in 1975 when his father was the U.S. envoy to Beijing" (Associated Press, 2000).

What Bush did not learn about foreign policy on his travels or from his advisers, he learned on the job. When terrorists struck the United States on September 11, 2001, millions of Americans prayed that he was a quick study. To the surprise of many political pundits, including AEI's David Frum (2003), a former speech writer for President Bush, the president was up to the challenge. According to Frum, like many world leaders, Bush found his voice in a time of crisis — he had come of age. The inexperienced and untested leader, who months earlier, could not answer some basic questions about foreign affairs, had become America's war president, a position that in time he would come to relish. According to Daalder and Lindsay (2003, 2), "As Air Force One flew over Iraq, Bush could say that he had become an extraordinarily effective foreign policy president. He had dominated the American political scene like few others. He had been the unquestioned master of his own administration. He had gained the confidence of the American people and persuaded them to follow his lead."

Shortly after Bush's campaign against terrorism went into full-swing, his leadership style had clearly begun to change. The insecurity and sense of vulnerability that accompanied him to the Oval Office was replaced by a growing confidence and bravado that other commanders-in-chief, including Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt, had exhibited (DeConde 2000). No longer content assuming the role of student listening diligently to his teachers, Bush began to assert his leadership. Although he continued to rely on the advice of Condoleeza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld and the other 'vulcans,' it became clear to those outside the inner sanctum that for the most part, the president had little interest in expanding his circle of advisors. To put it bluntly, for policy experts residing

in think tanks and at universities, the foreign policy -making process at the highest levels of government was, for all intents and purposes, closed. As Daalder observed (Abelson 2006, 220-21):

> This is a very, very, very closed system. I think the president does rely on a small group of people [but] I don't think he's listening to the arguments. I think the arguments in of themselves are being muted more and more. When [Bush] became president, he was always in receiving mode. He'd just sit there and listen. Now he's in broadcasting mode. He spends all his time telling other people what he thinks. Foreign leaders who met with him in his first year thought he was interested in listening to them and now it's all about telling them what he thinks needs to be done. He still listens, but he already knows what he wants. I think he's becoming more confident that he knows what he's doing and he doesn't need anybody's advice. So for these reasons, it is true that the process is not particularly open to outside influence.

The relatively closed policy-making environment that came to characterize the Bush White House may have impeded the access of policy experts from outside government, but it does not appear to have undermined Bush's ability to make policy decisions. Rather, limiting the number of participants involved in high-level policy matters has allowed the president to wage the war on terror more effectively. According to Daalder and Lindsay (2003), the president had a clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish and would not allow even his closest and most trusted advisers to interfere with his agenda. Moreover, contrary to the assertions of countless journalists and scholars that a small band of neo-conservatives had hijacked the Oval Office, they claim that the president remained the master of his destiny. As the two think tank scholars (Daalder and Lindsay 2003, 16) point out:

> The man from Midland [Texas] was not a figurehead in someone else's revolution. He may have entered the Oval Office not knowing which general ran Pakistan, but during his first thirty months in office he was the puppeteer, not the puppet. He governed as he said he would on the campaign trail. He actively solicited the counsel of seasoned advisers, and he tolerated if not encouraged vigorous disagreement among them. When necessary, he overruled them. George W. Bush led his own revolution.

If President Bush indeed exercised as much control over foreign policy as the two authors claim, it stands to reason why the majority of think tanks and other NGOs interested in defense and foreign policy issues had difficulty gaining access to the highest levels of government. Clearly, there have been exceptions as the discussion about PNAC and AEI reveal. But, if Bush's management of foreign policy was as restrictive as some have suggested, what does this tell us about the ability of think tanks to wield policy influence?

Summary

Think tanks prepared for the debates over the war on terror much like armies prepare for battle. They took stock of their resources, assessed their capabilities, designed a strategy and determined the most effective ways in which it could be executed. Although their efforts may not always have paid off, think tanks have and continue to stake out and defend their positions in the war of ideas. Through their publications, conferences and seminars, congressional testimony and ongoing interaction with the media, America's leading defense and foreign policy think tanks have made a significant contribution to shaping the national conversation.

How much of an impact think tanks have had in influencing the substance and direction of the Bush administration's campaign to eradicate terrorism is a question that has yet to produce any definitive answers. In evaluating the extent to which they have made a difference, scholars must, like any competent detective, review what they know and what they do not know about the involvement of think tanks in this controversial policy debate. What scholars who have monitored the debates over various aspects of the war on terror know is that several think tanks, including RAND, CSIS, AEI, Brookings, Heritage, PNAC, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment and the Center for Security Policy (CSP) have relied on multiple channels to convey their ideas to the public and to policy-makers on a wide range of issues. Among other things, think tanks have discussed the problems and prospects of homeland security, the advantages and disadvantages of supporting a surge in Iraq, the need to overhaul intelligence agencies both at home and abroad and whether the U.S. needs to mend fences with its European allies. In short, scholars acknowledge that when it comes to ideas about how to fight a successful war against terrorists, think tanks have spoken loudly and clearly.

Several scholars and journalists have also acknowledged that some think tanks have been better positioned than others to capture the attention of policy-makers. Indeed, the consensus is that no think tank was more effective at communicating its ideas to the Bush White House than PNAC. In the press and in much of the academic literature that has surfaced since President Bush assumed office, a lot has been made of the strong ties between PNAC and key members of his administration. Although PNAC was disbanded in July 2009 and rebranded as the Foreign Policy Initiative, much is still made of how closely the recommendations outlined in several of its publications and letters to policy-makers, resembled the policies Bush has pursued in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

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By probing more deeply into the relationship between PNAC and the Bush administration, I was able to uncover further information. For instance, I learned that the ideological underpinnings of the Bush doctrine, which among other things, helped to justify the war in Iraq, did not originate at PNAC, but were closely linked to recommendations made by several members of his cabinet. As Gary Schmitt acknowledged (Abelson 2006, 217), "It's perfectly obvious that Bush's war on terror was not something we articulated before 9/11... Bush pulled together a strategic vision based on the advice he received from Cheney, Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld." I also learned that AEI played an important role in advising the Bush administration on several key issues related to fighting the war on terror.

In a recent interview with Peter Feaver (2011), a former Special Advisor for Strategic Planning and Institutional Reform on the National Security Council, more information about the relationship between think tanks and the foreign policy-making establishment under President Bush has come to light. Recognizing the growing frustration among policy experts in the think tank community over their lack of access to the Bush White House, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley instructed his staff in 2005 to begin coordinating several meetings with a select group of Washington-based think tanks. The purpose of the meetings was to

solicit input from leading experts on a range of foreign and defense policy issues. But, according to Feaver, this initiative had little success in part because Bush had lost the confidence of the think tank community. To put it bluntly, "it was too little, too late."

When Barack Obama ran for the presidency in 2008, he clearly understood the importance of reaching out to intellectuals in the think tank world. Several scholars from prominent think tanks, including the Brookings Institution and the Center for a New American Security, made their way into the Obama administration and continue to advise him on various foreign policy issues. Even after the successful military mission that resulted in the death of Bin Laden, America's war on terror is far from over.

Over the course of the past thirty years, think tanks have come to play a more active and visible role in U.S. foreign policy. As a result, it is critically important for students of foreign policy to understand how they seek to become involved in the foreign policy-making process and what, if any, impact they may have had in shaping public opinion and the policy preferences and choices of leaders. Determining how much or little impact think tanks have had will likely continue to give rise to a host of methodological issues — issues that unfortunately, are not easy to resolve. However, the alternative — to simply make unwarranted claims about the nature of think tank influence — is a path we cannot afford to take. Think tanks will continue to grow in number and in stature in the United States and beyond. The challenge will be to determine the most effective ways to evaluate their contribution to public policy.

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