

Carol Beatty
October 10, 2005
PA306: Policy Actor Article

\$1 Billion For Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s by David Callahan
for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, March 1999

This article examines the growth and influence of conservative think tanks since their emergence in the early 1970s, focusing on “key policy and operational foci of 20 top conservative think tanks working the national and international scenes” (David Bothwell, President NCRP, p. 1). The author explores the significant increase in power of conservative think tanks in the 1990s and the strategies they employ to create and wield that power.

- 20 conservative think tanks studied: American Enterprise Institute, American Legislative Exchange Council, Atlas Economic Research Foundation, Cato Institute, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Citizens for a Sound Economy, Competitive Enterprise Institute, Empower America, Employment Policy Foundation, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Family Research Council, Free Congress Research and Education Foundation, Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institution, Hudson Institute, Manhattan Institute, National Center for Policy Analysis, National Center for Public Policy Research, Progress and Freedom Foundation, Reason Foundation.
- \$\$\$ - 1996 expenditures by those institutions = \$158.1 million. Spending is growing rapidly. Fundraising capability is strong and increasing.
- Old-style think tanks: research and fundraising; knowledge-based, problem-focused.
Contemporary think tanks: “operate like ‘extra-party’ organizations” with policy research and development, fundraising, marketing and communications, lobbying at national level, leveraging change at local and state levels, grassroots mobilization and constituency development arms.
- Ideological worldview: privatization-focused and market-driven. “Conservatives enlarged the think tank business while openly assuming that such institutes were not places where people developed new ideas but where they advanced a truth already known” (David Ricci, political scientist, p. 9).
- Initiatives: privatize Social Security and Medicare, ease up environmental and consumer safety regulations, disempower organized labor and workplace safety laws, dominate public policy debate and advocacy, privatize education, shrink government.
- Welfare to Workfare: 1996 – major victory. (Also, removal of Clinton’s healthcare initiative from agenda, telecommunications deregulation.)
- Why so powerful? Demobilization of American electorate, special interest money, media’s influence, political parties as top-down fund raisers rather than citizen mobilizers, declining influence of organized labor, failure of left/liberals to articulate and promote overarching philosophy and tendency toward single-issue focus.
- Lack of competition: “There is no mainstream or left-of-center parallel to the critical mass of conservative policy institutions currently operating in the United States today. Conservative policy institutions tend to be multi-issue organizations with multi-million dollar budgets, powerful corporate boards, and significant media access. They work along dual tracks, promoting a broad public philosophy while tying specific policy initiatives to it. They also tend to pursue bold structural reforms with the potential to change both the substance of policy and the rules of the political game for decades to come” (p. 6).

Callahan analyzes conservative think tanks' influence on several key areas and portrays how think tanks have effected "the transformation of America's public policy agenda by advancing new intellectual frameworks to justify paradigmatic change, by translating broad ideological concepts into detailed policy blueprints, and by legitimizing conservative ideas with expert voices and research products," thus bringing "previously fringe or extremely ideological ideas...into the mainstream of political debate" (p. 11). Callahan explores think tanks' influence on:

- Welfare
- Social Security and Medicare
- Deregulation and Environment
- Taxes
- Education

Callahan highlights conservative think tanks' tactics:

- Marketing and communications that target a) policy makers, b) media, c) internet communications
- Leveraging change at state and local levels
- Sources of financial support a) foundations, b) individuals, c) corporations.
- Internal governance – characterized by elite leadership, board of directors (fundraising, oversight of goal-setting and management, and "opening access to other centers of power in American society") (p. 34).

Callahan's conclusions:

- Conservative think tanks have seen major victories since 1994 "conservative takeover of Congress" (p. 34), including telecommunications deregulation, Kyoto Summit on global warming, tax breaks for the wealthy, shrinking government, etc.
- Conservative think tanks are well-positioned structurally to continue to influence public policy in the future.
- Conservative think tanks invest in human capital, supporting young policy specialists (often even more "ideologically aggressive" (p. 37) than the founders), thus ensuring future leadership.
- Conservative think tanks have built strong networks at state and local levels along with powerful coordination mechanisms which will ensure their influence even in face of shrinking federal government.
- Conservative think tanks have seemingly unlimited funding streams.
- Net effects:
 - Narrowed national public debate.
 - Increased imbalance of wealth.
 - Continued weakening of democracy.
 - Decreased attention to racial tensions.