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An Uphill Battle

Think Tanks, Donald Trump, and the War of Ideas

Donald E. Abelson

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Among the many questions that shape this series are how leaders at various levels of government immersed in different policy files have reacted to the challenges, pressures, and opportunities that come with elected office. What lessons can we learn from what went right, and at times, what went horribly wrong? This series aims to identify and illuminate what students of public policy and administration need to consider in evaluating the success or failure of various policy decisions.

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Donald E. Abelson*

Introduction

We live in an era when the president of the United States, arguably the most powerful leader in the free world, tweets with great regularity about national security, trade policy, immigration, health care reform, and dozens of other key policy matters in 240 characters or less (see Pfeiffer, 2018). Within a 24-hour news cycle, we are also inundated by an elite group of political provocateurs—including Tucker Carlson and Rush Limbaugh—who, armed with little more than a microphone and an ideological grudge, take to the airwaves to sway public opinion and public policy. In this turbulent, highly partisan and conflict-ridden political environment, which both nurtures and gives agency to extremist views, falsehoods, and half-truths, it would be both prudent and reasonable to ask: What has happened to the so-called ideas industry in the United States? This industry, which for decades has carved out an important niche in the American polity, is populated by thousands of highly educated, reason-driven, informed, and experienced policy-oriented professionals tasked with helping decision-makers think critically and responsibly about a host of complex domestic and foreign policy issues within the realm of dominant or contending policy objectives and values (Drezner, 2017). Many of these analysts work in think tanks or public policy institutes such as the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Along with several other US think tanks, these repositories of expertise exhibit considerable prestige and are ranked consistently among the “top policy institutes in the world” (McGann, 2019).

With 400 think tanks inside the Washington Beltway alone, and close to 1,500 more scattered across the US (see McGann, 2019), there is certainly no shortage of experts with prestigious academic and government credentials capable of sharing their knowledge and ideas on a broad range of issues. And when thousands of interest groups, industry associations, government relations firms, universities, and research bodies within the US government are taken into account, the wealth of policy capacity available to the nation’s top policy-makers is staggering. Yet, despite the vast resources that can be accessed by Donald Trump and his closest advisers,¹ with few exceptions, most of the nation’s leading

* A version of this paper will be published in the volume *Critical Perspectives on Think Tanks: Power, Politics, Knowledge* (Edward Elgar, forthcoming), edited by Julien Landry.

¹ De Graaff and van Apeldoorn (2019) nicely captured the composition of Trump’s foreign policy network.



policy experts, particularly those residing in think tanks, have maintained little more than a modest presence in the president's inner circle.

Not all think tanks in and around the nation's capital have had their voices muzzled by an administration known for embracing anti-intellectual sentiments in the US. Indeed, some think tanks, including the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), have seen their visibility rise. Supportive of President Trump's decision to pull the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement, the CEI represents the kind of think tank that helped make some of Trump's more controversial policies palatable to segments of the American electorate. Indeed, just as The Heritage Foundation helped usher in the conservative revolution in the US during President Ronald Reagan's terms in office by embracing free-market solutions to a range of policy problems, think tanks such as the CEI have introduced the American public to more populist and reactionary approaches to public policy. In doing so, they have given candidates like Trump the platform they require to convince a large swath of Americans that contributing to the further polarization of American politics can pay handsome dividends. Although several factors help to explain Trump's rise to power, it is important to point out that for think tanks and other organizations in the ideas industry, Trump represented little more than a conduit through which to espouse the type of xenophobic and racist policies they did not have the stomach to claim as their own. Put simply, in Trump they found a candidate willing to do their dirty work. After years of laying the groundwork for anti-immigration policies, reforming or replacing Obamacare, imposing tighter restrictions on international trade, and placing additional pressure on America's allies to assume greater responsibility for the defence of Western Europe, the stage was set. For the former reality TV star, it was a role he couldn't possibly turn down and an opportunity too tempting to resist.

The limited involvement of more mainstream think tanks in shaping the discourse around Trump's domestic and foreign policy agenda nevertheless begs several important questions: Why do more academically oriented think tanks find themselves in an uphill battle to capture the attention of the president and those entrusted with executing his policies? If these kinds of think tanks continue to remain on the sidelines in Trump's Washington, does this necessarily signal the demise of public policy institutes as some have suggested (Rogin, 2017), or should their relative inactivity be treated merely as an aberration? Moreover, what do think tanks have to do to ensure their voices are heard when their presence is unwelcome at the highest levels of government? Answers to these and other questions will help to shed light on how think tanks navigate their way through the US political system, particularly during periods of uncertainty and political unrest.

In their efforts to explain why the majority of presidential nominees and presidents in the latter part of the twentieth century relied heavily on think tanks for policy advice, Abelson and Carberry (1997) concluded that two variables—the lack of experience nominees had in federal politics before running for the presidency (dubbed Washington Outsiders vs. Washington Insiders) and the strength of their ideological convictions (perceived by voters and rated along an ideological continuum ranging from weak to strong ideologues)—helped to explain why some nominees and later presidents were more



inclined to establish close relations with think tanks than others.² Among other things, their model of think tank recruitment revealed that presidential nominees with little-to-no federal government experience, who were also thought to hold strong ideological convictions (like Ronald Reagan), were far more likely to rely on think tanks than those with weak ideological convictions and considerable experience in Congress and/or the executive (like George H. W. Bush).

Based on these findings, Abelson and Carberry's model would predict that Donald Trump would be the ideal candidate, and later Republican presidential nominee, to forge close ties to a select group of powerful Washington-based think tanks. After all, he took great pride in branding himself the quintessential Washington outsider with a singular focus to "drain the swamp." He also wasted little time infusing his stump speeches with harsh political rhetoric making inflammatory comments about his political opponents and casting aspersions on America's trading partners, the country's immigration and health care policies, and its defence and foreign policy commitments. Not surprisingly, these and other pronouncements made during his political rallies before and after the 2016 presidential election, and repeated so many times in his vacuous tweets, resonated with white nationalists and others who constitute his political base.

In the case of Trump, Abelson and Carberry may have missed the mark. While many would argue that, rather than embracing a particular ideology, Trump has remained a pragmatist, his position as an outsider alone would have led the authors to suggest that he would have a greater propensity to reach out to think tanks for guidance. Still, they would be wrong. A largely unconventional and unorthodox president who continues to thumb his nose at policy experts, there is clearly little room in Trump's political life, and in the life of his administration, for intellectuals. Put simply, the model did not take into account presidents with personality traits that compromise the ability of leaders to draw on expert advice. More broadly, it did not account for the permutability of the political environment and the possibility of a decline in the currency of adherence to expert advice in constructing the legitimacy of presidents.

In this paper, which explores the relationship between three presidents (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump) and think tanks, I argue that a number of important and troubling factors have limited the impact and visibility of academically oriented public policy institutes in the Trump White House. Unlike several of his predecessors, who, at different times during their presidencies, relied heavily on various think tanks for advice, Trump has intentionally erected a barrier between himself and many of the nation's most prestigious think tanks.

I begin by considering the various factors that motivate presidential candidates to turn to think tanks for policy advice and the general willingness of institutes to assist them in reaching and holding on to the nation's highest office. As will be discussed, both presidential candidates and the think tanks that advise them often recognize the enormous benefits that can be derived from a successful partnership. Of course, there are exceptions, as in the case of Trump's tenuous ties to think tanks. Among other

² According to this model, presidential candidates may fall into one of four cells: Washington Insider/Strong Ideologue, Washington Insider/Weak Ideologue, Washington Outsider/Strong Ideologue, and Washington Outsider/Weak Ideologue.



things, this strained relationship calls into question whether presidents and think tanks necessarily form a perfect union. Following this, the nature and extent of bonds that were formed between think tanks and three presidential candidates who would go on to win the presidency—George W. Bush (2000 and 2004), Barack Obama (2008 and 2012), and Donald Trump (2016)—will be examined. The final section will reflect on some of the many lessons to be drawn from the involvement of think tanks in presidential campaigns and transitions: among other things, why think tanks may find it difficult to resist the temptation to enter the political arena in such a highly visible way and some of the potential repercussions of their engagement.

A Perfect Union: Think Tanks and Presidential Candidates

It has become common for presidential candidates, particularly those who lack experience in federal politics, to engage think tanks. As the late Martin Anderson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution for many years and a close adviser to Ronald Reagan, observed:

It is during this period that presidential candidates solicit the advice of a vast number of intellectuals in order to establish policy positions on a host of domestic and foreign policy issues. Presidential candidates exchange ideas with policy experts and test them out on the campaign trail. It's like a national test marketing strategy. (personal communication, 19 March 1990)

Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush had all been governors, but none had served in any federal government capacity prior to securing the keys to the White House. As noted, the current occupant of the White House, Donald Trump, had no political experience before assuming the presidency.

For the most part, presidential candidates also recognize the enormous benefits of establishing a working relationship with think tanks. The most prominent think tanks inside and beyond the Beltway are populated with many former high-profile policy-makers and leading policy experts willing to share their intimate knowledge and sophisticated understanding of how Washington works. After all, they are, as Abelson (2018) observed, in the business of providing timely and, periodically, timeless policy advice. Most presidential candidates also understand how helpful think tanks can be in providing tips on how best to navigate their way through the policy-making process and what they need to do to nurture and strengthen their ties to the media and other key stakeholders. Moreover, by attending meetings organized by the CFR, the Brookings Institution, the RAND Corporation, CSIS, The Heritage Foundation, and others, where several former policy-makers and prominent business leaders are often in attendance, candidates can develop additional contacts in the private and public sectors that may prove invaluable as they travel the country soliciting support. However, even more important than the doors and wallets think tanks can open is the credibility and legitimacy they can give to a candidate's ideas, a currency often more valuable than campaign donations. Receiving the endorsement of leading public intellectuals and world leaders or, better yet, having distinguished academics providing advice on a range of policy issues can significantly enhance the intellectual depth



of a candidate's platform. Of course, this assumes that candidates are concerned about constructing their credibility and the legitimacy of their ideas through the lens of policy expertise.

For candidates, there are few costs and potentially enormous benefits in relying on well-established think tanks that can educate them about how best to strike a responsive chord with the electorate; for think tanks, there can be considerable benefits that stem from aligning themselves with a winning presidential candidate. Not only does an election victory bring prestige, notoriety, and, at times, job offers, but a higher profile can translate into more funds from affluent donors. Still, as noted, there can also be some risks. Think tanks must be careful not to associate themselves with candidates and presidents who, like Trump, continue to generate considerable controversy and who, with little effort, may do irreparable damage to their reputation and standing in the policy-making community. Keeping their distance from such leaders, rather than trying to endear themselves to them, may in the end be a wiser strategy.

Planting New Ideas: George W. Bush and His Quest for the Presidency

In April 1998, Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush interrupted a fundraising trip for a gubernatorial candidate in Northern California to meet with several scholars from the Hoover Institution, located on the picturesque campus of Stanford University. The purpose of the meeting was to allow the governor of Texas to get acquainted with some of the nation's leading conservative policy experts. As a result of the close to four-hour meeting, Bush "engaged twelve or so Hoover fellows to advise his presidential campaign on issues from taxation to welfare to foreign affairs" (Swanson, 1999).

Encouraged by the advice he received, and committed to allaying concerns about his ability to lead the world's remaining superpower, Bush, in the ensuing months, assembled a team of over 100 policy experts, many from the Hoover Institution (Hager, 1999), to advise him on economic, foreign, and defence policy. During his campaign, he also set up policy advisory committees on issues such as education and technology to help deepen his knowledge of domestic policy issues. Bush's team of economic advisers was headed by Lawrence Lindsey of AEI, who was appointed assistant to the president for economic policy and served as an adviser. Joining Lindsey were several prominent economists, including John Taylor, a Hoover fellow who served on President George H. W. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers; Harvard economics professor Martin Feldstein; J. D. Foster, executive director of the Washington-based Tax Foundation; and R. Glenn Hubbard of Columbia University's Business School.

The foreign policy and defence policy teams Bush assembled were even more impressive, reading, as Kitfield (1999) observed, "like a Who's Who of the Reagan and Bush foreign policy establishments." Heading the foreign policy brains trust were Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, who,



in addition to being a fellow at the Hoover Institution, had also served in the National Security Council under President George H. W. Bush; Rice's colleague at Hoover, former secretary of state George Shultz; and Vice President Dick Cheney, a former secretary of defense. Other prominent defence and foreign policy analysts included Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Robert Zoellick.

Much has been written about the impact President Bush's inner circle of foreign and defence policy advisers—the so-called Vulcans—had on shaping his foreign policy agenda (see Abelson, 2006). Given Bush's lack of foreign policy experience before assuming the presidency, it is not surprising that several officials close to him, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, were able to shape his thinking. During his first presidential campaign, it became clear that Bush would rely heavily on his battle-hardened team of conservative experts for advice. Known for his humility and self-deprecating humour, Bush stated in an interview with the *New York Times* during the 2000 campaign:

I may not be able to tell you exactly the nuance of the East Timorian situation, but I'll ask people who've had experience, like Condi Rice, Paul Wolfowitz, or Dick Cheney. I am smart enough to know what I don't know, and I have good judgement about who will either be telling the truth, or has got some agenda that is not the right agenda. (Kitfield, 1999)

George W. Bush never saw himself as a “policy wonk,” a phrase often used in the media to describe political leaders who enjoy immersing themselves in the intricacies of policy formulation, nor like Trump, did he ever try to convince himself or others that he was the smartest person in the room or, for that matter on the planet.³ And according to Tim Adams, a veteran of President George W. Bush's administration who organized a briefing on technology for the Texas governor, Bush understood and took stock of his strengths and weaknesses. This is what distinguished Bush from Donald Trump. The difference is that Trump has not been prepared to accept the advice of policy experts with years of experience in domestic and foreign affairs.

Further dividing a country that has become more polarized in recent years is Trump's ticket to success, not listening to reason-minded experts. Having said that, it would be remiss to ignore how many policy experts and philanthropic foundations helped lay the groundwork for Trump's ascendancy and victory (see Parmar, 2012; Stahl, 2016). In many respects, Bush's management style proved to be similar to Reagan's, who preferred to leave the details of policy development to his subordinates. In Reagan's case, this hands-off decision-making approach at times paid off, but as the Iran-Contra scandal demonstrated, it also led to some controversial foreign policy decisions. However, in the final analysis, as Daalder and Lindsay (1999) pointed out, President Bush was ultimately responsible for the management and mismanagement of American foreign policy in the post-9/11 world. His decision to follow the advice of some key advisers, while ignoring dozens of policy recommendations made by academics and policy experts at think tanks, must fall on his shoulders.

³ The fact that Bush did not see himself as a policy wonk may have made him more willing to listen to the advice of policy experts. This tendency to turn to others, however, at times led him down a dangerous path.



Changing Minds, Changing Course: Obama, Think Tanks, and His Vision for America and the World

During the 2008 presidential primaries, dozens of newspapers kept close tabs on which policy experts comprised the brains trusts of leading candidates. Once the party nominees were chosen, journalists and political pundits began to scrutinize more closely whom Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain would likely turn to for advice during the general election and in the transition period. Senator Obama's roster of policy experts consisted of scholars from centrist and liberal think tanks: the Brookings Institution, the CFR, CSIS, the Center for American Progress (CAP), and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Not surprisingly, Senator McCain, who passed away in August 2018, gravitated more to the right of the political spectrum in search of policy experts willing to endorse and enhance his policy positions. Scholars from AEI (upon whom McCain would come to rely when thinking about the surge in Iraq), The Heritage Foundation, and the Hoover Institution figured prominently in his discussion groups ("Senator McCain Announces Economic Advisers," 2007).

In the weeks leading up to the beginning of Obama's historic presidency, it was all but certain that several foreign policy experts from leading think tanks would receive high-level positions in the new administration. In December 2008, Susan Rice, a foreign policy expert from the Brookings Institution who had advised Senator John Kerry in 2004 and Senator Obama in 2008, was the first think tank resident to be catapulted into a high-profile position; she was confirmed by the Senate as US ambassador to the United Nations (UN). But as the section below illustrates, Rice was not the only think tank staffer to attract Obama's attention.

When Senator Obama announced his intention to seek the 2008 Democratic nomination for president on 10 February 2007, he understood what foreign policy challenges he would confront if elected. Speaking before thousands of people crammed into Springfield, Illinois's Town Square, he said that one of his priorities would be to bring US combat troops home from Iraq. But the Democratic presidential candidate also understood that ending an unpopular war would not, in and of itself, repair or restore America's position on the world stage. Before the US could realize its potential at home and abroad, Obama required a far more comprehensive foreign policy plan—one that would address global challenges to America's economic, political, and security interests. To do this, he reached out to a small, but well-connected core of international affairs experts, many of whom he had come to know when he served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

As early as May 2007, journalists in the US began to more closely monitor whom Obama was turning to for foreign policy advice. Initially, his cadre of foreign policy experts included Mark Lippert, a former staff member on the Senate Appropriations Committee Foreign Operations Subcommittee; Gregory Craig, director of policy and planning at the State Department under Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; Anthony Lake, former national security adviser; and Susan Rice, assistant secretary of state for African affairs during the Clinton administration (see Sweet, 2007). It did not take long for pundits



to identify the number of people in the Obama camp who had worked in the Clinton administration, nor did it take long for other Democratic and Republican presidential candidates competing for their party's nomination to develop their own stable of experts. By the fall of 2007, comprehensive lists of foreign and defence policy advisers who had gravitated to various Democratic and Republican campaigns appeared in major US newspapers. In a *Washington Post* article entitled, appropriately, "The War Over the Wonks" (2007), dozens of policy experts and their ties to the Clinton, Obama, Edwards, Giuliani, Romney, and McCain campaigns were duly noted. Some of these advisers had worked in government, taught at universities, or consulted for the private sector. Overwhelmingly, these experts were recruited from leading American think tanks.

These individuals brought different experiences to the campaign, but what they had in common was a desire to associate themselves with a candidate who shared their convictions and possessed the ability to engage the public in important conversations about America's role in world affairs. It was not just about finding someone to communicate ideas they had developed and crafted over years. They needed the right messenger. For many of them, it was Barack Obama. The group of policy advisers who had lent their names and offered their expertise to the Obama campaign included former ambassador Jeffrey Bader (Brookings Institution), Zbigniew Brzezinski (CSIS), Ivo H. Daalder (Brookings Institution), Richard Danzig (CSIS and later the Center for a New American Security [CNAS]), Philip Gordon (Brookings Institution), Lawrence Korb (CAP), Denis McDonough (CAP), Bruce Riedel (Brookings Institution), and Dennis Ross (Washington Institute for Near East Policy). Not surprisingly, Republican candidates turned to more conservative think tanks for advice. Policy experts from The Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institution, AEI, and the Hudson Institution were well represented.

The policy experts who had agreed to participate in the Obama campaign in the weeks and months leading up to and during the presidential primaries were not simply looking to pad their resumes. Many had already established impressive credentials at think tanks and in previous government positions. They were there to inform, advise, and educate a candidate who could conceivably become the next president of the US. They were also there to exchange ideas with a candidate who was committed to changing the nature and direction of US foreign policy. The information that experts communicated to Senator Obama took different forms, ranging from policy briefs and papers to one or two sentences that could be used in a stump speech or in a more formal address. They covered topics ranging from counter-terrorism and how to deter Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability to expanding trade in the Pacific Rim. Few topics were off limits. What Obama hoped to achieve by developing a network of policy experts was not only a wealth of knowledge, but also a group of talented people who were prepared to defend their policy recommendations. He wasn't looking for consensus. What mattered more to Obama was engaging in difficult conversations with leading foreign policy experts who were prepared to outline the costs and benefits of moving the US in a different direction. After all, the senator—a former law professor—was known for his willingness to encourage a lively exchange of views. By surrounding himself with people who were capable of providing thoughtful and penetrating insights about how the US could navigate its way through troubled waters, the candidate felt he could make some headway. Obama's thirst for more knowledge and advice about the complex world of international affairs only increased when he finally



captured enough delegates on 4 June 2008 to secure his party's nomination for president. After defeating Senator Hillary Clinton in the hotly contested Democratic primaries, Obama's foreign policy team went into full swing.

In mid-July 2008, *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Bumiller (2008a) noted that 300 foreign policy advisers "divided into 20 teams based on regions and issues" comprised what amounted to a "mini State Department" for Senator Obama. A 13-member "senior working group" was also established as part of the senator's foreign policy bureaucracy. According to Bumiller, "Every day around 8 a.m., foreign policy aides at Senator Barack Obama's Chicago campaign headquarters sent him two e-mails; a briefing on major world developments [. . .] and a set of questions accompanied by suggested answers." This process was overseen by Rice and other members of the core foreign policy group, including Lippert and Craig. As Bumiller noted, the foreign policy "infrastructure funnels hundreds of e-mail messages and reams of position papers and talking points each day to members of the core group, who in turn seek advice or make requests for more information to team members down the line." She added that "advisers often say they are unclear about what happens to all the policy paragraphs they churn out on request," but recognize the constant pressure to brief Senator Obama (see also Bumiller, 2008b).

The hundreds of advisers assembled to help shape Obama's vision of America's role in the world clearly paid off. Despite facing McCain, a far more seasoned and knowledgeable expert on foreign affairs, Obama was more than capable of holding his own in debates over foreign and defence policy (see Maraniss, 2012). While several factors may explain Obama's historic win in the 2008 presidential election, presenting himself to the American public as a viable leader in international affairs may very well have had an impact. If Obama's competence on important global issues was indeed a factor in his election victory, think tanks deserve much of the credit. They also deserve much of the credit for shaping the discourse around key domestic and foreign policy issues during the eight years of the Bush administration. The Heritage Foundation anticipated a Republican presidential victory in 1980 and took the necessary steps to position themselves strategically on the policy landscape. By the same token, many of the more centre-left think tanks created in the years leading up to Obama's historic 2008 campaign shouldered much of responsibility for creating a political culture that would be more receptive to Obama's vision of changing course at home and abroad (Maraniss, 2012).

President-elect Obama did not have to be reminded of the important contribution dozens of policy experts from think tanks had made throughout his campaign. Within 72 hours of giving his victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park, the Obama campaign announced that John D. Podesta, former chief of staff to President Clinton and CAP's founding president, would co-chair the transition team along with Valerie Jarrett and Pete Rouse ("Transition Team Profiles," 2008). Founded in 2003 as a counterweight to The Heritage Foundation, CAP currently has over 100 staff and a budget in excess of US\$50 million. Well-known for his progressive views on domestic and foreign policy, Podesta also played an important role in helping to launch CNAS in 2007, a think tank co-founded by Kurt Campbell and Michèle Flournoy. Both Campbell and Flournoy had previously held positions with CSIS. As part of their strategy to develop an effective transition for the incoming Obama administration, Podesta



and his co-chairs established several groups that would be responsible for meeting with outgoing officials in the Bush administration to identify key domestic and foreign policy issues that would have to be addressed. According to the *Washington Post's* Shailagh Murray and Carol Leonnig (2008), "135 people divided into 10 groups, along with a list of other advisers [. . .] will work until mid-December preparing reports to guide the White House, Cabinet members and other senior officials."

Several prominent think tank staffers emerged as key figures in the Obama transition. In the area of foreign policy, no think tank generated as much notoriety and media interest as CNAS. According to *The Wall Street Journal's* Yochi Dreazen (2008), CNAS, "a small think tank with generally middle-of-the-road policy views, is rapidly emerging as a top farm team for the incoming Obama administration." CNAS co-founders Campbell and Flournoy, along with Rice, Danzig, Wendy Sherman, and James Steinberg, members of the CNAS board of advisers were singled out as leading contenders for senior positions in the Pentagon and the State Department (see Ackerman, 2008). Other than Danzig, former secretary of the Navy under President Clinton, the remaining four members of the CNAS board of advisers would serve in the Obama administration: Rice, as US representative to the UN; Flournoy, as under secretary of defense for policy; Campbell, as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs; Sherman, as under secretary of state for political affairs; and Steinberg as US deputy secretary of state.

As this section has revealed, from the time Barack Obama won his Senate seat in 2004, he understood, and gained an appreciation for, the contribution think tanks could make to shaping public policy in the US in ways not deeply rooted in conservative values and traditions. To assist him in developing a new strategy for the US, one that was a departure from what The Heritage Foundation and other like-minded think tanks had crafted and refined over several decades, he enlisted the support of dozens of policy experts from leading liberal and centrist think tanks. Scholars from think tanks shared their expertise with Senator Obama during the 2008 presidential primaries and in the general election, participated on his transition, and served in the first term of his administration. Many of these experts also contributed their time to helping President Obama secure a second term in office.

In his second term, a new foreign policy posture took root. Although Obama made several mistakes along the way, his administration embraced a far more pragmatic and less ideological approach to managing America's international relations than the Bush administration. Much of this changed, however, when Donald Trump, the self-proclaimed Washington outsider and political neophyte, was sworn in as America's 45th president. Since taking the oath of office, Trump has confirmed in the minds of his critics what Hillary Clinton proclaimed on the campaign trail: that he is temperamentally unfit and wholly unqualified to be commander-in-chief. Although some policy experts at The Heritage Foundation and other conservative think tanks took issue with Clinton's remarks, they too were reluctant to embrace Trump during the Republican presidential primaries. This has changed, however, since Trump assumed the presidency. As we will discuss below, a handful of DC-based think tanks came out in support of the president's position on the travel ban, his decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, and his nomination of Neil Gorsuch to fill the vacancy left by the late Justice Antonin Scalia on the US Supreme Court. As noted, some think tanks, including Heritage, have been



even more vocal in their support of these and other issues and have offered Trump a detailed blueprint on how to reform government. It is to the role that think tanks have played so far in the Trump administration that we now turn.

Lessons Lost on America's 45th President: Think Tanks and the Presidency of Donald Trump

Before seeking the presidency, Donald Trump possessed little more than a rudimentary understanding of domestic and foreign policy issues, and even less of an appreciation for how a political system based on separate branches sharing power functioned. However, unlike George W. Bush, who had the humility and good sense to acknowledge that he was smart enough to know what he didn't know, or Barack Obama, who, as president, continued to feed his intellectual curiosity by exchanging and testing ideas with several think tanks, Trump has demonstrated that he is simply unwilling, or perhaps psychologically incapable of, recognizing his limitations. Not used to taking a back seat to anyone or admitting that he could actually benefit from listening to those far wiser and more seasoned, Trump has stated on multiple occasions that he has little to learn even from the nation's top national security experts. Indeed, during the presidential primaries and in the general election that followed, Trump claimed that when it came to fighting ISIS, he knew more than America's top generals. This brazen attitude may explain why, even as president-elect, he refused daily intelligence briefings.

With little intellectual curiosity to speak of, Trump's primary concern is not to become educated in the ways of politics; rather, it is to hold on to his base. Since the majority of people who supported and continue to support Trump shared his antipathy toward the Washington elite, what incentive is there for him to reach out to think tanks, organizations often regarded as key players in the DC establishment? Moreover, according to Josh Rogin of the *Washington Post*, two of Trump's closest advisers, former chief strategist Steve Bannon and Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, are also wary of think tanks. They see them, Rogin wrote, "as part of the Washington culture that has failed to implement good governance, while becoming beholden to donors" (Rogin, 2017). Quoting a Trump transition official, Rogin (2017) noted, "This is the death of think tanks as we know them in D.C. [. . .] The people around Trump view think tanks as for sale to the highest bidder. They have empowered whole other centres of gravity for staffing this administration." This view is not shared by think tank presidents, nor by others in the Trump administration, including former secretary of state Rex Tillerson, a long-time trustee of CSIS who, in his last weeks at the helm became one of Trump's favourite targets, and retired General James Mattis, who resigned as secretary of defense in December 2018. Mattis has been affiliated with the Hoover Institution.⁴ Nonetheless, Trump's anti-intellectual orientation, combined with his narcissistic tendencies, has not exactly endeared him to policy experts at think tanks or to conservative intellectuals more generally. Indeed,

⁴ Snodgrass (2019) provided more information on the role of Mattis in the Trump administration.



the *National Review*, a leading conservative magazine in the US, devoted its entire February 2016 issue entitled, “Against Trump—For Now,” to denouncing the Republican candidate (Krikorian, 2016). Trump did mention think tanks on occasion. In fact, one of the few times he referenced policy institutes during the primaries was when he mentioned a poll conducted by the Center for Security Policy which, among other things, noted that “25 per cent of American Muslims believe violence in the United States is justified as a part of a global jihad” (Colvin, 2015). Trump relied in part on this report to justify his controversial ban on foreign nationals travelling to the US from seven predominantly Muslim countries.

Not widely regarded among conservative intellectuals as a viable candidate to lead the Republican Party, most leading conservative think tanks turned their attention to other candidates during the hotly contested primaries. For instance, Florida Senator Marco Rubio interacted with AEI scholars on several occasions in the months leading up to the Republican national convention and was seen by many at the Institute as someone who could become the torch bearer for a wide range of conservative ideas (Smith, 2015). Meanwhile, his colleague and challenger, Texas Senator Ted Cruz, was making his presence felt at The Heritage Foundation where he found a receptive audience (Deace, 2015).

Heritage Foundation scholars may have preferred a Cruz victory, but it did not take long for the leadership at the foundation to jump aboard the Trump train. By most accounts, Trump enjoyed and continues to enjoy their company (see Mahler, 2018; “Trump Consulting Think Tanks,” 2015; “Has Heritage Just Released Donald Trump’s Bible?”, 2016; Heritage Foundation, n. d.; Kopan, 2016; Shephard, 2017; Fuller, 2016; Wegmann, 2016). Once it became a foregone conclusion that Trump would become the Republican presidential nominee, several Heritage staff, including its former president Edwin Feulner; James Carafano, vice president for foreign and defense policy studies; and Ed Corrigan, then vice president for policy promotion at Heritage, agreed to participate on the Trump transition team. Several other Heritage scholars came on board and contributed to a study filled with dozens of policy recommendations. Entitled *Blueprint for Reform*, a tome reminiscent of Heritage’s ground-breaking study, *Mandate for Leadership*, it was shared and discussed with Trump (“Has Heritage Just Released Donald Trump’s Bible?”, 2016). In addition, since assuming office, the president has periodically engaged other think tank staffers, although his interaction with the think tank community has remained modest. He has established ties to AEI’s John Bolton, former US representative to the UN, who, in April 2018, was appointed Trump’s third national security adviser before resigning from the post on 10 September 2019, and to Jim DeMint, former president of Heritage, to discuss various issues, including national security and potential nominees to the US Supreme Court. Indeed, amid reports that DeMint would be forced to leave Heritage, Trump thanked him profusely for helping him navigate the Gorsuch nomination through Congress (Balan, 2017; Wagner, 2017). There is no doubt that Trump is also grateful to Myron Ebell and his colleagues at CEI for their unwavering opposition to the Paris Climate Agreement. When Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the accord in the summer of 2017, Ebell and CEI were able to check off another policy victory. As the president moves forward on the construction of Keystone XL, CEI will undoubtedly have more to celebrate.



Conclusion

Trump's lack of intellectual curiosity, combined with other personality traits that impede his ability to learn from others, have had the effect of restricting the access of experts from think tanks and other research-oriented institutions to him and to those in his ever-changing inner circle. But in all fairness, several think tanks will likely continue to keep their distance from the beleaguered president even if more opportunities to communicate with him arise. Concerned that their reputation as credible and reliable public policy institutes could be compromised or tarnished if they become associated with Trump in any tangible way, some think tanks may continue to fly under the radar in the executive branch until a new commander-in-chief takes power. For some think tanks, self-imposed exile might be the best option especially if they see no avenue for their policy ideas, or if they see no opportunity to alter the priorities of the Trump administration. The unwillingness of several think tanks to gravitate to Trump during the 2016 Republican primaries, and after the hotly contested general election, speaks volumes about their concerns regarding his fitness to serve. Their reservations may also help shed light as to why the revolving door between think tank staffers and the incoming administration, which in many previous elections has been in full swing, remained virtually at a standstill during the first months of the Trump presidency.

Largely closed off from the executive branch's inner sanctum for the reasons highlighted in the previous section, many think tanks have had to think strategically and methodically about how and where to access the levers of power in Washington. For instance, establishing closer ties to allies on Capitol Hill, in the bureaucracy and, of course, in the media have afforded think tanks considerable opportunities to remain competitive in the marketplace of ideas. Because of their resilience, vision, and ties to key stakeholders, many continue to leave their mark. Indeed, as Rastrick (2017) pointed out, although many think tanks in Washington may not have anticipated a Trump victory nor the impact this result would have on their ability to exercise policy influence, they have identified new ways to extend their reach into government. By doing so, think tanks have not succumbed to what some analysts predicted would be their early demise (Rogin, 2017), nor have they buried their heads in the sand. Rather, like commanders surveying a battlefield, they have focused their efforts on how best to navigate their way around new and significant obstacles that litter the policy landscape.

In Trump's Washington, think tanks *still* matter, but not in the ways they have during several previous presidential administrations. Trump has relied on think tanks sparingly as he did when soliciting names of potential justices to fill a vacancy on the US Supreme Court. In this regard, The Heritage Foundation proved enormously helpful. However, as with most of the associations he has cultivated over the years (see D'Antonio, 2016; Bandy, 2019; Johnston, 2017), Trump seems to pay attention to think tanks and the policy positions they advance only when they suit his narrowly defined political interests. Moreover, he does not appear concerned about how think tanks can enrich the discourse around policy issues or, for that matter, how these institutes can serve the public interest by helping to define the parameters around major policy debates. After all, it seems that in Trump's mind, think



tanks, along with lobbyists, government relations firms, advocacy coalitions, and others who populate the Washington, DC, swamp, are simply part of a culture he despises.

It is the contempt Trump has for think tanks, along with the other factors relating to his personality that have been identified, which explains why Abelson and Carberry's model of think tank recruitment may, in this case, have missed the mark. Had the model taken into consideration different personality types of presidential nominees, perhaps it could have provided a more accurate assessment. In seeking to explain why some presidential nominees may rely on or shun think tanks more than others, it could be extremely helpful to draw upon the rich literature on predicting presidential behaviour in the White House (e.g., Barber, 2018).

For Trump, think tanks represent a means to an end, not a repository of expertise; if they can help him win some political battles, they will find their way onto his radar. Alternatively, should the support he requires come from other sources, he will not hesitate to ignore the steady stream of information and ideas think tanks provide. Similarly, if think tanks are willing to do the president's bidding as some have already shown, they may not languish in obscurity for long. As think tanks continue to adjust to a new reality in Washington, they will make whatever adjustments are necessary to ensure their voices are heard. This certainly would not be the first time, nor will it be the last, that think tanks are compelled to re-evaluate the strategies they employ to make their presence felt.

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