



# Beyond Unhelpful Metaphors: The Influence of Think Tanks on U.S. Foreign and National Security Policy

By Stephen J. Del Rosso | 29 October 2021

## Key Issues

- The metaphor of “the blob” invoked to characterise (and caricature) the purportedly unitary American foreign policy establishment is inapt. As a prototypical component of this establishment, Washington, D.C.-based think tanks reflect greater diversity – internally and among themselves – than critics allege.
- While think tanks have proliferated across the globe and share certain similarities, the American exemplars reflect a particular dynamic grounded in the idiosyncrasies of the country’s politics and policymaking.
- Despite questions surrounding their fundraising practices and other presumed deficiencies, American think tanks are likely to continue helping shape U.S. foreign and national security policy. But to maintain their credibility and influence, they must adapt to changing conditions while providing ideologically varied, methodologically sound, and empirically rich answers to important questions.

## Introduction

The flurry of expert commentary on the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and its consequences serves as a revealing microcosm of the debate over the ostensibly good, bad, and ugly role of the cliched foreign policy “blob” in influencing decision making in the U.S. government. As depicted in the 1958 cult classic movie of the same name, *The Blob* is a “corrosive, alien, single-celled, amoeba-like entity that crashes to earth from outer space inside a meteorite.”

Except for its alien origin and mode of arrival, this description of the blob is not far off from the version popularised when (in)famously invoked in 2016 by President Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor, Ben Rhodes. The term is now a proxy for the nebulous, seemingly monolithic, “single-celled,” foreign

policy establishment – even if a narrower interpretation could plausibly denote those who simply disagreed with Obama’s policies. In its broadest definition, it includes a subset of government operatives, as well as those outside government; journalists, columnists, cable news talking heads, and, perhaps most prototypically, the analysts populating “think tank alley” along Washington, D.C.’s Massachusetts Avenue and its environs who seek to bridge knowledge to power.

It is high time that the metaphor of the blob is retired and replaced with a depiction that is more granular, accurate, and less freighted. The term obscures more than clarifies, especially in caricaturing the role played by the people and institutions in the think tank community specialising in U.S. foreign and national security policy (the two elements are intertwined). The

breadth of criticism of the Biden administration's Afghanistan travails illustrates that, far from being unitary, this "Inside the Beltway" cohort constitutes a diverse and often querulous lot that warrants more nuanced scrutiny. Defying any broad brush characterisation, differences of opinion are common both among and within think tanks, whether viewed as progressive, conservative, libertarian, "restrainer," liberal internationalist in orientation, or somewhere in between. If, despite this ideological and political diversity, one set of overarching perspectives appears to have predominated, it is worth asking why.

### **A Little History**

For over a century, private philanthropy in the United States has been instrumental in establishing and supporting American think tanks—though the term only became part of the vernacular in the 1960s and 70s. Early 20th century American think tanks were the product of the country's Progressive Era with its reformist belief in the ability of scientific methods to help policymakers reduce waste, inefficiency, and the ills of patronage and partisanship. Their form and function evolved through Franklin Roosevelt's reliance on outside advisors in advancing his New Deal to their input into the creation of the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II. By some accounts, they also drew the roadmap guiding America's Cold War policies, and years later, the designs for John Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. In response to the ascendancy of more liberal think tanks, a new cohort of conservative counterparts arose that provided the intellectual scaffolding for the so-called Reagan Revolution. More recently, think tanks have been active participants in post-9/11 debates about America's role in the world, with decidedly mixed results.

With Donald Trump's election in 2016, some predicted the "death of think tanks," since the new administration largely shunned the ranks of think tank experts in favour of appointees from the military and corporate sector. Moreover, Trump himself was disdainful of the credentialed expertise that is the mark of the think tank world; a view coinciding with a broader trend in American society devaluing expert opinion and, in some cases, even facts. But rumours

of the demise of think tanks proved premature, as many nimbly found ways to engage with the new administration. Given the dearth of policymaking experience and substantive expertise among some senior appointees, it was not surprising that there were those who welcomed input from various think tank experts, however quietly. And think tank engagement at the working level in many government departments and agencies, not least at the Department of Defense, continued apace.

Following Joe Biden's electoral victory in 2020, the traditional "revolving door" between think tanks and government became unstuck. A procession of think tankers, many of whom had served in previous Democratic administrations, assumed more senior positions under Biden. Upon their return to officialdom, these policy veterans, joined by less experienced first-timers, took with them the intellectual capital amassed in the think tank world (or academia) that Henry Kissinger had famously cautioned would be consumed rather than created in high office. One prime example is the Biden Administration's championing of "a foreign policy for the middle class," an idea that was generated at a think tank and brought to government by its very authors who assumed senior positions in the new administration.

### **Institutions with an American Accent**

While think tanks have proliferated across the globe, developed their own means of influencing policy, and adopted certain comparable methods, the dynamic discussed in this inquiry reflects a peculiarly American phenomenon. According to a recent survey, there are now 2,203 think tanks in the United States, representing a more than two-fold increase since 1980. This figure includes 148 in Washington D.C., where some of the largest, most established, and influential are headquartered. Given the United States' still considerable, if increasingly circumscribed, role in world affairs, the extent to which these institutions contribute to the policymaking process has obvious ramifications abroad, as well as domestically, even if their role is only dimly understood by many Americans.

Standard functions of think tanks include generating new ideas not yet crystallised in policy, assessing

existing policies, drawing attention to heretofore neglected problems, convening experts to discuss these matters, and engaging with the media. Some organize “Track II/1.5” unofficial policy dialogues involving American and non-American experts and former and, at times, current policy officials. Think tanks also typically provide a convenient perch for those aspiring to enter or re-enter government. While most think tanks engage in some form of advocacy, and public education is an increasingly important part of their missions, their more traditional stock in trade has been outreach to the halls of governmental power.

Meetings and conferences convened by think tanks routinely include policymakers who vote with their feet by setting aside their busy daily agendas to

Much think tank policy outreach is done behind the scenes in private, off-the-record briefings that are not touted publicly. An inherent risk is that policymakers will seek out think tank views that validate rather than question paths that have been predetermined or already taken.

### **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly?**

The conventional role of think tanks as holding pens for future public servants is viewed by adherents as ensuring informed, authoritative input into the policymaking process. Eying government appointments, some think tankers may be constrained in criticising their presumptive future employer, although the prevalence of this practice is often exaggerated. There is also the element

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participate—and, in some cases, are introduced for the first time to colleagues from the same departments working on similar issues. Government officials also seek audiences at off-the-record think tank gatherings to explain and justify certain policy decisions before they are publicly announced, as well as to receive feedback. There are numerous recommendations generated by think tanks that have been adopted by policymakers, but these often reflect wonky issues that are seldom headline grabbers, although their impact may be substantial.

More often, think tank analyses frame debates and provide context on issues that harried policymakers facing the tyranny of the in-box have little time to generate. The policy uptake of think tank-generated ideas is also a function of timing. Ideas long under development can be taken off the shelf when the political and policy climates are most advantageous.

of trust, born of often longstanding associations that lubricate information flows between outside analysts and policymakers.

The perceived cosiness of the relationship between think tankers and government officials is at the crux of the problem for some critics. Certain think tanks are accused of having outsized influence by virtue of this proximity to power. In the face of the apparent unravelling of the international order, critics see think tanks as contributing to some of the major failings of U.S. foreign and national security policy—including its militarised, interventionist quest for global primacy; ill-advised persecution of the war on terrorism; and damaging misadventures in the Middle East.

Moreover, their presumed dominance in foreign and national security policy debates is blamed

for muffling the voices of those challenging the basic premises on which prevailing views are built and sustained. Some of the harshest critics of the denizens of think tank alley view them as constituting a “self-licking ice cream cone”— a system whose basic purpose is to perpetuate its existence. Like the football coach who keeps getting rehired by teams despite a losing record, there are certain think tankers who are seen as having paid no price for their repeated failures and keep getting invited back for yet more ice cream.

A seemingly contradictory indictment of established think tanks is that, rather than having excessive influence, they are increasingly irrelevant to policymaking and their products go largely unread. Their self-styled sway is viewed as exaggerated given the cacophony of voices in the so-called marketplace of ideas, the abundance of relevant information in the public domain, and the difficulty of disentangling causal links in an inherently complex and non-linear policy process. A distinct but related charge against some of the more partisan think tanks is that they engage in work that is mostly commentary, not deeply informed by research.

The circularity of some of this information exchange is underscored by the fact that journalists responding under deadline to fast-breaking developments may rely on sound bites from think tank experts that will make good copy. But think tank and other experts also have deeper conversations with journalists in the early stages of their writing to help them think through topics, identify analytical resources they may find useful, and provide sounding boards for their own views.

Whether the expert insights conveyed in these more thoughtful exchanges or hastily conducted media interviews are accurately represented, taken out of context, or misinterpreted, the fact remains that the availability of these sources is a major reason for their prominence in policy discourse. The same holds true for Congress, where staffers must rapidly sift through a multitude of policy ideas, opinions, and prescriptions to be responsive to their bosses. And think tankers are often invited to give testimony before various congressional committees on topics of their expertise.

As think tanks seek to be heard above the din, some attribute their constant pursuit of funding to the need to subsidise their expanding staffs and well-appointed offices, siphoning off resources that might be invested more productively elsewhere. The purported dark underside of this money chase was highlighted in a 2014 New York Times investigation alleging undue influence exerted by think tank benefactors, especially foreign governments and multinational corporations. This prompted some needed internal reforms to address potential conflicts of interest and promote greater transparency. All financial support, yes even from some well-established foundations, comes with certain normative or other objectives. To apply a favourite adage of former president of Carnegie Corporation of New York, Vartan Gregorian, when referring to transparency in grantmaking foundations, think tanks also “should have glass pockets.”

### **Balancing the Ledger**

Acknowledging the validity of some of the indictment against think tanks, a balanced assessment would also cite the many smart, knowledgeable, experienced, and well intentioned experts who ply their trade in a politically charged, media-saturated environment, where ideas for addressing a burgeoning roster of policy challenges are in high demand. These ideas do not arise spontaneously from the ether of the Potomac River. As noted, they are often developed and explicated by think tankers. And, although there may be some exceptions, most are motivated by far more than a guarantee of lifetime employment, punctuated as it may be by stints in government. While often reflecting largely Americentric perspectives, many think tankers are also informed by interactions with counterparts in other countries (and vice versa), as their frequent flyer accounts once attested and, post-COVID 19, may yet again.

To the extent that think tank discourse on certain longstanding American policies and practices occurs within a generally acceptable, if only implicitly acknowledged, range, it is largely a reflection of the messy, multifarious ecosystem in which these institutions function and seek to have

influence. Its differentiated and internally diverse components include Congress, the Executive Branch, corporations, and the media—all implicated in the homogenized “anti-Blobist” critique—as well as the broader American public, whose interest in foreign policy is episodic and generally low. This suggests a far wider, deeper, and more complex dynamic than implied by any simplistic, overly generalised characterisation. For better or worse, think tankers have little ability to significantly change the structural underpinnings of this ecosystem in the short run, despite efforts to chip away at its fundamentals. Within this context, if ideas generated by some have more resonance in policy circles than others, it may simply be that policymakers find the latter deficient.

Upend this ecosystem? Sure; that is one possible response to the perceived problem, however infeasible for now and fraught with its own uncertainties. It remains to be seen whether the impact of America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan will trigger a major reckoning that might advance this process. In the meantime, think tankers must deal with the imperatives of the current domain where they have chosen to work—one that has also been chosen for them by history, practice, and the idiosyncrasies of American politics and policymaking.

For funders, a more realistic and prosaic approach involves prioritising support for analysts who ask important questions, wherever they may be employed; provide ideologically varied, methodologically sound, and empirically rich insights on a wide range of issues; acknowledge other perspectives; and rather than tilt at windmills, offer recommendations that have a viable chance of gaining traction within an imperfect system. Informed critiques and productive debate, free of invectives and ad hominem attacks, that question basic assumptions on which certain failed policies

have been built and perpetuated should naturally be part of this. Further practical efforts that increase transparency and raise confidence in fundraising practices should also be encouraged.

Those wishing to participate in this peculiarly American foreign and national security policy scrum as it now exists, and is likely to exist for the foreseeable future, can engage on the field where this often unruly contest is played—or get out of this particular game. As described, think tanks remain major players on this field. But foundations typically do not only fund think tanks. In pursuing less direct and perhaps less bruising means of effecting positive change, their philanthropic toolbox also includes support for academic institutions (with their own distinct challenges); individual researchers, either directly or indirectly; and a variety of media platforms. Finding a proper balance among these investments is an ongoing challenge, as well as responsibility.

The alien creature in the 1958 movie referred to in the beginning of this commentary was eventually defeated by being frozen and airlifted to the Arctic, where it was to be rendered harmless as long as that region remained cold. Inadvertently anticipating the effects of climate change, the question mark added to the closing “The End” suggested that its fate was still in question. Upon closer examination, its namesake as invoked in contemporary political parlance is a poor analogue for its Hollywood rendering. The many elements of the American foreign and national security policy establishment defy glib metaphors. However desired by some, they cannot be frozen and disabled. As with the society and environment in which they operate (and nudged on by their benefactors, as well as their critics) the heterogeneous American think tanks will need to evolve and adapt to 21st century realities to survive, prosper, and continue being more part of the solution than the problem.



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The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author and a range of anonymised sources, and do not necessarily represent those of the Corporation.

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