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# The Role of Think Tanks in U.S. Foreign Policy After September 11

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## ABSTRACT

Think tanks constitute a significant phenomenon in the processes of domestic and foreign policymaking in the United States. Although political developments in our country, particularly over the past two decades, have been influenced by U.S. foreign policy, awareness of the role of think tanks in shaping U.S. foreign policy remains limited even among our elites. Therefore, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the complex layers of policymaking in this country, it is necessary to expand the body of knowledge and literature related to think tanks and to gain a more precise understanding of their functions. The central question of this article is: what role have U.S. think tanks played in shaping the country's foreign policy after September 11? To answer this question, a descriptive-analytical method has been employed. Data were collected using a library-based approach, with a focus on primary and secondary sources published in English. The theoretical framework of pluralism and the concept of the revolving door provide appropriate analytical tools for explaining and analyzing how think tanks operate within the domain of foreign policymaking. The findings indicate that think tanks, by supplying personnel to governmental bodies, participating in media debates, and through the presence of their affiliated figures in the September 11 Commission, have played a highly significant role in directing and prioritizing U.S. foreign policy in the post-September 11 era.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy, think tanks, United States, September 11, revolving door, pluralism, public opinion mobilization.

## Introduction

The United States, as the sole superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union, sought to establish a new world order and realize the "end of history" under the hegemony of liberal democracy. However, from the perspective of thinkers such as Samuel Huntington, despite the United States' victory in the ideological struggle, the path toward the end of history would still require confronting a "clash of civilizations." Within this intellectual and political context, the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon created the conditions for the United States to adopt a new foreign policy approach and, under the banner of the "war on terror," expand the scope of its external interventions. In this regard, the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq represent clear



manifestations of this approach in the country's foreign policy (1). At the same time, the United States, as a marketplace of ideas and a hub for intellectual production, hosts more than two thousand think tanks and research centers that actively seek to influence governmental policymaking in both domestic and international affairs (2). The prominent role of think tanks in shaping the general contours of U.S. foreign policy has become a significant and widely debated issue in academic circles both within the United States and globally. For several decades, scholars have examined this issue from multiple perspectives, and the volume and trajectory of research in this area—particularly after the events of September 11—have continued to expand.

The importance of this topic lies in the fact that in our country, which has been fundamentally influenced by U.S. foreign policy in the post-September 11 era, insufficient attention has been paid to this issue. It appears that even at the academic level, there is limited understanding of the nature of think tanks, their functions, and their influence in the contemporary world, particularly regarding the role of American think tanks in shaping U.S. foreign policy. The determination of U.S. foreign policy priorities in our context has largely been interpreted through a traditional lens that emphasizes the two-party system, the role of Congress, and, to some extent, public opinion and taxpayer preferences. Therefore, achieving a deeper understanding of policymaking processes in U.S. foreign policy necessitates paying closer attention to think tanks as a highly significant yet relatively underexplored variable. Accordingly, this article provides an overview of American think tanks and examines their role in shaping U.S. foreign policy after the September 11 attacks. The central research question is: what role have U.S. think tanks played in shaping the country's foreign policy after the September 11 attacks?

The preliminary answer, formulated as the research hypothesis, is that the role of think tanks in shaping U.S. foreign policy increased after September 11. To address this question in detail and to test the hypothesis, a descriptive-analytical method has been employed, and data have been collected through a library-based approach. Given the difficulty—approaching impossibility—of conducting field research on this topic, efforts have been made to rely on books, academic articles, reports, and official documents that are credible and relevant to the subject. Among the existing literature, priority has been given to the works of leading scholars in this field, including Donald Abelson, Richard Haass, James G. McGann, and Kent Weaver (3-6). In addition, official documents such as U.S. National Security Strategies issued after 2001 have been examined and, where appropriate, cited (7, 8).

In the Persian language, and particularly within our country, relatively little scholarly work has been conducted on this topic. In other words, the literature related to think tanks in Persian remains in its early stages, although interest in this subject has been growing in recent years. In contrast, in Western scholarship and the English language, extensive research has been carried out on the role of think tanks in shaping U.S. foreign policy both before and after September 11. Matthew Burrows, in a study titled "Nasty, Brutish, and Short: Scholars, Think Tanks, and Influence on Policymaking," examines the role of think tanks as a bridge between academia and policymakers. He argues that the transformation in think tank approaches over recent decades—from rigorous research to ideological advocacy and media engagement with political parties—has contributed to a decline in their scientific credibility. The study also highlights the traditionally bipartisan orientation of institutions such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations, while identifying the 1970s as the starting point for the ideological shift in think tanks. In the post-September 11 period, the study briefly addresses the influence of think tanks on U.S. foreign policy issues such as counterterrorism and the promotion of democracy (9).

James G. McGann, one of the leading scholars in this field, has produced extensive work on think tanks. In his book *The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance*, he conceptualizes think tanks as a "fifth estate"

and elaborates on their role in policymaking processes, including foreign policy. In part of his analysis, he provides a detailed explanation of the “revolving door” phenomenon. Elsewhere in the book, through case studies, he attempts to demonstrate the role of think tanks in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, including developments following September 11. Although McGann identifies challenges such as financial dependency, demand for rapid and media-driven influence, increasing political complexity, and the impact of digitalization and information technology, he continues to emphasize the significant role of think tanks in governance (10).

Tevi Troy, in an article titled “Devaluing the Think Tank,” evaluates the transformation in the approach of American think tanks in recent decades. He argues that newer think tanks have moved away from the traditional model of producing objective, policy-oriented research and have instead adopted more ideological and political orientations. The article highlights the cyclical emergence of partisan think tanks over recent decades as evidence of a shift in both the nature and orientation of these institutions. In this context, the Heritage Foundation is identified as one of the first politically oriented conservative think tanks, established in 1973, which exerted considerable influence on the administration of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. On the other hand, following electoral defeats in 1980 and 1984, the Democratic Leadership Council established the Progressive Policy Institute in 1989, which played a role in the Clinton administration (1993–2001) similar to that of the Heritage Foundation in the Reagan administration. After losing the 1992 election, Republicans created institutions such as the Republican Future Project and Empower America. Following George W. Bush’s victory in the 2000 election, Democrats established the Center for American Progress. After the 2008 election and Barack Obama’s victory, Republicans founded the American Action Forum. Troy characterizes newer think tanks—particularly the Center for American Progress and the American Action Forum—as “war rooms” rather than traditional “think tanks” (1).

The objectives and expected contributions of this study can be summarized in several dimensions. First, conducting and disseminating such research can contribute to a more fundamental understanding of how U.S. foreign policy is formulated and the role of variables such as think tanks in shaping its direction. Second, it provides policymakers and academics in our country with the opportunity to reassess developments over the past two decades—such as U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq—beyond the hard and military dimensions of American power, by also considering its soft, non-military, and even non-governmental aspects. Third, such research contributes to the expansion of the literature and knowledge related to think tanks, enabling policymakers, researchers, and the general public to incorporate this variable into their analysis of international affairs and the foreign policies of other powers. Finally, the development of think tank knowledge and literature, along with the demonstrated effectiveness of these institutions in evidence-based decision-making, can facilitate the establishment or strengthening of think tanks themselves.

### **A Look at American Think Tanks**

According to the University of Pennsylvania report, the United States ranks first among countries with the largest number of think tanks, hosting 2,203 such institutions (2). The states of Massachusetts with 168, Washington, D.C. with 148, California with 153, and New York with 137 think tanks rank first through fourth among U.S. jurisdictions (2). There is no full consensus regarding the definition of the term *think tank*, for which various equivalents have been proposed and of which “think tank” remains the most widely accepted rendering. Nevertheless, in the United States, the term refers to organizations whose principal mission is to provide policy research and advice, which are organizationally—though not necessarily financially—-independent of government and universities, and which

operate on a nonprofit basis. At the same time, the boundaries separating think tanks from nongovernmental organizations engaged in public information remain somewhat ambiguous (11). James McGann offers a broader definition:

“Think tanks are public policy research, analysis, and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy” (2).

According to McGann, think tanks may be either affiliated or independent. In most cases, however, they function as bridges between academic communities and policymakers on the one hand, and between the state and civil society on the other. Think tanks present both basic and applied research in a form that is understandable, credible, and accessible to policymakers and the broader public (2).

Richard Haass wrote in the early 2000s that think tanks had already been playing a role in shaping U.S. global policy for more than a century, but because they performed this role largely outside the spotlight of the media, they were not as visible as other influential sources affecting U.S. international policy. In other words, the rise of modern think tanks in the United States occurred simultaneously with the country’s ascent to global leadership (4). Over time, the status of think tanks increased, and during the past half century they have assumed a central role in shaping U.S. foreign policy (1). Sixty percent of the policy guidance that the Heritage Foundation prepared for the Reagan administration was implemented during Reagan’s two presidential terms; for this reason, David Von Drehle in *The Washington Post* referred to Heritage’s *Mandate for Leadership* as the “bible” of the Reagan Revolution (1). Nonetheless, Reagan himself stated in 1988: “Today, the most important American scholarship comes out of our think tanks, and no think tank has been more influential than the American Enterprise Institute” (1).

### *Waves of the Emergence of American Think Tanks*

The process of establishing and expanding think tanks in the United States occurred mainly across three time periods and in four waves. The first wave, which began in the first decade of the twentieth century and extended through the Second World War, is generally described as the Progressive Era (3). During this period, large and independent think tanks were established with the aim of professionalizing governance. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Institute for Government Research (1916), the Hoover Institution (1919), the Council on Foreign Relations (1921), and the Brookings Institution (1927) are among the most prominent examples of this wave. Within this group, the Carnegie Endowment was the first think tank dedicated specifically to foreign affairs and international peace, followed by the Council on Foreign Relations, which focused systematically on foreign policy (3, 4).

The second wave, which began at the end of the Second World War and continued until the 1970s, saw the rise of defense and security institutions operating with direct government support, often referred to as contract think tanks (3). The RAND Corporation (1948), the Aspen Institute (1949), the Hudson Institute (1961), and the Urban Institute (1968) are important examples of this wave (3). During this period, the United States emerged as a superpower and, according to its policymakers, assumed the role of defender of the free world.

The third wave of think tanks emerged during the final three decades of the twentieth century and continues to the present. During this period, advocacy-oriented think tanks were established in order to compete in the highly competitive marketplace of ideas by offering specialized policy advice. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (1962), the Heritage Foundation (1973), and the Cato Institute (1977) are among the most well-known think

tanks of this wave (3, 4). James G. McGann argues that most think tanks established during the third wave were specialized, meaning that they concentrated on a particular discipline or specific policy issue (12). Donald Abelson further contends that, within the same general period, a fourth wave also emerged, consisting of what may be called legacy-based think tanks. The Carter Center (1982) and the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom, later renamed the Center for the National Interest (1994), are examples of this type (3). One of the defining characteristics of think tanks established from the 1980s onward has been their specialization. Whereas earlier think tanks addressed a broad range of issues, third- and fourth-wave institutions have been largely focused on specific subjects (5). Another characteristic of this group is its overt political orientation and its deliberate effort to intervene directly in political affairs. After consecutive defeats in the 1980 and 1984 elections, Democrats established the Democratic Leadership Council in order to move the party toward greater moderation. Bill Clinton was involved in this council from its inception and eventually became its chair. In 1989, the Democratic Leadership Council founded the Progressive Policy Institute as an affiliated think tank (1). Following Bill Clinton's victory in the 1992 election, this institute played a role for the new president similar to that of Heritage during the Reagan era (1). With the beginning of the Clinton presidency in 1992, former officials from the George H. W. Bush administration established two new partisan think tanks: the Project for the Republican Future and Empower America. Both organizations were advocacy centers with explicit political orientations, although neither continues to exist today in its original form (1).

### *Typology of American Think Tanks*

Think tanks in the United States are classified according to various indicators, including strategy, political or ideological orientation, field of research, funding sources, degree of independence or institutional affiliation, budget size, and number of staff. Among these approaches, Kent Weaver classifies think tanks on the basis of their research and political strategies into three major categories: academic think tanks ("universities without students"), contract think tanks, and advocacy think tanks (6). Donald Abelson adds another category, namely legacy-based think tanks (3).

Universities without students rely heavily on academics, receive most of their funding from the private sector, and generally publish book-length studies. The difference between these institutions and universities lies in the fact that they do not conduct research merely for the sake of research or knowledge accumulation; rather, they pursue research primarily in order to influence public policymaking. For this reason, they are interested in producing and disseminating engaging and accessible literature. These think tanks also seek a visible presence on newspaper opinion pages and promote their books and journals more aggressively than universities typically do (6). James G. McGann divides this category into two types: broad-based academic think tanks and specialized academic think tanks. The Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) belong to the first type, while the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) belongs to the second (5). It appears that since the late 1990s, think tanks have increasingly moved away from their original model as universities without students and have become more active in formulating and advancing partisan political arguments (1).

Contract think tanks also rely heavily on academics and emphasize objective analysis. The research agendas of these institutions are largely determined by the governmental bodies that commission their studies. Unlike the first category, the main outputs of contract think tanks are shorter reports prepared for specific government agencies that request the research. As a result, many of the studies produced by this category are not publicly accessible

unless the contracting institutions decide otherwise (6). Advocacy think tanks differ from the previous two categories in several important respects. First, advocacy centers often do not conduct original research themselves; rather, they synthesize existing research and orient it in a particular direction. In addition, they are characterized by strong political orientation or a clear ideological tendency, combined with an aggressive inclination toward marketing their views and influencing current political debates. As a result, these think tanks often develop close ties to policymakers and attain significant influence over them (6). Advocacy think tanks generally emerged during the last three decades of the twentieth century and afterward (1). Some scholars, such as Andrew Rich of the City College of New York, identify another type of institution, namely the market-oriented think tank. These organizations, of which the Center for American Progress is a prominent example, are more inclined to market their outputs than to generate or present genuinely new ideas (1). Legacy-based think tanks are often established by former presidents who wish to leave behind a lasting legacy in the areas of domestic and foreign policy. These institutions also publish a wide range of materials, organize seminars and workshops, and conduct research in selected policy areas (10).

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Three Main Types of Think Tanks**

Type of Think Tank	Human Resource Characteristics	Funding Sources	How the Agenda Is Determined	Type of Content and Output	Prominent Examples
Universities without students	Emphasis on PhD degrees, other advanced academic credentials, and policymaking experience	Foundations, corporations, and sometimes government	Researchers and funders	Books and nonpartisan reports	Brookings Institution and Peterson Institute for International Economics
Contract centers	Emphasis on academic credentials, technical skills, and specialized professional backgrounds	Government contracts	Contracting parties (government organizations)	Reports and other services, both public and classified	RAND Corporation and Urban Institute
Advocacy centers	Emphasis on political alignment and networks rather than formal credentials	Funders focused on specific issues or broader political and philanthropic agendas	Center leadership	Explicit and partisan reports, often in the form of editorials and advocacy materials	Heritage Foundation, Center for American Progress, and World Resources Institute

## Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Various theoretical and conceptual frameworks can be applied in order to assess the role and position of think tanks in U.S. foreign policy. Here, two theoretical and conceptual frameworks that complement one another and that have the greatest relevance to this article are discussed.

### *Pluralism*

Pluralism is one of the accepted concepts for explaining democracy in the United States and the broader West, and over time it has retained both its applicability and analytical compatibility. Inderjeet Parmar, the author of *Think Tanks and Power in Foreign Policy*, which comparatively examines the role of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations and Britain's Chatham House during the Second World War, employs this framework (13). Pluralism, as one of the key ideas of postmodernism (14), regards openness of structure, accessibility, equality, and free and fair competition among opposing social, economic, and political forces as characteristics of American political culture and institutions. Pluralists believe that citizens, regardless of social status, gender, race, ethnicity, beliefs, or occupation, can establish associations and unions to represent and defend their interests before relevant authorities and

institutions. Workers can create labor unions, employers can establish their own associations, and women, minorities, students, farmers, and other social groups can also create organizations to defend their rights and interests (13). In such a pluralist environment, think tanks can contribute to the passage of new laws through lobbying in Congress, maintaining representatives in different branches of government, or engaging in advocacy, public education, and the mobilization of public opinion (13).

According to pluralists, political systems respond in different ways and at different levels of policy and power—including during election periods—to the demands and preferences of organized groups and individuals. In the pluralist view, the state is not an autonomous entity; rather, it is more or less subject to the influence of organized interest groups. Although the state makes decisions, it does so under pressure and in response to the demands of powerful interest groups. In reality, the role of the state is to mediate among conflicting demands in a way that results in balanced policy and secures the satisfaction and support of broad constituencies of interested groups. Within this framework, think tanks are regarded as associations centered on expertise. By providing information and recommendations in the field of foreign policy, think tanks attempt to influence governmental policy outputs. In addition, think tanks may independently conduct campaigns of public education and awareness. The degree of their influence on policy depends on the quality of their work, the extent to which their research is connected to political issues, the adequacy of their political methods, the timeliness of their interventions, and their capacity to compete with similar organizations (13).

### *The Revolving Door*

One of the most important concepts applicable to explaining the role of think tanks is the concept of the revolving door. The revolving door refers to the American political tradition whereby, with the arrival of a new president, a large number of individuals are appointed to key governmental positions, especially within the executive branch. Since 1961, the revolving door practice has facilitated the formation of governments-in-waiting (10). Richard Haass considers the revolving door a phenomenon distinctive to the United States and a source of that country's strength (4). On average, each president appoints approximately 3,000 individuals to leadership and advisory posts. Of these, around 800 are nominated to senior-level positions requiring Senate confirmation. Some of these individuals may come from the previous administration, but given the importance of partisan orientation, many cannot remain in positions of leadership for long and must give way to individuals from the victorious party. Presidents therefore need access to a large pool of nongovernmental experts from which to draw personnel. Think tanks play precisely this role, serving as institutions through which individuals move from government to think tanks and from think tanks back into government (15). James G. McGann has examined more than one hundred prominent political actors whose employment shifted between political activity and think tank work during the presidential campaigns and administrations of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, showing how they moved back and forth between government office and think tanks (10). Richard Haass himself states that over the course of a quarter century he worked alternately in the National Security Council, the Departments of Defense and State, and Congress, as well as at Brookings, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment (4).

### **Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy After September 11**

After September 11, the struggle against terrorism became the central axis of U.S. foreign policy, and think tanks and think tank scholars played a prominent role in conceptualizing, prioritizing, and shaping the implementation of

this policy line. The influence of think tanks was exercised through three channels: the mobilization of public opinion, the appointment of think tank experts to executive and advisory positions, and the participation of researchers affiliated with these institutions in the September 11 Commission.

### *Mobilization and Education of Public Opinion*

Through the publication of countless articles, books, memoranda, editorials, and extensive media interviews, think tanks became deeply involved in political debates that quickly engulfed both the United States and the wider world. According to Donald Abelson, a specialist on American think tanks, even before the dust clouds over the attack sites had disappeared, policy experts in the United States had already begun articulating their views on what President Bush should do domestically and internationally in order to defeat terrorism (9, 16). Following this event, many national security specialists published assessments claiming that the world had entered a new era of repeated attacks causing mass casualties (9). These assessments helped prepare public opinion for the acceptance of new policies. Two scholars affiliated with the Cato Institute outlined U.S. objectives in combating terrorism in three phases: short-term, medium-term, and long-term. In their view, in the short term, in order to prevent another attack on U.S. soil, the activities of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda had to be disrupted and their capabilities reduced. In the medium term, offensive measures against terrorist groups would help prevent attacks by other groups and encourage states supporting them to reconsider their policies. In the long term, however, the best way to ensure security would be to eliminate the conditions and environments that had given rise to terrorism (17). The Project for the New American Century and the Foreign Policy Initiative (2009–2017) were among the neoconservative think tanks whose experts influenced U.S. foreign policy through media activity and public debate (18).

Brian Michael Jenkins, Bruce Hoffman, and Martha Crenshaw—sometimes described as the “terrorism mafia”—attempted to help the U.S. government develop a deeper understanding of terrorism. With backgrounds spanning think tanks, government, and academia, these three figures linked universities, think tanks, and the state in constructing a new understanding of terrorism (9). Jenkins, who had participated in the Vietnam War, was head of the political science department at the RAND think tank in the period following the September 11 attacks and led studies on how the government should manage the post-attack environment. Hoffman was vice president of RAND at the time of the September 11 attacks, and afterward he entered government service and worked with the CIA. Crenshaw taught at various universities while also holding different government positions (9). In his annual address in January 2002, George W. Bush articulated two principal objectives in the fight against terrorism: first, the destruction of international terrorist sanctuaries from which attacks against the United States were planned; and second, the prevention of threats posed by terrorists and regimes seeking to acquire chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons (18). What Bush announced corresponded closely to the recommendations and proposals that had already been advanced by think tank researchers.

### *Appointment to Government Positions*

The role of think tanks in training executive personnel and facilitating their entry into the machinery of government can be assessed across the administrations of all four U.S. presidents after September 11. For the sake of brevity, this article refers only to several examples of the revolving door during the Bush and Obama administrations. With the formation of the Bush cabinet in January 2001, approximately eight months before the September 11 attacks,

the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Heritage Foundation played a prominent role in formulating and shaping the policy orientation of the administration (4). In accordance with the revolving door framework, Bush selected senior officials for his administration—especially within the Department of State—from among individuals who had prior records of activity and membership in ideologically aligned think tanks. A number of these figures are listed below:

**Table 2. Examples of Appointments**

Name	Previous Think Tank Position	Government Position
Paula Dobriansky	Former Vice President and Director of the Washington Office of the Council on Foreign Relations	Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs
John R. Bolton	Former Senior Vice President of the American Enterprise Institute	Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security
James Kelly	Former President of the Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies	Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs
Kim Holmes	Former Vice President of the Heritage Foundation	Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs
Peter W. Rodman	Former Director of National Security Programs at the Nixon Center	Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
Stephen Biddle	Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations	Member of General McChrystal's assessment team in Afghanistan

These examples illustrate how think tank personnel moved directly into key foreign policy and national security positions within the Bush administration (4, 19).

During the Obama administration, think tanks with Democratic orientations similarly placed their personnel into government, while institutions such as the Brookings Institution and the Center for Strategic and International Studies also played important roles both in the electoral campaign and in advising on the formation of Obama's cabinet (10). The Center for American Progress (CAP), founded by Democrats in 2003, is a particularly prominent example in the Obama era (1). Several members of this institution who entered the Obama administration include the following:

**Table 3. Further Examples of Appointments**

Name	Previous Position at the Center for American Progress	Government Position
Neera Tanden	Former President of the Center for American Progress	Director of the Health Reform Office
Melody Barnes	Former Executive Vice President of the Center for American Progress	Director of the Domestic Policy Council
Jennifer Palmieri	Former Vice President for Communications at the Center for American Progress	White House Deputy Communications Director
Carol Browner	Later Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress	Senior Advisor to Obama on Energy and Environment
Brian Deese	Former Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress	Senior Advisor to the President on Energy
Christy Goldfuss	Former Director of the Public Lands Project at the Center for American Progress	Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality

These appointments further demonstrate the extent to which think tanks served as personnel reservoirs for the executive branch during the Obama years (1, 20).

### *The September 11 Commission and the Role of Think Tanks*

After the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, commonly known as the September 11 Commission, was established through an act of Congress signed by President Bush on November 27, 2002 (10). The mission of this independent and bipartisan commission was to explain the root causes of the September 11 attacks and to provide

recommendations aimed at preventing future terrorist attacks. The U.S. government did not assign such an important mission to a commission composed merely of bureaucrats; rather, it entrusted the task to a bipartisan body made up of think tank scholars and former government officials. The establishment of this commission and the publication of its reports indicate that the government had confidence in think tank scholars and that think tank policy recommendations were influential in presidential politics (10). The record of this commission also made clear that think tanks play a mediating role between public opinion and government, generate new thinking under complex conditions, and constitute a clear example of the revolving door in practice.

The backgrounds and records of the commission's members, shown in Table 4, demonstrate the strong and visible presence of think tank scholars in the policy process surrounding the worst attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor. Of the ten principal members of the commission, four—including the chair and vice chair—had prominent think tank backgrounds, while three others had academic and quasi-think tank experience in their professional records. In addition, most of the members had held government positions in one of the three branches of government (10). Although both the presidency and Congress were under Republican control at that time, the composition of the commission reflected a form of pluralism in terms of party affiliation, academic background, and executive and research experience.

**Table 4. Principal Members of the Commission**

No.	Name	Position in the Commission	Position in Think Tank or Government
1	Thomas H. Kean	Chair	Former Governor of New Jersey and former head of Carnegie's New York branch, as well as several other educational and research centers
2	Lee H. Hamilton	Vice Chair	Former President of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and former Democratic representative from Indiana in Congress
3	Richard Ben-Veniste	Member	Head of the Watergate Task Force (1973–1975) and Special Foreign Affairs Counsel to a Senate committee during 1976–1977
4	Fred F. Fielding	Member	Counsel to President Reagan (1981–1986) and later counsel to George W. Bush (2007–2009)
5	Jamie Gorelick	Member	Deputy Attorney General in the Clinton administration (1994–1997)
6	Slade Gorton	Member	Republican Senator from Washington State (1982–2000) and former member of the committees on natural resources, transportation, infrastructure, and several other technical committees
7	Bob Kerrey	Member	Former Democratic Senator from Nebraska, former Governor of Nebraska, and former President of New School University in New York City
8	John F. Lehman	Member	Secretary of the Navy during the Reagan administration (1981–1987), deputy to Henry Kissinger on Nixon's National Security Council, member of the board of trustees of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and head of that institute's national security program
9	Timothy Roemer	Member	Former President of the Center for National Policy, former U.S. Ambassador to India, senior fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, and Democratic representative from Indiana in the U.S. House of Representatives (1991–2003)
10	James R. Thompson	Member	Former Governor of Illinois (1977–1991) and member of the American Bar Association Commission on Separation of Powers and Judicial Independence (1996–1997)

### Recommendations of the Commission

The September 11 Commission published its report on July 22, 2004, two years and ten months after the September 11 attacks. The report was received with broad public attention: within seven days, 50 million people visited the commission's website. W. W. Norton, the publisher of the report, sold 600,000 copies in the first printing and then issued another 200,000 copies (10). The commission's report contained recommendations intended to prevent the occurrence of another attack, and these recommendations were organized into two sections.

The first section addressed the question: What should be done? In this section, a global strategy was outlined in three dimensions:

**Table 5. Strategic Dimensions**

Strategic Dimension	Description
Attacking terrorists and terrorist organizations	Direct action against terrorist actors and networks
Preventing the continued growth of Muslim terrorists	Measures aimed at stopping further recruitment and expansion
Protection and preparedness against terrorist attacks	Strengthening domestic readiness and defensive capacity

The second section addressed the question: How should it be done? In this part, six concrete measures were recommended:

**Table 6. Recommended Measures**

Recommended Measure	Description
Establishment of a National Counterterrorism Center	To coordinate the counterterrorism activities of the CIA, FBI, Department of Defense, and Department of Homeland Security
Creation of the position of Director of National Intelligence	To supervise and coordinate the efforts of all U.S. intelligence agencies
Establishment of a Homeland Security Committee in each chamber of Congress	To improve legislative coordination and oversight
Creation of a specialized national security task force within the FBI	To strengthen the Bureau's focused capacity on national security threats
Strengthening the CIA's clandestine intelligence-gathering capacity	To improve covert intelligence collection and operational effectiveness

These recommendations reflected a comprehensive effort to redefine institutional coordination, intelligence oversight, and national preparedness in the aftermath of the attacks (21).

Implementation of the Commission's Recommendations by the Government

The publication of the report in mid-2004, coinciding with the U.S. presidential election, placed it at the center of electoral competition. In the initial days following its release, Congress announced that it would hold its fifteenth hearing on the commission's report. John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, declared that he would implement all of the commission's recommendations and committed to extending the commission's mandate for an additional eighteen months. President Bush initially opposed the report; however, support from the families of the victims and their lobbying efforts succeeded in gaining the backing of influential senators such as John Lieberman and John McCain. The support of powerful senators, the demands of victims' families, and the intense focus of public opinion and the media on governmental reform ultimately led Bush to accept the commission's proposed plan. Public pressure compelled the administration to demonstrate visibly that it was taking the commission's recommendations seriously. The White House spokesperson stated that the president was carefully reviewing the recommendations to determine which elements could be promptly approved and implemented by the executive branch (10).

In December 2005, the White House issued a statement reporting progress in implementing the commission's recommendations. According to this statement, four out of the six major recommendations had made progress in terms of implementation. The first major recommendation—the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center—was realized in July 2005, with Michael Leiter appointed as its first director. The second recommendation—the creation of the Director of National Intelligence—was also implemented, with John Negroponte, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and Iraq, appointed as its first head. The implementation of four of the

commission's key recommendations was reflected in the 2006 U.S. National Security Strategy, which described the establishment of the Director of National Intelligence as the most significant institutional reorganization of the U.S. security community since 1947 (7). In the National Security Strategy of the first Obama administration, the continuation of this intelligence-oriented approach and the necessity of integrating intelligence to prevent further terrorist attacks on U.S. soil were similarly emphasized (8).

The Bush administration also supported the use of biometric restrictions at points of entry into the United States as a measure to prevent the entry of terrorists. In its press statements, the administration further asserted that President Bush personally led efforts to transform the FBI into an institution focused on preventing attacks on U.S. territory through intelligence gathering and related measures (10). According to James G. McGann, one of the key factors contributing to the success of the September 11 Commission was that its members themselves were part of the revolving door process. The governmental and think tank backgrounds of the commission's members enhanced its credibility and legitimacy. Public pressure ultimately led President Bush to publicly announce, by the end of 2005, that four of the six principal recommendations had been approved (10).

### **Transformation in the Nature and Activities of Think Tanks After September 11**

Since the early 1970s, with the emergence of the Heritage Foundation, the nature of think tank activities in the United States began to undergo significant transformation, and in the 1980s a generation of institutions known as advocacy think tanks emerged. These think tanks departed from the traditional model—characterized by policy research, avoidance of direct political activity, and bipartisan behavior—and increasingly engaged in direct political action and overt partisan alignment. In other words, from the 1980s onward, think tank activities became less purely scientific and more political, often closely tied to the fortunes of specific political parties or factions (1).

Among the key transformations in think tank roles after September 11 was the heightened media presence of think tank scholars and the direct involvement of some think tanks in political campaigns (1). The emergence of the Center for American Progress in the early 2000s represents a clear manifestation of this transformation. The political orientation of this institution was explicit, and its officials openly acknowledged it—something unprecedented among earlier think tanks. Jennifer Palmieri, former Vice President for Communications at the Center for American Progress, wrote in a 2008 *Bloomberg* article: "Others try to be neutral; we are not" (1).

On the other hand, the strong conservative orientation and pragmatic approach of the American Action Forum, established in 2010, demonstrated that think tanks founded after September 11 had moved even beyond the advocacy model that had emerged in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and no longer resembled traditional think tanks in any meaningful way (1). According to Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a former advisor to George W. Bush and founder of the American Action Forum, the activities of existing institutions such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation were not effective in John McCain's electoral campaign because they were not sufficiently engaged in political activity and lacked media innovation. Holtz-Eakin argued that, in order to expand ideas, institutions must utilize modern tools, engage the American public in debates on partisan politics, personal freedoms, and market incentives, educate and challenge the media to address these issues, and ultimately contribute to the development of the next generation of political leaders (1).

## Conclusion

The discussion presented in this article demonstrates that think tanks, as one of the key variables in shaping U.S. foreign policy after the September 11 attacks, occupy a prominent position, and the research hypothesis is supported. The pluralistic political culture, the institutionalized practice of the revolving door between think tanks and the executive branches of government, and the focus of think tanks on policy-oriented political research have enabled these institutions to play a central role in determining U.S. foreign policy priorities for more than a century. This role became even more pronounced after the September 11 attacks.

During this period, newly established think tanks—characterized by stronger political and ideological orientations compared to earlier, traditional institutions—gained greater opportunities to exert influence, particularly through the placement of their personnel within the executive apparatus of government. At the same time, the media engagement of think tank scholars increased significantly after September 11, leading to an expansion of their role in shaping and educating public opinion. This development ultimately strengthened public support for the foreign policy directions advocated by these institutions.

Furthermore, the strong presence of think tank affiliates within the September 11 Commission enhanced the legitimacy and credibility of the commission itself and contributed to compelling the George W. Bush administration to implement four out of its six principal recommendations.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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