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## Think Tank Confidential

By Christopher DeMuth



Chad Crowe

I have been presiding at the American Enterprise Institute for 21 years. Today I am announcing that I will step down before the end of 2008. The search for a successor has begun -- this being AEI, it will be a competitive search, and we expect a happy conclusion long before the target date.

I hope to remain at the institute, if my successor will have me, pursuing my own research and writing. Policy think-tanks such as AEI have become important centers of applied scholarship, and friend and foe alike say we are terribly influential. But our position at the crossroads of politics and academics draws a certain amount of fire from both directions, and the reasons for our success are not widely understood. Here is my kiss-and-tell.

Think tanks are identified in the public mind as agents of a particular political viewpoint. It is sometimes suggested that this compromises the integrity of their work. Yet their real secret is not that they take orders from, or give orders to, the Bush administration or anyone else. Rather, they have discovered new methods for organizing intellectual activity -- superior in many respects (by no means all) to those of traditional research universities.

To be sure, think tanks -- at least those on the right -- do not attempt to disguise their political affinities in the manner of the (invariably left-leaning) universities. We are "schools" in the old sense of the term: groups of scholars who share a set of philosophical premises and take them as far as we can in empirical research, persuasive writing, and arguments among ourselves and with those of other schools.

This has proven highly productive. It is a great advantage, when working on practical problems, not to be constantly doubling back to first principles. We know our foundations and concentrate on the specifics of the problem at hand. We like to work on hard problems, and there are many fertile disagreements in our halls over bioethics, school reform, the rise of China, constitutional interpretation and what to do about Korea and Iran.

Think tanks aim to produce good research not only for its own sake but to improve the world. We are organized in ways that depart sharply from university organization. Think-tank scholars do not have tenure, make faculty appointments, allocate budgets or offices or sit on administrative committees. These matters are consigned to management, leaving the scholars free to focus on what they do best. Management promotes the scholars' output with an alacrity that would make many university administrators uncomfortable.

And we pay careful attention to the craft of good speaking and writing. Many AEI scholars do technical research for academic journals, but all write for a wider audience as well. When new arrivals from academia ask me whom they should write for, I tell them: for your Mom. That is, for an interested,

sympathetic reader who may not know beans about the technical aspects of your work but wants to know what you've discovered and why it makes a difference.

These methods are not new. They were in all essentials invented at AEI in the 1950s by William Baroody Sr., its president, and W. Glenn Campbell, its research director. The two would commission top academics to study front-burner policy issues, publish the results as pamphlets and distribute them around Washington, try to persuade newspapers to run extracts as "op-eds" long before that term existed, and organize conferences and appearances before congressional committees. They hit the big time in July 1954, when The Wall Street Journal published an excerpt of an AEI critique of farm price supports, accompanied by a vigorous editorial applying its teaching to an upcoming Senate vote.

By the measures of participation in political debate and generation of influential policy ideas and proposals, the right-of-center think tanks have been stupendous successes. They appear in the national media, liberal as well as conservative, well out of proportion to their numbers and output. AEI essays appear more frequently than those from other think tanks of all persuasions, not only in the opinion pages of The Wall Street Journal but also those of the New York Times and Washington Post.

What accounts for this growth and prominence? I have tried to explain it to people who have been setting up liberal and leftist think-tanks in recent years, advising them that the secret of success is to go away and spend 30 years in the political wilderness. They have thought I was joking. Let me try again here.

Every one of the right-of-center think tanks was founded in a spirit of opposition to the established order of things. Opposition is the natural proclivity of the intellectual (it's what leads some smart people to become intellectuals rather than computer programmers), and is of course prerequisite to criticism and devotion to reform. And for conservatives, opposition lasted a very long time -- in domestic policy, from the New Deal through 1980.

These circumstances meant that the think tanks in their formative years attracted many contrarian characters who were strongly disaffected by some aspect of politics or policy. One of AEI's founders was Raymond Moley, the FDR braintruster who coined the term "New Deal" and then became disillusioned with the project (a liberal mugged by reality long before the 1960s, he was a proto-neoconservative). Milton Friedman was an active AEIer when he was still considered a crackpot in polite academic circles. Robert Bork and Jeane Kirkpatrick worked at AEI long before they became public personalities.

These were intellectual outcasts of extraordinary talent, seeking the company of kindred spirits. As dissenters, they were fiercely attached to the principles of intellectual independence, freedom of inquiry, and open debate (AEI's motto was: "Competition of ideas is fundamental to a free society"). And as dissenters with little hope of influencing actual policy, at least in the short run, they were politically independent, too -- uninterested in accommodating their views to strategic calculations or partisan interests.

At think tanks such as AEI, that spirit of independence continued after 1980, when conservative, neoconservative and libertarian ideas acquired real purchase in practical politics and our phones started ringing. At AEI, we have spent more time kibitzing with friends in high office and talking about current events on television, and the attention has not been unwelcome. But we are in a different line of work from those on the inside, and have never hesitated to offer blunt criticism when we thought it was justified.

And the most gratifying moments in the think-tank world have come when ambitious ideas, politically out of the question at first, have worked their way through academic and professional debate, got noticed by public officials and legislators, and eventually were adopted as policy. That usually takes at least a dozen years -- the period from the publication of Robert Bork's first antitrust critiques to the adoption of his ideas by federal enforcers and courts in the 1980s, and from the publication of Charles Murray's "Losing Ground" to the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996.

We seem to be on schedule with the idea of reducing or eliminating capital taxation, and moving toward taxing consumption rather than income. (I predict that if Sen. Clinton is elected president the corporate income tax will be further reduced during her tenure). The idea of eliminating the tax exclusion of employer-provided health benefits, scorned for decades as politically infeasible (especially by conservative activists), has now been embraced by President Bush and several smart legislators.

Think-tank mavens like to point to episodes such as these as evidence that "ideas have consequences," but we know better than anyone how partial and contingent is the role of ideas in the march of politics. Public inattention, well-organized interest groups, anti-social ideologies and sheer happenstance powerfully shape the actions of governments. Think tanks serve as storehouses of ideas, patiently developed and nurtured, waiting for the crisis when practical men are desperately seeking a new approach, or for the inspired leader who sees the possibilities of action before the crisis arrives.

Sometimes the moment comes with astonishing speed. Last December, a group of military specialists closeted themselves at AEI to see if they could devise a new strategy for the war in Iraq, one that might have a reasonable prospect of victory following three years of catastrophic mistakes. Their plan was adopted within weeks by the White House, Pentagon and new commanders in the field, with all credit due to our soldiers in action for their great success to date.

Other times it seems that the moment will never come. That 1954 study of farm price supports is still waiting. Undaunted, AEI published 21 studies of agriculture policy this year, intrinsically as good as our Iraq reports. When I showed them to an ambitious young Republican congressman, he smiled and shook his head.

My own think-tank slogan is: "No one knows when the Berlin Wall will come down." It is imperative to maintain intellectual sanctuaries in a world where Harvard University forbids the discussion of certain important issues and Columbia University welcomes the contributions of a master terrorist. Our sanctuaries have been instrumental to the expansion of human freedom in recent decades. We are laying the groundwork for further advances -- as opportunities arise, as they surely will.

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