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# Battle Tanks: How Think Tanks Shape the Public Agenda

by *Bob Burton*

If you were the least bit nervous about all the worrying reports - from leading scientists, insurance companies and even the Pentagon - about human-induced climate change, don't worry: the Frontiers of Freedom (FF), a right-leaning think tank, is here to reassure you.

FF has established the Center for Science and Public Policy (CSPP) to alert "policy makers, the media, and the public to unreliable scientific claims and unjustified alarmism which often lead to public harm." If you are so inclined, you can subscribe to the "non-profit, non-partisan" *Climate & Environment Weekly*, CSPP's email bulletin that keeps track of why climate change is not the problem many make it out to be.

But if you want to find out who funds FF's climate change program, you won't find out by checking their website or annual report. However, over at ExxonMobil's website you'll discover that the CSPP was established in 2002 with a \$100,000 grant from the world's biggest oil company.

ExxonMobil is so supportive of FF that in the last five years it has invested another \$617,000 of shareholder cash to promote "informed discussion" on climate change issues.

Establishing the impact of an industry front organization like FF is not straightforward. However, it is beyond dispute that ExxonMobil's largesse towards a network of think tanks, skeptics and advocacy groups has had a substantial impact in stalling, and may yet fatally wound, the Kyoto treaty aimed at limiting human-induced climate change. In 2004 alone ExxonMobil invested \$6.4 million from its "public information and policy research" program in a range of institutions, including many think tanks like FF with a focus on climate change. With a budget of just over \$790,000 in 2003, FF is a minnow amongst the over 1000 think tanks in the U.S. beavering away to influence public opinion. FF and its ilk are keen to ensure that the Kyoto treaty, which came into force earlier this year, doesn't get extended beyond 2012, when it is currently set to expire.



World War II U.S. tanks, "helping in the development of a formidable Australian mechanized army." (Australian Commonwealth photo, U.S. Library of Congress archive)

In late July, President George W. Bush announced a deal with the governments of Australia, China, India, Japan and South Korea to emphasize certain technical policies that the energy industry loves: "clean" coal, nukes, and the Holy Grail of them all, pumping captured greenhouse gases underground. "We are taking action on climate change in a broad, pro-growth context," Bush said reassuringly. The unstated hope of the block of six countries is that by 2012 their voluntary, corporate-friendly measures will

supersede mandatory targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

While companies like ExxonMobil were discreetly quiet, traditional opponents of Kyoto, such as James K. Glassman, were ecstatic. It was, he wrote in a column for Tech Central Station, "a refreshing and effective alternative route to tackling the problem of climate change." TCS is "supported by sponsoring corporations that share [its] faith in technology and free markets" such as AT&T, McDonald's, General Motors, Merck, Microsoft, and yes, ExxonMobil, which sluiced \$95,000 their way in 2003. The site is published by DCI Group, an international "strategic public affairs services" firm. Glassman is the site's founder and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank that employs, among others, Second Lady Lynne Cheney, Contract with America architect Newt Gingrich, Reagan cabinet member Jeanne Kirkpatrick and *Bell Curve* author Charles Murray.

While FF concentrates primarily on countering the environmental movement, the largest conservative think tanks - such as the American Enterprise Institute - extol the virtues of everything from privatizing Social Security to the desirability of school vouchers and a muscular foreign policy.

## Too Noisy to Think

While the term "think tanks" conjures up an image of quiet studied reflection on weighty topics, the reality could hardly be further from the truth.

Think tanks are the intellectual equivalent of battle tanks, which rely on a combination of speed, defensive armor and offensive firepower to overwhelm opposition forces. The goal of conservative think tanks, in combination with air cover provided by conservative commentators, is to clear the way for supporting politicians and officials to implement policies once deemed too toxic for even conservatives to touch.

In 1993, the former senior vice president of the Heritage Foundation, Burton Yale Pines, himself adopted the military analogy, describing think tanks as "the shock troops of the conservative revolution."

Battle tanks are noisy beasts, too. The media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) calculated that, trawled through the Nexis database of media stories, think tanks defined as "conservative" or "center-right" received over 15,000 media citations, representing 50 percent of all think tank references in U.S. news in 2004. Including "centrist" groups brings that total up to 83 percent. The top 10 think tanks scored more than 1,000 mentions each, with the top five accounting for just over half of the total. Leading the charge were the centrist Brookings Institution, the conservative Heritage Foundation, the AEI, the centrist Council on Foreign Relations and the conservative/libertarian Cato Institute.

The enthusiasm of corporations and conservative philanthropists for funding think tanks is based on what is known in the PR trade as the third-party technique - finding a more credible organization to articulate what might otherwise be seen as a self-interested policy.

To be effective, think tanks don't need to appear in peer-reviewed academic publications. Indeed, much of their effectiveness comes from their willingness to eschew the cautiousness and caveats of traditional academic work. Instead of balancing pro and cons and recommending further research like an academic enterprise, a think tanker will deliver a



snappy policy prescription. Certainty sells.

For politicians, think tanks provide access to a pool of researchers capable of reducing a complex policy area to a set of conservative proposals and a sound-bite. For the media, the allure of think tankers is their accessibility, sound-bite savvy and a level of specialist knowledge greater than that of the reporter. So much the better if they were a former administration official or have an expansive publications list enabling them to be packaged as "experts."

In short, think tanks are a way in which media outlets and politicians can outsource the time consuming business of research and independent thinking.

And lots of arms-length noise is just what the deep-pocketed funders of the think tanks are looking for. Major conservative donor Roger Hertog told a 2002 Philanthropy Roundtable conference that by funding think tanks "you get huge leverage for your dollars." Much of the big money behind the conservative and libertarian think tanks can be traced back to foundations created by a handful of very wealthy individuals: Charles G. Koch and his brother David H. Koch, Richard Mellon Scaife, Adolph Coors, Lynde and Harry Bradley and John M. Olin.

While individually they would be unlikely to attract a receptive audience if they stood on a street corner with a megaphone, think tanks enable their funders to project their preferred political views to a much broader audience. Critical to their success has been a willingness to provide large unrestricted grants over the long haul to popularize what were initially seen as radical ideas and policies. Corporations, on the other hand, tend to send shareholder funds to conservative think tanks to fund campaigns that match their more immediate needs.

For instance, internal tobacco industry documents reveal that on one occasion in 1996, Malcolm Wallop, the chairman of FF and a former Republican senator from Wyoming, contacted Phillip Morris and railed against a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rule aimed at restricting tobacco industry marketing targeting youth as "an assault on the First Amendment." He noted his upcoming gig as guest host of "The Right Side," Armstrong Williams' syndicated radio program.

Accompanying the letter was a funding pitch. Wallop spent one hour of the three-hour program attacking the FDA rule. The following year, Wallop sent a funding request for \$15,000 to Loews Corporation, the parent company of Lorillard Tobacco, citing his work with Armstrong Williams as one of his group's successes. "Like any professional public policy group, we try to match up our contributors with specific issue areas," he explained.

## Mixing it with the media

The effectiveness of many think tanks owes much to a simple set of principles: obscure the funding source behind the advocacy, court journalists with impressive-looking, easy-to-use, masticated research and ready-to-roll talking heads, and dovetail advocacy in with allies to develop an "echo chamber" effect.

The Heritage Foundation, established in 1973 by conservative activist Paul Weyrich, had a budget of \$37 million in 2004 - which is larger than that of the combined funding of the largest "progressive" think



World War I recruitment poster by artist August William Huta. (Library of Congress archive image)

tanks. It also arguably has the best media massaging operation.

For those hunting for story leads, Heritage offers an e-mail bulletin on the "hottest topics" with contact details of approved experts. "Broadcast live from Capitol Hill? To reserve a fully-equipped Heritage studio, call the Media Hotline," the foundation states on its website. On a separate Policy Experts website, a reporter can find hundreds of Heritage-approved experts, classified into 160 areas of expertise. For editors looking for free content to fill opinion pages, many of Heritage's 200 staff are ready to help. In 2004, Heritage boasts that it provided over 900 free op-eds and commentary pieces to newspapers and online services with "more than 90 of them in Top 10 papers."

Heritage's Center for Media and Public Policy has also forged a role for itself in training reporters. In 2004 alone, its director, Mark Tapscott, conducted 13 special sessions in "computer-assisted research and reporting" (CARR) that "trained 186 editors, producers and reporters." Heritage's work on CARR projects even goes as far as becoming "partners with journalists," with a preference for assisting on projects "concerning healthcare, homeland security, defense, Social Security and federal spending issues." The foundation not only provides access to its economic modeling capacity, but also offers to "build computer models for specific news projects, as we did for Cox Newspapers' Washington Bureau."

The Heritage strategy is seductively simple: to provide a service that media companies are unwilling to pay for themselves, thereby building a relationship with reporters and establishing the foundation as a source of information for future stories. And once on the think tanks' free drip-feed, journalists are likely to go back for more.

The foundation is also a player in the online media world, having founded the conservative news portal Townhall.com and providing a weekly internet radio program, "The Insider." (Based on March 2004 data, the conservative direct mail pioneer Richard A. Vigeurie dubbed Townhall.com as the fifth highest ranking conservative news site, rating a few places higher than a mainstream Time.com).

Heritage also caters to up-and-coming conservatives by running a training program to "instruct" junior congressional staffers in "the key ideas . . . necessary for them to address current legislative issues and grapple with contemporary politics and policy."

How does its media work actually play out? While corporations contribute only a small percentage of Heritage's income, some of these sponsors have significant interests in the foundation's output. There's defense contractor Lockheed Martin, finance companies Mortgage Insurance Companies of America and Merrill Lynch, auto companies Honda and Ford, drug and medical companies Johnson & Johnson, GlaxoSmithKline, America's Health Insurance Plans, Bristol Myers-Squibb, Pfizer and PhRMA, the oil company ChevronTexaco, UPS and Microsoft.

Between 1998 and 2003, ExxonMobil was a generous funder of the Heritage Foundation, shoveling \$528,000 into its trough (though it got nothing in 2004). Not surprisingly, on its website Heritage lambastes the Kyoto treaty on climate change as "fatally flawed." Its Policy Experts lists the foundation's Vice President of External Relations, Becky Norton Dunlop, as one possible climate change contact. Dunlop's biographical information on the foundation's website notes that "her responsibilities include the departments engaged in strategic outreach and communication to . . . business leaders."

In 2002 - a year in which ExxonMobil gave the foundation \$75,000 - Dunlop was interviewed by reporters from the *Houston Chronicle* and Cox News Service, which syndicated the resulting article to the

*Palm Beach Post* and the *Austin American-Statesman*. While Dunlop expressed her scorn for the idea that human-induced climate change was underway, neither article mentioned ExxonMobil's funding or indicated that she had even been asked about who funded the foundation.

As with any serious modern attempt to understand power, critical inquiries should start with the old journalistic maxim "follow the money." Tanks, after all, aren't much use without heavy armor for sponsors to hide behind.

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