



# THE COMPETITION OF IDEAS: The World of Washington Think Tanks

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# CRITICISMS OF THINK TANKS

- The once civil and scholarly exchanges of ideas and information have been transformed into a “war of ideas.”
- The trend for think tanks is to produce research that is little more than polemical commentary.
- The dangers that privately-financed think tanks pose to a democratic society.
- A think tank should be more than the source of 15-second bites of expertise for the evening TV news.
- . . . a lot of tank, but not much think.

# CATEGORIES OF DC THINK TANKS

<u>Type</u>	<u>Sample</u>	2005 Expenditures <u>(in millions)</u>
Large and diversified	5	\$140
Brookings Institution		
American Enterprise Institute		
Center for Strategic and International Studies		
Heritage Foundation		
Cato Institute		
Large and specialized	7	209
Small and specialized	<u>20</u>	<u>62</u>
Total	32	\$411

# MEASURES OF CONCENTRATION AND COMPETITION AMONG DC-BASED THINK TANKS IN 2005

<u>Think Tank Category</u>	<u>Expenditures</u>	<u>Net Assets</u>
	<u>(percentage of totals)</u>	
DC-5	34%	45%
Top 10	79	89
Top 20	95	99
Bottom 12	5	1

# BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Founded in 1927 (predecessor organization in 1916)

Size of staff: 140 resident and non-resident scholars  
Over 200 research assistants and supporting staff

CEO: Strobe Talbott (Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State)

Governance: 44 member Board of Trustees

Public image: Mainstream liberal

# AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Founded in 1943

Size of staff: Approximately 175 at headquarters  
50-60 interns  
100 adjunct scholars

CEO: Christopher DeMuth (Official in Reagan's OMB)

Governance: 25 member Board of Trustees

Public image: Mainstream conservative  
(neoconservative in military and foreign policy)

# CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)

Founded in 1962 (originally at Georgetown University)

Size of staff: 220 full-time plus affiliated experts

CEO: John Hamre (Clinton's Deputy Secretary of Defense)

Governance: 32 member Board of Trustees

Public image: Middle-of-the-road

# HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Founded in 1973

Size of staff: 200

CEO: Edwin Feulner (Ex-Republican Capitol Hill staffer)

Governance: 21 member Board of Trustees

Public image: Mainstream conservative

# CATO INSTITUTE

Founded in 1977

Size of staff: 100 fulltime employees

Interns

90 adjunct scholars

CEO: Edwin Crane (Ex-Libertarian party candidate)

Governance: 14 member Board of Directors

Public Image: Libertarian

# FINANCES OF FIVE DC THINK TANKS

(in \$ millions in 2005)

Think Tank	Revenues	Expenditures	Net Assets
Brookings	48	40	270
Heritage	44	36	137
AEI	38	22	69
CSIS	27	27	34
Cato	22	17	21

# REVENUE SOURCES OF 5 DC THINK TANKS (percentage distribution in 2005)

Think Tanks	Individuals	Corporations	Foundations	Government	Endowment Income	Conferences Sales, etc.
AEI	37	21	16	0	0	26
Brookings	20	17	19	2	25	17
Cato	83	2	11	0	0	4
CSIS	12	28	35	9	5	11
Heritage	59	5	24	0	8	4

# MAJOR ACTIVITIES OF THINK TANKS

1. Perform research on public policy issues
2. Develop networks for research projects
3. Disseminate results of their work
4. Host conferences and meetings
5. Provide training and education

# REPRESENTATIVE THINK TANK PUBLICATION SERIES

## *Journals*

Brookings Papers on Economic  
Activity (Brookings)

The Cato Journal (Cato)

The Washington Quarterly (CSIS)

## *Magazines*

America (AEI)

Regulation (Cato)

## *Report Series*

AEI Policy Series

AEI Outlook Series

Brookings Policy Briefs

Cato's Letter

Cato Policy Reports

CSIS Insight

CSIS South Asia Monitor

Heritage Backgrounders

# THINK TANKS AND BUSINESS

- Promote business positions in public policy debates
- Strengthen public policy players favorable to business
- Provide sources of information
- Interact with governmental decision-makers
- Train corporate personnel

# BENEFITS OF CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

- Invitations to 2 or 3 private dinners each year with world leaders
- Annual presentation on topic related to company's business by Council staff.
- Invitation for company executive to go on high-level trip led by a Council leader.
- Opportunity to designate two "Corporate Leaders" to participate in Council activities.
- Participation in more than 30 interactive conference calls with Council experts.
- Opportunity to participate in small, in-depth study groups.

# BENEFITS OF CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (cont.)

- Invitation to annual dinner of Council's Board of Directors.
- Council researchers speak at the company's board or client meetings.
- Invitation to executive round-table with Council's president.
- Invitations to limited-seating events with leading figures in business and politics.
- Invitations to more than 70 events a year in New York and Washington.
- Prominent acknowledgement in Council literature.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Think tank staffers are activists *and* scholars
2. None of the 5 is totally conservative or liberal
3. Their differentiation from universities is substantial
4. Think tanks make a special contribution to public policy
5. But there is justification for saying that they are more tank than think
6. The positions of their scholars on public issues are too often predictable
7. Think tanks fall down in analyzing their own shortcomings
8. Quality control deserves much more attention

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The “war of ideas” has run its course; it should be retired.
2. Think tanks should be an antidote to the oversimplified sloganeering dominating public policy debates.
3. Their main mission should not be to dominate the print media or the nightly news.
  - a. Nor should it be to influence decisions on specific laws or regulations.
  - b. It is to elevate the level of the discussion of serious national issues.
  - c. That requires a fundamental change in the attitude of think tank managements.
4. The DC-5 should jointly develop more effective ways of dealing with society’s major domestic and international problems.
5. At their core, think tanks are (or should be) educational institutions promoting open-minded thinking and generating new ideas.
  - a. That is the basic justification for their tax exemption and their elevated role in the public policy arena.