

A war of ideas: think tanks and terrorism

Donald E. Abelson

“Even before the clouds of debris above ground zero had dissipated,” writes University of Western Ontario’s Donald Abelson, “policy experts began staking out positions on what President Bush had to do at home and abroad to defeat terrorism.” In this excerpt from his book *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*, Abelson writes of a war of ideas among Washington think tanks contending for the attention of the Bush White House. One that stood out was a small and previously obscure neo-conservative think tank, the Project for the New American Century.

« Les débris ne s'étaient pas dissipés au-dessus de *ground zero* que les experts s'employaient déjà à établir les mesures que le président Bush appliquerait au pays comme à l'étranger pour faire échec au terrorisme », écrit Don Abelson, de l'Université de Western Ontario. Dans cet extrait de son ouvrage intitulé *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*, l'auteur évoque la guerre d'idées entre les groupes de réflexion de Washington pour retenir l'attention de la Maison-Blanche. L'un de ceux qui ont réussi à se démarquer, appelé Project for the New American Century, était jusque-là un obscur et très modeste centre d'études néo-conservateur.

Under normal circumstances, the Brookings Institution would have had cause for celebration: one of its publications was attracting considerable exposure throughout the United States and had, within months of its release in 2001, sold thousands of copies. Written by Paul Pillar, a former official in the CIA and the National Intelligence Council, the book dealt with terrorism and counter-terrorism, topics that would soon preoccupy the Bush administration and Americans. “Intended as a guide to constructing and executing counterterrorist policy,” *Terrorism and US Foreign Policy* could not have been more timely, relevant, or prescient. As Michael Armacost, the former president of the Brookings Institution, stated in the foreword to Pillar’s illuminating and path-breaking study, “Few events can sear the national consciousness as deeply as a terrorist attack. The upsurges of concern that follow such

incidents tend to lead to new laws, new commissions, fresh commitments of resources, and calls for something more — or effective — to be done to combat terrorism. As the 21st century dawns, however, there is little basis to expect that terrorism will become less of a concern in the years ahead or that the United States will become a less desirable target.” Unfortunately, Armacost was right.

Policy-makers in Washington barely had time to digest Pillar’s recommendations for designing a more comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy before three hijacked commercial airliners, flown by suicide bombers, reduced the twin towers of the World Trade Center and parts of the Pentagon to rubble. Whatever progress the United States thought it had made in minimizing the threat of terrorism in the 1990s quickly vanished as the death toll in New York and Washington mounted. Indeed, the tragic events of September

11, 2001, a day that will forever be etched on America’s soul, served as a wake-up call, both to the United States and to its allies, that terrorist organizations could and would use whatever means necessary to bring the West to its knees. In the days and weeks following the unprecedented terrorist attacks on American soil, policy-makers in the White House, in Congress, and in the bureaucracy devoted considerable attention to how best to address what had clearly become America’s most pressing security concern. Americans, for good reason, had plenty of questions about who had orchestrated these heinous acts and how President Bush intended to respond to the September 11th attacks. Not surprisingly, policy experts in universities and in think tanks were anxiously waiting to provide answers.

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Despite the increase in terrorist activity during the 1990s, little was being done in the intelligence community to protect the United States against future attacks, a concern expressed by Stephen Flynn of the Council on Foreign Relations. In an article published in his think tank's flagship journal, *Foreign Affairs*, in 2000, Flynn outlined a scenario whereby bin Laden "might exploit our perilously exposed transportation system to smuggle and detonate a weapon of mass destruction on our soil." To Flynn's delight, the article sparked interest in the policy-making community and eventually led to briefings about the vulnerability of America's transportation system. Unfortunately, his fears about terrorism were not widely shared, and policy-makers were unwilling to take the necessary precautions to protect the American homeland. As he points out, "The common refrain I heard was, 'Americans need a crisis to act.' Nothing will change until we have a serious act of terrorism on US soil." His frustration as an outsider must have paled in comparison to that experienced by Richard Clarke, the first national coordinator for security, infrastructure protection, and terrorism, whose best-selling book *Against All Enemies* confirmed what others had told Flynn — nothing will happen until terrorists strike the US.

When terrorists did strike the United States, policy-makers had no alternative — at least no viable alterna-

tive — but to react. But how they reacted and the effectiveness of their response spawned an intense debate in the academic and think tank communities in the US and abroad. As the initial shock and horror of what occurred on 9/11 began to wear off, scholars took time to reflect on why the attacks took place and what the US had to do to protect its citizens. For policy experts on the left, the storyline was clear: Islamic terrorists had made their way to the United States to punish America's leaders for their foreign policy in the Middle East and in particular their steadfast support for Israel. Once the United States adopted a more evenhanded approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and abandoned its imperialist goals, the threat of terrorism would be significantly reduced. If it did this, it would no longer have to worry about the bin Ladens of the world. Order, rather than chaos and fear, would come to reflect the state of the international community. As an added bonus, America's strained relations with the United Nations and with much of Western Europe would improve dramatically, and the rising tide of anti-Americanism across the globe would gradually subside.

But for those on the right who believed that this solution could only work in fairy tales, the American response to dealing with terrorism had to convey a very different message. Rather than coddling terrorists and the states that either directly or indirectly support them, what was needed, according to many conservative policy experts,

was a clear and forceful demonstration of American resolve. As David Frum and Richard Perle of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) state in their book *An End to Evil*, "The war on terror is not over. In many ways, it has barely begun. Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas still plot murder, and money still flows from donors worldwide to finance them. Mullahs preach jihad from the pulpits of mosques from Bengal to Brooklyn.

Iran and North Korea are working frantically to develop nuclear weapons. While our enemies plot, our allies dither and carp, and much of our own government remains ominously unready for the fight. We have much to do and scant time in which to do it." For Frum and for Perle, nicknamed the Prince of Darkness for his hardline anti-Soviet policies when he served as an assistant secretary of defence under President Reagan, the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 was a good start. Among other things, it enabled the US and its coalition partners to topple the Taliban regime and destroy bin Laden's terrorist training camps.

Frum and Perle's recipe for defeating terrorism found strong support among several conservative members of Congress and think tank scholars. But, not surprisingly, their recommendations for future interventions have generated considerable controversy in more liberal policy-making circles. The absence of an exit strategy in Iraq, combined with an escalating body count, has produced little tolerance for additional conflicts. Although they are reluctant to admit it, President Bush and his advisers realize that this war cannot be won by relying solely on force. As Stephen Flynn reminds us, defeating terrorism requires a significant overhaul of the US and international intelligence communities and more cooperation between local, state, and federal law-enforcement officials.

By the time George W. Bush was sworn in as president, it had become Washington's worst kept secret: a small think tank with modest resources but

powerful connections to key members of the Bush team was rumoured to have developed a comprehensive foreign policy for the incoming administration. The think tank that had become a favourite topic of discussion for journalists covering Washington politics and for pundits

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searching for any clues that would help them predict Bush's behaviour in his first hundred days in office was not the Heritage Foundation or AEI, the darlings of the conservative movement. The heir apparent was the Project for the New American Century, a neo-conservative think tank whose foray into the policy-making community in 1997 sparked considerable interest among and support from several high-level policy-makers, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Scooter Libby, and Jeb Bush, the governor of Florida and the president's younger brother.

If there were any doubts about which sources of information would help the president manage American foreign policy in the post-9/11 world, they were put to rest when the decision was made to invade Iraq. When journalists and scholars skimmed through PNAC's September 2000 study *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, they thought they had discovered the Holy Grail. In its study, PNAC made several policy recommendations that closely resembled initiatives being pursued by the Bush administration. Indeed, the recommendations it made four months before Bush entered the Oval Office, such as "defending the homeland and fight[ing] and win[ning] multiple,

simultaneous major theater wars," may as well have been taken directly from his playbook.

However, other than portraying PNAC as an elite organization with unparalleled access to the White

House, we know very little about the inner workings of this think tank and whether it has lived up to its billing as the architect of Bush's foreign policy.

Gary Schmitt, president of PNAC, spent years in the academic community and in government before running a think tank. He understood Washington politics and how decisions were made in Congress, the White House, and the bureaucracy. He understood and appreciated that the right ideas presented at the right time could make a profound difference. That is why Schmitt, like many conservatives, relished the opportunity to present new and challenging ideas to a

Think tanks prepared for the debates over the war on terror much as armies prepare for battle. They took stock of their resources, assessed their capabilities, designed a strategy, and determined the most effective ways in which it could be executed. Although their efforts may not always have paid off, think tanks have and continue to stake out and defend their positions in the war of ideas. Through their publications, conferences, and seminars, congressional testimony, and ongoing interaction with the media, America's leading defence and foreign policy think tanks have made a significant contribution to shaping the conversation.

Republican administration. They did not have to wait long.

Founded in 1997 to promote American global leadership, PNAC spent its early years developing a new conservative approach to foreign policy. This

strategy was based on the belief that the United States could and should become a "benevolent global hegemon."

It was the release in September 2000 of *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, a 76-page document endorsed by several people who would come to occupy senior positions in the Bush administration, that propelled PNAC into the spotlight.

Scholars studying PNAC's ascendancy in the political arena cannot possibly overlook the fact that several of the original signatories to its statement of principles received high-level positions in the Bush administration. However, acknowledging these important connections is a far cry from making the claim that the institute was the architect of Bush's foreign policy. The president did not appoint Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and other foreign policy experts to serve in his administration because they were card-carrying members of PNAC or of any other think tank; they were recruited because they were people he could trust. Although Bush appeared to be sympathetic to many of the ideas presented by PNAC, we should not assume that this or any other organization dictated his foreign policy. As Daalder and Lindsay point

out, it is reasonable to conclude that the greatest influence on George W. Bush was George W. Bush.

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But how much of an impact they have had in influencing the substance and direction of the Bush administration's campaign to eradicate terrorism is a question that has yet to produce any definitive answers. In evaluating the extent to which think tanks have made a difference, scholars must, like any competent detective, review what they know and what they do not know about the involvement of these organizations in this controversial policy debate. What scholars who have monitored the debates over various aspects of the war on terror know is that several think tanks, including RAND, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), AEI, Brookings, Heritage, PNAC, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Center for Security Policy (CSP), have relied on multiple channels to convey their ideas to the public and to policy-makers on a wide range of issues. Among other things, think tanks have discussed the problems and prospects of homeland security, the need to overhaul intelligence agencies both at home and abroad, and the importance of mending the growing rift between the United States and many of its European allies. In short, scholars acknowledge that when it comes to ideas about how to fight a successful war against terrorists, think tanks have spoken loudly and clearly.

Several scholars and journalists have also acknowledged that some American think tanks have been better positioned than others to capture the attention of Washington policy-makers. Indeed, the consensus is that no think tank has been more effective at communicating its ideas to the Bush White House than PNAC. In the press and in much of the academic literature since Bush assumed office, a lot has been made of ties between PNAC and key members of his administration. Even more has been made of how closely the policy recommendations outlined in several of its publications and letters to policy-makers resemble the policies Bush has pursued since 9/11. But we also know that this Bush, unlike Reagan,

Had journalists and scholars been more diligent in analyzing the many sources of influence in the Bush administration, they would have discovered a much longer list. In addition to identifying other think tanks with whom Bush and his key advisers have had close contact, they would have considered the potential impact Bush's father and others close to the president could have had on his thinking.

has been reluctant to solicit the advice of non-governmental policy experts, preferring instead to surround himself with a small circle of advisers whom he trusts to execute his foreign policy.

By probing into the relationship between PNAC and the Bush administration, we were able to uncover further information. For instance, we learned that the ideological underpinnings of the Bush doctrine, which, among other things, helped to justify the war in Iraq, did not originate at PNAC, but were closely linked to recommendations made by several members of his cabinet. As Gary Schmitt acknowledged, "It's perfectly obvious that Bush's war on terror was not something we articulated before 9/11...Bush pulled together a strategic vision based

on the advice he received from Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld."

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To suggest that before he assumed the reins of power, Bush had given little thought to missile defence, weapons of mass destruction, and the potential danger of Iraq and other rogue states to the US, is completely without foundation.

His many 2000 campaign speeches on foreign policy highlight his thinking on these and other important issues. It is also unreasonable to conclude that it was because of PNAC that issues relating to the war on terror made their way onto Bush's agenda. If Richard Clarke was unable to convince Condoleezza Rice of the imminent threat that Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda posed to the United States, why would we expect PNAC to have been able to attract attention in the Bush White House? It was

not PNAC that made a difference in the White House; it was a tight-knit group of seasoned foreign policy experts with previous ties to this think tank who left an indelible mark on the president's foreign policy agenda. But despite the presence of several outside influences, in the final analysis, as Daalder and Lindsay remind us, it was the president and the president alone who spearheaded, for better or worse, a new revolution in American foreign policy.

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