

The Washington Post
May 16, 2005

Capital Brain Trust Puts Stamp on the World
Think Tanks' Dissections of Foreign Affairs Lure Policymakers -- and Kingmakers

by Maureen Fan

The former president of secessionist Chechnya had just been killed by Russian commandos. Was the attack a success or a setback for Russia? Would it radicalize the insurgency? As the world worried, a Chechen rebel leader prepared to work a crowd -- in Washington.

The setting was that capital institution, the think tank. But the hosts in this case knew that their invitations would bring together enemies -- the Chechen speaker and a Russian diplomat who had branded him a terrorist. An extra security guard was assigned to the event as a precaution.

The element of danger that night at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies belied the image of think tanks as places where long-winded academics offer narrow arguments in airless rooms. Foreign policy sometimes is born in these discussions, and as a result, the world comes to listen.

Including conferences at embassies and universities, there can be nearly 200 such events on a given day in Washington, serving as a kind of sausage factory for the opinions and ideas of the city's internationalists. Of 30 foreign-policy events on a recent Monday, a dozen focused on Iraq, Afghanistan, the Arab-Israeli conflict or the war on terror.

Think tanks are influential forums for floating trial balloons. They are also comfortable and temporary homes for that other Washington institution, the former senior administration official. And they attract agenda-setters of all stripes: diplomats, spies, academics, political opponents and experts who seek to influence the government or air their most passionately held views.

This is what Washington makes every day.

Listeners come to network and get information they can't get elsewhere. Speakers plot to turn their ideas into policy proposals or make sure they are heard by the right people. Authors promote books, and experts burnish their credentials by staying in the game. Amplified by C-SPAN, this riot of ideas influences a broader audience.

For all these reasons, the Russians put in an appearance at the Chechnya lecture. But there was no confrontation. In fact, the rebel leader and the Russian diplomat had sat together more than a year before at a presentation at the American Enterprise Institute called "Search for Peace."

Think tanks can be self-segregating, allowing hawks and doves to pick from a menu of moralities -- and perks. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is generally recognized to have the best food. The Center for Strategic and International Studies is where the brainiest insiders hang out. The Heritage Foundation is more dogmatic; a session Friday was titled "Home Invasion: Protecting Your Family in a Culture That's Gone Stark Raving Mad." The American Foreign Policy Council is seen as an old-age home for Cold War warriors.

"Let's face it, each of these groups has a book to flog, an idea to promote, a cause to advance," said David Hoffman, a consultant, writer and former congressional press aide who attended a recent Cato Institute briefing on U.S. relations with North and South Korea. "Of course they have a point of view. You'd have to be inert in Washington not to have a point of view."

Even a seemingly narrow topic can attract a diverse and important crowd. A geography professor's take on the lack of water resources in a Western desert province of China might not seem particularly newsworthy. But the province, Xinjiang, drives economic development throughout Central Asia, and an international community is increasingly worried about the problem.

More than 50 people came to hear Stanley Toops, an associate professor from Miami University in Ohio, assess the challenges. Business interests from Aramco and the American-Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce signed up. So did the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, such political activist groups as the Uyghur American Association and people who identified themselves only as "U.S. Government."

And then, with a few keystrokes, Washington's business was completed.

Immediately after the lecture, co-host Matthew Oresman, director of the China-Eurasia Forum, received an e-mail from a senior researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences who had just finished a paper on the same subject. Oresman sent the researcher's paper, as well as one by Toops, to an interested contact at the State Department.

If they can't guarantee the administration will attend, think tanks can take their ideas to that other nexus of power, the Rayburn House Office Building. That's where a foreign policy expert from the Cato Institute recently suggested what five years ago would have been a radical idea: the pullout of U.S. troops from South

Korea and U.S. acceptance should Japan pursue nuclear weapons as a deterrent against North Korea.

In the audience was the director of policy planning in South Korea's ministry of reunification, a visiting fellow at another Washington think tank. Others in the crowd included more than a few congressional staffers. Karen Milliken, a State Department fellow working for Rep. C.W. Bill Young (R-Fla.), took notes, then briefed her bosses afterward.

"Keeping tabs on world hot spots is important" for Young because he is chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on defense, said Harry Glenn, a spokesman for the congressman.

Whether this session was useful, Glenn wouldn't say. "You go to a lot of events, some of them are newsworthy, some aren't. Sometimes they just talk at you, sometimes there's a good back and forth."

But for the speaker, author Ted Galen Carpenter, it was enough to be able to put the issue on the agenda for a wide array of people on different ends of the political spectrum. No one booed, and no one asked hostile questions.

"We're trying to get members of Congress to focus on important issues and on certain policy options that may not be the most commonly presented options," Carpenter said.

Not long ago, terrorism was stuffed in a dark corner of debate. But the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and their aftermath shattered assumptions, the government began looking for answers from a broader group of sources, and experts felt increasingly compelled to weigh in.

To start with, how could the government improve the way it fights wars? Could it transform the Army? In a packed auditorium at the American Enterprise Institute, retired Maj. Gen. Robert Scales told a room full of military experts that the war on terror required more soldiers and more mature soldiers.

"The 18- and 19-year-old soldier, and the 20-year-old squad leader, those days are over," Scales told the crowd as men in uniform scribbled notes. The most efficient ages were 28 to 32, he said.

Converting the nation's land forces isn't like asking for more funding for weapons. It isn't an everyday discussion. "We need to take this conversation from a room like this and into the decision-making circles of government," said another panelist, defense strategy expert Michele Flournoy, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

But in many ways, she and the other speakers already had.

Afterward, an Army colonel approached Scales in the lobby, wanting to know how to better publicize Army efforts in the use of improved technology and how to better explain the transformation.

"Here's what you don't know," Scales began to tell the colonel, who works at the Executive Office of the Headquarters, a think tank under the Secretary of the Army at the Pentagon.

"How do you know that?" replied Col. Mark Rocke, a graduate of Harvard University, the National War College and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, his back stiffening.

"I've been in this business for many years," Scales said. "I've been fighting this on Capitol Hill for years. You need more than just the boys in green."

Then, spotting journalists, the two moved to a quiet corner to figure out how to pitch Congress on "future combat systems" and Army brigades.

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