

# **REPORT**

## **Scholars, Dollars and Policy Advice**

**James G. McGann, PhD**

*Director, Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program  
Foreign Policy Research Institute  
Philadelphia, PA, USA*

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## **Disclosure Statement**

None of the institutions participating in the study are current or former clients of McGann Associates. The Foreign Policy Research Institute was not included in the study due to Dr. McGann's affiliation with the institution. Information concerning the mission and programs of the Foreign Policy Research Institute can be found at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

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All requests, questions and comments should be sent to:

James G. McGann, Ph.D.  
Senior Fellow and Director  
Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program  
Foreign Policy Research Institute  
1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

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### **Think Tank and Civil Societies Program**

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the Foreign Policy Research Institute examines the role policy institutes play in governments and in civil societies around the world. Often referred to as the 'think tank's think tank', TTCSP examines the evolving role and character of public policy research organizations. The Program is directed by James G. McGann, Ph.D. a Senior Fellow at FPRI and President of McGann Associates, a program and management consulting firm specializing in the challenges facing think tanks, international organizations and philanthropic institutions. He is the author of *The Competition for Dollars, Scholars and Influence in the Public Policy Research Industry* (1991). In 1999, FPRI's James McGann completed an in-depth survey of all known public policy research organizations worldwide in order to develop an empirical base for research on the trends affecting think tanks, civil societies and public policies. The results are available in *The International Survey of Think Tanks*, which summarizes the findings of Dr. McGann's research on 817 think tanks in 95 countries. This study was supported in part by a research grant from the National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) in Japan. Dr. McGann and R. Kent Weaver (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution) edited an international comparative study of public policy research organizations entitled, *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalyst for Ideas and Action*, Transaction Publishers (2000). The current research agenda of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program is provided below. If you would like additional information about our publications and programs visit our website at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

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Responding to 9/11: Are US Think Tanks Thinking Outside the Box?

Think About the Future of Think Tanks

Think Tanks and the Political Transformation of Germany

Think Tanks in Britain and US

The Rise of the Euro Tank

Why Iraq Needs a Think Tank

Think Tanks and Transnationalization of US Foreign Policy

Think Tanks and Transnational Security Threats

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, a number of environmental changes have presented the think tank community with new challenges and opportunities that influence the ability of these organizations to effectively operate. To identify these trends and to provide guidance on how the credibility and sustainability of the think tank community can be ensured, 34 of the leading U.S. think tanks were invited to participate in a survey addressing these issues. The Foreign Policy Research Institute was not included in the study due to my affiliation with the institution. From these invitations, 23 institutions responded.

### List of Participating Institutions

***Baker Institute for Public Policy***  
***The Brookings Institution***  
***Carnegie Endowment for International Peace***  
***Center for American Progress***  
***Center for National Policy***  
***Center for Strategic and International Studies***  
***Center on Budget and Policy Priorities***  
***Council on Foreign Relations***  
***Economic Policy Institute***  
***Ethics and Public Policy Center***  
***Henry L. Stimson Center***  
***Heritage Foundation***  
***Hudson Institute***  
***National Center for Policy Analysis***  
***New America Foundation***  
***The Nixon Center***  
***Progressive Policy Institute***  
***The RAND Corporation***  
***Reason Foundation***  
***Resources for the Future***  
***United States Institute of Peace***  
***Urban Institute***  
***Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars***

These respondents identified a multitude of changes in the think tank community occurring in six major areas. These include: 1) changes in funding; 2) the proliferation of NGO's generally, and think tanks specifically 3) the emergence of a 24/7 media; 4) technological advances, and more specifically the dominance of the Internet; 5) increases in partisan politics; and 6) the continuing impact of globalization. Think tank survey respondents identified both positive and negative consequences that have emerged from all six of these catalysts which have provided institutions with new challenges to their effectiveness, as well as novel opportunities on which to capitalize in order to improve their operations. Some of the changes have taken place over the last 10-15 years while others are more recent, occurring only in the last 5 years. What is new and significant is the convergence of certain trends and the impact they have had on the role of think tanks as policy advisers. The report examines how the cumulative effect of restrictive funding policies by donors, the short term and narrow orientation of Congress and the White House, and the superficial and

sensational orientation of the cable news networks and the print media have served to erode the quality of policy research and limit the range of policy options available to the American public.

The survey results and follow up interviews have revealed major negative trends in a number of areas, the most noted of which is the handling of funding within the think tank community. Funding has become increasingly short-term and project-specific, rather than longer term, general institutional support, which has altered the focus and diminished the capacity of many think tanks. The short-term funds have challenged the independence and innovation of think tanks, as donors specify research projects and inhibit these institutions from exploring new research areas and thinking outside the box. Similarly, the omnipresent media with its focus on sound bites rather than sound analysis is driving think tanks to respond to its time and content parameters by producing quick, pithy analysis that is quotable, and accessible. The growth of the Internet has exacerbated the problem of funding, as think tanks increasingly publicize their research findings and policy advice online, providing free access to the public, the media, and potential donors. The independence and objectivity of think tanks is being challenged by an increase in partisan politics, from which a corresponding rise in partisan organizations and institutions that produce analysis along partisan lines has been identified. These negative trends combine to pose great challenges for the sustainability of think tanks as independent, reliable providers of sound public policy advice in the future.

These six major environmental changes have also provided opportunities for think tanks to advance their missions. The advent of the 24/7 media and the Internet have helped raise the profile of think tanks, enabled them to reach a larger more diverse audience and disseminate their publications more cheaply. The proliferation of organizations has facilitated greater cooperation between think tanks and other NGO's at the local, state, and international levels. This networking allows for the utilization of new mechanisms to effectively influence policy and to reach larger audiences. Additionally, the impact of globalization and unexpected transnational events such as 9/11 and SARS have ignited a greater interest in international affairs, foreign policy, and national security, allowing think tanks to increasingly focus on these issues. All these trends have been brought into greater focus during the 2004 presidential campaign. These opportunities that arise from the changing environment afford think-tanks the ability to advance both their institutional specific missions and the role of the think tank community as a whole.

The main goal of this survey was to ascertain how think tanks can cope with a changing environment while maintaining their relevance, independence, efficacy, and sustainability in today's world. The survey responses point to two main areas in which changes can be instituted to accomplish this. The first is through changes in funding mechanisms. If donors alter their funding timelines to allow for greater flexibility in research areas, think tanks can perform more thorough analysis and produce better policy advice for policymakers and the media. Similarly, if funders also change their focus by granting longer term, organizational support, institutions will have the ability to innovate and analyze emerging issues. Altering the funding will allow for the think tank community to regain some independence and innovation, both revitalizing and strengthening it. The second key way to ensure the vigor of the think tank community is for these institutions, despite partisan or ideological differences, to work together to insist upon high standards in their research, integrity, and independence from interest groups, partisan ideologies, and donors. Institutionalizing these reforms will help think tanks to benefit from the opportunities the environmental changes have provided, while minimizing the negative consequences that have manifested themselves in recent years.

## Summary of Key Findings

Change in Environment	Positive Consequences	Negative Consequences
<b>Funding Changes: Short term, project specific and results driven grants</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Has forced TT's to be more efficient and required them to demonstrate effectiveness.</li> <li>2. Increased policy orientation and focus on current issues and legislative agendas</li> <li>3. Greater focus on dissemination</li> <li>4. Gives donors greater control over how their gifts and grants are used</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of long run, general institutional support tends to distort the mission and research agenda of many TTs</li> <li>2. Limits the depth of analysis and innovation within TTs</li> <li>3. Increases the influence of donors on research design and outcomes</li> <li>4. Limited ability to attract and retain the best scholars</li> </ol>
<b>Increased Number of Think Tanks (TT's) &amp; NGO's</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Virtually every interest or issue has a think tank</li> <li>2. Increased collaboration between TT's and other NGO's at state, local, and international levels (more vertical and horizontal integration)</li> <li>3. Greater competition increases output and sharpens focus</li> <li>4. New energy and talented new players have entered the scene</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increased competition for funding</li> <li>2. Increased competition for the attention of policymakers and the media to utilize output</li> <li>3. The rise of advocacy organizations that have been labeled TTs results in a confusion between lobbying and promoting sound public policy via research</li> <li>4. Increased competition for scholars</li> </ol>
<b>Emergence of a 24/7 Media</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Higher level of media demand for output of TT's</li> <li>2. Provides TT's with a larger audience</li> <li>3. Connects TT's and other policy elites with the public</li> <li>4. Makes TT's more visible and relevant</li> <li>5. Engages an apathetic electorate on issues of national and international importance</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Media's focus on the provocative and sensational distorts policy debate</li> <li>2. Lure of media limelight forces TT's to go for the sound bite rather than sound analysis</li> <li>3. Increased focus on op-eds and pithy reports rather than in-depth analysis</li> <li>4. Shift in focus to the big picture and key points rather than on the details</li> </ol>
<b>Dominance of the Internet/Technological Advancements</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduces costs of disseminating information</li> <li>2. Allows for TTs to reach a wider audience</li> <li>3. Facilitates rapid and inexpensive coordination and collaboration between think tanks and other non-governmental organizations</li> <li>4. Increases the visibility of think tanks, which may lead to greater influence</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diminishes the quality of dialogue on certain issues</li> <li>2. Pressure for TTs to stay on the cutting edge of technology and expand staff to include professionals in the field</li> <li>3. Loss of control over the intellectual assets and research on the part of TTs as the immediacy of the Internet places demands on organizations to demonstrate their influence on policy</li> </ol>
<b>Increased Partisan Politics</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy debate in Washington has greater openness and variation in ideas, allowing for output from all TTs to be heard</li> <li>2. Partisan politics has forced some TTs to conduct more focused research and analysis and to be increasingly cautious of how and when to disseminate ideas</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increased polarization within the TT community</li> <li>2. Increased pressure to politically align/difficulty to remain nonpartisan</li> <li>3. Decrease in the number of centrist organizations</li> </ol>

<b>Globalization: Increased connectedness of issues, people, and ideas</b>	1. Increased interest in foreign policy, public policy, and international issues (they have emerged as hot topics) 2. Complexities/interrelationships of globalization have caused policy makers to increasingly turn to non-governmental sources, like TTs, for research and analysis	1. Has facilitated the proliferation of TTs, creating a more crowded and competitive environment 2. There has been a disproportionate focus on Iraq, the war on terror, and homeland security, while other important international issues have been ignored
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## Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are based, in part, on the results of the survey but are also informed and defined by my 25 years of studying, consulting and surveying think tanks in the United States. In addition, they flow from two previous studies: ***Thinking about the Future of Think Tanks***, Foreign Policy Research Institute 1999 and ***Responding to 9/11 Are US Think Tanks Thinking Outside The Box?***, Foreign Policy Research Institute July 2003. which addressed some of the issues facing public policy research organizations. These reports, however, only identified problems and failed to recommend a corrective course of action. The set of recommendations provided below is intended to serve as a starting point for further thought and action. A process that will hopefully lead to the development of a new architecture for how think tanks are funded and operated. At this stage in the process, not all the institutions that participated in the study have endorsed the proposed recommendations. Specific interventions also need to be mounted that will help develop the critical mass of researchers and analysts that will be needed to confront the domestic and international challenges that lie ahead. If we want our think tanks to be able to effectively challenge the conventional wisdom in Washington and around the country, we must be prepared to strengthen these institutions so that innovation, diversity and collaboration can flourish. Finally, the recommendations are not intended to focus exclusively on the 23 institutions that participated in the study but the entire think tank community of more than 1500 institutions. Provided below are a few modest recommendations for improving the quality and sustainability of independent public policy research, analysis and engagement organizations in the United States.

1. Convene a working group involving a broad cross section of think tanks to develop a set of strategies and recommendations for improving the funding environment for public policy research organizations.
2. Donors should take a more strategic and long-range view of funding public policy research organizations and in so doing should engage more in institution and capacity building and less in micromanaging institutions and research.
3. A broad cross section of the donors should create a forum where think tanks (producers of policy research), policy makers and the media (users of policy research) and donors (private foundations and corporate donors) would engage in a constructive dialogue about how to fund public policy research so that it is more innovative, interdisciplinary, forward looking and effectively addresses today's complex and intractable policy problems.

4. Donors and the think tank community need to explore ways to foster greater synergies, collaboration and consolidation among the more than 1500 public policy think tanks in the United States.
5. Develop a set of reasonable standards for funding public policy research in order to insulate think tanks from private and public donors who may attempt to exercise undue influence over their research and its findings.
6. Understanding that think tanks may be considered a “public good” they nonetheless need to find ways to better demonstrate the utility and efficacy of their work for donors and the public. A fuller and more enlightened set of criteria for measuring the impact of these institutions needs to be formulated.
7. Strategies and technologies need to be developed and shared that help think tanks recover the costs associated with the content service they provide to the media and the public through the Internet.
8. Think tanks should explore ways to effectively use the television, Internet and other technologies to advance and improve the dissemination of their policy research and engagement of the public in a meaningful dialogue on key policy issues.
9. Think tanks on the right and left should avoid being drawn into the partisan politics and ideological battles that are currently consuming American politics.

### **About the Author**

Dr. James McGann is a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he directs the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program. He is also President of McGann Associates, a program and management consulting firm specializing in the challenges facing think tanks, policy makers, international organizations and philanthropic institutions. He has published numerous articles and books on a range of issues including a book on think tanks entitled: **The Competition for Dollars, Scholars and Influence (University Press of America 1995)** which examines the strategy and structure of public policy research organizations and their role in the policy making process by comparing and contrasting the mission, structure and operating principles of some of the leading think tanks (Brookings Institution, Rand Corporation, American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Urban Institute, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Institute for Policy Studies, Institute for International Economics and Cato Institute) in the United States. He has edited with Kent B. Weaver of the Brookings Institution, an international comparative study of public policy research organizations entitled: **Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalyst for Ideas and Action (Transaction Publishers 2000)**. Dr. McGann is also the author of **The International Survey of Think Tanks (Foreign Policy Research Institute (2000)** which summarizes the findings of his research on 817 think tanks in 95 countries. This study was supported in part by a research grant from the National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) in Japan. Dr. McGann is currently researching and writing a book entitled **Ideas and Influence: Think Tanks, Politics and Public Policy (Edward Elgar 2004)**. He is a political science professor at Villanova University where he teaches domestic and international policy courses



## **Background**

Over the last several years the research of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program has focused on the role and effectiveness of think tanks in the US and other countries. In one of our recent studies entitled: “Thinking Outside the Box: Think Tanks’ Response to 9/11” we found that the convergence of three major factors: changes in how think tanks are funded; changes in the policymaking environment in Washington; and limitations within the think tanks themselves have served to undermine the critical role that these institutions play in the policy making process. In this study we will explore these issues further and have engaged some of the leading think tanks in America in order to better understand these challenges and their impact on the policy making process. Prior to launching the study, extensive research was conducted to develop a list of the leading think tanks in America. Relying on previous studies, think tank directories and lists, and experts in the field, we identified thirty-four (34) U.S. think tanks for inclusion in the study. A detailed questionnaire was then developed, tested and sent to these institutions. Twenty-three (23) of the thirty-four (34) institutions responded to the survey with the majority of them being completed personally by the President or Chief Executive of the organization. These respondents identified a multitude of changes in the think tank community occurring in six major areas. These include the proliferation of NGO’s generally, and think tanks specifically; changes in funding; the emergence of a 24/7 media; technological advances, and more specifically the dominance of the Internet; increases in partisan politics; and the continuing impact of globalization. Survey respondents identified both positive and negative consequences that have emerged from all six of these catalysts which have provided institutions with new challenges to their effectiveness, as well as novel opportunities on which to capitalize in order to improve their operations. Of these consequences, several clear trends have solidified themselves in the last few years, some building on previous changes and others rising anew. Competing positive and negative currents have emerged, presenting many organizations with novel challenges and opportunities. The analysis and recommendations that follow are based on the survey findings, interviews and my more than 25 years of experience working with these institutions.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

### ***I. Funding***

The issue of funding continues to be the most prominent area of negative change for think tanks. While this problem has been around for the last 15-20 years, the recent economic downturn and the ripening of detrimental funding policies and practices have served to make this a critical concern for the Boards and staffs of think tanks. What is new is that corporate and individual donors have followed the lead of private foundations and adopted the practice of making short term, project specific gifts and grants to these institutions. What was once a practice limited to private foundations is now widely employed by donors of every stripe.

The recent economic downturn has reduced the gifts and grants that individuals, corporations, and private foundations have made to think tanks in three ways. First, the slow economy has reduced the endowments of institutions, decreasing the internal source of funds from which to support general operations and programs. Second, business profits have fallen, restricting their contributions to the work of think tanks. Third, grants from foundations have decreased because their investment portfolios have suffered, reducing the funds they have allotted for grant making. As these three forces are converging to decrease funds, the proliferation of think tanks has continued unabated, serving to increase the competition between a larger group of think tanks for a smaller pool of available grant dollars.

Compounding these funding restrictions is the new reality that most grants are now project specific and shorter in duration. The limited funding that is available as a resource within the think tank community exists in a restrictive way. Shorter-term, project-specific grants have replaced longer-term institutional support, the consequences of which are far-reaching. Think tanks must respond to the issues donors want in order to receive funding, hindering their ability to produce innovative ideas and new research on emerging issues that their scholars and policymakers identify as important. As grants become more focused, the agenda of research topics considered by an institution is

increasingly less autonomous and the degree of freedom to explore innovative solutions to complex policy problems is diminished. Project specific funding also limits a think tank's ability to fund three distinct and important areas: 1) To provide seed money for the development of projects that examine old problems in a new way or emerging problems that are just coming into focus; 2) To bridge funding for worthy projects that are in between grants; and 3) To fund research on unexpected events such as 9/11 and SARS. While these critical gaps can be largely attributed to the overly restrictive funding guidelines of most donors, the absence of significant endowments and limited sources of general operating revenue at most think tanks are also contributing factors. If institutions were to receive more unrestricted, institutional support, their research topics would not be as constrained.

There is a great concern among think tanks about the shift away from longer term funding. One survey respondent captured the sentiments of the majority of the institutions responding to the survey when s/he described the funding guidelines of most foundations as having "Too much emphasis on short term projects, which is self-defeating." This fundamental change has contributed to the rise of "boutique or specialty tanks" that specialize in a single area or on a single issue. The net result of the vanishing sources of general operating funds is that it has made the think tank community more risk averse, reactive and short-term oriented.

This focus on short term, issue oriented project support rather than longer term, less restrictive funding discourages think tanks from identifying potential problems and preventing them before they begin or solving them before they spread. One survey respondent captured the depth of the problem by stating that, "[T]here has been a tendency to move away from the kind of research that focuses on understanding problems and toward [an] over-emphasis on prescription." The short run funding only affords think tanks the ability to work on current, popular policy issues, not preventing problems from occurring. While an over-emphasis on short run policy issues may be popular with the media and the public who are attracted to and distracted by hot policy topics, this keeps think tanks from carrying out crucial longer run analysis. This situation is compounded

by private foundations that are constantly developing new programs and guidelines---a practice I describe as “programitis”. As scholars spend time researching popular, more transient issues and as funds are increasingly channeled in that direction, think tanks can no longer carry out the more balanced mix of long and short run policy analysis necessary for their continued success. While it is true that prescriptive policy can solve certain problems and short run funding has been beneficial in its role of focusing the programs and operations of some institutions, think tanks should be funded in such a way that they may also produce preventative policy recommendations. Because short-term grants that result in policy prescriptions are not a cure-all, short run funding has actually been counterproductive in its over-utilization as a funding tool. In comparing think tanks to some of the more creative and successful corporations and institutions in the U.S., think tanks differ in that they are funded in a manner that is not conducive to the production of truly innovative ideas, information, and analysis because they lack a stable base of long term funding. Thus, there is a clear and pressing need for long term, general funding to balance the types of research think tanks pursue and to improve the functioning of think tanks within society.

Many policymakers and members of the public look to think tanks as a resource to gauge current problems and as providers of sound analysis of issues, many of which are long-term and complex. Failure on the part of donors to enable institutions to carry out this role results in negative consequences for society. Short run funding does not allow for the thorough and complex analyses that think tanks were originally organized to undertake. One survey respondent argued that “[D]epth of expertise” is a crucial role of think tanks, as “[A]nalysts typically work on a limited portfolio of issues over many years (or even a whole career) and in so doing create great insight, historical knowledge, and understanding.” This is threatened by short run funding, which forces scholars to compartmentalize ideas and miss the bigger picture. For a domestic example of the inadequacies of short run funding horizons and the complexity of research, consider that a think tank performing research on welfare reform must not only consider the problem of helping people move from welfare to work, but must also consider education, day care, job creation and training, affordable housing, public transportation, and crime, as these

issues are inextricably linked to the overall policy objective. A short-run project-specific grant on an issue such as welfare reform is far too narrow for an institution to carry out the level of analysis necessary to produce high-quality policy recommendations. This becomes an even greater dilemma when dealing with international issues, which have become an increasingly larger focus for think tanks. Short term funding for an institution analyzing the effects of expanding NAFTA and liberalizing trade in Latin American must consider not only economics, but wealth disparities, industrial makeup of nations, resolution of divergent legal and industry standards, language barriers, immigration, and many other dimensions that a short run timetable does not allow. Short term, project specific grants lead to tunnel analysis and the compartmentalization of policy problems, ignoring vital areas of research. The devastating impact of these policies on the ability of independent public policy research organizations to challenge conventional wisdom was documented in a Think Tanks and Civil Societies' report entitled *Responding to 9/11 Are US Think Tanks Thinking Outside the Box* issued in July 2003.

Donors are also demanding a “greater bang for their buck” which forces think tanks to emphasize high impact studies that grab headlines, generate website hits, make the nightly news and have a measurable impact on policies and programs. It is important to note that several respondents, 5 of the 23, indicated that they were not affected by project specific funding. Upon closer examination it was revealed that most of these institutions, 4 of the 5, had significant endowments and were less affected by project specific grants.

## ***2. Proliferation of Think Tanks and other NGO's***

Many of these trends noted in the report are affected by the rise in the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and specifically think tanks, in the past two decades. The number of think tanks in the U.S. has more than doubled since the 1980s. Despite much of the negative feedback that the propagation of think tanks has increased competition and tension within the community, this phenomenon has facilitated the cooperation between think tanks and other NGO's, allowing them to more effectively

operate in the changing community. While national think tanks across the political spectrum may not be collaborating with one another they are linking up with think tanks, advocacy and educational groups at the state and local levels and with think tanks and other knowledge based institutions at the international level. This increased networking creates synergies, extends the reach of think tanks to a broader audience, and makes them more productive. Yet, while think tanks have embraced collaboration with other types of NGO's, domestically they have not explored the full range of cooperative, bipartisan and interdisciplinary collaboration with other think tanks. This fact was underscored by one respondent who said to me in an interview: "I don't see my organization and the other think tanks in DC as being apart of a community" Rather, this proliferation of think tanks has created a highly competitive environment in which a growing number of think tanks compete for funding, media attention, and the attention of policymakers. In addition, the push to specialize has forced many think tanks to differentiate themselves from their competitors in a number of ways: research agenda, policy outputs, political orientation and marketing strategy. Several respondents to the survey pointed to the creation of new organizational designs such as the New America Foundation as one of the positive results of the continued changes taking place in the think tank community. The competitive forces in the market place of ideas have clearly resulted in major changes in how think tanks operate and generated novel ideas which has helped spark a lively debate of the issues. What it has not done so well is bridge the differences in approaches and politics so that effective policies and programs can be developed.

### ***3. Rise in Partisan Politics***

Another trend that has arisen in the think tank community is the increased polarization and pressure to politically align. While it goes without saying that our nation's capitol and the public policy process are inherently political and the competition of ideas is a hallmark of the American democratic experience. The current state of partisanship in Washington, however, has reached a fevered pitch and think tanks have been enlisted to provide the ammunition in the battle over good and evil that seems to preoccupy politicians these days. Partisan politics and the "war of ideas" have become

more complex and correspondingly, partisan institutions have become more common, as a greater number have adopted a political persona and a narrower view in their research and policy recommendations. The result of this change is a shift toward either side of the political spectrum, a large dichotomy of liberal organizations on one side, conservative organizations on the other, and a limited number of centrist institutions in the middle. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to find objective analysis that looks at a range of ideas, opinions, and policy options of an issue because as organizations become more partisan, the level and quality of internal debate is reduced. One think tank executive noted that the partisan politics and “war of ideas” has “created a situation in which there is little interest in detailed analysis looking at both sides of an issue, and if a group does not support an issue 100%, the group is seen as an ally of the ‘enemy’.” Overall, this results in a heated think tank environment, threatening the engagement of cooperation among think tanks, which would be one way to offset the negative funding trends. Respondents from across the political and ideological spectrum felt that while there should always be a vigorous debate of the issues, the current environment is not conducive for such an exchange. The increased level of partisan politics also serves to limit the innovation of think tanks, as it is difficult to express ideas that are nontraditional in the current polarized environment. One survey respondent argued that it is “hard to get a hearing for ideas that do not fit neatly into the conventional left-right boxes.” This is a dangerous gambit for think tanks because they place their independence at risk in their pursuit of greater influence. Think tanks owe much of their influence and credibility to their nonaligned status and intellectual independence. All of this led one respondent to point out that “evidence and research standards have suffered” leaving one to wonder how much of the think tank community’s credibility has been sacrificed on the altar of polemics.

However, once again, this trend has not been all bad, and some institutions have cited the increased partisan politics as being beneficial because it has heightened the interest of both policymakers and the public in the work of think tanks, which has forced think tanks to conduct more focused research on current, high profile issues and caused them to be conscious of how, where, when and to whom they disseminate their ideas. In fact, a small number 5 of the 23 respondents indicated that they were not affected by partisan politics.

I am not sure if this is wishful thinking or an indication that these institutions don't view partisan politics as an issue that affects think tanks. These positive trends associated with the rise in partisan politics led one think tank executive to suggest that this is the "golden age of think tanks," as the increased partisan politics coupled with the upcoming highly contested presidential election has created a huge focus on and interest in public policy research institutions, as well as areas of both domestic and international policy. Another think tank executive commented, "never before has there been so much interest in international affairs, [and] presidential politics and think tanks are right in the middle of it." While these may indeed be positive consequences arising from partisan politics, partisan politics causes think tanks to diverge in terms of ideologies, and as new institutions develop increasingly specific focuses, gaps have arisen in the depth and variety of their research.

The "trend" of think tanks taking partisan positions may well lead to the erosion of credibility entrusted to all think tanks. If we get to the point where the public will dismiss X institution's report simply as being part of the liberal agenda without discussing the reports merits or similarly discount Y Institution's findings as being part of a "vast right-wing conspiracy", then a major disservice will have been done that will not easily be reversed.

#### ***4. The Omnipresent Media and Rise of the Internet***

Another major trend has been the expansion of media coverage into a 24/7 phenomenon and the emergence of new technologies, specifically the Internet, which have presented the think tank community with new challenges and opportunities. The impact of the worldwide web is clear, as virtually every think tank now has an Information Technology professional as a member of the line staff and a Webmaster to maintain a fresh website. The widespread use of the Internet has allowed think tanks to disseminate their ideas more easily and has contributed to the heightened interest in think tanks. The advent of the internet and other communication technologies have reduced the costs of publishing research, enhanced the dissemination of information and increased the



access to scholars and publications which have served to expand the audience and influence of most think tanks. Yet the popularity of the Internet is not without caveats. Some think tanks have argued that the Internet has reduced the quality of dialogue on certain issues.

Similarly, the omnipresent media has created new challenges for think tanks. The emergence of the cable news channels has drastically increased the exposure of think tank commentators on all the networks. The impact of this trend be seen on the news shows that regularly feature commentators such as Ken Pollack, Brookings (CNN), Rachel Bronson, Council on Foreign Relations (MSNBC), Tony Cordesman, CSIS (ABC) and Peter Brookes, Heritage (Fox). The 24/7 media that has emerged is characterized by sensationalism and sound bites. The national media is drawn to the 30-second sound bite rather than an in-depth analysis of the issues and many websites publicize reports without critiquing the methodology or level of analysis. These practices serve to undermine the basic standards desirable for rigorous analysis of the issues. It is the combination of these twin trends that directly impacts the ability of a think tank to prepare carefully considered proposals and engage in reasonable discourse before presenting them to the public. These changes in how the media and Internet convey information to the public have created a pressure for think tanks to produce sound bites, rather than sound analysis, as the need to “get it out there” is real and present. While these technological developments have been quite constructive, increasing the interactions between think tanks and the public. One think tank executive observed it is helping to “put the public back in public policy”. Unfortunately these trends have also made some institutions slaves to Web hits and sound bites. The attraction of the media limelight and the need to keep the website fresh and exciting has proven to be a distraction for both scholars and institutions who cannot resist the lure of these sirens. While the Internet and 24/7 media can be effectively utilized by think tanks, they must be kept in check, and must not be allowed to infringe upon the quality and independence of the research associated with think tanks. The media’s insatiable appetite for controversy and conflict and its superficial examination of issues have a distorting affect on informed debate. The highly competitive environment in which think tanks operate forces them to respond to in order to garner media attention.

Today the immediacy of the Internet and the 24/7 media, when coupled with the increased demands on think tanks to demonstrate their influence, have forced them to give up control over their greatest asset: ideas, information, and analysis to the media, WWW and donors. In the past, think tanks had greater control over their intellectual products as they could require private donors, the public and the press to become members or sponsors in order to get invited to programs or receive the organization's publications. This is no longer the case, as information is more freely and easily disseminated and accessed, exacerbating the age-old problem of getting donors and the public to pay for ideas (policy advice). All of this led one think tank scholar to conclude that "the media is challenging the way we communicate, and think tanks are slow to adopt new modes...video, audio, PowerPoint are the way people in business, military and government do it, but on the whole, think tanks still publish tomes of paper when reading is a lost art. Think tanks must adapt and develop web-published audio of talks, video, and E-Note format to reach thousands quickly in easily read chunks". While another survey respondent argued that all these changes have caused certain institutions to be more concerned with dissemination rather than quality control of their institution's output.

### ***5. Rise of the Specialist and Boutique Think Tanks***

More generally, advances in technology are occurring in all spheres of society, challenging policymakers to understand the many complex policy problems that are present in today's world. Politicians trained in law or policy are having an increasingly difficult time understanding the area-specific complexities of emerging issues in many areas, such as biotechnology, genetics, nuclear energy and the biosphere. Thus, they need the help of those scholars employed at think tanks who are trained in these specific areas to provide them with sound analysis and advice on the best policy for society. As issues become more complex and outside the purview of the politician's expertise, making the job of the policymaker more difficult, the public experiences a similar trend in having

trouble comprehending the issues facing the world today. Consequently, there is an increased need for solid advice and analysis from think tanks on highly technical matters. This led to the rise of the specialist and dramatic increase in the number of boutique think tanks that specialize in one issue or another. This has led to a dilemma for think tanks that must hire a number of highly specialized analysts for a range of policy issues rather than hiring more broadly gauged scholars who may have expertise in several areas. While this may meet the needs of donors and policy makers it further ties the hands of think tank executives who need to be responsive to a range of issues and concerns. The vast majority of think tanks that have come into existence since 1970 have been specialized. The idea, of course, would be a careful mix of generalists and specialists who work in interdisciplinary teams on both short term and long-term policy problems.

#### ***6. Globalization and the Increased Demand for Policy Advice***

Overall funding has become more and more restrictive which has limited the independence and innovative thinking at think tanks at a time when the need for independent and innovative analysis has increased. Globalization has made the complex relationships between localities, nations, issues, and spheres of life more apparent, through the transmission and diffusion of knowledge, which has both impacted think tanks and been impacted by think tanks and other knowledge/information based institutions. This illustrates the need for a more thorough analysis of issues and the potential repercussions and contingencies of all policy alternatives. Without a more creative approach to funding, truly innovative policy research cannot be undertaken and the result will be inadequate policy advice. Yet, policy advice must be maintained at a high level, as the transnationalization of foreign policy increases the interest in these issues. 9/11 was a catalyst for the emergence of this trend and consequently, a heightened level of interest in foreign policy and national security have afforded think tanks numerous opportunities to educate policymakers, the public, nonprofits, the media, and other stakeholders on such issues. As a result, many think tanks have been able to

capitalize on their institutional nexus between intellectual strengths and the heightened interest in public policy. Associated with this trend is the fact that most contemporary policy issues involve complex interrelationships and novelties that are not evident at first examination. This requires policymakers to think outside the box because current policies and paradigms are no longer adequate or applicable. Thus, this transnationalization affects think tanks at both an institutional level and at a policy diffusion level, as think tanks cannot block the repercussions of what they say and do. Policy decisions and think tanks in the U.S. affect what goes on in the rest of the world and vice-versa. As economist Joseph Stiglitz argued, it is imperative to “scan globally reinvent locally,” meaning think tanks should consider the alternatives and implications of policies around the globe and then adapt them to their local context. Thus, there is both an increased need and demand for innovative solutions, yet changes in the international arena, as well as budgetary and institutional constraints keep think tanks from providing them.

## Summary of Key Findings

<b>Change in Environment</b>	<b>Positive Consequences</b>	<b>Negative Consequences</b>
<b>Funding Changes: Short term, project specific and results driven grants</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Has forced TT’s to be more efficient and required them to demonstrate effectiveness.</li> <li>2. Increased policy orientation and focus on current issues and legislative agendas</li> <li>3. Greater focus on dissemination</li> <li>4. Gives donors greater control over how their gifts and grants are used</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of long run, general institutional support tends to distort the mission and research agenda of many TTs</li> <li>2. Limits the depth of analysis and innovation within TTs</li> <li>3. Increases the influence of donors on research design and outcomes</li> <li>4. Limited ability to attract and retain the best scholars</li> </ol>
<b>Increased Number of Think Tanks (TT’s) &amp; NGO’s</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Virtually every interest or issue has a think tank</li> <li>2. Increased collaboration between TT’s and other NGO’s at state, local, and international levels (more vertical and horizontal integration)</li> <li>3. Greater competition increases output and sharpens focus</li> <li>4. New energy and talented new</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increased competition for funding</li> <li>2. Increased competition for the attention of policymakers and the media to utilize output</li> <li>3. The rise of advocacy organizations that have been labeled TTs results in a confusion between lobbying and promoting sound public policy</li> </ol>

	players have entered the scene	via research 4. Increased competition for scholars
<b>Emergence of a 24/7 Media</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Higher level of media demand for output of TT's</li> <li>2. Provides TT's with a larger audience</li> <li>3. Connects TT's and other policy elites with the public</li> <li>4. Makes TT's more visible and relevant</li> <li>5. Engages an apathetic electorate on issues of national and international importance</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Media's focus on the provocative and sensational distorts policy debate</li> <li>2. Lure of media limelight forces TT's to go for the sound bite rather than sound analysis</li> <li>3. Increased focus on op-eds and pithy reports rather than in-depth analysis</li> <li>4. Shift in focus to the big picture and key points rather than on the details</li> </ol>
<b>Dominance of the Internet/Technological Advancements</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduced costs of disseminating information</li> <li>2. Allows for TTs to reach a wider audience</li> <li>3. Facilitated rapid and inexpensive coordination and collaboration between think tanks and other non-governmental organizations</li> <li>4. Increased the visibility of think tanks, which may lead to greater influence</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Diminished the quality of dialogue on certain issues</li> <li>2. Pressure for TTs to stay on the cutting edge of technology and expand staff to include professionals in the field</li> <li>3. Loss of control over the intellectual assets and research on the part of TTs as the immediacy of the Internet places demands on organizations to demonstrate their influence on policy</li> </ol>
<b>Increased Partisan Politics</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy debate in Washington has greater openness and variation in ideas, allowing for output from all TTs to be heard</li> <li>2. Partisan politics has forced some TTs to conduct more focused research and analysis and to be increasingly cautious of how and when to disseminate ideas</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increased polarization within the TTs community</li> <li>2. Increased pressure to politically align/difficulty to remain nonpartisan</li> <li>3. Decrease in the number of centrist organizations</li> </ol>
<b>Globalization: Increased connectedness of issues, people, and ideas</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increased interest in foreign policy, public policy, and international issues (they have emerged as hot topics)</li> <li>2. Complexities/interrelationships of globalization have caused policy makers to increasingly turn to non-governmental sources, like TTs, for research and analysis.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Has facilitated the proliferation of TTs, creating a more crowded and competitive environment</li> <li>2. There has been a disproportionate focus on Iraq, the war on terror, and homeland security, while other important international issues have been ignored.</li> </ol>

## Conclusions

A major goal of this study is to ascertain what may help the think tank community and individual organizations reach their full potential, which requires their ability to successfully fulfill their role in society. While each organization has a slightly different concept of their purpose, most feel the unique role of think tanks is to serve as independent, innovative, and credible providers of ideas and analysis for policymakers, the public, and the media. Think tanks serve our country best when they are able to: study and analyze issues of national and international concern; challenge conventional wisdom and develop workable alternatives to the status quo; anticipate problems before they arise; and communicate their findings and recommendations to policy makers and the public. Many feel that think tanks are responsible for identifying emerging issues that have not yet become mainstream and alerting policymakers of their development. This relates to the need for longer term, rather than shorter term funding. Other roles of think tanks include providing a venue for debate, cutting through political discourse to identify the real problems, defining the questions that shape public policy, providing support for various policy alternatives and against others, and broadening the range of policy options.

Yet many of the changes in the think tank community are hindering the ability of these institutions to carry out their functions. When questioned about how think tanks can improve their effectiveness, the community answered that they must tackle the negative trends from two different points of origin: externally and internally in relation to the community itself. Externally, many survey respondents identified the need for donors to allow for more flexibility in their funding guidelines for research programs. They also specified the need for funders to shift their focus from short term, project specific grants to support research that is longer term and allows for the exploration of complex and enduring problems. Without allowing for long run analysis and more general institutional support, think tanks cannot produce the analysis society needs. Other respondents were very concerned with not only maintaining but also improving the credibility of think tanks, which must be approached both internally and externally. Externally, donors need to refrain from attempting to influence the finding of research projects. Internally, the think tank community should be proactive in developing industry-wide standards in order to “ensure that the credibility and independence of the think tank community is not jeopardized.” Many institutions were concerned with creating uniform community standards, one respondent urged for the insistence of “rigorous intellectual standards and independence.” Another

respondent stressed this theme, arguing that it overcome partisan differences. The “think tank community should adhere to rigorous standards and be willing to criticize the misuse of data, regardless of whether it [was] disseminated on the right or the left.” This could be accomplished via the development and implementation of a “Think Tank Code of Conduct,” akin to the Corporate Social Responsibility Movement occurring in the business sector, in which think tanks collaborate to identify, outline, and ensure that the community as a whole follows high standards, that would ensure the quality and independence of the research and credibility of the institutions conducting it. Such a movement would strengthen the capacity of think tanks and help ensure their sustainability. While this would require a good deal of cooperation from a diverse, competitive group of think tanks, the benefits of these institutions working together to both the think tank community and society as a whole would greatly outweigh any costs or frustrations of convening to establish such regulations. Additionally, the survey responses allow one to think this may be plausible, as numerous respondents listed merging, consolidation, and working together as ways to improve the effectiveness, viability, and sustainability of think tanks.

These comments regarding funding reforms and institutional standards should not be interpreted as a return to a more academic oriented approach to policy analysis, as 19 of the 23 survey respondents described the primary activity of their organization as “policy oriented research” and only 3 institutions indicated that it was “scholarly oriented research” Thus, merely desiring ongoing (longer term) support from donors should not be viewed as a case for a shift toward more academic oriented research and analysis, which no institutions are advocating. The tension between policy oriented vs. scholarly oriented research is indicative of the broader imbalances and tensions that exist among think tanks, policy makers and donors. The think tank scholars/analysts desire to conduct rigorous policy research and analysis is pitted against the policy makers demands for timely, policy relevant, action oriented research and the donors proclivity to provide funding for short term, results oriented programs.

Additionally, to overcome some of the negative trends outlined in this report, think tanks should not only collaborate to ensure high standards, but to find solutions to the problems posed by negative trends. For example, think tanks could work together to advocate the reform of the funding system. If donors witnessed liberal, conservative, and centrist think tanks collaborating to pressure funders to promote innovation, longer-term support, and greater flexibility, they may be more apt to move in that direction. Thus, internally, think tanks can work to improve the environment in which they exist via collaborating to reform the institutional mechanisms under

which they operate. Doing so would allow them to more efficiently fulfill their roles and to achieve a greater positive impact on society.



## Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are based, in part, on the results of the survey but are also informed and defined by my 25 years of studying, consulting and surveying think tanks in the United States. In addition, they flow from two previous studies: *Thinking about the Future of Think Tanks*, Foreign Policy Research Institute 1999 and *Responding to 9/11 Are US Think Tanks Thinking Outside The Box?* Foreign Policy Research Institute July 2003. which addressed some of the issues facing public policy research organizations. These reports, however, only identified problems and failed to recommend a corrective course of action. The set of recommendations provided below is intended to serve as a starting point for further thought and action. A process that will hopefully lead to the development of a new architecture for how think tanks are funded and operated. At this stage in the process, not all the institutions that participated in the study have endorsed the proposed recommendations. Specific interventions also need to be mounted that will help develop the critical mass of researchers and analysts that will be needed to confront the domestic and international challenges that lie ahead. If we want our think tanks to be able to effectively challenge the conventional wisdom in Washington and around the country, we must be prepared to strengthen these institutions so that innovation, diversity and collaboration can flourish. Finally, the recommendations are not intended to focus exclusively on the 23 institutions that participated in the study but the entire think tank community of more than 1500 institutions. Provided below are a few modest recommendations for improving the quality and sustainability of independent public policy research, analysis and engagement organizations in the United States.

1. Convene a working group involving a broad cross section of think tanks to develop a set of strategies and recommendations for improving the funding environment for public policy research organizations.
2. Donors should take more strategic and long-range view of funding public policy research organizations and in doing so should engage more in institution and capacity building and less in micromanaging institutions and research.
3. A broad cross section of the donors should create a forum where think tanks (producers of policy research), policy makers and the media (users of policy research) and donors (private foundations and corporate donors) would engage in a constructive dialogue about how to fund public policy research so that it is more innovative, interdisciplinary, forward looking and effectively addresses today's complex and intractable policy problems.

4. Donors and the think tank community need to explore ways to foster greater synergies, collaboration and consolidation among the more than 1500 public policy think tanks in the United States.
5. Develop a set of reasonable standards for funding public policy research in order to insulate think tanks from private and public donors who may attempt to exercise undue influence over their research and its findings.
6. Understanding that think tanks may be considered a “public good” they nonetheless need to find ways to better demonstrate the utility and efficacy of their work for donors and the public. A fuller and more enlightened set of criteria for measuring the impact of these institutions needs to be formulated.
7. Strategies and technologies need to be developed and shared that help think tanks recover the cost associated with the content service they provide to the media and the public through the Internet.
8. Think tanks should explore ways to effectively use the television, Internet and other technologies to advance and improve the dissemination of their policy research and engagement of the public in a meaningful dialogue on key policy issues.
9. Think tanks on the right and left should avoid being drawn into the partisan politics and ideological battles that are currently consuming American politics.

## COMPILATION OF SURVEY RESPONSES

*This document provides a summary of the surveys completed by twenty-three (23) of the thirty-four (34) institutions invited to participate in this study. The attached survey instrument was designed to capture the major trends and challenges facing the leading think tanks in the United States. The study was conducted by Dr. James McGann, Senior Fellow and Director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, PA. The survey data was collected between December 2003 and May 2004. We are pleased to report that with few exceptions the questionnaire was completed personally by the president of each institution. The trends summarized below are taken from comments and information provided on the surveys and, in a number of cases, follow-up telephone interviews. Twelve (12) of the fifteen (15) questions in the survey were completely open ended. In addition, respondents were given the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on questions or concerns in follow up interviews. Some liberties were taken to shorten and/or consolidate closely linked comments; however, great care was taken to ensure that this document strongly correlates to the actual comments contained in the surveys. This segment of the report provides a summary of the survey responses and is intended for use as a reference point. It does not attempt to draw conclusions beyond what is represented in the returned surveys. For analysis, comments and recommendations please refer to the narrative segment of the study. Finally, since this is a summary of 23 detailed surveys and hours of interviews it cannot possibly do justice to all the comments and suggestions conveyed to me by the institutions that participated in the study and I apologize in advance for any comments that were overlooked in the summary that follows.*

*Please note that many respondents referred to and in many cases elaborated on issues/ points raised in questions that appeared in other sections of the survey. I point this out in order to caution those who might be inclined to draw conclusions from the responses on a single question. This is particularly true of responses concerning funding, impact of the Internet, 24/7 media and partisan politics. The number next to each trend indicates the number of institutions that referenced that particular trend. (e.g. The "1" next to "funding challenges" means that one organization noted this trend.) Additionally, there is no particular significance to the number of comments provided for each question since more than one comment may be cited from a single institution.*

### List of Institutions that Completed Surveys:

**Baker Institute for Public Policy**  
**The Brookings Institution**  
**Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**  
**Center for American Progress**  
**Center for National Policy**  
**Center for Strategic and International Studies**  
**Center on Budget and Policy Priorities**  
**Council on Foreign Relations**  
**Economic Policy Institute**  
**Ethics and Public Policy Center**  
**Henry L. Stimson Center**  
**Heritage Foundation**  
**Hudson Institute**  
**National Center for Policy Analysis**  
**New America Foundation**  
**The Nixon Center**  
**Progressive Policy Institute**  
**The RAND Corporation**  
**Reason Foundation**  
**Resources for the Future**

**United States Institute of Peace  
Urban Institute  
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**

**Provided below is a list of the questions that were sent to each institution this is followed by a summary of the responses to each question.**

1. What negative trends have emerged in the last five years in the think tank/public policy research community in which you operate?
2. What positive trends have emerged in the last five years in the think tank/public policy research community in which you operate?
3. What are the major challenges facing your organization?
4. What opportunities are presented by the current environment in which your organization operates?
5. How has the partisan politics in Washington and what has become known as the “war of ideas” impacted on your organization and the think tank community-at-large?
6. What should private foundations, corporations and individual donors do to improve the effectiveness, viability and sustainability of think tanks?
7. What should the think tank community do to improve the effectiveness, viability and sustainability of think tanks?
8. What do you think is the unique role that think tanks play in the policy making process?
9. How has the increase in project specific funding by donors affected the operations of your organization?
10. In what stage of the policy-formulation process do you feel your organization is most effective?
11. How does your organization measure its performance (increased contributions, number media citations, website hits, etc.)?
12. Provided below is a list of think tanks in the US. Please rank the organizations you consider to be in the top 25.

**American Enterprise Institute** \_\_\_\_  
**Baker Institute of Public Policy** \_\_\_\_  
**Brookings Institution** \_\_\_\_  
**The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** \_\_\_\_  
**Carter Center** \_\_\_\_  
**Cato Institute** \_\_\_\_  
**Center for American Progress** \_\_\_\_  
**Center for National Policy** \_\_\_\_  
**Center for Strategic and International Studies** \_\_\_\_  
**Center on Budget and Policy Priorities** \_\_\_\_  
**Century Foundation** \_\_\_\_  
**Council on Foreign Relations** \_\_\_\_

Updated: 9-8-04

Economic Policy Institute \_\_\_\_  
 Economic Strategy Institute \_\_\_\_  
 Ethics and Public Policy Center \_\_\_\_  
 Heartland Institute \_\_\_\_  
 Heritage Foundation \_\_\_\_  
 Hoover Institution \_\_\_\_  
 Hudson Institute \_\_\_\_  
 Institute for International Economics \_\_\_\_  
 Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies \_\_\_\_  
 New America Foundation \_\_\_\_  
 Nixon Center \_\_\_\_  
 National Bureau of Economic Research \_\_\_\_  
 National Center for Policy Analysis \_\_\_\_  
 The Pacific Institute \_\_\_\_  
 Progressive Policy Institute \_\_\_\_  
 RAND \_\_\_\_  
 Reason Foundation \_\_\_\_  
 Resources for the Future \_\_\_\_  
 Henry L. Stimson Center \_\_\_\_  
 Urban Institute \_\_\_\_  
 United States Institute of Peace \_\_\_\_  
 Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars \_\_\_\_

13. What is the primary activity of your organization? (*choose one*)

- a. Scholarly research \_\_\_\_
- b. Policy-oriented research \_\_\_\_
- c. Contract research \_\_\_\_
- d. Public policy advocacy \_\_\_\_
- e. Training and technical assistance \_\_\_\_
- f. Public education \_\_\_\_
- g. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

14. Your organization is best known for its research in: (*choose all that apply*)

- a. Domestic economics \_\_\_\_
- b. International economics \_\_\_\_
- c. Environment \_\_\_\_
- d. Security studies \_\_\_\_
- e. Regional studies (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- f. Social policy \_\_\_\_
- g. Education policy \_\_\_\_
- h. Health policy \_\_\_\_
- i. Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

1. What negative trends have emerged in the last five years in the think tank/public policy research community in which you operate?

*Trends:*

Funding challenges: fewer funds, more competition, increasingly project specific, a lack of long-term general support - 7

The rise of “advocacy organizations” labeled “think tanks” - 3

- confusion between promoting public policy and political lobbying

Proliferation of think tanks (more crowded, more competitive) - 3

Increasing polarization, pressure to politically align - 2  
Focus on short-term results - 2  
Shrinking media interest - 2  
Less funding for long-term programs and initiatives - 2  
“Excessive specialization” - 2  
Focus often simply on measurable results - 2  
Disproportionate focus on Iraq, war on terrorism and homeland security - 2  
Limited ability to attract the best scholars due to funding challenges - 3  
Media: 24/7, driven by sound bites rather than sound analysis, increased pressure to rapidly produce analysis and get it to the media - 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

Internet diminishes quality of dialogue on issues - 1  
Emphasis on form over substance - 1  
Too many think tanks - 1  
More overt political alignments - 1  
Funding often flows only to established think tanks - 1  
Focus on op-eds over more serious scholarship - 1  
Focus of foundations frequently shifts - 1  
Increased partnerships - 1  
Misuse of data among some think tanks - 1  
Focus on social change at the micro level at the expense of broader political and government focus - 1  
Insufficient attention to China and U.S. economic interests - 1  
Greater emphasis on “prescription” over an understanding of causes - 1

2. What positive trends have emerged in the last five years in the think tank/public policy research community in which you operate?

*Trends:*

Internet has reduced costs, increased speed and availability of information, provided an opportunity to expand audience, and increased interaction - 5  
Collaboration among think tanks and other types of NGO's - 5

- increased networking and cooperative efforts

Increased interest in international affairs since 9/11 – 2  
Think tanks gaining visibility and influence - 3  
New energy and new players/creation of a new brand of think tank (New American Foundation - 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

Policy makers and media turning to think tanks - 1  
Policy making expanding outside the government sector - 1  
Collaboration among think tanks and other types of non-government organization - 1  
High-profile giving - 1  
Greater competition increases output - 1  
A more accommodating media: open to more diverse views - 1  
Greater openness to policy innovation - 1  
Robust and sustained support - 1  
Rich menu of problems - 1  
Growing diversity of think tank staffs - 1  
Recognition that think tanks should have strong communications arms - 1

Entry of highly trained professionals to manage administrative functions - 1  
An extraordinary talent pool - 1  
Strong hiring from political/government sphere - 1  
Foundation community increasingly looking to outside organizations - 1  
Sophisticated treatment of terrorism and the purpose of US power - 1

3. What are the major challenges facing your organization?

*Trends:*

Funding, funding, funding: fundraising difficulties - 7  
Recruiting and retaining talent - 4  
Building and maintaining infrastructure - 3  
Finding sustained funding for long-term projects - 3  
Increased competition for resources and the attention of policymakers - 2  
Expansion of policy issues - 2  
Staying creative and finding people who can develop innovative ideas/don't rest on laurels – 2  
Freeing up researchers' time so they can develop new research directions – 2  
Responding to demands for more short-term information (without becoming captive); getting results out quickly – 3  
Responding and keeping up-to-date on new issues and new programs that funders want – 2  
Attracting attention in a crowded marketplace, staying ahead of the curve, generating media attention – 3

*Interesting/provocative:*

Immediate awareness of new and challenging issues - 1  
Sustaining political influence - 1  
Meeting expectations while balancing a much greater workload - 1  
Engaging the public on international affairs issues - 1  
Managing growth consistent with goals - 1  
Maintaining staff diversity - 1  
Moving into implementation without advocacy - 1  
Fostering collaboration - 1  
Shifting priorities - 1  
Following up on policy studies - 1  
Responding and keeping up-to-date on new issues - 1  
Forced to sharpen focus - 1  
Need for space and funding - 1  
Financial exigency – 1  
Producing relevant empirical research: balancing the tension between policy and academic research – 1  
Update website/technology - 1

4. What opportunities are presented by the current environment in which your organization operates?

*Trends:*

Subject areas of study getting strong public interest: “hot topics” - 10

- nexus between intellectual strengths and current issues
- numerous opportunities to educate policy makers, non-profits, the media,

the stakeholders and the public  
Homeland security and security interest - 2  
Appreciation of international issues and foreign policy since 9/11 – 2  
Stagnated political environment presents an opportunity for influence and change - 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

Internet: increased networking – 1  
Internet: increased reach of programs and publications - 1  
Government funding - 1  
Increasing number of partnerships between the government and non-profit corporations - 1  
Merging or consolidating organizations - 1  
Increased media opportunities - 1  
Expanding research and policy topics/areas - 1  
Opportunity to build global research institutions - 1  
Diversity of the client base - 1  
Ability to sustain an agenda of non-partisan programs - 1  
Federal fiscal crisis increases demand for change – 1  
Left is responding to work done by rightist think tanks – 1  
Ability to adopt effective techniques utilized by other think tanks (especially those on the right) – 1  
Having a real impact on policy - 1

5. How has the partisan politics in Washington and what has become known as the “war of ideas” impacted on your organization and the think tank community-at-large?

*Trends:*

Has not impacted us - 6  
Creates pressure to take sides - 3  
• Forces many think tanks into an increasingly narrow partisan stance

*Interesting/provocative:*

Difficult to get a hearing for ideas that do not fit neatly into the conventional left-Right boxes - 1  
Reduces room for consensus - 1  
Pressure to simplify findings and disperse them faster - 1  
More difficult to develop bipartisan interest in promising new ideas - 1  
Little interest in objective analysis that looks at both sides of an issue - 1  
Funding not likely to be aimed at non-ideological think tanks - 1  
More polarized think tanks - 1  
Demonstrates the stagnation and the “corrupt” structure of the policy-making Environment – 1  
Enter debate where organization is strong (strategic participation) – 1  
Need to guard against funders influencing the findings/results of output – 1  
Paralyzation of centrist think tanks that are afraid to take sides and alienate a party - 1

6. What should private foundations, corporations and individual donors do to improve the effectiveness, viability and sustainability of think tanks?

*Trends:*

Updated: 9-8-04



Provide sustained general program funding: “think long-term” - 3  
Encourage think tanks to be more creative, produce innovative ideas - 2  
More general “institutional” support and less project-specific support - 4  
Set high standards for rigorous and credible analysis: intellectual integrity - 2  
Resist the temptation to promote narrow partisan political agendas - 2  
Encourage think tanks to go beyond the immediate issues of the day – 2  
Encourage more cross-discipline work and collaboration – 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

Avoid any role in the focus or conclusion of research - 1  
Base funding on performance - 1  
Think outside the Beltway - 1  
Donors need to adjust their time horizons and their measures of success - 1  
Take a more entrepreneurial view - 1  
Provide discretionary funds to allow for exploration - 1  
Help build the internal capacity for think tanks to operate in a more business-like manner - 1  
Demand transparency and accountability for results - 1  
Be patient - 1  
Respect venture nature of floating and developing new policy ideas: resist lobbying - 1  
Define own priorities - 1  
Endowments should streamline grant-making process - 1  
Modernize think tanks - 1  
Support long-term studies - 1  
Be willing to fund objective well-designed projects even if the outcome is uncertain - 1  
Retain intellectual integrity - 1  
Coordinate funding among donors - 1  
Encourage communication efforts within think tanks - 1  
Make funding available for “big ideas” – 1  
Foundation programs developed in a vacuum - 1

7. What should the think tank community do to improve the effectiveness, viability and sustainability of think tanks?

*Trends:*

Ensure high standards - 7

- insist on rigorous intellectual standards and independence

Connect with citizens, invest in outreach - 3  
Collaborate: cross-pollinate in shared forums - 2  
Consolidation within the think tank community - 2  
Less ad hoc and more long-term work - 2  
Emphasize results: focus on effectiveness – 2  
Strengthen think tank performance with better professional development/improve methods of operation – 2  
Be more willing to challenge established orthodoxies/don’t pull punches on important issues - 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

Focus on making an impact - 1  
Master the use of new media - 1  
Translate academic findings into the vernacular - 1

- Hire communications professionals - 1
- Improve donor accessibility and candor - 1
- Resist “funder” efforts to change their missions or goals - 1
- Work on more relevant problems - 1
- Raise money - 1
- Reject restrictive funding for explicit lobbying - 1
- Do a better job explaining the role of think tanks to the public - 1
- Move beyond the Beltway - 1
- Develop frameworks of transparency regarding funding for all major research - 1
- Find niches and avoid duplication – 1
- Engage in critical thinking – 1
- Be innovative/introduce new ideas - 1

8. What do you think is the unique role that think tanks play in the policy making process?

*Trends:*

- Offer new and innovative ideas - 9
- Inform the decision-making process as well as policy makers and the media - 4
- Provide credible independent research and analysis - 3
- Flag emerging issues, raise issues/Frame debate - 4
- Provide new and alternative policy recommendations/ Broaden the range of policy options - 3

*Interesting/provocative:*

- Offer applied research - 1
- Supply expertise coupled with arms-length distance - 1
- Provide long-term picture - 1
- Cut through political discourse - 1
- Define the questions shaping public policy - 1
- Offer backing for policy positions - 1
- Equip policy makers - 1
- Serve as analytical counter weights to special interest groups - 1
- Educate the public - 1
- Supply a venue for real debate - 1

9. How has the increase in project specific funding by donors affected the operations of your organization?

*Trends:*

- Have not been affected - 5
- Limits the ability to obtain sufficient funding for emergent or new research areas - 2
- Important source of funding - 2
- Won't accept project specific support - 2
- Makes it more difficult - 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

- Trend needs to be reversed: greatly hinders operations - 1
- Forces increased support from members and others for unrestricted funds - 1
- Requires ability to perform in new ways while maintaining focus on core competencies - 1
- Leads to disproportionate attention to a few issues - 1
- Stifles growth - 1

- Touts specialization as the name of the game: faster to market - 1
- Offers less “intellectual venture capital” to identify new issues - 1
- Increases partnerships with funders - 1
- Limits the ability to structure programs consonant with organization’s mission - 1
- More closely examine the real cost of projects - 1
- Does not permit donors to screen and approve work - 1
- Moves to launch more project-specific activities - 1

10. In what stage of the policy-formulation process do you feel your organization is most effective?

*Trends:*

- At all stages - 3
- At the earliest stages - 2
- Calling attention to important but ignored issues/Agenda Setting – 3
- Providing fresh ideas – 2
- “Engineering” and “marketing” stages/Framing the issues - 2

*Interesting/provocative:*

- Educating the public, policy makers and the press - 1
- Informing the debate - 1
- Making recommendations based on solid research - 1
- Assisting when government realizes it has a problem but has not reached a consensus - 1
- Changing long-term paradigms - 1
- Erecting new policy frameworks on a foundation of solid research - 1
- Most effectively defining the question, doing first rate research and analysis, and providing solutions - 1
- Offering practical solutions and building nontraditional coalitions - 1
- Collecting and analyzing data, along with evaluating programs - 1
- Providing options and expertise to government officials - 1
- Supplying new ideas as needed for policy reorganization - 1
- Providing options and expertise to government officials - 1
- Connecting a wide spectrum of people with common problems to each other - 1
- Providing solid information and outlining policy alternatives - 1
- Networking think tanks - 1
- Analyzing new proposals and educating journalists, policy makers and other stakeholders throughout the process - 1
- Progressing in troubled bilateral relationships, (e.g. Russia, Iran, China) - 1
- Setting the environment in the early and middle stages - 1
- Center for critical thinking - 1

11. How does your organization measure its performance (increased contributions, number media citations, website hits, etc.)?

*Trends:*

- Impact on policy decisions (changed policies, political influence and ramifications) - 12
- Media citations/exposure/use of studies - 11
- Contributions - 10
- Website hits - 8

Invitations to testify before Congress - 4  
Requests for help from policy makers and the media - 3  
Number of attendees at events - 3  
Interest in membership - 3  
Book sales/ use in classroom - 2  
Subscriptions to e-publications/listservs - 2

Interesting/provocative:

Reputation of people that work with the think tank - 1  
Quality of our ideas - 1  
Importance of our scholars - 1  
Awards - 1  
Google ranking - 1  
Publication sales - 1  
“Effectiveness ranking” by www.fair.org - 1  
Number of research products - 1  
Diverse audience - 1  
Credibility among political elite and broader public - 1  
Demand for ideas - 1

12. Provided below is a list of think tanks in the US. Please rank the organizations you consider to be in the top 25.

**Top 25 in alphabetical order\***

American Enterprise Institute  
Baker Institute of Public Policy  
Brookings Institution  
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Carter Center  
Cato Institute  
Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities  
Century Foundation  
Council on Foreign Relations  
Economic Policy Institute  
Heritage Foundation  
Hoover Institution  
Hudson Institute  
Institute for International Economics  
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies  
New America Foundation  
Nixon Center  
National Bureau of Economic Research  
Progressive Policy Institute  
RAND  
Resources for the Future  
Henry L. Stimson Center  
Urban Institute  
United States Institute of Peace  
Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars

\*There are actually 26 institutions on this list because two institutions tied for 25<sup>th</sup> .

13. What is the primary activity of your organization?

*Results:*

Policy-oriented research - 20  
Scholarly research - 3  
Training and technical assistance - 2  
Public education - 1  
Contract research - 0  
Public policy advocacy - 0

*Other:*

Policy development - 1

14. Your organization is best known for its research in:

*Results:*

Security studies - 10  
Domestic economics - 9  
Environment - 7  
International economics - 6

Regional studies:

China - 2  
Latin America - 1  
Asia - 3  
Europe - 3  
Middle East - 2  
Multiple U.S. regions and metropolitan areas - 1  
Africa - 2  
Russia - 1  
Japan - 2  
Korea - 1  
Asia Pacific - 2  
Indiana, US based studies - 1

Social policy - 9  
Health policy - 9  
Education policy - 6

*Other:*

Energy studies - 1  
Conflict resolution - 1  
Space policy - 1  
Role of religion and culture in policy - 1  
Environment and climate change - 1  
Social security - 1  
World poverty - 1  
Civil justice - 1  
Public safety - 1  
Privatization - 1

Tax policy - 2  
International conflict issues - 1  
International affairs and foreign policy - 1  
Religion and politics - 1  
Modern history - 1  
Faith-based organizations - 1  
Poverty and income trends - 1  
Information technology - 1  
Family work policy - 1  
Foreign policy - 1  
Labor markets – 1

# Foreign Policy Research Institute

## *THINK TANKS AND CIVIL SOCIETIES PROGRAM*

1528 WALNUT STREET  
SUITE 610  
PHILADELPHIA, PA 19102  
TEL. (215) 732-3774  
FAX (215) 732-4401  
EMAIL: [jm@fpri.org](mailto:jm@fpri.org)

Date

Think Tank  
President  
Address

Dear:

In recent years, changes in the funding and policy environment have impacted on how public policy organizations operate. Other factors such as high operating costs, advances in telecommunications and information technologies, and partisan politics have created new challenges and opportunities for this class of institutions. In an effort to create an open dialogue about the future of think tanks and to draw attention to their specific needs, I am preparing a paper on the major trends in the public policy research community and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. In the conclusion of the paper, I plan to identify and discuss specific strategies and interventions that will help nurture and sustain public policy think tanks.

In order to prepare a detailed assessment of the think tank community, I need your input. I would like to enlist your help by soliciting your views on what you think are the current trends, challenges and opportunities facing the think tank community. To facilitate this process, I have developed a set of questions that I would like you to carefully consider and then answer. Once you have completed the attached survey, please return it to my office. It is our hope that your response will provide greater insight into the challenges facing your organization and help guide public and private donors in their prioritization and allocation of funds for independent public policy research organizations. It is also hoped that the study will help forge a new partnership between the funders, producers and users of public policy research.

I appreciate your response and welcome any questions or comments you may have as you formulate your response to the questionnaire. Should you have questions, you can contact me at (215)-732-3774 ext. 209 or by email at [JM@fpri.org](mailto:JM@fpri.org)

Sincerely,

James G. McGann, Ph.D.  
Senior Fellow and Director  
Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program