

Saving Business: The Origins of Right-Wing Think Tanks

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[This is part 5 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), and [part four](#).]

Since the goal of these think tanks clearly isn't to advance knowledge, what are they for? To understand their real goals, we have to look at why they were created. After the tumultuous 1960s led a generation of students to start questioning authority, business decided something had to be done. "The American economic system," explained Lewis Powell in a 1971 memo for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "is under broad attack" from "perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians."

And business has no one to blame but itself for not getting these things under control: the colleges are funded by "contributions from capital funds controlled or generated by American business. The boards of trustees ... overwhelmingly are composed of men and women who are leaders in the system." And the media "are owned and theoretically controlled by corporations which depend upon profits, and the enterprise system to survive." So business must "conduct guerilla warfare" by "establishing a staff of highly qualified scholars" who can be paid to publish a "steady flow of scholarly articles" in magazines and journals as well as books and pamphlets to be published "at airports, drugstores, and elsewhere."[†]

William Simon, president of the right-wing Olin Foundation (the same one that later funded Brock) was more blunt: "The only thing that can save the Republican Party ... is a counter-intelligentsia. ... [Conservative scholars] must be given grants, grants, and more grants in exchange for books, books, and more books." (*Blinded By the Right*, 78)

The Powell memo was incredibly influential. Soon after it was written, business began following its advice, building up its network of think tanks, news outlets, and media pressure groups. These organizations began to dot the landscape, hiding behind respectable names like the Manhattan Institute or the Heartland Foundation. While these institutions were all funded by partisan conservatives, news accounts rarely noted this fact. (Another FAIR study finds The Heritage Foundation's political orientation — let alone its funding — was only identified in 24% of news citations.)[†]

As the conservative message machine grew stronger, political debate and electoral results began to shift further and further to the right, eventually allowing

extreme conservatives to be elected, first with Ronald Reagan and now with George W. Bush. More recently, conservatives have managed to finally win not only the White House but both houses of Congress. While their policy proposals, when understood, are just as unpopular as ever, conservatives are able to use their media power to twist the debate.

Next: [Part 6: Hurting Seniors](#)