



Jason M. Stahl. *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. xii + 248 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-2788-5.

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How Public Policy Debates Got So Polarized

Jason Stahl, a historian and lecturer in the Department of Organizational Leadership and Policy Development at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, has written a well-researched, clear, and useful history of the rise of right-wing think tanks in America since World II. His book tells an interesting story, because when conservative think tanks first appeared on the national scene, they were very much on the defensive. In what Stahl calls “the era of liberal consensus,” such think tanks mostly confined themselves to critiques of liberal policy proposals, with the goal of revealing their weaknesses in terms of conceptualization and evidence. This was because the earliest right-wing think tanks, of which the American Enterprise Association (later Institute) was the leading example, wanted to be taken seriously in official government circles. And so, as Stahl explains in detail, the emphasis at first was on analysis, not advocacy. At its best, the AEA produced rigorous assessments of national aid to higher education and federal antitrust laws that won respect from many in official Washington.

What changed, as Stahl explains, was the larger political context, which increasingly pressured AEA to play a somewhat different role. As the New Right began to gain ground in the mid to late 1960s, pressures grew from funders to add advocacy to policy analysis. What makes Stahl’s book interesting, even to readers who might find conservative think tanks a less-than-stimulating subject, is what *Right Moves* says about how quasi-academic institutions evolve in response to changes in the social context. Stahl’s book will also be of interest because it illu-

minates a larger social trend, which was the decline of faith in the ideals of “objectivity” and “disinterestedness” from the early 1960s through the early 1970s. In 1962, the AEA’s president, William Baroody, proclaimed his (and its) commitment to those ideas; ten years later, he explicitly rejected them. In its place came a new concept: that think tanks simply competed in a “marketplace of ideas” in which none was truly objective. In that view, AEA’s main contribution was to restore better balance in a universe dominated by liberal think tanks, most notably the Brookings Institution and the Ford Foundation.

Right Moves then goes on to chart the emergence of other New Right think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, which embraced advocacy from the start, and stole a march on the AEA in the 1970s by producing studies connected with advancing immediate public-policy goals. So successful were such organizations in doing so that by the early Reagan era, their example even influenced Brookings and other liberal think tanks to emulate, to a degree, such an approach. Thus, Stahl has given us more than a history of right-wing think tanks. *Right Moves* is also a window into just how and why polarization came to public policy debates in Washington and the state capitals during the 1970s and ’80’s.

The key drivers of that shift were rich, strongly conservative funders, Stahl argues, such as Joseph Coors and Charles Koch. In return for major financial support, conservative think tanks agreed, at their wealthy benefac-

tors' insistence, to become agents of policy advocacy, including down to the level of tactics, not overall philosophy or grand strategy. Leading conservative intellectuals such as Irving Kristol and Arthur Laffer contributed ideas, but it was the dollars donated that turned these institutions into a kind of pressure group that promoted such ideas, thereby making them really matter. At the extreme, Stahl argues, right-wing advocates such as George Gilder rejected the very idea that conservative policy advocacy needed to be grounded in broadly accepted evidence. *Right Moves* thus gives the reader a very clear sense of where the highly polarized world of "talk radio" debate came from.

Not everything in this analysis is new, as Stahl himself acknowledges. He points—correctly—to the groundbreaking work on the development of right-wing think tanks done by Donald Critchlow in his book *The Conservative Ascendancy* (2007). What Stahl's book has done is

flesh out the story in much greater detail, and with an eye to its broader implications.

The only real weakness in Stahl's book is that he chose to end the story in 2010, which makes it seem a bit dated today, given the unexpected turn national politics has taken since then. At its best, though, *Right Moves* helps explain how and why ever more opinionated policy analyses have fed polarization of debates in Washington to such a degree as to make such discussions little more than exercises in talking past one another. Just as the heavy emphasis on objectivity came to be seen as a dead end by the late 1960s, so, too, does its rejection appear to have produced a different kind of dead end fifty years later. *Right Moves* makes that case persuasively, which has the kind of broad implications that will interest scholars who work on political history in general, and not just the more specialized subject on which Stahl's book is focused.

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