

From a Distance: Influencing Foreign Policy from Philadelphia

By Daniel Pipes

Can a small institute in Philadelphia materially affect the actions of the U.S. government, or any one else? More generally, is it possible to have sustained impact on American foreign policy from beyond the Beltway? This question is key to the activities of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and many others too. We need an answer for ourselves, to know what we are doing; and we need one for our financial supporters, so that they know what they are getting.

Before delving into these matters, however, I should like to begin by telling you about FPRI and offering some general thoughts on the goals of policy-oriented research institutes.

Foreign Policy Research Institute

Many of the distinguished speakers who have preceded me in this forum represented fairly novel forms of public policy organizations: one has a libertarian outlook; another works with state governments; a third serves as bridge between business and education. In contrast, I come to you from what is probably the most common and best-known area — foreign affairs. Accordingly, I shall assume that you already know a fair amount about kind the work we do at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

The Institute was founded in 1955 by Robert Strausz-Hupé, the distinguished political scientist who taught for many years at the University of Pennsylvania and then held five ambassadorships after 1969. (Today, I am pleased to report, he is back from eight years as President Reagan's representative in Ankara, and is with us again at FPRI; he is also active as a Distinguished Fellow at the Heritage Foundation.)

The Institute, which defines itself as "an independent, non-profit organization devoted to research on issues affecting the national interest of the United States," has a full-time staff of over twenty, a part-time staff of about the same size, and an annual budget of \$1.4 million. It publishes a book series, a monograph series, *Orbis* (a quarterly journal of world affairs), *Agora* (a Romanian-language journal), and a syndicate for newspaper opinion pieces. The Institute oversees the annual Thornton D. Hooper Fellowship in International Affairs.

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Geography goes far to define FPRI. We are not in Washington, with its buzz of social activity, insider information, and maneuvering; nor are we in California, three time zones and as many thousands of miles away from the decision-making centers. Being in Philadelphia puts us an hour and ten minutes from New York City by train and an hour and forty minutes from Washington. That is too far to go casually for dinner, but close enough to make the trip on a regular basis.

This fine location has the ironic effect, however, of rendering Philadelphia in some ways the biggest small town in America. The metropolitan area is the country's fourth or fifth largest (much larger than the Washington, D.C. area, by the way) but its location means the city lacks a hinterland. Large as it is, Philadelphia itself is the hinterland. This diminishes the sense of regional leadership that one finds in many smaller cities. Proximity to national centers also makes it easy for the city's intellectual leadership to look beyond the region for companionship and rewards.

Until recently, FPRI was certainly part of this problem. For nearly thirty years, the Institute just happened to be in Philadelphia. During that time, it had no important activities in and for Philadelphia; it was virtually unknown in the city and received negligible support from it. Then we woke up to the opportunities that go with being the only foreign policy think tank between New York and Washington. In response, we initiated a number of local efforts. We work closely with the media, frequently publishing opinion columns in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and on occasion being retained by a local television network affiliate. We sponsor seminars for local university specialists on foreign policy in an effort to (1) get them to meet each other and (2) encourage them to address a national audience.¹ We hold breakfasts, lunches, dinners, receptions, briefings, and weekend retreats.

The Institute has responded to an era of flux by a shift in emphasis, as indicated by three subsidiary bodies that have recently come into being: the Middle East Council, the Corporate Advisory Service, and the Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education. The Middle East Council points to less concentration on the Soviet Union and more on other regions, including East-Central Europe, East Asia, and Latin America. A wealth of talent on the Middle East spurred us to create a new organization to house activities related to that region. The Corporate Advisory Service marks a different change; whereas the Institute always had a strong military emphasis, we hired our first international economist in 1989 and are making plans to work more closely with businesses.

Recalling FPRI's traditional focus on policy, the Wachman Fund represents a major new activity. The Fund houses an education program that addresses several fora for the general public — downtown, suburban, the aged. But teacher education and on-the-job-training are our two special niches. We work with high-school teachers in four different programs, bringing them into contact with leading writers and government officials — the sort of people they would otherwise probably not meet. In the long term, we hope to translate this pedagogical experience into curricula development, where potentially we have a national impact.

¹A volume bringing together their contributions was recently published: *Perestroika at the Crossroads*, edited by Alfred J. Rieber and Alvin Z. Rubinstein (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1991).

We also emphasize on-the-job-training. Some think this is the most important job an institution like FPRI does. For example, James Allen Smith, author of a recent study, *The Idea Brokers*, writes that "think tanks of the Right did not make a revolution; rather, they prepared the revolutionary cadres who ascended to power in 1980."² FPRI has a proud record of helping launch individuals who moved on to distinguished careers in Washington, including a good many who came into office in January 1981. For example, John F. Lehman, who worked at the Institute back when it was part of the University of Pennsylvania, commented during his tenure as President Reagan's Secretary of the Navy: "Had the FPRI not been at Penn, I wouldn't have this job or be in this business." Interns and work-study students pass through the Institute in numbers; from these many talented individuals we find one each year or two who stands out and whom we keep on.

For all these other activities, policy remains our primary mission; or, as we put it, the Institute seeks to have a voice in the public debate. I shall therefore devote the rest of my time to policy-related issues.

What Is a Policy-Oriented Research Institute?

A policy-oriented research institute does many things. Like a university, it houses scholars and encourages research. Like a foundation, it sponsors projects. Like a publisher, it issues books and journals. Like a wire service, it distributes newspaper opinion columns. Like a world affairs council, it organizes public talks and conferences. Like a lobby, it attempts to influence government and public opinion. Like a government bureau, its staff comment on current events to journalists (unlike government officials, however, they do so on the record).

Perhaps because it is so multi-faceted, the research institute has an identity problem. Why does this hybrid organization exist? What services does it perform not already fulfilled by universities, foundations, publishers, wire services, world affairs councils, and lobbies? Those of us working in research institutes often find ourselves engaged in a process of self-definition, asking what our institution's mission should be, what good it does, and what constitutes success.

Perhaps the best way to start is by showing how a research institute differs from a university, and more precisely from the centers that have grown up at so many schools. Three contrasts stand out: our policy orientation, our vantage point, and our intended audience.

To begin with, policy is our middle name. Unlike a teaching institution, we do not engage in abstract studies for their own sake, but are in the business of applying knowledge — bringing specialized information and theoretical concepts to bear on issues of the moment. The practical nature of our orientation is illustrated by the fact that the FPRI staff has a nearly equal number of political scientists and historians. Whatever the field of training, all of us are historically-minded and alert to politics. The best indication of our practical

²James Allen Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 203.

outlook, however, is our work; what we write and say invariably has some bearing on contentious issues.

Second, we have a vantage point. Unlike the university-based center, which ought not make appointments on the basis of political outlook (an ideal, alas, too often breached), we explicitly take politics into consideration. A policy institute makes its mark by having a point of view and trying to get it across; lacking this, our very existence would be brought into doubt. Had our staff no cohesion, it would be working at cross purposes. There is also the added benefit of esprit de corps; that we have much in common does wonders both for intellectual exchange and a pleasant workplace.

At the same time, FPRI has no doctrinal litmus test. We agree on first principles, but often disagree on how these work out in practice. This has led to some especially interesting discussions in recent years: those agreeing on the Soviet Union find themselves at odds vis-à-vis Germany; those in harmony on the Arab-Israeli conflict disagree when it comes to dealing with Saddam Husayn. We now live in formative times — an old order is crumbling and its replacement is not at all formed.

This said, it may be helpful for me to make explicit the politics of FPRI. Put most baldly, we have always advocated an activist U.S. foreign policy; we have shared an abiding suspicion of the Soviet Union and other Communist states; and we have always maintained a strong interest in the promotion of democracy, free-enterprise, and the rule of law. Perhaps most controversially, the professional staff is not shy about the use of force; were we members of Congress in January 1991, all of us would not only have voted with President Bush and Operation Desert Storm, we would have led the charge.

Hearing this brief enumeration, some of you might be thinking, "Ah hah — it's a Republican institution." But that would be a wrong conclusion, for two reasons. The research and administrative staff divides quite evenly between Republicans and Democrats; in a technical sense, we are bipartisan. Also, looked at from the longer term of American history, the main debate of American foreign policy has not been between liberals and conservatives, or between Democrats and Republicans; it is, rather, one between activists and isolationists. At times, the Democrats take an activist viewpoint, at times the Republicans do; simultaneously, each party has its share of isolationists, the McGoverns and the Buchanans. Today, it happens that the Republican party is more activist, so FPRI has more in common with it; but this is neither a long-term nor an institutional connection. We adhere to certain principles and we are in the business of doing research; we do not promote party interests, and certainly not individual politicians.

Finally, the audience we seek distinguishes us from a university think tank. The university's work is primarily aimed at fellow scholars; our audience is much broader. This leads me to my main topic — the way in which FPRI exerts influence. What difference does it make that the twenty or so of us are out there, researching, talking, editing, writing?

Influencing Policy

I shall start by defining two groups we are not especially interested in reaching: decisionmakers and the broad masses.

We make no special effort to get position papers on the desk of the key congressional aide the morning he has to write a report. It would be foolish for us, or any institution

outside of Washington, to attempt this. Further, there are many institutions in Washington that do precisely this and do it very well; and none better than our host here today, the Heritage Foundation. Nor do we, with the exception of one small program (our newspaper syndicate), try to reach the masses. The reason has something to do with the nature of our work; scholarly research can only be so much diluted. But it also has to do with the place of foreign policy in American politics.

Let me take a minute to elaborate on this. Most major domestic issues start from the bottom and percolate up: think of educational questions, censorship, the abortion issue, conservation, and the like. The grass-roots nature of these concerns means that opinion-makers tend to articulate the strong views held by domestic constituencies. To be sure, they sometimes lead the debate, but their efforts are for naught unless they can find popular support.

How different with foreign policy! With the exception of U.S. involvement in a war — which is a form of domestic issue, after all — foreign questions tend to be decided from the top down. The absence of popular activities opens the field for specialists. This pattern applies equally to prominent issues (such as dealing with Gorbachev) as it does to more obscure ones (say, U.S. policy toward Indonesia).

In short, a foreign policy elite — scholars, journalists and editors, government officials, businessmen, and professionals — formulates the range of opinions and the rest of the population follows. This group has a far more critical role in the formulation of foreign policy than its domestic counterpart. I need not attempt to quantify its size, nor define it with great precision, for all of you know roughly who it includes — in part because most of you are within its boundaries. This elite is our natural constituency. If we can reach it through the written word, television and radio, and in person, we can influence the debate. This gives us a say in the shaping of American ideas and a part in the formulation of policy.

How then, do we get access to the important book publishers, journals, magazines, newspapers, and radio and television shows? Or, in the case of *Orbis*, how do we make sure that our publication is one of those read by the elite? Here the answer is somewhat surprising, for access to the elite has almost nothing to do with the size of circulation or audience. The *New York Times* reaches the elite but the similarly-sized *New York Post* does not. The *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* does, whereas *Good Morning America*, with a vastly greater audience, does not. The *New Republic* does, *Reader's Digest* does not.

My favorite example along these lines had to do with two friends of mine, one working for Jack Anderson's column — which has a distribution in the tens of millions — and the other putting out his own newsletter, with a circulation of just 700. In 1983, the Anderson reporter broke a story about the existence of a U.S. training program for a Jordanian rapid deployment force to be used in the Persian Gulf. Nothing happened; the story was completely ignored. Then, half a year later, the newsletter writer learned about the same training program and broke the same story again. The next day, both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* carried it on their front pages.

This example points to a key point: where you publish is as important as what you publish. Presentation is as important as substance. Let us consider, then, the complementary issues of style and substance.

On style: new information and good ideas are not enough. Readers must be wooed and won. This means editing, organizing, and doing whatever else is needed to present materials in an attractive format and elegant style. Such an approach may sound obvious, but it goes against the culture of a research institute, which tends to be to get things out plentifully and fast, without much heed to these niceties.

On substance: if we are to publish with the book houses, journals, magazines, and newspapers of choice, we need sound information and good ideas. We need to offer something useful but not always available. My personal experience as a writer on the Middle East leads me to conclude that the biggest lacuna is bringing context to issues of the moment. Someone who knows about Iraqi history through the twentieth century has the edge in interpreting recent events. The same goes for the Arab-Israeli conflict: a novice observer might imagine, for example, that this has only do to with the Palestinian issue, and would thereby miss the Arab states' involvement. When the next terrorist incident takes place, the best analysis will be done by those aware of biographies and patterns. In short, we at FPRI try to elucidate matters of the moment by calling on background knowledge most commentators (and many government officials) lack.

These guidelines about substance and style apply as well to the publications we put out — especially *Orbis*. If these are to be read by the elite, we have to draw them in and offer them something useful. They also apply to dealings with journalists.

This approach has helped FPRI influence policy, and we can point to many specific instances where our influence was felt. Here are four examples, two from the past and two current ones:

Robert Strausz-Hupé's 1959 concept of a "protracted conflict" between the United States and Soviet Union played a major role in reconfiguring the intellectual basis of containment. The Soviet challenge was at that time seen as moral on the one hand and military on the other; Protracted Conflict added the political element. Strausz-Hupé, a consummate geopolitician, showed how to defeat Soviet efforts through an integrated understanding of them. In the process, he provided a means of discriminating between various threats to Western interests, providing a basis for judgment as to when, and how, the United States should intervene abroad.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. army saw "fire-and-forget" anti-tank missiles — an exotic stand-off weapon making use of early submunitions technology — as a qualitative means of offsetting Warsaw Pact numerical superiority in Europe. Ori Even-Tov, a weapons engineer on the FPRI staff, demonstrated how the costly technology could be foiled by simple Soviet counter-measures, and argued that the system's vulnerability would leave NATO troops with no close fighting backup to defeat a Warsaw pact challenge.³ Even-Tov's work stimulated a fundamental re-thinking of the program.

In the mid-1980s, at a time when the world saw stagnancy in Eastern Europe, Vladimir Tismaneanu saw hidden movement, and argued for the need to pay attention to what

³Ori Even-Tov, "The NATO Conventional Defense: Back to Reality," *Orbis*, Spring 1979.

he called the emerging civil society.⁴ In a much-noted 1987 conference organized by Mr. Tismaneanu, FPRI presciently took up the subject, "Will the Communist States Survive?"⁵ As a result, Mr. Tismaneanu was consulted virtually on a daily basis by the State Department in early 1990, giving him a direct role in defining the differentiation policy (which connected U.S. assistance with concrete steps toward democratization) subsequently adopted with regard to Eastern Europe.

Finally, in June of last year, I argued that the Arab-Israeli peace process as it was then pursued — pressing the Israelis to make concessions to the Palestinians — could not work. I argued that this ignored relations between the Arab states and Israel, and so was doomed to failure. Instead, I proposed that the U.S. government base its peace process diplomacy on getting the Arab states to make concessions to Israel in return for Israeli concessions to the Palestinians.⁶ When a new round of peace process diplomacy began in March 1991, this became U.S. policy. For example, Secretary of State Baker suggested to the Saudis that they suspend their economic boycott of Israel in return for an Israeli suspension of settlement activity in the occupied territories.⁷

A "Writer's Think Tank"

In the end, however, research and writing is the key activity at FPRI. This means that the research staff have critical importance; and so, I would like to conclude with a few words about them.

The ideal think tank analyst has wide interests, a fast and elegant pen, an ability to come up with timely topics, and a willingness to put himself on the line. We seek someone who knows the ways of the government and of the media, who writes scholarship but can also drop everything and produce a top-notch op-ed in five hours. A good radio and television presence helps. The ideal analyst can be a scholar who has a flair for the media or a journalist with serious research interests. Interestingly, the majority of new staff members in recent years either have press experience or put in time as free lance writers. Put negatively, we are looking for people who find they don't quite fit the university, the media, or the government — because they want a bit of them all.

⁴Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe: The Poverty of Utopia* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

⁵Published as Vladimir Tismaneanu and Judith Shapiro, eds., *Debates on the Future of Communism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991).

⁶Daniel Pipes, "Don't Despair — Middle East Peace Is Still Possible," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 June 1990.

⁷In a hearing before the Foreign Operating Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, 22 May 1991, #21 Secretary Baker acknowledged the novelty of two-track diplomacy, noting that "this is different than the approach we took last year or a year and a half or so ago when we were trying to create an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, solely one track."

To foster high quality work, we try to create an environment in which the researcher has maximum freedom to follow his own interests. This means providing a stable environment and making minimal demands on the researcher's time. Noting that the most important work is invariably done by a single author working on his own project, FPRI gives researchers the maximum latitude to choose their own topics, pace, and format. Consistent with this approach, we commission pieces or hold conferences only when there is a compelling purpose. Thirty years ago, conferences were significant events, but today they have multiplied to the point that, to be frank, most of us pay little attention to multi-author books and conference proceedings.

At the same time, we try hard to find innovative projects, issues that will grow in importance and that we can reasonably undertake. Given the changes taking place now in the U.S.S.R., should we concentrate on the non-Russian nationalities, the liberal intellectuals, or the Russophile reactionaries? With regard to Latin America, should we emphasize democratization or debt? Are commodities and strategic minerals a topic for tomorrow? Along these lines, FPRI recently conducted two major programs: a three-year study of the friendly tyrant dilemma created by pro-American dictators; and a two-year study on transitions to freedom — the problems that follow the relaxation of the Kremlin's iron rule. A journalist recently described the Institute as a "writer's think tank," and I find this an apt summary of what we are. His phrase also answers the question I posed at the start of this talk: How can a small institute in Philadelphia affect the actions of the U.S. government? By having an impact on one of the country's largest metropolitan areas; by making the most of our outside-the-Beltway perspective; and by picking the right subjects, dealing with them in a timely way, and offering the kind of well-reasoned and well-written analysis that gains a significant audience.

